



Educational blogs and their effects on pupils' writing

Myra Barrs and Sarah Horrocks



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1. Introduction

'Digital literacy gives writing a whole new dimension which primary children must be exposed to; it is, after all, their future.' (Year 3 teacher)

'Our blog is a place where you can write, watch and learn new things that you never knew.' (Year 6 pupil)

Many schools are launching school blogs as a way of developing their online profiles and involving pupils in digital writing. Blogs are used in many different ways. They are sometimes used as a way of sharing class activities with pupils' family members and caregivers, or as a showcase for pupils' writing – a kind of online school magazine with a wider audience. They can be used as 'work blogs', a way of establishing ongoing learning dialogues with pupils, and sometimes they include personal journal spaces for individuals. The extent to which pupils are involved in organising the blog and posting their contributions differs, and so does the extent of their personal involvement. Sometimes pupils write their blog-posts only in school time, sometimes they blog and post from home – this raises issues about access to computers and the internet. The extent of teachers' contributions and the control they choose to exercise over blog content also differ.



This research study developed as a result of a small survey¹ carried out in three schools in Lambeth in South London in 2012. The survey was part of a scoping paper carried out for London Connected Learning Centre (formerly Lambeth City Learning Centre) which reviewed general issues about educational blogging and gathered information about how schools can set up and manage blogs. It also reviewed what was known about the impact of school blogs on pupils' writing. This survey revealed that the blogging practices across the schools that took part in the survey were very different, but all of the teachers interviewed were excited by the response of their pupils to blogging and its effect on their attitudes to writing.

At the moment, very little is known about whether there are differences between pupils' digital writing and their regular school writing on paper. There is some evidence to suggest that blogging increases pupils' interest and enthusiasm for writing (see the recent survey: *The state of educational blogging*² – The Edublogger, 2012), but little attention has been paid to its effects on the quality of writing in general, about its potential for developing pupils' writing in new directions, or about the ways in which teachers frame tasks for blogging and respond to pupils' writing on class blogs. The differences between pupils' writing on the class blog and their writing in their books were the main points of interest guiding this research investigation.

¹ The findings of this survey are unpublished: it was conducted for internal purposes only

² <http://theedublogger.com/2012/07/26/the-state-of-educational-blogging-in-2012/>



1.1 Aims and methods

The primary aim of this study was to explore the differences in pupils' writing on blogs compared to their other writing. The secondary aims were to investigate the potential for using blogging to develop pupils' writing skills and to identify good practice in blogging, as well as the elements that supported (or hindered) effective use of blogging to further writing skills.

1.1.1 The methods

In order to address these aims, the study adopted a mixed-methods approach relying largely on qualitative data collection and analysis. The study focused on four primary school classes (in three different London schools) over a period of six months. All the participating class teachers had ICT expertise and three were ICT subject leaders. All but one had been blogging with their classes for between one and two years.

Throughout the project the researchers worked closely with teachers both to gather and reflect on the data and the emergent findings. At a formal level, three meetings were held over the course of the project. In these meetings the participants:

- shared the main aims and assumptions of the project (for example, assumptions about educational blogging; how school blogging is different from personal blogging at home; blogging as a new way of developing writing; blogging as a new approach to teaching and learning; how educational blogging is like or unlike other social media; and how this affects the writing that appears in class blogs)
- discussed emerging evidence and interim findings
- reflected on what they had learned from their involvement and how it had influenced their classroom practice.

All four teachers and all pupils in the four classes were invited to respond to questionnaires at the beginning and the end of the project. An international group was also invited to complete an online questionnaire on blogging and writing (there were 30 respondents to this survey from Australia, Canada, the USA and the UK).

All four classes held discussions about the differences between writing on the blog and writing on paper; their views were documented and became part of the data.

In order to discuss pupils' progress in writing we also needed to discuss the models of writing that their teachers were working with and to ask the question: 'What makes writing good?' The teachers all contributed a brief written reply to this question and the pupils responded to a short survey.

1.1.2 Case studies

The overarching design frame of the research work was based on case studies, but within this structure a range of data collection methods was used by both teachers and researchers. The participation of teachers was a vital component of the design and their role was both researcher/data collector as well as participant. Teachers were closely involved in the progress of the investigation. The aims, approaches and research findings as they developed were shared on the project blog and through meetings with the project teachers at three points in the project: teachers' responses became part of the evidence. Their observations and records were essential contributions to the data.



The case studies were of particular pupils, a total of three from each of the four classes, resulting in 12 case studies. Four of these are reported here; the names of pupils have been changed to protect their anonymity. These four have been selected because they represent a range of ages (Years 3, 4 and 6), a mix of boys and girls and a range of abilities (as judged by performance and improvement in reading and writing scores over the project timescale). Each case study drew upon the same data collection methods: interviews with both case study pupils and teachers; structured and unstructured observations (continuous, unstructured observation from classroom teachers and five structured observations conducted by the researchers); and the collection and analysis of the case study pupils' blog writing and writing in their literacy books.

In addition, the teachers provided assessments of pupils' writing progress in relation to National Curriculum criteria both before and after the project, and more qualitative assessments on the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) Writing Scale 2 at the end of the project.

Interviews were conducted with all case study pupils and their teachers after the first and second questionnaires; these touched upon responses given in the surveys.

1.2 The structure of this report

This report does not follow the traditional research format (presentation of the literature, findings, discussion etc.) but instead pulls together elements from each in a series of thematic discussions. Each chapter states explicitly the data sources that have been used to underpin the discussion.

Throughout the report the authors weave together their professional experience, elements of the literature and materials which already exist in this field, and the evidence and data from the research investigation. The result is a discursive document which explores blogging in classrooms today and the differences between pupils' writing in blogs and their writing in books.



“...pupils need to be able to think critically about the information they encounter online and about how they create and present their own information for a public audience.”

2. Digital literacies and school blogging

This chapter explores the digital literacy skills, understanding and thinking which pupils require to become successful bloggers. Throughout this discussion, three sources of information are used:

- the authors' experience and expertise in advising and leading schools in the use of digital technologies
- the findings from the research project
- the contributions of authors who have written explicitly about digital literacies and digital writing in education.

2.1 Defining digital literacy

Digital literacy (or digital literacies) is a contested term with multiple definitions. Instead of looking for one definition it is perhaps more useful to look for commonalities between definitions. The 2014 English computing curriculum includes a purpose statement about pupils becoming digitally literate: '[pupils should be] able to use, and express themselves and develop their ideas through, information and communication technology – at a level suitable for the future workplace and as active participants in a digital world', (DfE, *The National Curriculum in England*, September 2013, page 178). Peter Twining, a member of the original Chartered Institute for IT (known as BSC) and the Royal Association of Engineers (RAEng) drafting group which wrote the first iteration of the new computing curriculum, defines being digitally literate as: 'being an intelligent user of new technology [...] it would encompass understanding how technology impacts on society, eSafety, and how to use technology effectively (e.g. searching the internet)' (Twining, 2012). Meanwhile Doug Belshaw identified eight elements of digital literacies: 'cultural, cognitive, constructive, communicative, confident, creative, critical and civic' (Belshaw, 2012).

The notion of criticality is central to the views of digital literacy discussed above. As well as being able to use digital tools effectively (for example using the blogging platform confidently to post blogs or being able to upload photographs and videos and use hyperlinks), pupils need to be able to think critically about the information they encounter online and about how they create and present their own information for a public audience. They need to know how to behave safely online and to think about the kinds of personal information which is appropriate to post on a blog. They need to learn the conventions of commenting on other people's blogs and to understand about copyright in relation to photos, videos and others' writing when they make their own posts.

Elements of this are reflected in some of the comments from pupils in this study. These Year 4 pupils had been involved in many whole-class discussions with their teacher about e-safety aspects of their blog:

'We listen to Miss M so we know how to be safe. No one puts names and photos. We know people could be pretending to be other people.'

'I'm happy to share my goals, but I would mind about sharing something about my family on the internet.'

'It's going to be seen so we should be careful about what we post but also make it exciting.'



2.2 School blogging

This next section is concerned with exploring some of the reasons for blogging and the benefits that are associated with blogging as a form of writing in education. This section draws predominantly on wider literature but also on the data collected during this investigation.



2.2.1 Greater opportunity to write

DeVoss et al. define digital writing as 'compositions created with and oftentimes for reading or viewing on, a computer or other device which is connected to the Internet' (2010). Through email, texting and online writing, new forms of writing are emerging. Often these are more conversational forms – so online writing can be more spontaneous, personal and informal, closer to speech. There can be more use of abbreviations and (in texting) more use of non-alphabetic symbols. At the same time there can be a range of different registers in online writing – with some writing remaining formal and 'public' in character.

There are more fundamental differences in the possibilities offered by online writing. Danielle Nicole DeVoss, in a keynote address to the National Writing Project in the USA, suggested that digital writing is:

- networked (i.e. shared, collaborative)
- multimodal (it can include pictures, sound, moving images)
- remixed (it can rework existing texts, include clips from other media texts, and create new texts by juxtaposing these excerpts with the author's own text). (DeVoss, 2009)

DeVoss also pointed to the need for critical thinking in reading online writing – because of the possibility of photographs being doctored and writing being posted anonymously, readers must be made aware of the need to gauge credibility and accuracy in all digital media (DeVoss, 2009).

Pupils in our study showed an appreciation of creating multimodal texts. One eight-year-old said: 'When someone uses a video or photos they express themselves.' When asked about including photographs in her blog posts, an older pupil said:

'Sometimes it helps because pictures help you if you are stuck [for ideas]. I feel looking at a picture you can put more detail in. It's about seeing it.'

Another Year 6 pupil said: 'Sometimes photos help you see the topic of your writing.'

Blog writing is governed by a different set of rules from writing in books, and this may be part of the attraction of blogging for pupils. This impression that the blog provides an area where communication is more open-ended, more informal and more democratic is borne out by a more detailed examination of class blogs.



“...one of the main benefits of blogging was that it provided a way of motivating pupils to write for a wider audience.”

2.2.2 Social media, social networking and the opportunity to write

School blogging has helped to transform the business of writing, but we should acknowledge that it is also part of a general increase in writing that has come about through the huge growth, over the past few years, in email, texting, comments on webpages, wikis and social media such as Twitter and Facebook. Of all these, blogging is potentially the most exciting for educational purposes because of its openness, flexibility and range.

School blogs are one example of social media. They involve posting writing to the internet and are interactive in nature. They are sometimes seen as similar to other online communities and social networks. Pupils may perceive their contributions to class blogs as being analogous to their postings on social network sites such as Facebook; after all, both are ways of showcasing achievements and communicating with wider audiences, and writing in both contexts can be informal and conversational. The difference is that educational blogging happens in a school context and for educational purposes, rather than just for social purposes. We believe that social interaction is an important and motivating feature, but school/class blogs are spaces for learning.

Digital writing can draw on many resources; it can be multimodal and include pictures, sound and moving images. This creates exciting possibilities; there are all kinds of ways of conveying and amplifying what the writer wants to say. Although digital technology is changing literacy – reading as well as writing – that does not mean that it is less important to focus on what it is that makes writing powerful as a means of developing thoughts, expressing meanings and sharing ideas. Eidman-Aadah of the USA's National Writing Project emphasised this in an interview entitled 'Re-envisioning writing for a networked age':

'The writing doesn't get any easier just because we are not doing it with a pen and paper. Even when mechanical creation is easy, it's so important to slow oneself down and to take one's text quite seriously. It's not about how pretty or glossy the final product is. If we don't hold on to that in writing instruction – the search for meaning and communication in relation to context, purpose and audience – then we will lose a tremendous thing.' (Eidman-Aadah, 2012)

2.2.3 Reaching a wide audience

One of the main reasons teachers begin blogging with their classes is because of the wide audience that this creates for pupils' writing. When teachers talk about the benefits of blogging they are inclined to focus on the importance of audience – giving pupils a wider audience for their writing and their school activities. Teachers' responses to a 2012 Edublogs survey focused above all on the motivation for writing that blogs can provide:

'Blogging provides an authentic educational experience, where what they write is not only seen and commented on by their teacher, but by their peers and the "public". For most pupils, it's a bit of extra motivation knowing their peers will see their work.' (The Edublogger, 2012)

The four teachers involved in this research project all felt that one of the main benefits of blogging was that it provided a way of motivating pupils to write for a wider audience. In the questionnaires they completed at the beginning of the project, two teachers ranked this as the most important benefit, and two as the second most important (after 'a way of showcasing pupils' writing/school work').



Most pupils also thought that having a big audience was one of the main things they liked about blogging:

'The blog is good because you're not just writing for your teacher, you're writing for the world.'

'I like showing it to a big audience best, because they can comment and see what I've done and what I've done good.'

'You really feel like an author on the blog because everyone is reading your writing and it makes you feel proud.'

'On the blog there is a thing called QuadBlogging where you can connect to other schools and you can see their work and they can see your work.'

Teachers developed pupils' understanding of the global audience for the blog by using the statistics page. In a lesson in one Year 4 class, the pupils were learning how to read the blog statistics. They understood the statistical breakdown, which showed the numbers of countries and numbers of people who had visited the blog. They saw how many people had looked at the blog since September 2012, and where they were based – the countries represented included the UK, the USA, the Netherlands, the Philippines and the United Arab Emirates. There was great excitement in the class when they realised how many countries had been viewing their work. Similarly in another class (Year 6) the pupils were asked to comment on what they found interesting in the statistics. Their discussion focused on the numbers of people from different countries who had been looking at the blog. As a class they discussed these figures and in one class the teacher wrote a post on the blog to draw class attention to the fact they had reached a milestone:

'Our blog has reached the magnificent, half-millennium milestone of 500 visitors! If you click on the ClustrMaps icon on the right-hand column you'll see that we have had people reading our blog from as far away as Peru, Australia, Egypt and India as well as visitors from all over the UK, from Newcastle to Norfolk and Dundee to Gwynedd.'

However, not all the comments expressed in interviews with pupils about writing for a global audience were positive. One teacher described such reservations as 'the flipside of audience'.

The comments of some pupils suggest that the idea of such a big audience could induce anxiety and stress:

'I check it a million times (e.g. for spelling mistakes) because everyone in the world will see it. It makes me nervous – are they going to like it or not.'

'On the blog it's quite weird, you don't know if it's good enough.'

'Sometimes I'd prefer not to show my writing to everybody.'

