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Abstract

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Voices from the Classroom: Elementary Students' Perceptions of Blogging

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Abstract: Blogging appears to be a promising instructional strategy which may provide solutions to some of the challenges in traditional writing instruction; however, few studies explore elementary students' views on blogging. This qualitative case study gives elementary students voice as it examines their perceptions of blogging and their views of themselves as writers, readers, and learners. The researchers drew from multiple data sources, including student and teacher interviews, student and teacher blog writing, and classroom observations, to ascertain young writers' perspectives. The findings indicate these student bloggers' reader awareness and appreciation of the reader-writer relationship. Student bloggers also benefited from emotional and pedagogical assistance, both of which addressed their needs as writers, readers, and learners. While students enjoyed positive comments from readers, they struggled with critical feedback. Ways to offer encouragement and to prepare young writers for critical comments as they learn to write are provided.

Keywords: Blogging, writing, student perceptions, writing instruction, elementary education, technology

Voices from the Classroom: Elementary Students' Perceptions of Blogging

Although there is research available on what blogging means to university students (Nackerud &Scaletta, 2008) or adolescents (Collins & Kelly, 2008), there is little research on elementary students' views on blogging. Blogging appears to be a promising instructional strategy that may help children develop as writers (Penrod, 2007). Understanding the ways in which young writers experience blogging will help teacher educators and teachers develop instruction to support student bloggers' growth as writers and learners. The purpose of this study was to explore elementary students' perceptions of blogging and their views of themselves as writers, readers, and learners, and in doing so to give these students voice.

Blogging in Elementary School

Blogging affords worthwhile possibilities to students when used as an instructional approach for writing growth. Penrod (2007) offers these five reasons in support of classroom-based blogging:

1) Blogs are incredibly easy to publish because of technological advances.

2) Blogs mix pleasure with information to create an information reformation.

3) Blogs are a malleable writing genre.

4) Blogs allow writers to generate new personas and construct new worlds.

5) Blogs empower those who are often marginalized in society. (p. 3)

Penrod cautions, however, that blogging technology in itself does not produce successful writers or "ensure a successful blogging experience" (p. 6). Student bloggers still need guidance from teachers so that they can develop the necessary writing skills and social practices, and master the technology. Penrod explains: "Without a solid foundation in the skills, strategies, tactics, and

aesthetics of composing the written word, writers rarely become master bloggers" (p.6). What should such instruction look like?

Teacher educators and teachers have provided numerous examples of blog use to support student literacy development in the classroom (Boling, 2006; Boling, Castek, Zawilinski, Barton, & Nierlich, 2008; Kajder & Bull, 2003; Zawilinski, 2009). Some of the blog uses they discuss include collaborative reading and writing projects, literature response, self-expressive and reflective writing, news bulletin writing, or communication with parents and students. There have also been published numerous guides and practical articles on how to develop a classroom blog (Gelbwasser, 2011;Parisi & Crosby, 2012; Richardson, 2010; Wilber, 2010) or how to integrate blogging into existing classroom practices such as reading, literature discussion or writing workshop (Boling, Castek, Zawilinski, Barton, & Nierlich, 2008; Davis & McGrail, 2009). Zawilinski (2009), too, advances a specific form of scaffold, *HOT Blogging*, to encourage higher order thinking (HOT) and online reading comprehension development as part of the blogging program. Other teacher educators suggest ways to create successful collaborative online learning communities (Boling, 2006) and offer advice on how to connect to and work with commenters and readers outside the classroom (Davis & McGrail, 2009).

As Penrod (2007) does, these teacher educators and teachers have demonstrated that blogging is an attention-worthy alternative to traditional writing instruction in elementary classrooms. However, as with any new strategy or approach to instruction, it seems only natural to ask exactly what impact it has on student literacy advancement, in particular on writing development, which is of interest to this work.

Blogging and Writing Development

Research has only begun to examine what in blogging serves as support for writing development and what does not (Lamonica, 2010; Read & Fisher, 2006). For example, Lamonica's (2010) study that examined blogging as part of the writing program in a fourth-grade classroom found blogging to be "highly beneficial for elementary students, resulting in increased motivation, strengthened writing skills, and engagement in an authentic activity" (p. 2). The biggest growth in terms of writing for these young writers was in word choice and sentence fluency. Although Lamonica (2010) interviewed students about their experiences with blogging, more of the statements shared in the report came from the teacher than from the students themselves. Neither did the study indicate whether, nor to what extent, the audience provided feedback to these students as well. We thus need more research to explore the connections young writers make with the audience in open online environments such as blogging and the ways these connections assist them in developing the concept of audience, the writer, and the reader/writer relationship.

