The Impact of Participating in a Class Blog on the Writing of a Struggling Adolescent Learner

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Abstract
Writing competently can be a challenge for many adolescents, especially struggling learners. The social networking technology of blogging has the potential to offer an alternative strategy to students to improve their writing skills. In this article the author analyzes the impact of blogging on a grade nine struggling learner and his written communication in Geography and Religion class (i.e. each teacher set up a blog for students to post comments and respond to each other). The investigation of the blog posts and an interview indicate that it can improve motivation, as typing is physically easier than writing on paper. The social nature of the blogs had a positive impact on the content and amount of writing the student did. The full potential of classroom blogs still needs to be learned and experienced, but this small study suggests that blogging can be a reading, thinking, and writing tool that can positively build on the communication skills of struggling learners.

The social networking technology of blogging has the potential to offer an alternative strategy to teachers in order to improve students’ written communication. Large numbers of adolescents are not able to write at proficient levels (Graham & Perin, 2007). Part of this reason could be that writing competently requires a variety of skills and strategies: “Writers not only have to formulate their own thoughts but also organize and transcribe those mental representations into words that can transcend time and place” (Coker & Lewis, 2008, p. 233). With such a complex task, more than one intervention is likely required to support and scaffold student learning in this area. Consequently, teachers need to test mixes of interventions (Graham & Perin, 2007) to discover the ones that work for individual students. One possible intervention, that not only provides authentic writing opportunities, but also uses technology, is the weblog (better known as a blog).

The blog can be used to integrate the skills of the new literacies of technology into the current curriculum (Richardson, 2006; Zawilinski, 2009). Literacy today involves much more than reading and writing; students need to be critical thinkers. The Internet allows for quick access to a wide range of information which often needs to be analyzed, synthesized, and communicated to others. Students need opportunities to practice these functional skills and weblogs can be an easy to use and authentic venue to facilitate this type of learning. A weblog is an editable Website where anyone can write about whatever interests him/her; these entries are dated and published on the Internet. Teachers and students all over the globe are communicating with each other and contributing to the virtual social network through their own blogs. Blogging has become easily accessible to anyone with Internet access and has rapidly grown in popularity:
“Since its emergence in the 1990’s, the weblog has become an increasingly recognized genre” (Oravec, 2002, p. 620).

Today’s youth are exposed to vast amounts of information and must be taught how to critically sift – not to accept all of the text they hear, read, and view without question. They need to be able to express their thoughts, understanding, and opinions both orally and through writing. In order to become a community of learners and bloggers/writers (Glogowski, 2008), the classroom dynamics need to change. It is no longer sufficient for students to memorize information and respond to teachers’ questions. Blogging in school represents a dramatic shift in how teachers interact with students and how students interact with their peers (Luehmann & Frink, 2009). Educators need to move from the transmission model of teaching to a mindset of collective intelligence and shared leadership that encourages students to construct their own learning. Ellison and Wu (2008) propose that “Internet based communication technologies allow students to create and share their writing, as opposed to merely consuming texts selected by the instructor, these tools are inherently well-suited to support these kinds of constructivist, peer focused experiences” (p. 101). The good news is that the language disciplines have begun to adopt blogs as a pedagogical practice where students can practice their writing skills (Bartlett-Bragg, 2003). Many educators have already entered the virtual domain and are co-learning with their students. Another benefit is that most of these young learners are already adept at using technology—why not engage them in writing with tools they are more eager to use?

Following such promising research, this research sets out to explore the question: “What impact does introducing the genre of weblogs have on a struggling grade nine student’s written communication of his ideas and motivation to write?” I am interested in finding ways to support adolescents’ learning and writing skills. I chose to investigate the thinking and writing that Matt (a pseudonym) did in his blog posts for two reasons. First, he understands that he is not a “strong writer” (his own words) and, secondly, two of his teachers (grade nine applied Geography and Religion) agreed to participate in a project to implement the use of class blogs into their respective curricula to improve the writing of their adolescent learners. In this paper, I will briefly state some of the research on the challenges of adolescent writing. Next, I will present evidence of Matt’s blogging process throughout the semester and the implications on his writing that were evident in his blog posts. Recognizing the value of student voice, I include Matt’s perceptions and reflections on the experience. Lastly, I will conclude with a reflection on what I have learned and some further work that needs to be done in the area of classroom blogs.