Greater access and exposure to audiences closer to home should also not be overlooked. Several pupils valued the fact that their families and friends could see their work on the class blog:

'Most of all I like showing my family what we are doing in school.'



'My mum sees what we do at school, what our topic is.'

'My mum said that she's happy that I've found something I've glued on. I often write my own stuff. I show as many people as I can – neighbours, aunts. They find it interesting how other people are writing.'

'I don't live with my dad but he can go on the blog and looks at what I've been doing. If there's friends in other countries like my friend in Nepal, I think it's really nice. They can see what you do and how it's different to their country.'

Teachers also remarked on the positive effect of pupils being able to develop their speaking and listening and performance skills through the blog. One teacher commented:

'It's somewhere you can show off your work apart from assemblies and displays. For example we'll video the Galileo speeches. The blog really helps with speaking and listening (e.g. when we do drama, radio adverts). The aspect of performance means the children up their game and it improves their communication. Just performing to each other in the class, you wouldn't get such quality from them.'

In writing, teachers felt that it made a great deal of difference for pupils to be able to see each other's work, comment on it and – through this window on the work of the rest of the class (and of other classes) – gain ideas and become more aware of possibilities for writing.

Pupils echoed these sentiments:

'We can read other people's work and get inspiration.'

'It's very interesting to see others' ideas and what they think. You can learn from it. They might do something you didn't know. You can keep a mental note in your head to do something like they've done, at the same time as keeping it your own.'

'You can see how people put their points of view, you can take note of ideas.'

There was also evidence from our research that suggested that the greater sense of audience supported pupils to become more critically aware of the differences in writing and blogging styles. Some classes regularly read blogs from other schools, such as partner schools, in QuadBlogging, and they were occasionally critical of the approaches to blogging in these schools. A pupil commented: 'Their blogs are less strict than ours... lots of pictures of cute rabbits. Maybe it's because our blog is assessed.'

2.2.4 The effect of blogging on within-class relationships

Blogging in class has the potential to change and develop the relationships between pupils and between pupils and the teacher.

Regularly reading the blogs of the classes participating in this project has introduced the researchers to online communities where teachers and pupils are all contributing to the blog, commenting on blog posts, and often replying to each other. There is a sense of sharing and community in some blogs that reflects the fact that this kind of communication was not all channelled through the teacher, as it generally is in class discussion, for instance. Reading the blogs gave the impression



of classes where there was a new dimension in place – a kind of parallel online class with slightly different ways of relating.

Teachers were asked whether they were getting to know their classes in a different way through blogging. Their comments included:

'I have more of an insight into what the children enjoy at home and what switches them on, their personal interests and what they enjoy about their peers, through seeing the comments they make on their peers.'

'Blogging has made a better relationship because it's a better means of communicating. It's not the same as traditional writing, or like speaking, it's good fun.'

'When they started to write their own posts they were happy to tell you things about their interests: pets, favourite films that you don't get the chance to talk to them about, e.g. you find out about a child's passion for Hitchcock films or that someone has lots of dogs. It gives you something to talk about. There's no room for this in a literacy book.'

In some cases this relationship developed during the course of the project, as one teacher explained:

'I have blogged with my class all year so I think the relationship has been improved because of this from September. However, the project has made the blog more educational and more meaningful. Before they were posting about their weekends but only certain children were using the blog in their own time. The project has meant that all the children in the class have a voice, and therefore I feel I know them all better. They love when I comment on their work and posts and we have a good dialogue, improving rapport between myself and the children.'

This teacher habitually commented fully in pupils' literacy books and pupils often wrote back in response to her comments. A very positive and supportive way of giving feedback, the interactive approach transferred easily onto the class blog, which allowed these relationships to be developed further online.

As these responses from teachers suggest, one big difference created by the blogs was the ease with which pupils could bring their home lives into the classroom and share more of their interests and experiences. They could also post from home – though this practice was more prevalent in some classrooms than in others:

'I like the blog because you can do it at home whenever you want.'

'We can go on the blog at home because you just have to log in on the website and you can write more when you're not at school.'

Comments on blog postings are central to the relationships between teachers and pupils, and between pupils. One teacher felt that she had not fully taken advantage of the comment function on the blog, though she had encouraged pupils to do so:

'I don't think that blogging has changed my relationship with my class, mainly due to the fact I have not used commenting/feedback as I perhaps should have been. I am sure I will though. No doubt my comments will be less formal on the blog, despite the fact that more people will be able to see them, they won't be focusing on levels and targets as in the books.'



This teacher went on to make clear why her comments on the blog would be likely to be very different from the way she commented in pupils' books, stating: 'often these book comments are not always for the children as I usually talk to the child individually, but to show learning moving on to management/Ofsted).'

Pupils' comments to each other were sometimes detailed, and this was a feature of blog-writing that teachers often spent considerable time on, encouraging comments which gave useful feedback to the writer. One pupil commented about a poem which dealt with the theft of the Mona Lisa:

'I found this very cool because you have gone beyond thinking and found out some information on what happened to the painting, but not only did you do that you have told us what happened to it and how it got taken through a poem! I must say this is very good.' In response to a different poem another pupil wrote: *'I really like this, you made it rhyme while still making it make sense, which is something people find hard. Great job!'*

Most pupils appreciated receiving comments on their work and it was definitely one of the features of blogging which added to the sense of an active online community. Henry Jenkins and colleagues call this 'participatory culture':

'Participatory culture shifts the focus of literacy from one of individual expression to community involvement. The new literacies almost all involve social skills developed through collaboration and networking.' (Jenkins, 2006)



3. Making blogging work: creating a context

Practice in blogging in the four project classrooms differed. We were interested in these differences and particularly in what made for good practice in blogging – that is to say the kind of practice that seemed to result in particularly interesting writing on the blog from a wide range of pupils. What pupils are able to do and the progress that they make are often closely bound up with the opportunities that teachers provide. In this research, therefore, there was a dual focus – on teaching as well as learning. One of the aims of this project was to consider how pupils' writing on blogs could best be supported, and to work out which kinds of interventions seemed to be most effective.



This chapter focuses on the context required in order for blogging to work: the fundamental building blocks that good practice suggests. Again, a range of evidence sources have been drawn upon including our own professional judgement and online resources where appropriate.

3.1 Setting up class blogs

Our experience of helping schools to set up class blogs leads us to suggest that teachers' choice of blogging platform and the way they plan the structure of the class blog has an impact on the way pupils are able to become involved in blogging. The teachers in our study had been blogging for differing amounts of time and considered their blogging practice to be

a continual process of learning and refinement. As they became more experienced and reflective about class blogging, they appreciated the features and limitations of the platforms they were using.

Schools use a number of different platforms and services to create blogs. Many schools in the UK use free blogging tools such as WordPress,³ Blogger⁴ and Kidblog⁵ to create class or individual blogs which are managed by class teachers, and which are usually viewed through links on a school website. Such free services enable schools to work within a template to create a blog site 'hosted' by the service provider. These require little technical expertise and do not make any demands on schools' technical infrastructure. All of the schools in the project used a Wordpress.com based platform, with one school using Wordpress within a Primary Blogger⁶ service. Other options available to schools include services such as Edublog⁷ or The School Bloggers, which, like Kidblog, allow for the creation of linked class and individual pupil blogs with options to create private areas within a public site. Some of these services charge fees but include access to substantial advice, guidance and technical support. In the authors' experience, UK schools tend to opt for the free services. Some teachers use Edmodo,⁸ Google Apps,⁹ wikis¹⁰ or a virtual learning environment¹¹ (VLE) to create blogs.

³ <http://wordpress.com/>

⁴ <http://www.blogger.com>

⁵ <http://kidblog.org/home/>

⁶ <http://primaryblogger.co.uk/>

⁷ <http://edublogs.org/>

⁸ <https://www.edmodo.com/>

⁹ <http://www.google.com/enterprise/apps/education/>

¹⁰ a database that can be edited by users

¹¹ an online e-learning mode of delivering educational content



Anecdotal evidence would suggest pupils can find it very motivating to have their own individual blog spaces. The ability to set up separate spaces and individual mini-blogs within the blog is a feature which offers greater opportunities for a class blog and which solves the issue of how to have a learning space as well as more personal pupil journal spaces. Different platforms offer various solutions in terms of how to do this. The teacher responses to the web-based survey highlighted differences between school blogs in the UK and other English-speaking countries. Teachers who responded to the survey from schools in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the US encouraged more use of individual blogs, whilst UK schools seemed to focus on a general class blog into which everyone could contribute.

During the project meetings with the teachers involved in this study, the teachers talked about their increased understanding of how the structure and functions of the blog affected what the class did and how the 'look' of a blog contributed to its clarity and readability. For example, the project group noticed that using features such as archives, categories and tags would have helped significantly with navigation of their blogs. Without these, finding specific posts to reflect on progress was hard for the teachers and for the researchers. One teacher used the 'Author Archive' function as a way to find specific pupils' work, but this was used inconsistently.

Most blogging platforms have useful guidance on how to set up users. For example WordPress provides advice on setting up blog roles and responsibilities within its help pages¹² and Edublogs has very helpful and detailed guidance for teachers on how to set up a class blog.¹³

3.2 Access to computers

Easy access to computers is an important factor for educational blogging. The study highlighted a number of practices around physical access to computers that either hindered or facilitated blog-writing activities. For example, if a class has to move to an ICT suite then this can impact on the amount of time available for writing.

The findings from the online survey showed that in schools in other English-speaking countries, access to computers within classrooms did not seem to be a problem. An Australian teacher noted: 'Easy, we are on a 1:1 laptop program.' Responding to the question about differences between writing in books and writing on the blog, the same teacher said: 'Not sure this applies in Australia [as] we don't use many written books any more.' The US and Canadian teachers also seemed to suggest that pupils having inadequate keyboard skills or access to computers was not a challenge, but this was not the case in the London project schools. The use of ICT suites in English schools seems to have persisted despite the huge investment made in education technologies in past decades. Multiple demands on the computers in these rooms mean that pupils do not have the access to technology needed for computing-specific activities, practising skills or for technology-enhanced learning across all curriculum areas.

During a whole-class discussion Year 4 pupils had clear views about the differences between working in the classroom and in the ICT suite, commenting:

'In the class it's quieter than in the ICT suite.'

'Maybe we rush [in the ICT suite] because we have less time.'

'When we do it in the ICT suite we are excited as it's only once a week and people get silly.'

¹² <http://en.support.wordpress.com/user-roles/>

¹³ <http://theedublogger.com/2010/01/05/week-1-create-a-class-blog/>



“...the use of ICT suites seemed to be holding back developments in blog-writing”

Interestingly, among the schools and classes that took part in this study, only one of the four participating classes had permanent computers in the classroom. This enabled the teacher to incorporate blogging into his guided reading sessions or other class-based activities. The teacher saw this as a real advantage, not least because it enabled him to moderate pupils' blog posts through the week rather than in one go. Although the pupils in the classroom with six computers had no additional timetabled provision for blogging, they had a lot more informal access time within the school day. Interviews undertaken as part of the study and observations by the researchers showed that the use of ICT suites seemed to be holding back developments in blog-writing, and by the end of the project teachers were actively considering the possibility of using iPads in the classroom as an alternative or an extra means of providing access to computers, even though tablet devices are not usually the best device for extended writing because of the size and nature of the keyboard.

3.3 Automaticity

From the earliest discussions with project teachers, the question of keyboard skills arose in relation to pupils' writing on blogs. Observations and discussions in classrooms also identified that for many pupils the question of which was easier, typing or handwriting, influenced their views about writing inside or outside the blog. Younger pupils were generally not as used to typing as older pupils and this influenced what they were able to write in blogging sessions; some older pupils who found typing easier than handwriting were still not always typing fluently.

There is a broad range of literature in education about automaticity (sometimes called fluency). There is also an interesting (and continuing) discussion about the role that automaticity plays in writing progress and how far (and at what ages) pupils are likely to achieve automaticity in their handwriting or on the keyboard. This is not just a matter of the advantages of speed-writing: pupils' ability to read their own writing more objectively and to be aware of its features can be helped if it is made more visible to them – for instance improving handwriting can also have the effect of making the content of the writing, and any errors in the writing, clearer and easier to revise for the writer.

An emerging programme of research by Medwell and Wray (2013) at Warwick University considers the relationship between automaticity in handwriting and composition. The researchers observed that handwriting, and in particular orthographic-motor integration (automaticity of letter production), appeared to play a role in facilitating higher-order composing processes by freeing up working memory to deal with the complex tasks of planning, organising, revising and regulating the production of text. In this way, automatic handwriting facilitates written composition. Similarly, Lisa Neilson, director of digital literacy and citizenship at the New York City Department of Education, suggests that: 'with typing we are freed from the slowness of handwriting, finally allowing us to get our ideas down at the speed of thought' (Neilson, 2011).

Getting better at any skill involves practice. The following passage from a seminal text on learning to read is a clear explanation of how learners acquire fluency and accuracy in reading, through 'using what they've got' to practise reading:

'The only way for a novice to gain proficiency is to practise the skill, using whatever resources he or she commands. Nothing else suffices in the long run, because acts of orchestration and coordination are functions of the brain that apparently can be learned only through repeated attempts to perform them. Learners may want to concentrate on different aspects of the action at times (e.g. the fluency OR the accuracy), and they may limit their ambitions at first, but practising the action is what counts.' (Bussis et al., 1985, p. 68)



Even in English schools where pupils are introduced to keyboard skills – for instance through programmes such as the BBC Dance Mat Typing¹⁴ or 2Type¹⁵ – they rarely have sufficient access to computers to get daily keyboard practice. Access is a perennial issue in blogging; three of the classes in this project did most of their blogging in the schools' ICT suites. As we have already mentioned, this greatly limited their opportunities for blogging and also meant that they had very few opportunities to develop and practise their keyboard skills.

In general it seemed that younger pupils found typing on the blog more difficult than handwriting. When researchers observed the Year 3 pupils in blogging sessions their typing was slow and tentative, often characterised as 'hunt and peck' typing. This slowed them up and was frustrating, especially if they were working with a partner who had to wait for them to find the right keys. Older pupils, however, often preferred typing, even if they were quicker at handwriting. Three Year 6 pupils commented:

'On the blog it's easier to write for me because when I type my hand doesn't ache.'

'I prefer the blog because the pen hurts my hand... I guess I just like the blog better and I like typing. I'm quicker at writing (with pen), but I like typing better.'