There are few studies, however, which explore this question in general, and even fewer investigations that examine it from the student blogger perspective in elementary school. For instance, Lapp, Shea, and Wolsey's (2010/2011) case study examined second grade students' awareness of audience in the context of a classroom blogging experience. The researchers analyzed student writing on their blogs and their comments on peers' blog posts, as well as pre/during/post-blogging survey data, looking at students' growth of awareness of their audience through their participation in blogging. Their findings indicate not only student growth in audience awareness, because of "the near-immediate feedback provided by their peers" through the commenting feature of the blogging software (p. 33), but also "a concern for what the

audience thinks" (p. 41). The students in this study also expressed a preference to write for an audience, including those students who liked to write for themselves, too. In addition, interaction with the audience motivated most students to improve their writing, and as a result, they were willing to make changes to their writing. The researchers concluded that "blogging technology can help young authors construct an understanding of what the audience for their written work might require to fully understand the text and to connect to the writer as co-constructors of the intended message"(p.42).

Wong and Hew's (2010) study investigated the impact of blogging and scaffolding to support narrative writing among fifth-grade students in a primary school in Singapore. Scaffolding of student learning was in the form of a guide that asked specific questions about the story development such as what the plot for the story is, when and where the events take place, who the characters are, and other questions. In addition to pre/post blogging writing and reflections, the researchers conducted interviews with the participants, inquiring what they liked/disliked about blogging as a writing tool, if it differed from writing on paper, and what advice they had for educators. These bloggers liked blogging and appreciated peer responses as they saw them as the way to help them improve their writing. They wished to receive more comments, though. As an explanation, the researchers offered the students' failure to respond to their peers' ideas and content, and suggested that teachers should encourage such feedback, rather than focus primarily on the language issues in student writing. Both Lapp, Shea, and Wolsey's (2010/2011) and Wong and Hew's (2010) research offer insight into young writers' audience awareness and writing development during blogging, but the audience in these studies was limited to peers and the teacher only and the writing instruction focused on narrative development centered on the topics offered by the teacher.

On the other hand, McGrail and Davis's (2011) study investigated a blogging/writing program in which young writers (fifth-grade students) enjoyed freedom regularly in topic selection and were able to write expository and persuasive pieces for the audiences from their own classrooms and beyond. The young writers in this study developed confidence as writers and the ability "to take ownership of the writing process and the writer's craft" (p.415). The researchers concluded that the attention to idea development in their writing and building relationships and support systems with the audience as respondents, rather than "a heavy focus on corrected writing conventions" (p. 415), resulted in engaged writing. While McGrail and Davis's initial report focused on describing student writing and the writing process, the current article brings to the foreground the voices and perceptions of fifth-grade bloggers as writers, readers and learners. The following research questions guided this exploration: 1) What are fifth-graders' perceptions of themselves as writers, readers, and learners? ; 2) How does blogging affect fifth-graders' perceptions of themselves as learners and thinkers when reading and publishing?; and 3) What kind of classroom and community support helps students to advance literacies?

Theoretical Frameworks

New Literacies Perspective

This study approaches blogging from a New Literacies Perspective (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004; Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008). This framework is concerned with exploring the ways in which the internet and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) "shape the ways in which we view and use language and literacy" (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004, p. 1571). Weblogs (blogs) have opened new opportunities for communication and information exchange with a larger audience. The New Literacies Perspective was

particularly useful to our understanding of blogging as a new literacy writing practice. This new practice involved writing to the larger audience, beyond the teacher and peers, and the opportunity to comment on others' thoughts and ideas and to receive response from the audience. We were also interested in the ways blogging influenced students' perceptions and practices of writing and their views of themselves as writers, readers, and learners. Additionally, with its focus on learning as "socially constructed within new literacies" (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004, p. 1589), this lens allowed us to explore the unique relationships that developed between student blog authors and their readers (commenters). This was another area of interest to this research.

Theory of Sense of Community

The emerging results from the study led to the selection of McMillan and Chavis's (1986) sense of community theory to help us describe the unique blogging community that we watched evolve in our study, and the ways in which their members developed and nurtured it. The theory uses four elements to define a sense of community. Element one is "membership," which the researchers define as "the feeling of belonging" or of a sense of "personal relatedness" (p. 9). Element two is described as "a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members." This element is called "influence" (p.9). Element three is "reinforcement" or "integration and fulfillment of needs" and is explained as "the feeling that members' needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group" (p. 9). "Shared emotional connection" is element four and is described as "the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together and similar experiences" (p. 9).

In our blogging project, we spent a great deal of time simply being available for students during class time. Both researchers walked around the classroom as students were blogging. Students were invited to help each other, talk about what a particular comment meant, or to offer suggestions for a response. In addition, our students had opportunities to communicate not only with their peers and the teacher but also with readers beyond the classroom. The multiple and varied forms of social interaction that the blogging environment provided to our young writers yielded itself to an analysis through the lens of community theory. This is because these diverse opportunities for social interaction opened the door to community and relationship development for our students. They also provided us, the researchers, with new spaces in which to explore the presence or (lack thereof) of the four elements that define a community, as proposed above by McMillan and Chavis (1986). See Table 1 for manifestation of these four elements in our data.