The Challenges of Teaching Students to Write

Bangert-Drowns et al (2004) found that the way writing is conceptualized and valued may have a significant impact on thinking and learning. They explain that the characteristics of writing tasks (authenticity, scope, interest level, frequency, and mental operations) will likely influence the learning effects of writing. I am not convinced that teachers think much about the characteristics or required cognitive operations (e.g., analysis, inductive reasoning, synthesizing, etc.) involved in the writing tasks they create. My observation in working with teachers and talking with students reveals that many assigned writing activities lack some (or all) of these characteristics, perhaps robbing students of more meaningful writing opportunities to learn. Much of the writing students are asked to do must fit into rigid structures (e.g., five paragraph essay) with much of the emphasis being placed on spelling and grammar instead of the

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1 Applied refers to a type of course; these courses are meant to be more practical (less abstract) and draw on personal experiences.
communication of ideas and learning. The intended audience is always the teacher who assigns a grade. When students have authentic writing tasks, that are interesting to them and involve a wider audience, they are more invested in their writing (Ellison & Wu, 2008). Participating in a class blog has the potential to engage students in a structured and ongoing written conversation with several other people where they can share, comment, question, clarify, etc.

Engaging and motivating students to write is a major challenge for educators, especially at the high school level. Richardson (2006) and Ellison and Wu (2008) found that students showed more interest in their school work when they were given authentic opportunities to tinker with technology. Blogs can provide new forms and formats (Luehmann & Frink, 2009) to stimulate writing to learn. Research indicates that writing improves when tasks assigned to students are relevant and meaningful (Brewster & Klump, 2004). Having an audience and real readers other than the teacher (de Almeida Soares, 2008; Ellison & Wu, 2008) to communicate with, “can increase engagement and depth of writing” (Kajder & Bull, 2003, p. 33). When students have the opportunity to respond to the embedded hyperlinks in the blog as well as their classmate’s blog posts, they likely will engage in higher order thinking (Zawilinski, 2009). Many adolescents today are no longer willing to complete simple tasks that require rote memorization and regurgitation; they are more interested in relevant learning.

Contributing to a class blog involves much more than simply recording what the student knows. Writing to learn advocates believe that writing can help students to discover new knowledge by sorting through previous understandings to draw conclusions and uncover new ideas (Brewster & Klump, 2004). A class blog by its very nature invites students to sort through what has been previously posted before new thinking is added. Students are able to view attached hyperlinks and read what others are thinking before and after they post their own writing. In this way students can link new understandings to their own learning as blogging “facilitates connections in ways that plain paper cannot” (Richardson, 2006, p. 340).

Implementation and Management of Classroom Blogs

Recognizing the potential of class blogs, I was able to gather together a small group of grade nine teachers willing to explore how blogging could engage their students to improve their written communication skills. After learning as much as we could about blogs and how to use them effectively, the project began in the second semester.

Matt’s two teachers set up and managed their classroom blogs a little differently. The Geography teacher set up the class blog in a way that she would see every post before it actually was put on the blog. She was concerned about what the students might write or that they would just “chat” with each other; this way she had an opportunity to also give some feedback before others could read what their classmates posted. This educator included hyperlinks (i.e., a YouTube video on a recent earthquake) and gadgets (e.g. photos, quotes, tips, etc.) that related to the topics they were learning about. Students were expected to view these embedded attachments before responding to the teacher prompts in their blog post. The Religion teacher, feeling a little more at ease with the Internet, set up her students so that they could not only read each others’ posts, but they were also able (and encouraged) to comment on what their peers wrote. She asked her students to write their post first and then read and comment on what classmates wrote. This teacher also gave viewing permission to the students’ parents and guardians to widen the audience. Like her colleague, she too, included hyperlinks and gadgets to scaffold the students’ learning and thinking before they wrote.
Both educators introduced the concept of blogging to their classes by visiting a variety of blogs, noting common characteristics and how posts were written, to help students become familiar with this genre. They both provided writing prompts to students to blog about. In Religion, instructions were generally given as follows:

*Using your notes from class, our discussions, and the research you have done, I would like you to post your first blog titled as "Love is......" In your blog please state your opinion of what you think love is and is not. Use all the resources available to you to support your opinion. Once you have posted, I would also like you to comment on some else's post. Do you agree or disagree with their opinion.*

In Geography, students were given some flexibility in that they had a choice of video clips (e.g. on natural disasters) to watch and were encouraged to blog about their initial thoughts and opinions. As the semester went on, students were asked to respond to specific questions. For example, after viewing Annie Leonard’s (2007), “The Story of Stuff”, they were asked, “What can you do to reduce the “stuff” in your life?” Students could read each other’s posts, but were not set up to comment on or respond to them.

It is significant to mention again that the goal of this project was to improve written communication skills; however, teachers were encouraged to focus on the students’ evidence of learning (or not) and how effectively they communicated their ideas, rather than their spelling and grammar. We all recognized however, that very poor spelling and grammar impedes one’s understanding of what the writer is trying to communicate.

The Impact of Blogging on Matt’s Written Communication and Motivation to Write

I collected data by gathering Matt’s twenty-one blog posts and seven posts where peers made reference to something Matt wrote. I also interviewed him after the project was over. I analyzed Matt’s writing by looking for aspects of the classroom blog that affected the communication of his thinking and ideas, as well as any indicators that motivated Matt to write. The interview questions are listed in Appendix A. Two distinct themes emerged in the interview: (1) there are physical challenges of writing on paper that disappear when using a computer and (2) the social nature of a class blog positively impacts thinking and writing.

My initial observation of Matt’s blog posts is the number of words he wrote. His very first post (in Geography) is sixty-four words long. Matt’s first post in Religion (written the next day) is only forty words, but he also wrote comments to three classmates (related to their posts), writing a total of 127 words. The next time students were asked to blog (two weeks later) Matt posted two entries in Geography, totaling 205 words, while in Religion, he wrote a total of 305 words—a number he never beats. See table below. The remainder of the totals ranged between 117 and 226. Because students were encouraged to comment on each others’ blogs in Religion, the numbers are always higher than in geography. Matt did not include any comments to peers in his last two posts in Religion, likely causing the decrease in numbers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of words</th>
<th>Geography</th>
<th>Religion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First entry</td>
<td>64 words</td>
<td>127 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second entry</td>
<td>205 words</td>
<td>305 words</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even though I did not have any paper pencil work of Matt’s to compare to his blog posts, I believe the number of words to be significant, as he considers himself to be a “fast typer”. He informed me that, “Blogging is a lot better because I could type as much as I want. With
blogging you can just go back and quickly erase and retype it quickly. The computer’s much faster.” In my conversation with Matt, he described the physical challenges he faces when he has to write. Having to form large letters takes Matt a long time to put on paper what he wants to say (he labeled himself a slow writer). Erasing and fixing a mistake is time consuming. Often he does not “have everything on his mind when he begins to write” so when he wants to change what he has written, he has to do a lot of erasing and then rewriting”. “It could be a big mess,” he explains. On the other hand, “when I write fast, it’s usually really messy …but you have to get things done on time.” Lastly, he admits that being a “big” writer makes him run out of room quickly; teachers do not give enough space sometimes. This is not an issue when blogging. Matt adamantly believes that he wrote more when blogging than when he was asked to write on paper.