'A pen is easier but there's not much difference. I learned to type in Year 3. I can type without looking at the keyboard.'

Fluent typing is important if pupils are to be able to engage effectively in blogging, and unfortunately this issue of learning to type is still a contested one in educational circles. There is no reference to the importance of learning to type in the official curriculum, and no agreement about when pupils might learn to type. Yet the teachers in this project felt that their pupils were held back in their blogging because of their lack of some basic instruction and lack of opportunities to practise typing, and they suggested that the project might make recommendations about this.

¹⁴ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/typing/>

¹⁵ <https://www.2simple.com/2type/>



4. The case studies

One of the main aims of this project was to explore the differences between pupils' writing on the class blogs and their writing in their books. The pupil case studies shed light on this issue. The evidence for these case studies was taken from the analysis of class blogs, samples of online and offline writing, interviews with pupils and teachers and observation of pupils in both classrooms and ICT suites.

The study included twelve case study pupils across the four schools. Four of the case studies are reported here in detail because they best highlight the findings presented across all twelve studies. The case study pupils reported on are from Years 3, 4 and 6. Their names have been changed in the interests of anonymity.

This chapter follows the progress of these four children and gives detailed pictures of them as writers, both in their books and in their blog entries. Their case studies often refer to the classroom contexts in which they are working and thus provide an overview of some of the practices associated with writing and blogging in the participating schools.

Case Study 1

Isaac, a Year 3 boy

Unlike the other classes in this project, Isaac's class began blogging only in January 2013, at the beginning of the project. The teacher was an ICT subject leader but was new to blogging. When the class began blogging at the beginning of the term their posts were very brief. In order to work on the blog they had to move into the ICT suite, where only half of the class could work at a time. This meant that they lost momentum. In the first session observed, on moving into the ICT suite they found it hard to get started on the blog. They were working in pairs which meant that one of the pair was not typing and in several pairs this pupil was unengaged. However, by the end of the project pupils had visibly gained in confidence as bloggers and their writing on the blog, though generally brief, was more colourful and imaginative.

Isaac's first piece of writing in his books was a labelled diagram of a plant. This writing was very well prepared in the class – they had already discussed the layout of information books and the features of an information text (title, sub-headings, labels, diagrams) and at the beginning of the session they recapped on these features. The teacher introduced them to the term 'text box' and to the importance of paragraphs as a way of structuring information texts, saying that information writing was 'very, very organised'. The learning intention for the lesson was to understand 'the functions of the parts of the plant – what each part does and why.'

This class had been working on plants for some time and had grown some plants in the classroom, so they were familiar with plant growth, what plants need to grow well, and so on. In this session the class went on to look at a diagram of a strawberry plant which they were going to label, and were invited to suggest some of the parts of the plant which could be labelled – they suggested 'leaves, roots, flowers, fruit, stem.' Following this introduction the class improvised simple dramas in which each group of four pupils became the four key parts of the plants: the roots, the stem, the flowers and the fruit. Each part of the plant explained what it was for: 'I am the stem. I take the water up to the flower and fruit'; 'I am the stem. I hold the flowers and the fruit closer to the sun.' Following this drama they were given copies of the strawberry plant diagram to write captions for.



Isaac's captions were clear and written in 'information book prose'. His page was headed 'Plants' and began: 'Year 3 is learning about plants. This information text will give you all you need to know about plants.'

The diagram below this was labelled as follows:

Leaves are usually green the chlorophyll makes it that colour and uses the energy from the sun to make plant food.

The stem holds the leaves and the flowers up closer to the sun so it can grow and brings water and minerals up to the plants.

This information went beyond the facts that had formed part of the 'plant dramas'. His labels were appropriately placed next to the part of the plant that they referred to, with clear arrows linking the diagram to the captions. His teacher commented: 'A fantastic amount of facts remembered. You've also presented the information clearly.'

On moving into the ICT room the whole class found it hard to get started; they did not have an organising principle to work with in telling what they knew about plants, or a sufficiently helpful invitation. The teacher decided to ask them to write 'three top facts about plants'.

Isaac and Simon, working together, wrote:

I know that if you put to much water on a plant it will die and when a plant is to cold it will freeze and die.

If a water lily is always in water why wont it die?

Will a venomous fly trap catch eny other insects than a fly's

Why does a venomous fly trap catch fly's because plants eat plant food not fly's?

They found it easier to generate questions than to write what they knew, yet they did know a lot. Their shared text was very brief, which partly reflected their inexperience with typing.

A week later the class had moved on and were looking at bees, the pollinators of plants. They had had a visit from a bee-keeper and went to the Southbank Roof Gardens to learn more about the life of bees and their role in pollination.

Two weeks later Isaac's half of the class went into the ICT suite to blog about bees. In the classroom they had been writing a story about a day in the life of a bee. When they went on the blog they found a BBC logo as a heading, and the following invitation:



Thank you for coming into the studio today to tell our audience what the life of a bee is really like!

First of all we'd like to know...

- 1) What does it feel like to live in a hive?*
- 2) Why do bees have to work so hard?*
- 3) Tell us what your favourite part of your job is.*
- 4) How do you find your way to and from the flowers?*
- 5) How do you communicate with the other bees?*
- 6) What do you think of the Queen Bee?*
- 7) How do you make honey?*
- 8) What problems do bees face now and in the future?*

Writing as 'Mr Buzz', Isaac replied in role:

When I find a good flower patch I memorise that place and every time I go out of the hive I go to that same place but I cant bigin to tell you how much love the smell of the lillys in tescos car park but these pescky little children are always chacing me away from them.my best part of beeing a bee is flying around relaxing but a few anamals has tride to eat me thats the only danger.

Writing in role allowed Isaac to be more personal and playful even though he was conveying (some) information. His writing was much closer to speech than his information writing and the ideas were joined by chaining with 'and' and 'but'. However, this was a very brief post, as were most of Isaac's posts. He was not a confident typist and had to work hard to find the keys.

Writing in the same week in his literacy book, Isaac chose to write a story about his 'last day of being a bee'. This was a very inventive and humorous story, and Isaac clearly enjoyed writing it:

When I woke up this morning I remembered today was my last day of being a bee. So I decided to write this diary. But the thing that cheered me up was the extraordinary sweet smelling honey and ow my I really forgot I was dieing in 24 howers...And guess what, for the first time the bee-keeper didnt do enythink mean to us. The moment he walkt twards our hive we all got scered he was going to take our honey but supriseingly he didnt he took about an inch of our wax.

With the wax the beekeeper makes 'a little sine' on the front of the hive, a postcode to help the bees remember their way back to the hive. Isaac was going to end his story at the bottom of the first page ('I have to end my letter heer because I am feeling like it is time to move on and die') but was persuaded by his teacher to write some more:

You wouldnt believe what happend. I have another life but the not so good thing was someone chased me into a humans house they were so anoying I wanted to sting them but I thought to myself 'you only live twice'.



Flying out of the catflap the bee finds himself in the garden:

When I flew out you wouldnt believe what I sore.....lillys, lillys, lillys and lillys and guess what was behind the bend lillys! I couldn't choose what flower to start on I soon decided to go on a small pritty flower next to Mr Bizz house. Once I had the pollen on me me I couldn't stop laying the pllen on my fur was so funny feeling. I felt a rain drop so I rush back to the hive.


This piece went on for another page. Isaac was writing at length; his writing drew on many elements of his knowledge about bees but also became an adventure story with death, revival and several ingenious features such as the 'postcode' on the hive.

Isaac's writing on paper continued to get longer and more detailed: he was writing with imagination. However, his writing on the blog continued to be brief and never took off in the way that his writing in his book began to do. He really enjoyed story-writing and wrote stories at home – on the whole there was not much opportunity to write them in school. In describing his home story-writing, Isaac said he 'wrote them down from the top of my head', but when pressed said that he 'began with a list'. He wrote 'the best parts, the funny parts' first, and then developed the story later. Most of this writing was done on paper early in the morning and then Isaac would 'write it up on the computer'. So contrary to impressions he was reasonably used to using a computer – although not for composing.

Year 3



Telferscot Primary School's Year 3 2013 - The Blog!



Home
Notices
About us!
Amy and Lucy's Blog
Bees!
Blogging Rules
Kids Space
Plants!
Southbank Imagine Festival 2013
Vikings



Bees!

Richard the Beekeeper of Balham Check out the Video of our special visitor!

How many viewers?

6,547 hits

Twitter Updates

Fantastic achievement from our football team today. 2nd best team in LONDON! And a treat watching Fulham first team train too! 18 hours ago

Modelling our Organ Expert tshirts! @southbankcentre <http://t.co/9j8fCW> 20 hours ago

Telferscot is everywhere! Come and see our animation, films and photos in the Clore Ballroom. #pulloutthestops <http://t.co/7eN7pQq2> 21 hours ago

We've built it... Now can we make it work? <http://t.co/PhubChvPA> 22 hours ago

Anfield and Telferscot work together to make an organ! <http://t.co/W7cWlc5t1> 22 hours ago

Ella, a Year 4 girl

The work produced by Ella illustrated very well the deep divide between children's writing in their books and their writing on the blog. However, in focusing on her writing in her book, it may be interesting to start with a piece of writing that happened just before the project began, in December 2012. The learning objective for this piece was 'to write a modern nativity play script'. There was every indication that Ella found this an inspiring invitation.

Scene 1 – Nazareth

(Mary is in her flat eating her breakfast and watching the telly then angle gabriel sends her a message. Phone buzzes)

Mary: I wonder who that could be? I'll have a look

(She reads the message)

Mary: I'm very happy but I'm scard the message ses: Hello I need to tell you that you are pregnet with the son of god.

Ella had got off to a great start. The next scene was in Bethlehem and again began with a substantial stage direction:

Scene 2: Bethlehem

(Joseph gets home Mary tells him the news so they get on his moto bike and leave. But they get stuck in lods and lods of traffic so don't get anywhere)

Joseph: Are you all right Mary?

Mary: I'm OK but we'll be stuck here for a long time and also my tummy is really hurting. We need to get there soon.

They arrive at an empty building at the back of an hotel, which is full, and decide to stay there.

Mary: It's not a puerfect place to have a baby but it will do.

Joseph: at least were off the motoway

In this piece Ella showed ingenuity, a lively imagination, a good ear for dialogue, and a real sense of fun. The play was four pages long, whereas most of the pieces she wrote in her book were not as long or open-ended as this play.

As her teacher said, the writing tasks the children were given in their books were very specific indeed. Each piece had a learning objective and a set of desirable outcomes. For instance, the writing assignment for 28 January was based on a book the class had been reading. The learning objective was 'to understand how a character is feeling' and the class were asked to take into account the following requirements:

- **Must:** Write a letter from Esperanza's point of view. Describe how Esperanza is feeling.
- **Should:** Include adjectives to describe the setting.
- **Could:** Organise your ideas using paragraphs.



The teacher marked Ella's book very much with these kinds of objectives in mind, commenting favourably on descriptive sentences – 'Bright with sun the leaves glisened for last night's rain' – and figures of speech – 'I saw a forest of people'. Ella's piece of writing was one page in length. The comment was: 'I love your description and use of metaphors... could you add more feelings?'

Most of the writing that Ella did in her book was relatively short and the tasks were tightly defined in this way. Ella generally did exactly what was asked for. In the course of the two terms the kinds of writing that she was asked to do included a persuasive letter, a letter from a fictional character, a diary entry, a descriptive paragraph and a short poem designed to 'combine words, images and other features', using 'adjectives and a repeated phrase', similes and personification. These tasks were all designed to practise using the features of particular genres and to emphasise the elements thought to make for good writing. Among these elements were 'powerful verbs, strong adjectives, adverbs, paragraphs, subordinate clauses, speech punctuation.' These were the kinds of elements picked out and commented on positively by the teacher: 'You have created some good pictures in my mind. It would be good to include some more interesting adjectives.' They also closely reflected the commercial system of writing assessment being used by the school.

On the school blog, however, as her teacher indicated, Ella had a much freer hand. She was a regular contributor to the blog and often used photography in her blog posts. Ella frequently used pictures with commentary as her preferred form of posting. One or two of her blog posts in this form were striking. In interview she herself said that she thought her best blog post was the one she wrote on taking Cuthbert, the class teddy bear, to Pizza Express for her birthday party: 'It was my best and it was quite funny... I took good pictures for it.' In the pictures Cuthbert was seen (with his arm in a sling) drinking Peroni beer through a straw, and then – in one very well-lit photograph – with Ella's birthday cake. The caption to this picture was 'Cuthbert blowing out the candles'. Ella was entering into the fantasy game of Cuthbert and his adventures begun by her teacher.

Another blog posting from Ella was a very striking piece of work and seemed to have been initiated by her, rather than being done as a suggested task. In it she wrote about 'My great-great grandma and grandad's trunk'. The whole blog entry was built round the pictures taken by Ella. First there was a picture of the old trunk, next a picture of 'Great-great grandpa's pipe and magnifying glass'. There followed a picture of 'Great-great grandma's dancing shoes', and then a picture of 'the tragic handbag'. Under the picture of the handbag was a long caption about how it came to be called tragic:

'This is my great great grandma's handbag. My mum calls it the tragic handbag because when my grandma was 4 years old in 1935 she and her mum were waiting for her to arrive at the house. But she never arrived and as there were no phones in those days they didn't find out what had happened until a few days later. She had died at the train station on the way. She had this handbag with her, and it still has the train ticket in it.'

Several members of the class commented on this blog entry. One of the strengths of Ella's blogging was her understanding that words and pictures work well together on a blog and that the pictures can structure the writing. Her use of commentary could have been much more fully developed, but it showed an important possible direction for children's contributions to school blogs. For Ella, blog writing represented a new kind of writing in which she wrote on subjects of her choice in an unaffected and personal style.

Rakeem, a Year 6 boy

The blog for this Year 6 class was entitled 'Amazing 6W', and it was clear that this class had a strong sense of community and a great sense of pride in their work and in their blog. The class teacher was the ICT coordinator for the school and had only begun blogging at the beginning of the school year in September 2012, before the project began in January 2013. She was interested in the differences that joining the project had made to the blog:

'The project has made the blog more educational and more meaningful. Before they were posting about their weekends but only certain children were using the blog in their own time. The project has meant that all the children in the class have a voice and therefore I feel I know them all better.'