Table 1 Sense of Community Theory and Student Blogging

Element	Manifestation of Element in the Study
Membership	Being part of the blogging project and of a group of *Blogicians* who shared a class blog entitled *Blogical Minds*. Working with others on blogging; Owning a personal blog and doing blogging; Joining the larger community of bloggers beyond the classroom.
Influence	Being influenced by members of the blogging community and also influencing others, especially the readers and commenters who were learning a great deal about student bloggers, their interests, passions, and ambitions; Inspiring each other through the use of language and

	certain writing conventions; Being enthused with new ideas for writing that came from the larger community; Struggling with embracing reader criticism though.
Reinforcement	Experiencing emotional support in various forms and from a variety of commenters/readers, including a word of encouragement; support of their dreams, recognizing their progress and accomplishments or just knowing that someone was reading their posts and being ready to comment back; Experiencing pedagogical scaffold, ranging from being introduced to blogging and social practices of blogging through developing together procedures and strategies for meaningful and responsible communication online to receiving individual writing intervention and support.
Shared Emotional Connection	Developing and appreciating the unique friendships with commenters; Identifying readers as "heroes," and "adult friends;" Getting to know their readers and commenters as people and wanting to learn about their lives, their places, and their feelings; feeling comfortable to express themselves through writing to others and sharing with them their personal lives and interests.

Methodology

The Case Study: The Blogging Project

The case in the present study is defined as one class of fifth-grade students (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 2000) and the setting for this bounded system was a public school in the southern portion of the United States with a population of approximately 680 students in grades kindergarten through five.

Taking an emic approach (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006), we were interested in elementary students' experiences with blogging and their perceptions of these experiences. Studying "emic interpretations" of children allows for "see[ing] the world from their eyes" (Hudson, 1986, p. 297). Children's viewpoints are important since their underlying functions in literacy use are not always identical to those of adults (Hudson, 1986). Both the exploratory nature of the research questions and our interest in the perspectives and experiences of the participants provided the grounds for selecting case study within the qualitative paradigm as methodology for this work. The case study method is appropriate for an exploratory investigation such as ours (Yin, 2009) for yet another reason. It enabled us to study the blogging phenomenon and intervention within a clinical context, rather than from the policy or theory points of view. This approach is also valuable because it afforded the opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of such intervention for writing development of young learners in our study.

Characteristic of case study methodology (Creswell, 2007), we purposefully (Stake, 2000) selected a fifth- grade class at a particular elementary school. The classroom teacher was interested in exploring blogging with her students to support student writing and literacy development, and the students were new to blogging. The school was a Title I setting, which allowed researchers to explore the influence of blogging as an instructional intervention as well. In addition, the blogging teacher's thinking and use of blogging for literacy development, which

reflects a New Literacies Perspective on the role of technology in literacy instruction (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004), provided theoretical grounding for selecting the school where this teacher had the opportunity to field-test this approach toward literacy instruction. The second condition served thus as a theoretical sampling criterion (Merriam, 2009) for the study, since the new literacy theory embraced by the blogging teacher was one of the theoretical frameworks that guided this study design.

The Context and Participants

Sixteen fifth-grade students participated in this study. Of these volunteer students, seven were male and nine were female, two were gifted students, one student had a learning disability, and one student was an English language learner (ELL). Almost one-half had previously been pulled out of class for the intensive ELL help. The group included six Hispanic students, nine Caucasian students, and one African-American student. This student body reflected the school student population ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, with 81% considered economically disadvantaged. Out of 680 students housed in this Title 1 school, 58.8% were of Hispanic origin, who accounted for 36% of the student population identified and served in the ELL program. The rest of the student body was 16.5% African American, 21.3% Caucasian, and 3.1% multiracial. The students we studied were a group of mixed ability learners whose writing and critical thinking skills required closer attention. Although they were comfortable with word processing, internet searches, and mind-mapping software, they were all new to blogging.

Other participants were the classroom teacher and the school technology teacher. While the classroom teacher was new to blogging herself, she was willing to explore the potential of blogging for student writing and literacy development. She worked together with the school

technology teacher who offered technical as well as instructional support for the blogging project.

Role of the Researchers

There were two researchers involved in the study: a university professor (first author) and a university information systems training specialist (second author). The university professor interviewed students and teachers and observed all but one classroom of the blogging sessions. The university information systems training specialist (the *blogging teacher* throughout this article) provided writing and blogging instruction to students and mentored both the classroom teacher and the technology teacher about blogging. The blogging teacher collaborated with the classroom teacher so that her instruction supported the existing curriculum as well as a special interest in enhancing writing development for this group of student bloggers. The blogging teacher assumed the role of researcher, too. Together the researchers collected and analyzed the data for the study. Such collaboration served as an audit check (Creswell, 2007) and also added to "the depth and breadth of understanding" (Corbin & Buckle, 2009, p. 57) about student bloggers' experiences in this study.

Blogging Instruction

The blogging teacher met with student bloggers in a language arts block period once a week for four hours over a period of one year in a computer lab. She developed activities to introduce students to blogging as technology and as a way to share with others information and ideas. These activities included an exploration of a webquest focused on understanding blogging and an ABC "*Blook on Blogging*" (an online book that illustrated with pictures and little stories what blogging meant to a group of previous elementary student bloggers) as well as discussing

safety guidelines on a class wiki. These and other activities are described further in the findings in this article.