The second opportunity to blog (in both subject areas) indicates a visible difference from Matt’s first attempts. Unlike his previous posts, every sentence (but one) in his second posts begins with a capital letter and ends with punctuation. I am not sure if Matt (and a few other students) was reminded that he was writing for school or if he noticed how most of his peers were communicating. In subsequent posts, Matt is not consistent in this area; he mostly uses end punctuation, whereas many of his sentences begin with a lowercase letter. Grammar was not a focus in this project, however, I was interested in knowing if he worried about spelling and grammar while blogging. He said he did not because “everyone has MSN or Facebook so they are probably used to seeing incorrect spelling; we can understand what we are saying.” He pointed out, however, that this was not the case when he was not blogging: “With paper you always have to watch constantly what you are going to write and punctuation and all that.” Matt agreed that when he blogged, his teachers seemed to look more at his thoughts and ideas rather than his spelling and grammar.

When reading Matt’s blog posts, it is evident that he is able to communicate thoughts and ideas to his readers. He does this through his writing after: (i) reflecting on the work the class is doing, (ii) viewing and reading the embedded supports in the class blog, and (iii) following his teachers’ prompts. For example, we see the type of judgements he makes when he responds to a film with the following observations: “Trevor helps his mom by taking all of her alcohol and dumping it down the sink because when she is stressed or something she gets drunk to help her problems but it makes everything worse. Its weird because trevors mom thinks everything will be better by what she is doing but she is making everything worse.” Clearly, the mother is making some bad decisions according to Matt. When he describes love as, “the meaning and promise of life. when you love someone you have to be loyal and confuble with the personne”, in an earlier blog post, we get an inkling of the values he has. As I continue reading, it is obvious that Matt does not seem hesitant to say what he thinks: “It is sad that computer stores sell chips but they over price and they make it so the chip wont fit in the computer!!!” His response to the film, Sea of Slaughter (CBC, 1990), begins with “I thin the slaughtering of the sea is very wrong!!!!!!” Matt also demonstrates his sensitivity with sentences like these: “im very worried that All of the animals will die” and “When people are hurt i want top help them and make sure they will be ok.” By the time I have read Matt’s entries over a number of times, I know some of his thoughts and ideas, but I also have some insight into the young man he is because of the voice that comes through the writing he has shared.

Furthermore, Matt’s blog contributions also make visible his misconceptions and areas of weakness. In one of his posts, he describes characteristics of the Appalachian Region and why it would be a good place to live. He recounts that there are a lot of mountains “mostly out in
Virginia”. The problem is that the class has been learning about the seven landform regions in Canada. Matt goes on to write that “about 23.6 million people live in 420 countries”. Plainly, the implication is that Matt needs some support and redirection to clear up his misunderstandings; this can happen soon after his post, instead of finding out later in an evaluation. Another blog post clearly demonstrates that Matt still has much to learn about critical literacy. He writes, “I like this film because its true nothing that is said in the film is fake everything the girl said was 100% right.” In this class, students were not encouraged to write to each other so I was not able to see how peers might respond to inaccurate information.

As I continued to reflect on Matt’s writing, I could not help but notice that the social nature of the class blog contributed to the amount and type of writing he did. As mentioned earlier, Matt writes more when he responds to what his peers have shared. Certainly, some of the writing Matt and his classmates did demonstrates that having an authentic audience is motivating. Shortly after Matt’s first post, one of his classmates affirms his work: “I agree with [Matt] about his idea of what love is.” This person goes on to elaborate on what Matt has written. This could well be the first time a classmate has not only responded to a piece of writing he has done, but also embellished his ideas—how motivating for a struggling adolescent learner! Would Matt not be inspired to continue to write knowing that his peers might be interested in what he has to say? A fellow learner states, “I agree with [Matt] that we need to take a stand and help these kids.” Yet another classmate mentions Matt’s name right in his blog: “You can run and get to high ground (like [Matt] said) and be safe”. There are even a few comments made by Matt and his peers explaining why they disagree with each other’s points. Matt has opportunities to explore not only his own ideas, but also the thinking of others; this option does not exist when he writes alone and only for the teacher.