In general pupils' contributions to the blog were different in many ways from the writing in their books, which was closely geared to National Curriculum (NC) assessment. In these books both the teacher's and the pupils' attention was focused on learning objectives, on the 'must, should, could' targets, and on the features which it was assumed would help to 'raise the levels' of individual pupils. So the blog represented an opportunity for more self-expression and a more personal style. This opportunity was taken advantage of fully by one of the case study pupils, Rakeem.

Rakeem enjoyed writing and this relish was often apparent in what he wrote. In summarising his work during the year his teacher said: 'his imaginative ideas have been fantastic throughout.' Highly motivated and articulate, Rakeem was a great interviewee; he enjoyed reflecting on his own progress and talking about his preferences as a writer. His attitude to the class blog was initially ambivalent; in his interview at the beginning of the project he was more aware of the drawbacks of blogging than of the advantages:

'Well I think that writing is better because when you write it improves your own handwriting and then you can also focus a bit more but typing sometimes on the computer you might be distracted by something funny or something cool on the website or word presentation. Also I think writing is a bit better because when you are in the classroom the teacher gives you verbal feedback and she talks it through in class and shows you on the board, but the difference is in the ICT suite the teacher has to help all 30 children in the ICT suite because their computer might not be working and they might be stuck on something but in the classroom there can't really be any equipment broken and if there was that wouldn't distract us. So there that is my opinion!'

But a little later in the project Rakeem was becoming more aware of the advantages of blogging. Firstly it meant that he did not feel under pressure because of his handwriting. In his own idiosyncratic phrase, 'I'm more comfortable [with writing on the blog] because my hands feel more tappy than holdy.'

Towards the end of the project Rakeem was asked to think back on the year and choose a favourite piece of writing that he had done in his book. He deliberated on this question: 'I'm actually not sure on that question. I have had some lucky moments when words just pop into my head. I think I like the piece I wrote about the chameleon.'

This descriptive piece of writing was done at the beginning of the project and was done in role as an observer of wildlife, reporting on his observations, rather in a style befitting David Attenborough.



Most of the class chose large animals – zebras, lions – but Rakeem chose to examine a chameleon in close-up. The beginning of the piece set the scene:

I raced boyantly out my house back into the caged domain. I climed the elder tree, hoping it was still sturdy. I couldn't wait to see what animals were roaming about – But it was the same charging zebras that were being persued by a hyena pack with a anxious alpha.

But amid all these exotic animals, what caught Rakeem's observant eye was a much smaller creature:

But suddenly I witnessed something I had never encountered in my life. It was rather small and his body was a boring plain green. It had eyes like the sun and a tail that was a spiral like on a sea shell. He whipped out his red tongue to catch the pesky fly.

Rakeem went on to describe what happened when this small animal met 'an enormous carnaging lion'.

It seems likely that Rakeem found the word 'carnage' on an online thesaurus – the pupils in this class had a habit of consulting a thesaurus. In the list of targets that were always included under the learning objective at the top of their work, there was often one about using 'impressive vocabulary' or 'adventurous vocabulary' and so they often engaged in word searches for this purpose.

In the encounter between the lion and the chameleon that followed, Rakeem's observer got involved and was only saved by the chameleon's bravery:

The lion, who was now interested in me, was approaching me ready to assult me with his claws. But then the baby blue lizard turned red. He whipped the lion with his tongue to get his attention. The lion gave a tremendous roar – but the creature stood his ground.

All of Rakeem's instincts were to make this into a story, and so he did. But this was not the purpose of this piece of writing, which was intended to be descriptive writing using 'appropriate vocabulary to depict feeling'. His teacher commented at the end: 'Make sure it's not too much of a story... but I loved reading this... you are such a great writer.' Rakeem replied: 'Thank you I try'.

Rakeem did try, very hard, in his literacy writing, and it was clear that he took assignments seriously and was determined to improve as a writer. He commented on this in his final interview: 'This year I've tried to make a giant push in my writing – lots of new vocabulary and words... I am a bit more alert to punctuation.'

But, interestingly, Rakeem had not seemed to see the point of blogging until he burst onto the blogging scene on February 12 in a blog post entitled 'I'm Here': 'Hey i'm Rakeem and I'm now going to start blogging more so get on your computar and START BLOGGING!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!'

Immediately, on the same day, he posted a challenge to the rest of the class. He challenged his peers to take the work that they had been doing on spies 'to the next level'. The language of this post was particularly interesting: Rakeem took up a role usually taken by the teacher and this was reflected in the wording:



Not a long one [story] – remember this was just a suggestion for me to know more about your spy's as I will be checking your story's.

There was an emphasis on the fact that this was not a set task but an invitation:

*You could write a page a day (or not) of how your spy is...
You can do it or not do it, it was a suggestion.*

At several points Rakeem welcomed feedback, one of the special features available in blog posting:

But if you do like the idea comment right here I would really want to know your opinions.

This was a bold invitation, especially considering that Rakeem had previously had so little presence on the blog. But he appeared to have realised some of the possibilities in it, especially the opportunity that it presented of addressing the whole class and proposing a new agenda for them. Here is the blog posting in its entirety:

Your Spy Opinion – Please Comment

I was thinking to start going to the next level with the spy stuff. What i was thinking of is that i should write a story. This also apply's to everyone as well – if you want to you could write page a day (or not) of how your spy is or what would really be amazing if you could write a story. Not a long one- remember this was just a suggestion for me to know more about your spy's as i will be checking your story's. If your wondering this is Rakeem. writing this comment since i love writing story's. You can do it or not do it, it was a suggestion. But if you do like the idea comment right here I would really want to know your opinions. Also this could help your writing- if you do take part and like this you could (or I could) tell miss Walker and she might level you (remember this is just a suggestion) so have a think about it. Please tell me your opinions.

Here, the slightly jokey tone – but also the perfectly serious nature – of the intervention, indicated that Rakeem himself was 'going to the next level' in blogging, as well as 'with the spy stuff', by taking up such an innovative role on the blog. This was an interesting example of the way in which the democratic forum of the blog allowed pupils to take the lead and initiate a new topic. The class teacher reported that the class took up Rakeem's suggestion the following week, and all of them wrote spy stories which appeared in their literacy books.

Rakeem's persuasive tone in this blog post was echoed when he came to write a 'balanced argument' about whether there should be NC assessments (colloquially known as SATs) or not. Though he did put both sides of the argument, his case against SATs was put with much more feeling:

'The reason SATs are terrible is because of the pressure put on kids. They are reluctant, they have to hesitate all the time. It's too much to put in a child's head. They need space and air. Not stuck in a room worrying about if their doing well or not.'



Rakeem was a natural rhetorician: he enjoyed addressing an audience and influencing them. In his book he received encouraging feedback from the teacher, who commented on this piece: '5C a good argument, with some strong points Rakeem. You're using some argument phrases.' Rakeem replied: 'Thank you I tried to get 5B.' Like most of the class he was aware of his assessed level and was consciously aiming for the features associated with the next level.

Shafia, a Year 6 girl

This class was at home with blogging but many of the class said they liked writing in their books more than writing on the blog. Nevertheless they were mostly enthusiastic about blogging. One pupil summed up her complex feelings in this way:

'I love [writing in] books a lot, they give me a reason to write good stories, letters, words just flow out of my mind. I have such a passion for writing, it's like my life. The reason why I prefer [writing in] books is because it just does its own thing, it's like the pen has a mind of its own. But in the Cyber world once something's there it's there for good. When you think you have edited it the non-edited bit is still out there somewhere... I enjoy the blog a lot. Because you can show the whole world how articulate you are. It encourages me to take my writing to the whole next level.'

Shafia, the case study pupil discussed next, had a similarly mixed response to these different contexts for writing.

Shafia was a high ability pupil. Her teacher described her literacy writing as 'ambitious in scope, always interesting and sometimes surprising'. She only blogged from school. The aspect she liked best about the blog was having a big audience, but she actually preferred writing in her book. She compared blog and book writing in this way:

'Sometimes we write in our books first but usually we go straight to the blog and write. In writing in the book you've already thought about your ideas and pluck ideas from that. On the blog you go straight to it without thinking so much about it before.'

This quotation highlighted what Shafia found unsatisfying about writing on the blog – it calls for less reflection and less preparation. Shafia liked writing in her book because she liked to be able to:

'... think of ideas, how I can change it. Sometimes I plan in my head, sometimes I make notes. I feel more comfortable in a book.'

Shafia wrote at home; she said she wrote 'books' – long stories of eight pages or more, some of which were her own versions of films or TV programmes. She really enjoyed creating a fictional world:

'If you are writing it's like your own world, so you can do anything with it...'

Shafia's samples of writing in her books demonstrated her desire to create a fully realised fictional world. In the opening to her long story based on *The war of the worlds*, she spent a long time creating the 'normal' world that was going to be disrupted by the events of the story:

I'm finally on my way to my father's house. Since our last visit I've been counting down the days... I could hear the robins singing. I leaned my head slightly out of the window, embracing the warm summer breeze.



Suddenly, the car came to a complete stop. Before Harry, my brother could slip his seat belt of I decide to run out of the car. To my delite I could see my tall father grinning at me. I ran into his arms so that he could swing me round in little circles.

'Hey my little angel' he said, his voice muffled by my sleek blonde hair.

The level of detail in this writing was characteristic of Shafia's work and reflected her desire to imagine the world of the story fully. This particular story seemed quite difficult for her to manage in places because of its apocalyptic character – she was less at home with a story which is so fast paced and action-packed:

I leaped onto the roof and quickly ran to the edge to get a look at the invasion. People were yelling. Children were screaming. Dogs were barking. People being abducted. For a split second I witnessed the ground caving in before...

"You – will – be – dis – troyed!" the robot said before roughly shoving me past the ledge with his 'exterminator'. I fell.

This was a very ambitious story for pupils of this age to attempt and Shafia did her best to bring the situations to life. Given her preferences as a writer, it was not difficult to see why she might prefer to apply herself on paper rather than writing in the 'short bursts' dictated by the length of the class blogging sessions. On the blog she was hyper-aware of audience and was somewhat worried by the idea that 'everyone in the world will see it'.

'On the blog I use 'out there words', hard-to-spell words that you wouldn't use in conversation. I try to make it interesting. I check it a million times e.g. for spelling mistakes because everyone in the world will see it. It makes me nervous – are they going to like it or not. I enjoy writing on the blog in English [lessons] I show people what I can do.'

On the blog Shafia had to make the most of her blogging time and organise an effective piece of writing in a short space. The following story, based on the short animated film *The lonely robot*, showed how successfully she was often able to do this:

Once upon a time there was a small delicate Robot who used to live in the country side, which had tall grand trees that towered above him, unleashing dark, scary shadows in the moonlight.

One day the little Robot was wandering through the woods when he saw something he had never seen before. It was a train. On it the mechanical creature saw that a big picture was printed on it. He had seen it before, hopeful, he looked down at his small hip. There he saw a identical picture. Without pausing he leaped onto the green train.

When the train got it's destination the Robot hopped of it. Suddenly the Robot stood dead in his tracks. He saw a small ball of light that illuminated the dark lifeless base. The Robot stood amazed by the sight. Following the light came a skinny, bony, jet black haired boy with black round glasses. Soon he acknowledged the Robot and picked him up into the palm of his hands and covered him with his checkered hankerchief. The Robot closed his eyes, smiling at the boy...



This, like the film that prompted it, was a remarkably effective and economical narrative. Shafia's imaginative mind enabled her to bring this short story alive through a very few telling details – the trees' shadows in the moonlight, the robot's 'hopeful' glance at the picture on his own hip, the 'small ball of light that illuminated the dark lifeless base'.

Shafia's feelings about the blog were ambiguous. Although she did prefer writing at length she also enjoyed the comments she received, and felt that the blog represented the experience of the whole class – 'our memories': 'But if we had no more blog I'd be upset. Our memories would be wiped away. I like having people's comments. It feels better.'



“...providing the class with effective invitations was an essential pedagogic move in stimulating pupils to write good blog postings.”

5. Discussion: practice and pedagogy

This chapter draws out some of the key features of ‘good practice in blogging’ arising from the pupil case studies in Chapter 4. It will be clear that several of these features also relate to good practice in the teaching of writing. The chapter draws extensively on classroom observations and on interviews with teachers in its discussion of what makes for effective practice in teaching writing within and outside the class blogs.

5.1 Effective invitations

Through observations in schools and the sampling of pupils’ writing on blogs, it became apparent that it was often the nature of the ‘invitation’ which made the difference to the writing on the blogs. In the course of the project we discussed at project meetings how teachers invited pupils to respond to an online task, and how teachers framed tasks in a way that helped pupils to respond.

In reading school blogs it was clear that some invitations to blog were too vague and general in character to give pupils enough encouragement to respond. For instance a teacher’s posting might have suggested: ‘You could research this’ or ‘What can you find out about...?’ without giving suggestions for sources of information, or how to go about researching something online. It was clear from the thinness of the responses to some of these suggestions that pupils had not had enough preparation or support to take up the invitation. Similarly, questions which were too broad and general in character (e.g. ‘How was your half term?’) did not usually prompt many substantial answers. However, where the invitations were more focused, where they were introduced in a clear and specific way, where they expected a detailed response from the whole class, or where they were linked to a helpful starter – a piece of video, an article or a detailed discussion point – then there was much more chance of eliciting meaningful and longer responses from more of the pupils. So providing the class with effective invitations was an essential pedagogic move in stimulating pupils to write good blog postings.

A Year 6 teacher was clear about needing to structure blogging tasks. He had thought through the potential of blogging and planned how to support his pupils. The other teachers in his school sometimes found it difficult to devise inviting topics for pupils to blog about:

‘The problem is that some teachers don’t use the potential of class blogs. Teachers must make links and be creative. Children need teacher prompts on the blog. Once children have done lots of blogging they can take it on themselves and see possibilities.’

The kinds of tasks that pupils were being presented with on this blog were not at all like the tasks in their literacy books. They were not dealing in text types or asking pupils to write to a model or to include certain textual features. They were inviting pupils to focus on specific content, and providing opportunities for engaging with concepts, or with imaginative ideas. The nature of pupils’ responses very much depended on the quality of the teachers’ initial prompts or invitations.