The blogging teacher and student individual blogs used Typepad software for blog development and management. The blogging teacher chose this platform because of unlimited educational accounts through her university connection and because of the ability to monitor student activity on their blogs within this platform. The blogging teacher incorporated into the blogging sessions additional interactive online applications such as podcasts, Skype, Gizmo, or Google Maps, to facilitate communication with commenters and readers, locally and globally.

Data Collection

Data were collected over a period of one academic school year. The primary data for this work included student interviews. There were two longer, up to 45- minute student interviews at the beginning and end of the research project. We also held informal conversations with individual and small groups of students during the blogging sessions that were recorded throughout the project duration. In addition, the blogging teacher met with different groups of five or six students during the last few months for a total of seven times, to discuss what they were experiencing and learning from blogging. We used semi-structured interview guides (Patton, 2002) to gain student perceptions of their blogging experiences and views of themselves as writers, readers, and learners, as well as teachers' feedback to situate these experiences in the context of the curriculum and instruction. While the guides provided a focus for conversations that was consistent across all participants, they were open enough to allow the researchers to ask spontaneous questions and/or to invite elaboration from student and teacher interviewees. The interview data helped to answer all research questions.

Another set of the primary data were student and blogging teacher writing for a total of 420 student posts and 206 teacher posts. Student blog posts provided an additional insight about their experiences with blogging, in particular about the ways they processed and applied what they were learning from the blogging sessions. Some of the prompts specifically asked the students to reflect on these experiences (What are the best and worst parts about blogging?; What are some tips on how to proofread on a blog?; What makes you want to comment to a blog?). Teacher blog posts, in turn, illustrated the instructional support the student bloggers were receiving in class. As such, teacher posts served as the larger context for understanding student experiences and their perceptions of blogging.

The secondary data were videotaped blogging class sessions, for thirty meetings, which served as observation data (Creswell, 2007) and three shorter interviews with the teachers, at the beginning, middle, and end of the year. These data shed light on student learning of blogging, particularly on the ways they were responding to what they were learning in the blogging class sessions. In addition, the video data revealed the interplay of the blogging teacher's conversation/talk and activity/action in scaffolding student literacy development. Furthermore, the video data showed over time how students engaged in developing a shared community and how they were negotiating newly acquired social practices blogging afforded them within the community (Lewis & Ketter, 2004). The classroom observation data were instrumental in providing answers to the third research question: What kind of classroom and community support helps students to advance literacies? Additionally, the rich video data provided the necessary information for describing the project, the school context, and the social interactions among the project participants.

Data Analysis

The constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was used to analyze, interpret, and reduce the primary data (student formal and informal discussions, individual and group interviews as well as student and teacher blog posts) into clusters of codes and then into major themes about student perceptions of themselves as writers, readers, and publishers and the influences that they believed shaped these experiences and their perspectives on these experiences. These areas reflect the specific research questions # 1 & 2 in this study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). We applied both macro- and microanalysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to these data. The macro-level of analysis was more holistic and led to the development of initial coding, with broader codes and open coding categories across the primary data sets. The micro-level analysis, on the other hand, focused on examining more closely the data using the initial coding matrix as the analytical framework. Such close coding resulted in several revisions and refining of initial coding, and eventually led to developing the emerging themes (the evolving theory) reported in this work.

Throughout the entire analysis, we strived to give voice to students, reflecting the focus on the emic perspective of the study. Keeping this interest in mind and drawing from the New Literacies Perspective, which studies the ways technologies influence their users' perceptions and use of language and literacy (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004), we looked specifically for student blogger explanations of what blogging was to them and how this technological intervention affected their ways of learning, thinking, and communicating with the members of the larger blogging community to which they belonged. These areas of focus correspond to the areas of interest in this research. Reporting the findings from this study by extensively using the language of student bloggers and their interpretations of their experiences was another method

we applied to bring forward student voices. Qualitative research methodologists recommend this approach to data analysis and reporting (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Spradley, 1979).

The secondary data (videotaped classroom sessions and teacher interviews) were analyzed holistically to help the researchers to understand general student experiences with blogging first hand as well as the evolving blogging community and the ways members within this community helped our young writers improve their writing and literacy skills. These were the areas of interest in our research question #3. Such a macro-level analysis brought to the researchers' attention consistent student face-to-face interaction as they helped each other compose blog posts. Interestingly, student bloggers did not give much attention to this form of writing support in their interviews. Finally, we used these data to describe the context for the study and the blogging teacher's pedagogy.

To establish intercoder reliability (Creswell, 2007), all data were coded by both researchers, initially individually, which was followed by a discussion of points of similarity and difference in their coding. This compare- and- contrast method of analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) led to some adjustments to the initial coding and to the development of the revised coding matrix and the emerging themes. Where necessary, the researchers modified or discarded the codes, or the themes. When no new coding categories and themes were found or modified, the researchers ceased data analysis.