Matt shared that blogs made an impact on his thinking before and after he blogged. He assessed that blogging was also better because “people could respond to you but if it were on paper, none of the students would check your paper and respond to it.” He enjoyed reading the other students’ blogs because he “got to see what kids’ opinions were. “You can read everyone’s feedback [re] what you write.” Clearly, Matt appreciated this aspect of the class blog. He confirmed that he always wrote his blog post first and then commented on what others had written. (This was the expected procedure in both classes.) Matt shared that “seeing what other people thought and having different opinions on things”, improved his writing: “Like I haven’t looked on the other side of the opinion, I just look at what I thought of.” He also felt that the gadgets and hyperlinks on the blogs helped him with his thinking and writing: “They helped us figure out what we wanted to write and give our opinions.”

Another possible implication of the social nature of blogging that may have impacted Matt’s writing is evident when he comments on what good writers some of his peers are. To one classmate he declares, “good job you must like to write alot its like a novel.” To another he admits, “I love your post” and suggests, “be a writer”. Reading what other students post gives Matt several opportunities to see how “strong” writers express their thoughts and ideas. It is too early in the process and too few opportunities to blog were given in the semester, to see any evidence that reading classmates’ posts improved the quality of Matt’s writing. I can only speculate that this practice would benefit Matt’s written communication skills, given frequent opportunities and support.
Reflections on What I Have Learned

Through this inquiry, Matt demonstrated to me that blogging positively impacted the written communication of his ideas and his motivation to write. Even though Matt gave me the sense he enjoys school, I had no idea how much he struggled as a writer. His teachers describe him as an enthusiastic student with inconsistent work habits, but good listening skills. Matt is an “identified” student in the area of communication. (Weber & Bennett, 1999) In Matt’s case, this means that he has a learning disability which requires support in the areas of speaking, writing, and spelling. It seems that any type of writing is a challenge for Matt. I have a better understanding of the physical challenges Matt faces when he has to put pen to paper. Not only does he have to think about what the teacher has asked him to do, but he also has to negotiate the large letters he creates and the physical space for writing. Most of these challenges disappear when he types. I feel that being able to write on a computer and to be part of a social network where fellow students read and commented on his work, created an environment where Matt was on a more level playing field with his peers. Even though he was only given ten opportunities to blog in class, I saw evidence that he was more motivated to write in this genre, if only because he could use a computer. Graham and Perin (2007) found that, “word processing equipment has a consistently positive impact on writing quality” (p. 17).

Another motivating factor of participating in a class blog on Matt is the social nature of this genre. It was obvious from our conversation that Matt enjoyed reading what his peers post and appreciated the opportunity to comment if he wished. Every time he responded to the thinking of his peers, his posts were longer. He shared that his classmates helped him to see other viewpoints; they responded to what he wrote. The fact that Matt posted an entry every time the class was asked to write about a specific topic indicates his commitment to blogging as well. For a student with inconsistent work habits, completing all assignments is a challenge. Like Ellison and Wu (2008), I want to “hypothesize that students might attend more carefully to online writing opportunities as opposed to writing submitted to a teacher” (p. 106). Generally, all student work is handed in to and read only by the teacher. Learners will put in more effort to improve all aspects of their writing when they understand that an authentic audience, (not just the teacher) will read what they write. In one of the classrooms when the students were blogging a young lady was overheard saying she wanted to do a good job because she knew other students were going to see her writing. Richardson (2006) believes that students take ownership of their writing when they know it is going to be published. Matt learned quickly that his classmates would be reading his posts and so he wanted his writing to accurately express what he was thinking and feeling in a manner that would encourage the audience to read and then respond to his entries. We all write differently knowing that our peers will be seeing our work.

Technology provides access to a lot of information. Sawmiller (2010) suggests that having all this information at students’ fingertips can give them a sense of empowerment. For example, being exposed to more information bolsters the background knowledge of students (Zawilinski, 2009). Alongside what is already happening in the classroom, the blogs increased Matt’s exposure to information through the attached hyperlinks and gadgets attached to the blogs and through reading fellow students’ posts. Having prior knowledge helps learners think more deeply about the topic and puts students in a better position to write. Access to more information encourages students to become more analytical and critical (Ellison & Wu, 2008; Oravec, 2002); two essential skills in a world overloaded with information.