This teacher was asked what he had found to be the most effective invitations that he had used in setting blog tasks. Could he define what makes a good invitation? This was his reply:

‘It’s common sense when teaching to scaffold the learning; you don’t want to introduce something unknown. The invitations on the blog have all been related to what they’ve been doing in class e.g. we read books together such as Holes, Trash. When everyone knows a story, everyone has




The screenshot shows a blog post titled "Year 6 blog" with the subtitle "Life and learning at St Leonard's". The main heading is "Galileo's speech". Below the heading is a paragraph: "We wrote speeches in character as Galileo, to describe his scientific discoveries and defend his name against the Church, who accused him of spreading lies by saying the Earth was not the centre of the Universe. Who do you think gave the most convincing speech and why?". Below the text is a video player showing a student in a school uniform speaking, with the Leaning Tower of Pisa in the background. The video has a duration of 01:45. To the right of the video are social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Further right are statistics: "Recent Comments" (listing names like daniet18, troy22, megan9, neta20, jarvis13), "Recent Posts" (listing "LIVING THINGS", "Holiday news", "Brainwave", "Our trip to the CLC", "Making the News"), "visitors to our site" (2,093 visitors from 18 Nov 2013 to 5 Feb 2014), "Links" (listing "Brain Pop", "Manga High Maths"), and "CBBC News Feed".

a lot to base their writing around. You can then select the kind of writing. It makes invitations easier if you do it this way, linking it to a theme.... I choose the words carefully. For example I used a trailer of the film *An inconvenient truth* – the children had to use the power of the images to describe it to someone else. What you do on the blog doesn't have to be bound by the curriculum, even though it links.'

5.2 Framing the task

It was important the blog task was sufficiently well 'framed' – that is pupils were given a good standpoint for approaching the task. This might come about when they were asked to write in a particular style or voice with which they were familiar, or for a particular kind of audience. The task might suggest that they should write in the style of a TV newsreader, or an on-the-spot reporter. This kind of 'framing' enabled pupils to work in role, which could be an effective way of releasing latent linguistic knowledge in pupils (who invariably have a lot of linguistic resources that they do not normally use in either speaking

or writing). Alternatively the task might suggest that they wrote about material or topics which they were thoroughly familiar with and presented this for a particular audience. Sometimes the task was linked to a short video, as one teacher explained:

'A two minute video prompt is a really good way to get them thinking. You do it with a purpose – for example we did performance poetry based on a clip of Mohammed Ali – boastful poems.'

The use of video had been highly successful in this classroom, and the teacher often developed pupils' understanding of their reading and learning by the use of appropriate video clips, which they could view on the blog before responding. The teacher described the blog as having: 'a function as a library of resources... being able to embed videos really supports the learning e.g. the Galileo science videos.'

Below are some examples of interesting invitations from teachers to pupils on the class blogs, together with sample responses. The first example is linked to the class's reading of *Trash* by Andy Mulligan, and also to their previous research related to Jane Walker's work (see below). The teacher's invitation here was brief and clear, and suggested a clear framework for pupils' responses; it also suggested that they watch the video twice, to get an idea of the whole of it, and then make notes on each of the sections. In their responses the pupils showed they had made use of these suggestions. The combination of an effective and thought-provoking starter (in the shape of the video clip), the class's previous knowledge (which they could draw on to make sense of the video) and the teacher's succinct and supportive introduction provided a helpful framework for response.



Jane Walker

This film is about Jane Walker, the so called 'Angel of the Dump', who we read about last term. She has devoted her life to helping children that work on the dumpsites in Manila.

Can you summarise her story, a sentence at a time, describing things like:

- Why she went to the Philippines in the first place
- What happened when she first saw the shanties
- The moment when her life changed
- Why education is so important to her
- The first thing she did to help the children.

Watch the video all the way through and then watch it again, pausing after each section of the interview to summarise that part.

Below are two replies to this post:

A boy wrote:

Jane Walker came to the Philippines for a sabbatical in 1996. When she saw the shanties, it shocked her so much she asked the taxi driver to stop and she got out.

She saw two boys carrying a big sack. She followed them curiously and she saw them go into an open dumpsite. She also saw children staring at her and she was staring at them. Jane said that moment changed her life. She said that her education saved her even though she didn't get to finish it.

A girl wrote:

The Angel of The Dump was like a Saint to these unfortunate people. It all started when she just wanted time of work, she went to the Philippines and couldn't stop thinking about the people in the dump. Until finally one day she was in a taxi and saw these shanties, she demanded the driver let her out so she could walk the rest of the way. But these two very young boys caught her eye - they were carrying sacks and this sharp stick kind of thing, she just couldn't help but follow these boys. That's when her life changed forever. As she had witnessed this horrible site of people digging for rubbish.

The following invitation was different although it contained some of the same elements. The pupils blogging were asked first of all to look at a timeline of 'robots throughout history', to choose one of the robots featured, and to take on the role of this robot, explaining its features. Although this was a task with a serious point, looking at the history of robots and their different functions, the use of role enabled the pupils to be more inventive, and to experiment with robot speech. This more playful invitation produced some imaginative responses:



Robots through history

Robots have been around for longer than you think! Check out this timeline, read about robots from history:

<http://www.scienceboffins.co.uk/blog/robots-through-history/>

Write a reply to this post – in character as a robot – explaining who invented you, what you can do, and what life is like as a robot.

One reply read:

My creator named me Asimo!! I was built on the 7th of August 2000.

Beep beep. I was an anthropomorphic robot I was purposely built for the needs of people. Not fair! I have a range of cameras that function in my head. Being a robot is a disadvantage because humans are afraid of me. Once when I went to the robotic 'cinema' named after a robotic friend of mine who went to mars I enjoyed 'popcorn', while watching robots, it was very offensive to me as all the robots that ever lived, turned evil and took over the world, once the film was over me and my friends hit the shopping centre and bought tons of oil. Aboutttt the cameras they also allow me to recognise the motion around me and to be able to recognise how people move and I can copy how they react to their movements. Any robotic people out there?

5.3 Building up to blogging

When pupils were writing on the blog, the factors that influenced the quality of their writing were no different from when they were writing on paper. Generally, good writing on the blog was preceded by helpful preparation. At the very least the pupils had discussed the blogging topic at some length with the teacher and with each other, and this kind of 'oral rehearsal' made it easier for them to move into blogging quickly. It was particularly important for pupils to be well prepared for a blogging session if they were physically moving – into an ICT suite – to do their blogging. The ICT suites lacked many of the supports that classrooms offered – there were no displays relevant to the topics, no posters showing vocabulary or reminding them of what they had been learning. They were barren learning environments compared with the classrooms that the pupils had come from.

As a result it was all the more important that pupils should have plenty of experiences and material to draw on before embarking on a blogging session, and some of the most effective blog posts did reflect this kind of pre-writing experience. The Year 3 teacher was particularly emphatic about the need for 'building up to blogging'. She commented:

'I believe that a build up to a piece of writing, online or on paper, is key. The more input and experiences the children receive the better the quality of writing. So with the blogging I usually treat it as a literacy activity, in the build up to writing we do hot seating, freeze frame, drama, storytelling and plenty of research, resulting in the children experiencing the text/topic in many different ways. Then invite them to write, they are fuelled with so much ammunition they rarely have writers block and produce some fantastic writing.'

That mysterious night...



The work done on the Vikings by this class reflected this kind of 'building up'. As part of their Vikings project the class studied:

- basic facts about Vikings
- Viking journeys
- gods and goddesses – making Top Trumps cards about Viking gods and goddesses and then creating their own gods which would be featured in their own invented myths.

All of this work preceded the work on myth-making. After the myths the class went on to study Viking towns and villages, Viking quests and their travels to new lands; and then to write Viking play scripts. Finally the class took part in 'Vikings Day' – dressing up as Vikings for the day when the school had a visitor from the Jorvik centre in York. On that day they also learned to play a Viking game, and took part in a Viking battle on Tooting Common, dressed in Viking armour.

For the 'myth-making' part of this work they also learned about the Vikings' gods, their names and characteristics and their place in the pantheon, and they invented stories about the gods. They did this in groups, and once they had invented their myths they acted them out, creating the story through a series of 'freeze frames' which were photographed and put

into the format of a comic strip through the use of Comic Life software. They created captions and speech balloons for the comic.

With the myths now available to them in comic form, they embarked on a storytelling session in a large resource room, to create a dramatic retelling. Prior to the retelling, sitting round in a big circle they listened to a passage from a pupil's version of *Beowulf*, read by their teacher in dramatic style. One pupil observed, in some surprise: 'It didn't have tons and tons of description but it was exciting!'

After this the teacher asked them to sit in storytelling groups. Each was going to tell a bit of the story, passing the myth round the circle. She emphasised: 'Your job is to make your part of the story the most exciting part – we want to be on the edge of our seats!'

Following a substantial period (about 40 minutes) for the rehearsal of these retellings, they returned to the classroom where one group retold their story – in 18 parts. It was a very well organised retelling and featured dramatic dialogue. Some of the group entered fully into the storytelling role and declaimed their episodes confidently.

It was only after all this activity that the class went into the ICT suite to write their own episodes of the group story on the blog. Because they had built up to this writing through so much previous experience and oral rehearsal they had no difficulty in getting started on their posts and completed their substantial group story easily within the half-hour blogging session. Here are the first parts:



A Viking Myth

Eric the red was a perfectly normal Viking because he fought loads of men and always won. He ate, drank, slept and fought. (Boy)

Suddenly Erik the red realised he wanted to be a god because he was a very good fighter and could kill an army with one stab. He won all the battles and loved epic victories he drank and drank and ate nice food. (Boy)

Odin said you have to pass three utterly impossible, tasks for a regular VIKING if passed, you may turn into the god of fire if failed you will not turn into the god fire the. The first task is to get Freya's necklace from the fat, ugly dwarf. (Boy)

When he went to the underworld his saw the dwarf sleeping on the other end, when he saw the necklace he saw a shiny gold ring on his finger but he never knew that he had to take the ring so he told Odin if he had to take the ring of the dwarf's fingers. (Girl)

Eric went up from the cruel Underworld to the bright Asgard where birds sing all day. He was ready to give Freya her beautiful necklace and too ask Odin about the ring and his next task. He went to the palace and explained about the ring. Odin asked him to go and get it for his next task. (Girl)

As the Year 3 teacher suggested, this kind of in-depth preparation for writing was just as important and necessary with work on paper as it was for writing on the blogs; these examples demonstrate how thoroughly the pupils had become immersed in the Vikings' world and their stories. Some pupils continued to blog from home in role as Vikings during this project.

5.4 Blogging from home

Blogging from home can introduce a whole new element into class blogging and enable pupils to contribute in different ways and at their own leisure. Pupils were allowed to blog from home in some schools but not in all. In one class the teacher saw the blog as a major resource for home learning and strongly encouraged pupils to post their own contributions about their weekend and holiday activities. This teacher found this to be a very popular feature of the blog: 'There is a lot of home learning posted on the blog, this is done independently at home by the children (with perhaps a little support from the parents) and we do a lot of commenting in an ICT lesson.'

This kind of blogging from home had made the teacher more aware of pupils' personal interests and preferences: 'I have more of an insight into what the children enjoy at home and what switches them on, their personal interests and what they enjoy about their peers through seeing the comments they make on their peers.'

The case study pupils in the class particularly mentioned how much they enjoyed posting their own home news on the blog, and all of them chose posts from home as their favourite pieces of writing on the blog:

'... when I did my birthday piece, when I took Cuthbert to Pizza Express. I like it because I got a lot of comments on it. It was my best and it was quite funny. I had fun doing it and I took good pictures for it. I'm planning to write about the Harry Potter experience. It's really nice when you get comments. It's a nice feeling.'

'I went to the leisure centre and I inspired some children in my class to go there after they saw my post. And when I went ice skating I got a comment from Maya. I love how different people from other countries look at our blog – Philippines, Argentina, Hungary.'

Pupils' posts from home were often different in kind from their posts produced at school. They were more inclined to post photographs with a commentary and to write expressively and personally. The teacher commented:

'When they started to write their own posts they are happy to tell you things about their interests; pets, favourite films that you don't get chance to talk to them about e.g. you find out about a child's passion for Hitchcock films or that someone has lots of dogs. It gives you something to talk about. There's no room for this in a literacy book.'

One class provided a very interesting example of the differences between pupils' writing on the blog at school and their writing from home. The teacher introduced the work to the pupils on the blog in this way: 'We have been doing some fantastic blogging about our teeth this week. I would like you to do some more at home! Add a post to our front page and write something creative about teeth...' and gave them some ideas about what they could write: a poem or rap; a diary entry as a tooth; a story about the adventures of a plaque monster; or a news incident involving teeth.

These younger pupils habitually wrote rather short blog posts in class time but in response to this invitation almost all of them wrote at much more length and in a much greater variety of styles and genres. There was a general feeling of enthusiasm, inventiveness and wit about this writing. Two examples are given below:

The evil plaque

Here in jaw city the evil plaque named Destroyer struck again. His first bad deed was at old Mrs Molars, he wanted to make old Mrs Molar get rotten outside and inside. He wants to make her in his team (but in his team its only him) but just in time Super Floss came to the rescue by getting in between Mrs Molar and the evil plaque Destroyer! The Destroyer fled to find his next victim. This time it was the Incisor family, all 8 of them!! He crept up slowly from the gum line and started his attack, holding on hard and trying to make their enamel crumble. 'Oh HELP!!' cried the Incisor children. Luckily their cries for help were heard by the heroic Captain Toothbrush and his trusty sidekick Pasty, they joined together to brush the Incisor family all over which made them strong and protected them from the Destroyer. The Destroyer thought he would try one more time going for the Canine gang but they released their mighty powerful Mouth Wash pistol which washed the Destroyer right away down the plug hole never to be seen again.

HOORAY FOR HEALTHY TEETH!!! AND OUR TEETH HEROES SUPER FLOSS, CAPTAIN TOOTHBRUSH AND PASTY AND THE MIGHTY MOUTH WASH

THE END



“Getting comments – I actually think people care. I am so buoyant.”

My last day as a tooth

Hello my name is violet and I am baby molar.

It is my last day of being in Daisy's mouth and I am very wobbly!

I am VERY excited about where I am going to go when I fall out. Tonight I am going to be put under Daisy's pillow for some reason.