Limitations

The findings from this case study cannot be generalized to other contexts and student populations (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 2000). The case study design allowed the researchers, nevertheless, to examine student blogger experiences and perceptions of blogging at length in one particular context. Further, multiple data sets of different kind (interviews, observation,

writing samples and other artifacts) facilitated an in-depth exploration of student blogger perceptions and experiences with blogging as an instructional intervention. In addition, the teacher's experiences with blogging in this study might be valuable to the teachers who are interested in trying out blogging in their own classrooms. More specifically, the teacher's instructional strategies, the class blog, and student writing might serve well as a source of inspiration and also as a model for improving their own practice.

With so much data to analyze and present, some perspectives had to be given more detail in this report than others. Every effort was, however, made to include a representation of issues across student bloggers (cases) participating in the study. Drawing quotes from different data and different student bloggers served this goal as well.

Findings

What are 5th-graders' perceptions of themselves as writers, readers, and publishers?

In response to this question, one theme emerged, Being Engaged as Writers and Learners, and it is presented below.

Being engaged as writers and learners. Initially, some bloggers were a bit anxious or concerned about blogging. M.V., shared: "On the first day Mrs. A. introduced blogging to us, I sat there nervous and uneasy at the moment." [All student names are pseudonyms; all quotes in this article contain the participants' original spelling and grammar.] This was due to having false conceptions of blogging, as Tina, a student blogger confessed, "I didn't even want to start because I thought it would be a boring and none interesting thing," and due to a lack of experience with blog writing, Tina elaborated further, "When I first started in the blogging class I had no clue what to do." As bloggers had gained more confidence and experience with blogging, the feelings of engagement and motivation soon prevailed among the bloggers in our

study. TK declared: "I was not nervous once I started blogging." Tina too experienced such transformation and she described it in this way:

> After the first day I thought it was so boring and wanted to quit right away but then people started to help me and then I made new friends and got to know new people. I began having fun and getting to type a lot and having more fun..... So here I am in class near the last day and have lots of new friends such as Lani and many more and hoping I get to do this again.

Commenting, a unique feature afforded by the blogging software, was a particularly motivating force for these student writers. This was reflected in the feelings of excitement and pleasure, which were common among our student bloggers. To illustrate, Anni observed that blogging was "an exciting and creative experience," because it allowed her to "meet people from all around the world" and to "meet new friends" as well. Eddie, another fifth-grader, could not agree more when he boasted about the places that his comments came from, "I have commenters from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, and even New York." Anni's enthusiasm was perhaps best expressed by this statement, "I am hungry for blogging." She chose to communicate this sentiment with an image of a juicy red strawberry.

Like Anni, Mary found blogging an engaging literacy practice. This is how she described this feeling to Lani, another commenter,

> You asked how I feel when I blog--
>
> I often feel excited about what I want to share with my readers! And I feel free that I can express my feelings!
>
> Sometimes when I blog I can think and figure stuff out and when I've finished a post, I feel worn out in a good kind of way-And I always want to return, do you?

Mary

Other reasons that inspired the bloggers to write in our study were perhaps more practical or pragmatic in nature. M.V., one of the bloggers, spoke about these qualities in this way: "Well, sometimes blogs can be funny or things you've learned about a couple of days or things you just have learned. And sometimes it gives intriguing information to make post better. That's what I like best about commenting."

M. V. explained further what informational comments were for him:

> Well, the good comments they are usually mostly informational ones like Chris. When I
> first started commenting Chris, Chris has told me something that she liked about it and
> things that I can improve on. I would consider that again because she gave me a lot of
> information…

Several student bloggers voiced even an interest in becoming writers, because of experiencing powerful prose produced by their commenters. This was true for Victoria who admired Chris's writer craft. She elaborated on this inspiration in this manner:

> Chris comments to me a good bit! I have been to Chris's blog before and I just loved how
> she used such interesting and catchy words! Chris has also inspired me to write as
> fluently as she does. Doesn't she write good? [*sic*]

Chris responded with further encouragement, "I'm so pleased that you feel inspired to write - I have been inspired too by other writers and I think it's important to have a model to look up to."

Other research has shown that students do not always have positive associations with writing at school (Paquette, 2008). In contrast, student writers in our study held affirmative, if not enthusiastic, stances toward blog writing. They were also engaged as writers and learners throughout this writing and learning experience.

How does blogging affect 5th-graders' perceptions of themselves as learners and thinkers when reading and publishing?

Three themes emerged in response to this question and they include: Student Bloggers' Feelings of Connection; Student Bloggers' Encounter with Influence; and Embracing Reading and Writing as Interaction with the Audience. A discussion of each theme ensues.