The various components of participating in a blogging community invited Matt to be an active learner. Blogging encourages reading, viewing, responding, and rethinking, unlike
passively sitting during a lecture style lesson. Being active is good for all students, but is especially essential for struggling learners like Matt.

Blogging also allowed Matt to develop a unique writing voice (Glogowski, 2008; Oravec, 2002). Having the opportunity to read all of Matt’s posts gave me some insight into his personality. He shared beliefs and emotions about what he saw, heard and read. He let the reader know when he agreed or disagreed with various text. His writing seemed to be less about getting a grade and more about letting the reader know what he thought.

**Final Thoughts and Questions to Explore**

Classroom blogs can have a positive impact on struggling learners’ written communication of ideas and motivation to write. However, a lot of work needs to be done in order to effectively use blogs in the classroom. Zawilinski (2009) reminds us that, “sound instructional techniques must be developed and practiced in order to achieve increased student learning” (p. 116). The teachers and I took a semester to familiarize ourselves with blogs and how to set them up for a classroom. Even so, we barely scratched the surface of the potential of classroom blogging; it was a completely new experience for all those involved. Analyzing Matt’s blog posts gave me some insights into his learning process; I can only predict that working more with classroom blogs would create opportunities for all types of communication (e.g. student responding to teacher’s probing questions, students writing to a “virtual expert”, students synthesizing and summarizing a variety of text, teachers modeling critical thinking, etc.). Glogowski (2008) confirms that much needs to be worked through by both teachers and students in order to become a community of bloggers and writers. For example, students need to learn how to give effective feedback to each other. Matt’s statements like “I agree/disagree”, “good point”, and “I love your post” are a beginning and are necessary, but do not do much to enhance ongoing learning. This type of motivation will not last or provide the support students need to improve the quality of their writing. The full potential of classroom blogs still needs to be learned and experienced.

Even though I believe that there is often too narrow a structure around writing tasks in schools, teachers and students require some structure around blogs because it is still a relatively new genre in classrooms. For example, depending on the context and purpose of the classroom blog, which traits (e.g. voice, ideas, conventions, etc.) are conducive to a meaningful and effective post? What is the difference between the social writing students do on MSN and Facebook compared to blogging in the classroom? We need to honour all forms of writing students do; however, learners must understand the different purposes of written communication and the connection to the audience, so they can make appropriate decisions when setting out to write.

More research is needed around how blogging can actually improve the quality of high school students’ written communication. I was not able to measure differences in Matt’s writing from such a small sample. I did not have access to any of Matt’s hand constructed writing to make comparisons to his blog posts. After this project, I am left wondering what the specific cognitive demands of different blogging tasks are and how they translate into blog posts. How often should students blog in order to create a valuable learning community that supports and improves written communication? How should teachers respond to their students’ blog posts? What are effective teacher prompts that motivate students to keep on writing and are prompts necessary? What does blogging look like in different disciplines? There is still much to explore in the genre of blogs in the classroom.
Finally, although blogging has immense potential to improve student writing, blogging alone will not transform Matt into a “strong writer”. Blogging is one of a variety of tools which provide the means of writing; teachers and their students have to construct the meaning (Luehmann & Frink, 2009). Blogs in the classroom are not a panacea, but rather one of the mixes of interventions that educators need to develop to meet their students’ needs to become proficient and confident writers.

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Appendix A
Interview Questions

1. What is writing normally like for you?
2. Tell me how blogging made you feel compared to when you had to write?
3. Did blogging improve your writing? How so?
4. How did you enjoy reading the other students’ blogs?
5. What are the advantages of blogging?
6. Both teachers included gadgets and hyperlinks on the blog. Did these things help you with your thinking and writing? Can you tell me how?
7. Did you worry about things like spelling and grammar?
8. Can you think of anything else you could tell me that was different about blogging compared to all the writing you have to do in all your other classes?
9. Do you think you wrote more in your blogs than when you had to write on paper?