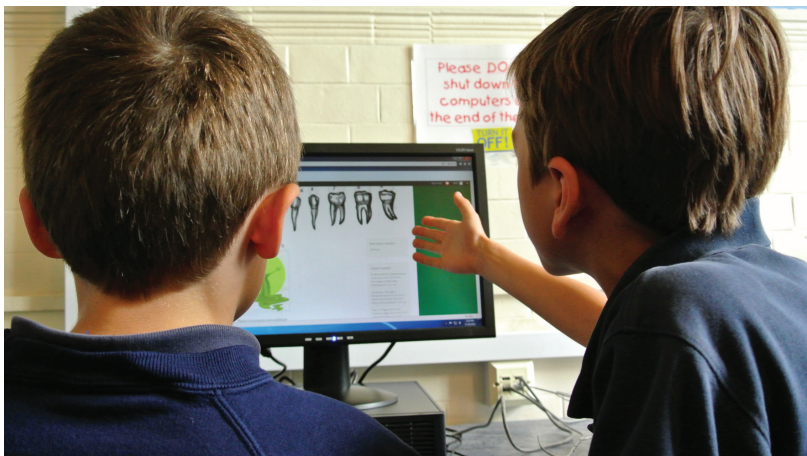
Now it is nine o' clock at night I am under Daisy's pillow and I am very worried about what's going to happen to me.

I saw a flashing light it was very bright it was fizzing and popping and lots of different colours! It was a fairy! She picked me up and put me into her bag.

I travelled in the dark for one hour in her sparkling bag then I arrived in fairy land! It had lots of teeth statues and teeth houses I was very suprised!

She put me on the queen's throne and I stayed there for the rest of my life.

THE END



Posting from home enabled these pupils to write at more length, developing their good ideas for a wide audience, but also displaying what they had learned in the 'Teeth' project.

However, posting from home also raises issues about pupils' personal access to computers and the internet. If teachers are aware that some pupils do not have computer/internet access at home they need to make sure that they have priority access at school. Differences in parental support increase the possibility that different pupils in the same class may have very different experiences of blogging.

5.5 The role of commenting

The comment function, where pupils are encouraged to read and respond to one another's posts, is specific to blogging, and its use created a new web of relationships within these classes. For the first time they could all look at one another's work. Pupils really appreciated the comments they received from the rest of the class:

'I like getting comments on my writing – they can tell me what they think of it. They give me a bit more encouragement.'

'It's good to know they are actually reading my work. Most people keep it real, they say the truth. If they didn't like something they'd tell you.'

'Getting comments – I actually think people care. I am so buoyant – I can do this if I get positive comments. If I get negative comments or nothing I feel like I've done all this for nothing.'



Both the interactive nature of blogging and the wider audience that it gave access to were pivotal in transforming children's relationship to writing. Comments from other pupils were frequently detailed and helpful. In response to one boy's piece of writing in role as a character in the book *Trash*, another pupil commented:

'Your chapter is really good! I like the way you used brackets and all your full stops are in the right places. Plus while your reading it, it kind of pulls you into the story too. Well done! The only thing a bit off is your spelling, otherwise its perfect and you can really picture.'

Comments by the teacher were a strongly motivating factor in pupils' blog writing. A Year 6 teacher reflected on how this had affected a particular pupil in his class:

'Yesterday I had a meeting with a mum who said her child really liked getting my teacher comment on his blog posts. He's very proud and showed his mum. Ashley's writing is characterised by wanting to get it right but it lacks in spark. He's a very competitive child. It's interesting to look at the differences. In his books he's really concerned with everything being correct, but on the blog he doesn't punctuate.'

However, several pupils highlighted, as one of their main reasons for preferring writing in books to writing on the blog, the fact that the teacher gave them fuller and more personal feedback on their writing in their books. One pupil commented: 'I like writing in the books. I like the comments he writes in the book – because sometimes they're funny and it makes me happy. They tell me what I need to improve on.'

One teacher in particular gave pupils frequent and helpful feedback on their writing in their books. Her positive and helpful comments were highly valued by pupils, who often replied to her comments, so that the marking almost became a conversation. For instance, on one piece of work she commented: 'Wonderful vocabulary', to which the writer replied: 'Thank you. I think I have achieved my target for vocabulary.' Similarly, on another child's work she commented: 'Great short sentences' and the writer replied: 'Thank you Miss I am good at them.' Most pupils replied to this teacher's comments; marking was a really interactive process in this class.

All of this evidence points to the positive effects of comments, and especially helpful comments, both on pupils' writing on the blogs and on their writing on paper, and also suggest that it can enhance their engagement with learning. This reflects much that is known about the use of quality feedback as one of the most powerful ways to improve pupils' learning. See, for example, Dylan William's guidance in *Embedded formative assessment* (2011) on the great value of using feedback that moves pupils' learning forward. The comment function in blogging provides an immediate way for pupils to receive much more feedback, both from their teacher and their peers. If commenting is encouraged and developed to become truly 'quality feedback', it can make a real difference to pupils' progress in writing.

Analysing some of the pedagogic approaches to blogging in these project classrooms has illustrated how teachers are making the most of this new medium to provide opportunities for writing, but has also shown the continuities between writing on paper and writing on the blogs. What the blogs provide, however, is a medium which enlarges and makes more public some effective ways in to writing. They also, importantly, provide a forum for the members of the classroom community to share and comment on one another's writing in a way which makes writing a truly communicative activity.



6. Good writing: what is it?

6.1 Introduction

One of the issues that arose in the course of the project related to the models of writing in use in project classrooms. Despite the diversity of practice in the project schools, we observed considerable similarities in the kinds of writing that were being foregrounded in all these classrooms, and the features of writing that were emphasised in the teaching of writing, especially in literacy. These models of writing had obviously originated in the National Literacy Strategy and were linked to the criteria for national assessment. But in all the project schools these National Curriculum (NC) criteria were less influential on teachers' practice than were commercial schemes which claimed to help teachers to 'uplevel' pupils' writing and boost scores. The assessment criteria in these schemes were different from, and more reductive than, NC criteria. We observed these schemes, and the targets derived from them, being referred to frequently by teachers and, in most classrooms, being used regularly in setting targets and/or assessing work by individuals. Some of the very considerable differences we found between pupils' writing in literacy books and their writing on the blogs were clearly related to the models of writing in use in literacy teaching, which strongly influenced pupils' writing in their literacy books but were not nearly so present in their blog writing.



Some of the differences between the writing on the blogs and the writing in books were related to the fact that much blog writing was cross-curricular, and was not assessed by literacy-related criteria. The differences between pupils' cross-curricular writing and their literacy writing consequently became another focus of the research. In this chapter we consider these differences. We also investigate what teachers and pupils see as 'good writing'.

6.2 The kinds of writing that pupils enjoy

When asked, in the end-of-project questionnaire, what kind of writing they liked best, the great majority of pupils opted for 'stories and plays' as

their first choice, with poems, news reports and argument, in that order, being the next favourites. Yet our evidence showed that not many pupils had the opportunity to write complete stories either in their literacy books or blog posts during the course of the project. This was particularly true for the younger pupils, several of whom remarked, at the beginning of the project, that they had not written many stories that year: 'We mostly wrote stories in Year 2, we've only done one or two in Year 3.'

All of the case study pupils in this Year 3 class liked writing stories most. The current emphasis on teaching pupils to write in a wide range of genres may not take sufficient account of the fact that, at this stage in the school, their reading experience is likely to be focused on fiction and that they are therefore likely to be more confident at writing in narrative forms. In his book *Crafting digital writing*, Troy Hicks commented on how pupils in the United States were also increasingly being required to focus on non-narrative genres: '... we now find ourselves with core standards that value argumentative writing over informational writing and informational writing over narrative' (Hicks, 2013).



6.3 Short-burst writing

On the blogs, pupils' writing was limited because of the time available for blogging – most pupils were blogging in an ICT suite, or had limited access to computer time. This meant that the blogging tasks suggested were likely to be ones best suited to 'short-burst' writing and certain genres predominated. These included recounts and summaries, persuasive writing and argument, and diary entries. Except when they were blogging from home, pupils rarely had a chance to develop their writing at any length on the blog, with one or two notable exceptions, such as one class's plays about smoking.

Even in the classroom and in pupils' literacy books, time for writing was often limited to short periods of up to 30–45 minutes and in some classrooms there was often not time to undertake or complete a long piece of writing. This emphasis on 'short-burst' writing meant that many pupils were not having much practice in managing some of the higher-level features of writing which would become increasingly important to their writing progress.

Such features, as detailed in the English programmes of study and attainment targets, include the ability to sustain and develop ideas, to engage the reader's interest, to build an argument and support it with evidence, to organise increasingly complex texts, using paragraphing and other means to structure texts appropriately for the reader, to develop the plot and characters in a story, and to find the right tone and style for a particular text. These text-level features, from which so many other aspects of the text flow, were not generally foregrounded in the teaching of writing. Instead the features of writing emphasised – by the learning objectives set – were generally sentence- or word-level features. Targets often focused on the use of particular markers which were thought to indicate 'good writing'.

6.4 What makes for good writing?

As we discussed writing with pupils and learned more about their personal theories of what they had to do to improve their writing, the question of what really makes for good writing became more pressing and central to our enquiry. It seemed important to learn more about what, for the teachers in the project classrooms, constituted good writing – in general, not just in relation to assessment in school. At the final project meeting we therefore invited them to write their personal definitions of what makes writing good. The teachers wrote:

'Good writing has purpose – i.e. it means something to somebody; it tells you something new about the world / contains original ideas; it is not just 'correct' – doesn't have to be accurate and obey the rules – other things are more important; it is stylish – a good writer has command of grammar, punctuation, spelling, genre etc and can play around with them for effect; it never bores and often surprises, it talks to its reader; and it is readable!'

'[Good writing] has a good idea, something interesting which has substance and a meaning to the author and/or others. Their imagination and creativity drives it along to some kind of conclusion.'

'... a piece of writing which makes you able to imagine a scene/character easily through use of detail and description. Feelings and emotions are included and readers feel these.'

'Good writing must be for a real purpose and in context and the writer must truly understand who the audience is/will be. Good writing is creative and expresses something, be that feelings or humour. The writing needs to be fluent and the best writing is the type that captures and draws



in the reader. I love reading work that has the 'wow factor' and that isn't necessarily because of vocabulary or sentence structure, it can be because of how the writer has conveyed their message.'

'Content – that could be description or character emotions or a solid story line. It could mean powerful emotive words or passion, it could mean funny comments or rhetorical questions, but essentially the writing, whatever genre it is, needs to engage the reader by being fast paced and interesting... Without a good idea or a strong plot a piece of writing is not going to be classed as good.'

There was a good measure of agreement between the four teachers about what makes for good writing. The key themes that appear in what they wrote have to do with:

- good content and ideas
- real meaning and purpose
- imagination, originality and creativity
- fluency and momentum
- a strong sense of a reader/audience.

However, these were not the key factors that appeared in pupils' responses when we asked them the same question. When asked 'What makes writing good?' many of their responses reflected the teachers' marking of their books, and the learning objectives and targets that they were used to:

'It would need 'wow' words to impress me.'

'Good sentences full of adjectives.'

'Describing. Good punctuation.'

'Vocabulary that catches attention.'

'Description and similes.'

These responses reflect the criteria used in literacy teaching, derived from the commercial assessment schemes in use. Such schemes strongly promote certain assumptions about writing – adjectives and adverbs are good and adding more of them makes writing better; writing can be improved by adding more subordinate clauses and varying connectives; good writing should contain ambitious or unusual vocabulary. Pupils absorbed these (mainly sentence-level) criteria.

Some of the features emphasised, such as the use of complex sentences, were ones that tend to mark more mature writing. But such features generally develop as a consequence of reading and as accompaniments to developments in thought; it is not effective to teach them as a short-cut to achieving higher levels in assessment.



“Good writing takes imagination, creativity and patience.”

As Richard Ings suggests (2009), one of the common weaknesses of teaching writing is ‘an over-emphasis on technical matters such as punctuation and complex sentences, at the expense of helping pupils to develop and structure their ideas.’ Where improving a text is regarded mainly as a question of using more adjectives or adverbs, or of ‘varying connectives’, the texts produced are often stilted or over-decorated; the focus is all on the surface of the writing rather than what the writer wants to communicate. A significant number of the texts we read were of this kind.

This way of thinking about writing has become deeply embedded in school practice and was clearly reflected in the project teachers’ marking in pupils’ books which often included comments such as ‘good figurative language’, ‘lovely subordinate clause’, ‘I can see you are trying out some connectives’. The emphasis on ambitious vocabulary, or ‘wow’ words, seemed often to be particularly unhelpful, especially where pupils were using thesauruses to find unusual synonyms, and were not in a position to evaluate the choices offered by the thesaurus. Clicking on an online thesaurus was a common practice in the classrooms observed and can be a perilous process, as thesauruses provide very little context for the words suggested. This can lead to pupils using words quite inappropriately (for example the noun ‘decampment’ being used as an ‘ambitious’ alternative for the verb ‘escape’).

In his review of teaching writing conducted for the Department of Children, Schools and Families, Richard Andrews (2008) identified one of the ‘sticking points’ in the development of teaching writing as ‘too limited a sense of audience and function so that writing becomes an activity that serves assessment requirements in school (‘school writing’) rather than a form of communication that can make a difference in the world’. It was apparent from the close focus on assessment criteria in these project classrooms that writing in literacy was indeed in danger of becoming ‘an activity that serves assessment’.

But it is only right to note that not all of the pupils interviewed emphasised the importance of adjectives, similes, connectives and sentence-level features of writing when they were asked ‘What makes writing good?’ There were some very interesting individual responses:

‘Understanding what you’re doing. You have to tell the story and know what it’s really about.’

‘I think using your own sense and imagination.’

‘When people are consistent; when their writing is the same quality throughout, and when this quality is more than skin-deep when there is genuine heartfelt emotion in the writing.’

‘Good writing takes imagination, creativity and patience. You need to imagine what it looks like, be creative and be patient to see how it turns out at the end because that’s the only way to have good writing.’

‘The emotion and effort that you put into writing. If you take the time to go to your limits then you can do something so amazing that it will put you up levels. It’s the emotion.’

However, the reference to ‘put you up levels’ in this last response is highly significant. Teachers and pupils alike in these classes were all affected by the pressure to boost pupils’ levels and this was obviously a powerful factor behind the emphasis on particular features of writing.



6.5 Writing on the blog

This pressure was not present in the same way on the class blogs. Students' replies to the questionnaire illustrated this:

'Usually on the blog the teacher is applauding me for my great work. In my book he tells me to do my punctuation properly.'

'Their comments in your books are more detailed and normally have next steps. Their comments on the blog rarely have next steps and are more to the point.'

'In writing the comment usually is more punctuation but on the blog it's ideas to try and make it better.'