Student bloggers' feelings of connection. In the first place, as learners and thinkers, student bloggers in this study developed a sense of membership of the larger blogging community. They also grew a special connection to the members of this community. McMillan and Chavis (1986) use the terms of "membership" and "shared emotional connection" to describe the special feelings "of belonging or of a sense of personal relatedness" in a given community (p.9). Emmy appreciated the unique friendships that she developed with her commenters. She spoke dearly of these respondents, identifying them as her "heroes," and her "adult friends," because she believed they made her comfortable to discuss any topic she wished to entertain with these friendly readers:

> ***Thank you commenters.*** I want to thank all my commenters by this post and thank them for all the advice and comments they have given me to help me through out the first weeks. I thank you all for commenting and I hope you keep going at it just like I did when there was no doubt and I needed a super hero and she is my first thank you.
>
> My first thank you will go out to Mrs.C because she has inspired and persevered to keep me going on my blog at the beginning after a while I felt like I couldn't keep going but she pushed me and led me to victory. Her words were great and it was my second post and I didn't think many people would like it and she was my first comment back and her

first sentence was the most inspiring. It was " I think you have written a lovely

poem." Yes! My super hero got my call.

My next thank you goes to Ms. Brown I have had many comments from her and

wonderful advice. She is just like an adult friend for me that can always talk on any

subject. I always consider coming to weblogs to be able to read her comments.

As bloggers forged special connections with their readers through blogging, they valued

very much the opportunity to get to know them as people, to learn about their lives, their places,

and their feelings. Mary spoke in this manner about friendship opportunities all over the world in

this post:

Blogging, it allows me to discover new places like with Chris. She lives in Scotland,

which is a very far place and we are here and we still have people commenting from

different states, for different countries, which is a way to connect to people from different

parts of the world. Scotland and Canada are good examples because we get comments

from them a lot. And of course here in the school there are people who comment, and

outside of the school from different counties, from different states, it's all the same in

blogging.

Our student bloggers agreed that they liked the opportunity to express themselves on the

Internet. Tina clarified: "You can express who you really are inside. You can tell people where

you've gone in your lives…." Emmy, too, shared the need for self- expression as a way to

explain her life to her readers, and in doing so to connect to them:

When I blog it's like I'm telling the whole world about my life and how it works, all the

things that happen in my life are put onto my blank screen. I find that is the most

interesting and fun thing about blogging, knowing that the world knows how your life

works.

The underlying agenda behind sharing the personal lives that both the commenters and student bloggers had as members of the community in this study was, as Tina observed, to enable both parties to discuss "what they like and what is in common between me and them." This need for having shared experiences and a shared spirit are a reflection of what McMillan and Chavis (1986) saw as a characteristic that is discernible in successful communities. The blogging community in this study was such a community.

Student bloggers' encounter with influence. The blogging community in this study both influenced the student bloggers and empowered them to influence others. In terms of McMillan and Chavis's (1986) sense of community theory, student bloggers in this study were both influencers, making a difference to a group, and the receivers of influence from the members within the blogging community. For example, Michael was impressed with Randy's, a blogger from Canada, ability to write extensive responses to his readers. As a result, he challenged himself to write a minimum of five sentences in his new post, and he did so, as illustrated in the post itself:

Randy's tribute. Randy, those are some long answers. How do you stretch your answer so far? I keep my very short. But you inspire me. I think my replies should be 5 sentences long. Do you think that is OK? When I read the Q & A then I was amazed. When I heard I was supposed to make this post I got straight to work. We tried to talk to Mr. Fisher but it did not work. sadly we had a computer malfunction. So we will have to do it some other day.

Mary was fascinated with the idea of creating a page on Wikipedia. This led Mary, a student blogger, and the college student to teaching each other new lessons. Specifically, Mary

introduced the college student to the concept of 'blethering' while the college student gave Mary the idea for setting up her own Wikipedia page. This is how Mary presents on her blog this mutually influential experience:

Literacy in ECE commented to my post 'Blether'. Here is the comment:

> Hi Mary,
>
> Thanks for your definition of "blether". I had no clue what it meant. I tried to follow your link, but think my computer is being unruly at the moment. I did a search for the word "blether" on wikipedia and nothing could be found.
>
> I am in college and just learned that anyone can create, or update, a page on Wikipedia. Perhaps your class should update this information. It's really easy:
>
> 1) You go to www.wikipedia.org/
>
> 2) You type "blether" in the search box
>
> 3) It bring up a page that asks if you would like to update information
>
> You could be an author on the World Wide Web. How neat!! I certainly learned something new from you today. You should share this knowledge with others.
>
> Good luck, Literacy in ECE

Another area in which bloggers inspired each other was the use of language and certain writing conventions as well. This was true of Rosalinda (a student blogger) and Lani (a commenter). In their online conversations, Lani used frequently, "Always" to close her posts to Rosalinda. Rosalinda adapted this language in her own writing. She also added a personal touch to it by adding the word "caring" to Lani's word "Always," which resulted in a new phrase, "alwayz caring," the phrase she announced to Lani a few exchanges later. Including little post scriptum annotations after the main body of the post was another example of the linguistic

influence these two bloggers had on each other. Lani introduced this convention to Rosalinda and Rosalinda implemented it immediately in her own writing. The following excerpts represent such influence:

Hi Rosalinda,

I'm thinking 7 books is not bad at all! You're not through with summer yet! Do you have a goal of how many you'd like to read?

Have you finished "Skeleton Man"? What happens in the end? Were you surprised?

It's time for me to fertilize the tomatoes, beans and peppers in my garden-- are you gardening this summer?

Always,

Lani

No Lani ,actually i'm not really gardening but I am reading! My goal is to read 15 I'm almost to itI'v read 13 I'm on my 14th book "m on the last chapter though. do you think I will be able to complete My goal?

alwayz caring

Roalinda

P.S. how are your tomatoes and peppers doing? well good luck whith that and blog to me soon!

Love Rosalinda! Take care! :) (SMILE)

Some student bloggers were enthused with new ideas for writing because of blogging. This influence came from the larger community. Michael agreed: "They [readers/commenters] always give me ideas on what to write on my comments." Johnny benefited from such influence too and this is how he reflected on this influence: "They helped me with good ideas. They

splattered ideas on me and they usually were really good." In his explanation, Johnny noted that his readers' questions were most helpful in providing inspiration for future posts:

> Well, when they give me a comment, it usually just sends a red flare into my head saying, hey you know they're asking me a question and if I can answer it good and well enough, they may do it again and give me better ideas on what I can do for writing.

Johnny, too, was a source of inspiration for readers in the larger community as well. One of his stories in particular was the influence that led a sixth-grader, Tom from Canada, to start a blog of his own. Tom, who found Johnny's story to be funny and creative, had become his fan and a friend. Here is the post from Tom that acknowledges Johnny's power to influence others as well:

> that is a funny story!!! this blog is good…. it got me into blogging. so thank you jhonny. thank you a lot. write back to me i am your biggest fan. i am in sixth grade and i am 12 years old. you are now my friend. so ya. your my friend. thank you friend. i thank you a lot. …yes you inspired me to start a blog. so ya again thank you. you are funny and creative. wait have i already said creative? o sorry. Bye Tom fr

The influence that the student bloggers had mixed feelings about was reader criticism. Many welcomed and invited reader criticism, as it is evidenced in this thank you- post that Victoria wrote to her commenter, Chris: "Thank you for telling me that I need to work on my puncuation skills. Since you told me that, I can tell you are a person who is helpfull. And a person who tells the truth." M. V. too, who realized that readers would read and evaluate critically his writing, was prepared and ready to embrace such response, and even offered it as advice to his fellow writers: "One tip I give in blogging is try to use figurative language and don't let your hopes up because people will comment." Others struggled with critical comments though. Some were discouraged. Mary, who felt that way when she had received criticism from

Chris, explained: "Chris, when you commented on my first 'The Disappointment Turned Great!' you discouraged me." Over time, Mary though began to understand the need for such feedback, "Now I understand you just wanted it to be longer and have less exclamation marks." Others felt dispirited or even offended by negative reader comments. For example, in this exchange, we learn that T.K. was not prepared for the criticism he received on his *I am poem*:

> it was not very good,because it would have sonded better if it rhymed but u tried your best i am so sorry if i disappointed you with my comment,but i told you the truth and that is wot matterd tri again and put rhymes in it it will be a load better. You tried your best i am so sorry you can make a horrid comment about me im so sorry posted by chloe

Neither did he appreciate it, and indicated such a reaction in this rejoinder to his critic:

> Chloe,
>
> I think that was very mean,it hurt my feelings a lot and it was very harsh. Didn't you know all poems don't have to rhyme?You need to put a capitalized letter at the begining of your paragraph. Posted by t.k.

Interestingly, Chloe, a peer reader and respondent, did not feel good about the negative comment she made in response to T.K.'s poem either. Chloe's apology, "im so sorry," which she repeated twice in her writing, revealed the need to defend her critical remark, which she had perceived as something "horrid." She even gave T.K. permission to write back with a "horrid" comment too. T.K. seemed to prefer to focus on Chloe's grammar instead, and perhaps used this strategy as a deflector of the critique he had received from this reader.

Embracing reading and writing as interaction with the audience. The unique connections that student bloggers developed with the members of the blogging community helped our student bloggers to see reading and writing as connected to the reader and responder.

They also learned that blogging could be a means for self-expression and an exchange of ideas and information, the processes that they termed "storytelling." This blogger asserted this new understanding of writing in this way, "It is fun because we got to read other people stories…. We hope people read our stories." Emmy agreed, but also emphasized the interactive nature of the reader and writer communication. Emmy explained in the interview:

> It means being able to express myself and to type about some news on the Internet and different ideas from other people around the world may be about it. And then it just turns into a big conversation that we can have back-and-forth about it.