There was some evidence on the class blogs that they were enabling pupils to develop more public styles of writing. This may reflect the fact that pupils are aware they are addressing an unknown audience:

'I think writing on the blog is easy because you feel free, the whole world is reading your work and you could do different things on it.'

'This does change the way I write it makes me think I am representing our school to the world.'

However, set against this was the fact that pupils' writing on the blog in these classrooms was rarely revised or edited. This was strange, given the emphasis that both teachers and pupils put on the global audience for the writing. It was also in contrast with practice in other contexts – for example some of the Australian and US teachers who replied to the project's online questionnaire suggested that they placed particular importance on the editing of work for 'publishing' on the blog.

A Canadian teacher who responded to the online survey wrote:

'Each year there are students who are reluctant paper-and-pencil writers that become engaged using the blogging platform. They choose to write more frequently, often without prompts from me. Another effect is the willingness to revise and edit increases because of the public nature of writing for the blogging audience.'

An American teacher wrote that on the blog pupils 'are more aware of their audience and they proofread more carefully,' and an Australian teacher also mentioned that 'they usually take time to edit their work on the blog.'

Perhaps the relatively narrow approach to writing in books in English schools explains this. One Australian teacher who had visited English schools wrote:

'The big difference I have noticed between UK and Sydney schools is ... that UK teachers seem obsessed with the need to fill books with handwritten work in order to satisfy Ofsted and your use of levels. The writing done in my classroom tends to be more connected with what we are learning about.'



Members of the US National Writing Projects also emphasise the importance of 'revising, revising, revising and revising again.' There would in fact be a strong case for giving pupils opportunities to work on some of their blog writing before posting it – using Word as a drafting and editing tool. One essential point about writing is that it's revisable, but on the blogs we studied pupils were routinely posting first drafts and not being offered the chance of revising them before going public.

Where writers are working in role, it often results in some very creative and convincing writing. This also happened on the blogs when pupils wrote in role – as in some very entertaining parodies of David Attenborough – or were interviewed in role, as in 'hot-seating'. The use of role enabled them to adopt adult personae and move into different spoken and written registers. In one class pupils wrote speeches for Galileo to deliver, arguing with the church about his theory that the sun was the centre of the solar system, and some of the class were videoed in the role of Galileo for the blog. In these circumstances some pupils achieved very authoritative and public styles of writing.

6.6 Cross-curricular writing on class blogs

One of the case study teachers commented: 'The literacy consultant working with the school on our moderated assessment wants to see examples of cross-curricular writing and the blog is such a good example of this. It's all there across a whole year. Children write much, much more over the year because of the blog.'

Although we were interested in comparing pupils' writing on the blog with the writing they were doing in the context of literacy lessons, we were also interested in the blog as a learning medium and in the way in which it was used to introduce and record projects across the curriculum. The blog writing that we observed pupils doing in the context of science or history projects was often different in interesting ways from the writing that appeared in their literacy books.

6.6.1 Year 6: Space travel

One task that generated a lot of enthusiasm in the class and which also made them think hard was a 'space travel' task; pupils were asked to make a rocket from (very) basic equipment. The teacher described what the point of the task was and why he felt it was successful:

'In our space topic I gave the children equipment and asked them to make a rocket. It was group problem solving. We made a video of a group and asked them to write a description. It was a really good way to stimulate writing on the blog and to engage with an audience. The QuadBlogging partner schools commented on the film and it was a great way to get comments and replies from other children.'

On the blog he posted the video of the group that had been made and then the following invitation:

We have just started our new topic, Space Explorers. To get us warmed up we were given a challenge: to find a way of sending an astronaut (ie Lego man) in a rocket (well, a plastic tub) across outer space (er, a table) with only a few basic materials to help us achieve our mission. Describe (using as much scientific language as you can) what happened. Try to talk about force, resistance, friction etc.

Below are two responses:

In class we did a science experiment to transport a little lego man from one end diagonally across our table. In the blast off/experiment we used tape, string, a balloon, or two, if needed, a ruler, an eraser, straws, a clip, (not a paper clip) a sharpener pot and a little lego man, that we eventually transport. The first thing we did was put two metre sticks against the ledges of all the tables, in the classroom. When that was completed we tied a long string around the two metre sticks, then we got our pot and we got the straws and tied it in a upwards position creating a pod (like in the London Eye) but we still had some straws leftover, so we used it to put over the long string and under the straw we had used for the pod, we did it because of friction otherwise the pod wouldn't have moved on the rough string. Then we attached one balloon on our pod with tape. The balloon we had blown up, we then had attached a clip to it so air didn't come out, we had planned to unattached it when we did blast off. Finally blast off came! We counted down from 3 to 1 then we replaced 0 for blast off. The experiment worked wonderfully as you would have seen in the video above.



The screenshot shows a blog post from 'Year 6 blog' at St Leonard's. The main heading is 'Space Explorers blast off!'. Below the heading is a video player showing students in a classroom setting, with one student holding a large pink balloon. The video player has a play button and a progress bar. To the right of the video are several widgets: 'Recent Comments' with a list of comments, 'Recent Posts' with a list of posts, 'visitors to our site' with a map showing visitor locations, 'Links' with a list of links, and 'CBBC News Feed' with a list of news items.

What we had to do was transport our pod to the other side of space (table) using string, paper pipes, cellar tape, glue and a balloon. All the groups attached the pod to the string, but after a while we thought about the friction because the string and string were rubbing together so we threaded the string through a paper pipe and carried on. At first we tried attached a ballon on the bottom. It made it fly, but not for long. The ballon made it swirl round and only went half way. So some people tried putting it on top. At first it didn't work because to much tape was on it then came off because there wasn't enough tape. In the end we got it right and realised it flew because of the air pushing it forward. It was a very fun and exciting project that we learnt a lot from.

The students writing here were having to put into words a very complex sequence of events. It is one thing to describe a successful experiment – here they were having to explain a series of experimental moves, and describe why they worked or did not work. They responded to the

teacher's suggestion that they should use scientific language where they could. The writing was detailed and clear, but also communicated some of the fun and frustration of the 'space flight' work. This was writing with a clear purpose.

6.6.2 Year 6: Plays about smoking

In another Year 6 class, the focus was on smoking and drugs, as part of 'transition' work in PSHE (personal, social, health and economic education). The class had already written a piece of argument about the smoking ban. They also had had experience of writing plays, and were familiar with the role of a narrator and of stage directions in a playscript. At the beginning of the session in the ICT suite, they sat on the carpet and acted out a series of improvised playlets, based on one or two individual pupil scenarios. The basic situation was that of a school student who was being persuaded to smoke by another, 'cool', student. Most of the playlets involved four people: the two students, a narrator, and someone giving stage directions. This really brought out the features of the playscript form.

The class enjoyed these playlets and the brief performances provided a very good preparation for the writing that followed, which was initially done in pairs. They were asked to write in the same basic form as the improvised dramas, with a narrator introducing and commenting on the scene, and stage directions to contextualise the dialogue. In the brief space of a 45-minute session in the ICT suite, members of the class improvised and performed three playlets and all of the class began to write their own plays; most pupils were able to make a good start on the task.

The class was very familiar with the arguments against smoking, but also with the pressure that school students sometimes have to face up to if they do not want to be over-influenced by their peer group. The situations, characters and language of these plays were authentic and convincing. The class were using the language of the playground and the street, and skilfully suggesting the kinds of put-downs and bullying that can be used to intimidate young people:

Narrator: It's the end of school and Harry trudges through the damp, deserted road, keeping his head low and his hood draped over his eyes. Unfortunately, because the hood was draped so low over Harry's eyes, he accidentally bumped into Billy. Billy was a tall meaty boy with dark hair and menacing grey eyes. This boy was a nasty piece of work.

Billy: Oi! What do you think you're doing?!

Harry: Oh, erm, sorry.....(immediately backing away)

Billy: You're not goin' anywhere (grabs Harry before he can run) Do you smoke?

Harry: No. I've never wanted to and never will.(muttering in a quiet voice)

Billy: I didn't hear what you said, say it again (moves closer to Harry)

Harry: I said NO! I'VE NEVER WANTED TO AND NEVER WILL! (almost screaming at Billy)

This writing was different in kind from much of the writing in the class's literacy books; the focus here was definitely on the subject and the content, rather than on the form and features of the writing.

6.7 Does blogging help writing?

In comparing pupils' writing in their books with their writing on the blog we gave a great deal of importance to teachers' assessments of writing, both formal and informal. However, as has already been suggested, very different models of writing were apparent in teachers' and pupils' approaches to writing on the blog and writing in literacy books. Whereas writing in literacy books was habitually assessed according to tight assessment criteria, writing on the blogs was not so evaluated. Both



teachers and pupils were aware of these kinds of differences and articulated them in interviews and in responses to questionnaires.

In this research project we had wanted to look at the effects of blogging on pupils' writing and to discover whether blog-writing helped to improve their writing in general. This was quite difficult to establish, given the different ways in which blog-writing and writing in books were viewed and assessed. However, there was a strong groundswell of opinion among project teachers that blogging had helped pupils' writing, for a range of reasons which we explored in interviews and group discussions with the teachers.

6.8 How teachers assessed work on the blog and in books

None of the teachers assessed writing on the blog in the same way as they assessed pupils' writing in their books:

'I don't pick up on spelling and punctuation on the blog – only the content. In their books I give feedback on all of it.'

'I think the children wouldn't say that I necessarily do assess them on the blog. The comments I give are less about their punctuation etc. and more about the content and my personal response to their work (this is the same with peer assessment too)... My assessment in their books is much more focused on the SATs criteria.'

The blog seemed to be regarded as an area of freedom from assessment, more about 'process' and less about detailed literacy criteria as laid down in the schools' literacy teaching and assessment programmes. Assessment in literacy books was much more focused on the criteria for achieving particular levels and sub-levels, on accuracy in spelling and punctuation, on grammar, and on the use of descriptive and 'ambitious' vocabulary.

Pupils were aware of this difference:

'When she marks our books she writes our levels, what to improve. On the blog she responds, not really marks it.'

'There's a massive difference. In the book she comments on handwriting, punctuation 'You forgot this, you forgot that'. On my blog writing her comments are much more positive.'

'On the blog the teacher doesn't tell you much about spelling and punctuation. His comments are encouraging. If you are writing a cliffhanger he'll say what he likes.'

'In the book our teacher extends his comments e.g. a whole page on what to improve and on the blog he doesn't do that. He makes short comments.'

'He tells you what he likes and doesn't like, but in the book he gives you corrections.'

'In your book you get a question or two stars and a wish – a thing to improve on, but you don't get it in ICT. When we get asked to write comments on other people's work, they didn't put much effort in, they don't give the detail. We get comments [from the teacher in the books] like you've done something on your level, but you don't get levelled on your blog. We all had personal targets in our book.'



“...blogging seemed, to teachers, to have contributed to a general improvement in pupils' writing over the course of the project...”

‘On the blog Ms M says it [verbally] about what is good, how to improve and we talk about it on the carpet. She gives different comments in our book than on our blogging work – in our literacy books she says e.g. ‘you can add this in’.

‘She gives constructive comments on the blog [when we’re talking] on the carpet e.g. ‘I love that but make it more snappy’. In your books she says ‘I love your similes, very good use of adjectives’.

6.9 How does blogging help writing?

Teachers generally felt that blogging had helped pupils to become more confident writers, although it had not always made them better writers:

‘The children’s writing is more informal on the blog. The quality of their writing is not as good. Their writing is rushed. Their ways of writing is not as good. They go down in their writing levels.’

Yet the same teacher felt that the case study pupils had improved their writing in the course of the year:

‘The case study children’s quality of blog posts have improved greatly over the year. For some of them the quality of their writing is starting to go up in their books. Many have improved more all round in their writing, not just in stories.’

Another teacher presented a nuanced comparison of pupils' writing on and off the blog:

‘When I moderated the pupils’ writing levels together with our literacy consultant a few weeks ago we looked at the blogs to reinforce our judgements, though it wasn’t the first place we went. Performance varies between the two formats. The level of writing might not be as high on the blog. Punctuation is worse on the blog.’

Despite the fact that the pupils' writing was not as accurate or careful on the blog, this teacher felt that the blog had helped their writing as a class:

‘It has helped them all become more confident writers. It helps their writing stamina and gives more opportunity for writing. When writing in books, some children are reluctant especially boys and are slow to get going but this isn’t so on blog. Everybody likes doing it.’

Similarly, a teacher of younger pupils also felt that they did not do their best writing on the blog:

‘Their work on the blog is more informal, chatty and with extra emoticons which they would never use in their books! The punctuation and sentence structure is much poorer on the blog than in the book.’

But she also felt that the big difference that the blog had made was to pupils' confidence:

‘I think the main improvement is their attitude to writing; they have all become so much more confident with both writing in their books and on the blog. They are less cautious about typing and publishing their work on the blog and are really starting to find their voice. In their books I think their non-fiction writing (which we have done a lot of this year) has improved, becoming more detailed, explanatory and technical. They are a knowledgeable bunch and so are very keen to tell everyone what they know! They are enjoying doing this on the blog.’



“You really feel like an author on the blog because everyone is reading your writing and it makes you feel proud.”

Blogging was viewed by both pupils and by teachers as more informal than writing in literacy books, and is judged by different standards. This may explain why pupils seemed to experience it as an area of freedom and experimentation. In general, blogging seemed, to teachers, to have contributed to a general improvement in pupils' writing over the course of the project, even when their writing on the blog was not seen by their teachers as being as careful or as accurate as their writing in their books. Blogging had been a 'game-changer' for pupils: it had made writing fun, even for reluctant writers, and had also given them valuable writing practice as well as a sense of a wider audience for their work.

One extremely interesting point was that blogging had made the pupils in all these classes much more conscious of one another's writing. They rarely read one another's books, but on the blog they read one another's work, commented on it, and were sometimes influenced by how one another wrote. Commenting enabled them to communicate with other writers and respond to their writing. Consequently they also became more aware of their own writing and more interested in how they might improve it. Most importantly, they felt themselves to be part of a writing community: the blog established an area of sharing.

6.10 Progress in writing

We invited the project teachers to place all their case study pupils on the NC reading and writing levels at the beginning and end of the project. All of the pupils made progress on NC levels and their progress in writing was as great as, and sometimes greater than, their progress in reading. To be specific, four of the twelve pupils made greater progress in writing than in reading on these assessments, and only one made greater progress in reading than in writing.

But some of the aspects of writing where pupils seemed to be improving as a consequence of blogging, as reported by their teachers, were not related to NC criteria. Some of these developments were affective in nature: they related to pupils' increased interest and engagement in writing, their sense that writing could be fun, their increased confidence. These very positive changes can make a great difference to pupils' learning and their importance cannot be understated.

In addition, some developments unquestionably took place through blogging in these classrooms which gave pupils a broader conception of writing. They were aware of these developments, reported them in questionnaires, talked about them in whole-class discussions and discussed them with researchers in interviews. These developments can be summarised as follows:

- Within the blog they gained a wider sense of audience, and they saw their writing as communicative in nature. They were not writing just for the teacher to mark (as was sometimes the case in literacy books) – they were communicating through writing.
- Consequently there was a development in the pupils' sense of their own 'voice' as a writer. And, as has been suggested above, they became more conscious writers, more aware that they were writing in order to be read by others.
- This affected their sense of standards and gave them wider criteria to use in judging both their own writing and that of others. One pupil commented:

'You really feel like an author on the blog because everyone is reading your writing and it makes you feel proud.'



7. Outcomes of the project: reflections and responses

We had hoped that this project, by involving teachers closely (not only in data collection but also in discussion and in reflection on the emergent evidence), would make a difference to their practice in blogging and writing. Involvement in a project such as this can be professionally valuable to teachers. Even though we were not able to offer teachers much in the way of extra time, apart from attendance at project meetings, the project provided an opportunity for them to reflect on their practice, observe pupils closely, document their observations and share their practice. The visits from the researchers and the email correspondence with them, the project interviews and questionnaires, and the provision of a website for posting examples of pupils' writing and blogging, all combined to create a 'virtual space' where teachers were engaged in an ongoing discussion with the researchers and each other about the issues raised by the project.



At the end of the project we held a meeting where we presented the main findings and invited the teachers to reflect freely on their experience of the project, and on whether it had influenced their practice in any way. In addition to these responses from project teachers we invited responses, via an online survey, to a wide range of questions relating to practice in blogging, and received responses from international respondents as well as from respondents in other UK schools.

7.1 Project teachers' reflections on changes in their practice

Towards the end of the project, in final interviews and questionnaires, teachers talked about what they had gained from the project.

Teacher 1:

'I've really enjoyed the whole process of doing it and talking to colleagues about it. It's been useful to get someone else's perspective on what you are doing especially as I'm working in a one form entry school. You don't often get to see other teachers work. I've really enjoyed the meetings. It's made me realise what a good thing it is to do blogging.'

'The children would say it's one of their favourite things to do but not just fun like leisure activities, they think of it as fun but don't describe it as work. They enjoy it in a way they don't other writing. If you can get children to write without any negative connotations it's a very magical thing to hold onto. Under the guise of it being something fun you can get them to do lots of work and thinking and expressive writing without too much effort, because it's being done on a computer, which makes it attractive. Their relationship with each other changes, because they talk about what other people wrote on the blog. This all makes them try harder and show off their writing more.'

'Writing a lot every day improves writing. It's rather like physical training – doing a slightly different form of exercise improves your overall fitness, so swimming can improve your cycling – it's called 'cross training'. Blogging is like cross-training.'

**Teacher 2:**

'The project has made the blog more educational and more meaningful. Before they were posting about their weekends but only certain children were using the blog in their own time. The project has meant that all the children in the class have a voice and therefore, I feel I know them all better. They love when I comment on their work and posts and we have a good dialogue, improving rapport between myself and the children.'

'The project has really helped me to understand what an invitation is. I used to post questions, often related to the news, but once again, only certain children would respond in their own time. I like the invitations when they are related to an exciting video or an interesting picture and I am able to give all the class time to answer the question I pose/or complete the task set. A good invitation needs to be motivating for the children and allow for open-ended answers, rather than the children giving me the answer they think I want to hear.'

Teacher 3:

'To be a more reflective teacher. I have learnt the benefits of reflecting on what I have taught, often there is not time for this but with the sessions we have had altogether, I have been able to think about my practice as a blogging teacher and how this has helped progression in groups of children. It would be interesting to see what these children get as their end of Year 6 levels and see if this blogging project has helped them in any way. I know that my blogging teaching has progressed through the ideas we have shared. The children are now more reflective and use the blog to great effect. The tips we have shared over the months have helped me to teach more specific lessons. I have also been more reflective in my teaching practice, which has helped my planning of both ICT and literacy and helped the link between the two.'

Teacher 4:

'Having started this blog in line with the beginning of this project, it has made me put a lot more effort into the children's blogging opportunities. It has made me more aware of the children's attitude to writing in general. I'm proud of the blog, though I wish more people would leave comments when they visit it. I would like it to be more public. These meetings have been very supportive. It's been great learning so much more about blogging through comparing experiences. Realising that what we have been doing as teachers is valued, and that it is of interest to researchers and to other teachers is a matter of professional pride. I think the blog is a great way to document learning, and a great documentary of the year. Blogging encourages reluctant writers. Through enabling them to give effective and understanding feedback to each other, they develop a realisation of a wider audience and an exciting purpose for writing. Digital literacy gives writing a whole new dimension which primary children must be exposed to; it is, after all, their future.'

7.2 Reflections from teachers who responded to the online survey

The online survey provided a wider sample of teacher reflections on blogging. We have already referred to several of these comments in other sections, but it is worth highlighting the experiences of some of these teachers as well as emphasising the differences between responses from UK teachers and those in other English-speaking countries. The attention given to editing and revising, the greater numbers of classroom-based computers, the focus on individual student blogs and the greater incorporation of digital writing in everyday classroom practice were all noticeable in responses from Canadian, Australian and American teachers. As well as writing more about editing and revising, several of the teachers from other countries talked about the importance of 'voice' in



writing. When asked about whether they had noticed any effects of blogging on students' writing, a Canadian teacher wrote: 'content has improved (more detail), writing voice shows tremendous development, too.'

UK teachers from outside the project also made valuable contributions through the web survey. Chris Waugh, a Lambeth teacher well known in the EdTech (educational technology) community for his Edutronic.net¹⁶ secondary English blog is recognised for his innovative work with older students. The transfer to digital writing is impressive and all of his students' work appears on the blog. Chris has noticed how his students' attitudes to blogging have changed:

'They take it in their stride. They enjoy the swiftness of feedback and are encouraged when their work is read. They tend to become more and more open with sharing their work as time passes (they always have the option of setting their work to 'private' at will).'

Chris also comments on the differences between writing on the blog and in books:

'The blog writing is shorter and more crafted in the sense that it has been manipulated more for effect – though this is something I have been explicitly encouraging more of late as well. They are more willing to edit their work as it doesn't require re-writing. Spelling is a spell-check issue. It provides amazing affordances to students with dyslexia as they can use voice dictation software. Sometimes they feel they 'haven't written much' as typed text that is constantly refined doesn't look as impressive as pages and pages in a book.'

The vast majority of teachers who responded to the survey monitor and/or moderate pupils' posts and all teachers moderate comments made on the blog by outsiders. Whether teachers set up the blog so that they needed to approve a pupil's post first depended on the age of the pupils. A US high school teacher wrote: 'I monitor them, but I do not currently moderate them prior to them posting (I do not pre-approve). So far, this has not been an issue.' Whereas a Canadian teacher, like many others teaching primary or elementary level, said: 'All posts and comments are vetted by me before being posted publicly.'

Nearly a third of respondents had noticed the effects of blogging on pupils' writing, with 64% noticing a difference between writing on the blog and writing on paper or in books. Some illustrative quotes included:

'Children learn about the importance of working hard to get their work to that stage where it's good enough to be published.'

'Children are thinking more about what they put in their writing to share with others. They try and think about the reader more.'

'More willing to write. More willing to write across a range of genres. Too early to say emphatically but SATs writing results improved last year.'

An American teacher felt that her class blog 'increases motivation, increases student voice, increases editing and increases citing sources' and helps her students 'make connections with other writers and reflect on others' writing.' A Canadian teacher talked about her students' 'eagerness to publish their own writing to receive feedback, especially from peers and overseas students.'

¹⁶ <http://edutronic.net/>



However, not all teachers saw the improvements they had hoped for: a London deputy headteacher wrote: 'It didn't quite have the benefit I was looking for in that way. I would like to say it has improved the quality of their writing but I can't at present.'

Many UK teachers referred to the same benefits and challenges that we had come across in the project schools: the power of sharing work with parents; how a wider audience motivates pupils; how connecting with other writers and reflecting on their own work improves writing. But they also referred to challenges such as the problem of access to computers in an ICT suite: 'Most of them still find it easier to write on paper. They're usually more considered. They are quite rushed on the computer due to limited access to ICT suite.'

However, as in the case of the project teachers, respondents to the online questionnaire were overwhelmingly committed to blogging, and convinced of its positive contribution to writing development.

8. Conclusions and recommendations

The following conclusions and recommendations are drawn from the report as a whole and are not arranged hierarchically. Thus some very broad and general conclusions are interspersed with findings of a less far-reaching nature.

8.1 Blogging and writing

Blogging enthused the pupils in this study and gave them access to new kinds of writing and new audiences. In fact this link between greater audiences seemed to act as a motivating factor, as they were very interested in the wider audiences for their writing and some demonstrated they were aware of these audiences as they wrote.

Pupils' writing was different on the blogs and in certain cases it was judged by the teachers to be better than the writing in their books. This appears to have been the case particularly for some groups of pupils, such as EAL pupils (English as an Additional Language).

Blogs flourished best when teachers provided effective support and preparation for blog-writing, where the invitations to blog were truly inviting, and where pupils were offered an adequate framework for their responses.

Pupils valued the wider audiences for their blog writing, yet many placed greater value on the more personal feedback from teachers that they received on their blog post compared with that given to writing in their books. Reasons given by pupils who preferred writing in their books included the possibility of writing at length and issues of privacy.

Some of the best writing on the blogs happened in cross-curricular contexts. In some classes where blogging was used to document learning and to develop ideas, explanations and arguments, blogging was a valuable learning medium.

Blog entries were not always revised or edited in the same way as writing in books, despite the general emphasis on the wider audience for the blogs. This paradox needs discussing and resolving.

Teachers reported that blogging could enhance relationships between pupils and teachers and between schools and homes. Though parents do not always comment on the school blogs, pupils reported that many follow the blogs and are interested in what classes are writing.

Although pupils' writing on the blog was not generally judged to be better than their writing in their books, and despite it being less carefully edited, teachers still thought that it had helped to improve writing overall in important ways.

In most classrooms, for most pupils, blogging resulted in pupils' increased engagement in writing, increased confidence in writing, greater awareness of audience, a greater sense of their 'voice' as a writer, greater awareness of their own writing and that of others, and an enhanced sense of belonging to a writing community.



8.2 Writing in general

Referring to all writing tasks (blog and book) the majority of pupils said they valued most the genres of writing that they had had the least opportunity to engage in. Stories and poems were the genres that they rated most highly.

One of the challenges that teachers in this study faced was the pressure of having to undertake frequent assessment of pupils' writing in their literacy books and they reported that this often resulted in a skewing of priorities in relation to teaching writing. Detailed and countable criteria were often given more weight than broader and higher-level criteria in assessing literacy writing, especially where commercial assessment schemes were in regular use.

Analysis of pupils' writing in their literacy books also showed that there was an undue emphasis on word- and sentence-level features, such as using adjectives and 'ambitious vocabulary', and a corresponding neglect of text-level features of writing. However, teachers and pupils approached blog writing in a less prescribed way, allowing pupils greater freedom to experiment and develop a sense of audience.

8.3 Recommendations for blogging practice

Moving between the classroom and the ICT suite sometimes had a detrimental effect on the flow of pupils' ideas for writing. Consideration should be given to investment in classroom computers or mobile devices to enable ongoing and wider access to blogs across the school day.

Pupils sometimes mentioned how little time they had on the blog in the ICT suite. Protecting time to blog is crucial.

Blogging from home can be very successful, but issues of access and monitoring need to be carefully managed. It may be best to set up a separate section on the blog for writing from home.

Care should be taken to ensure that pupils are given appropriate permissions or roles within the settings of the blogging platform. For example, in general, younger pupils should not be given rights to edit or delete one another's work.

Teachers need to build in time to monitor and moderate the class blog. Teachers embarking on blogging or working with younger pupils should set up the blog so that they have to approve posts and comments before they are made public. External comments should always be approved by the teacher.

Teachers and pupils see blogs as public writing – yet blogs are not always structured so as to welcome and help the reader, and navigating the blogs may be difficult. The blogs that work best are those that are carefully structured. It is recommended that teachers who are setting up a class blog should decide how to use such features as archives, categories and tags to enable others to navigate the blog.

Automaticity (or fluency), both in handwriting and in typing, is essential to progress in writing. Both handwriting and typing need to be given due attention and pupils need time for practice.

Blog writing, like other forms of writing, benefits from thorough preparation. For example, familiarity with the content/material of the writing and different forms of oral rehearsal (e.g. role play) can help pupils engage in effective blog writing.

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Useful links

2Simple 2Type <https://www.2simple.com/2type/>

Angels of the Dump. YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=8wfjgcSxEw8

BBC Dance Mat <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/typing/>

Blogger https://www.blogger.com/tour_start.g

Brain Pop Galileo Galilei <http://www.brainpop.co.uk/science/theuniverse/galileogalilei/preview.weml>

Edublogger <http://edublogs.org/>

The Edublogger <http://theedublogger.com/>

Kidblog <http://kidblog.org/home/>

London Nautical English Department <http://edutronic.net/>

Primary Blogger <http://primaryblogger.co.uk/>

QuadBlogging™ <http://quadblogging.net/>

School A Year 3 blog <http://mbenrabha.wordpress.com/bees/>

School B Year 3 blog <http://cuthbert4m.wordpress.com/page/3/>

School B Year 6 blog <http://amazing6w.wordpress.com/>

School C Year 6 blog <http://stleonards6.primaryblogger.co.uk/>

The School Bloggers: Benefits of blogging in the classroom <http://theschoolbloggers.co.uk/school-blogs-benefits/blogging-in-the-classroom/>

The School Bloggers <http://theschoolbloggers.co.uk/>

Wordpress guidance on blogging roles <http://en.support.wordpress.com/user-roles/>

Wordpress.com <http://wordpress.com/#!/read/following/>



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