Eddie interpreted this new perception of writing slightly differently. He saw it as a perspective-broadening experience. He explained this discovery in his writing to one of the commenters in this manner, "I reaaly think it is important to communicate with others because it opens you up to new things. You can learn about other people's cultures and back grounds." In the follow-up interview, Eddie included another reason. Blogging enabled him to stay current with the world events: "I've learned that we're communicating with people in our society to get upgrades on what's happening…. Some things happen in different states or different countries. I want to be upgraded on that." In this post, another blogger, Anni, saw this mind-opening educational experience on a more personal level. In it, she explained the ways blogging afforded her to get to know people as people.

> One of the most important things in blogging to me is that we get to explore places that we would like to know about such as when we type to Chris she tells us about the weather and how it is there [Scotland]. Also people show us pictures like around where they live and how it is there. And the greatest thing to me is that by some of the pictures we fell like we are there without being there.

Emmy expressed similar feelings,

> ...blogging is an open gate for me. It let's me be free and makes me feel good. We can
> pretty much write about anything if we have the option to but it lets me get most of my
> feelings out but it feels like I have a second life which I pretty much do with blogging
> and it lets me start a new day and start the new life for that day and being able to float
> away in my mind and just be free with it and try to have fun with it.

In addition, the above-discussed reflections demonstrate the ways in which these young writers came to embrace blogging as a space for both self-expression and for developing connections and community with their commenters.

As reading and writing were taking on a new meaning and a communicative purpose, our student bloggers' feelings of care about and an interest in their commenters as readers and their needs as readers increased as well. Again, Emmy presented a strong case in one of her blog posts for the necessity to provide the reader with a choice and a variety of topics or stories to access. She believed that this approach would engage the readers and provide them with a joy reading their stories. Emmy explained:

> ***My belief.*** I strongly believe that writing in weblogs, every student should have different
> topics, and then our reader can read in vibrant colors.
> Also the reader can choose from different varieties of stories. It will keep the readers'
> minds open and alive. They wouldn't be reading the same thing over and over. Our idiom
> sentences were good because we had six-hundred idioms to choose from.

She also argued that such writing has an educational value too. Emmy explained:

> People can learn different things instead of just having two topics on subjects in school.
> We should do four to six topics which would make variety. Which is what the reader

wants. …I would like us to be able to have different topics because it is a variety of colors and our colors will shock the readers. It would help us and the readers learn more and have more fun.

During a whole class discussion, other bloggers agreed on the importance of keeping the reader interested. The following quote captures this recommendation from these student bloggers: "Write good stories so that it can catch the reader's attention." Additionally, being respectful in communication with the audience was at the forefront of Mary's mind. This is how Mary explained and illustrated this important principle in her interview with the researcher: "Like when you disagree, you do not want to sound rude or arrogant. You want to sound respectful and calm." Mia also noted that readers liked receiving frequent updates and expressed this advice like this:

> … you don't want to wait that long to comment them back and you might like you might just want to keep writing to them and they want to be writing back to you and then we'll write back to them.

In her interview with the researcher, Rosalinda provided additional tips on writing that she thought could appeal to the readers. These suggestions included: "…try to use figurative language.... The three tips I would give are do not stop blogging, don't mention personal things, and most of all what we Blogicians do ask a thought provoking question."

Additionally, Mia advised student blogger writers to pay attention to the sentence structure and sentence clarity, as ways to make writing comprehensible and interesting to the readers. She adopted ideas from Six Traits of writing to aid her in accomplishing this goal. She learned these traits in her language arts class:

...After that I use Sentence Fluency. I want to make sure that all my sentences make sense or else how is my readers going to understand. Plus I don't want a robot's post. When I finish with my sentence Fluency I use Voice. i check if I need to use enthusiasm or spice up my sentences....

As demonstrated in these comments, because student bloggers in our study were writing to the real audience, they took special care to meet their needs and expectations as readers. In addition, as evidenced above, student blog writing served well as a social event (Fairclough, 2004) that brought together writers and readers from all over the world, and provided the opportunity for sharing and community building.

What kind of classroom and community support helps students to advance literacies?

Two types of support, or reinforcement, to use the term from the sense of community theory by McMillan and Chavis (1986), emerged from the data in response to this research question: emotional support and pedagogical scaffold. Although we discuss each separately, they worked in tandem in support of student needs as writers and learners.

Emotional support of student bloggers. Emotional support came in various forms and from a variety of commenters/readers. At times, it was a word of encouragement, a kind of "you can do it" communication. Johnny spoke about such support in the interview with the researcher: "I kept getting something wrong and they'd just told me come on, I know you can do it. I've seen you do it before."

Eddie, another student blogger, was appreciative of his commenters' encouragement, too, which, as he observed, "ma[de] me feel important like I'm on top of the world." He was particularly thankful to one of the readers for supporting his "dream" of becoming a scientist in the future. Eddie confessed that he needed to hear such encouragement from someone else than

his own family. As a result, he felt even more motivated to continue to learn. His thank you note said:

> First I would like to thank Mrs. C she encouraged me to stick to my dream. These are one of the things she said "We need good scientist. I'm glad you are thinking of that career." What Mrs. C said made me feel warm inside. When she told me that it felt good to hear that from someone different than my family. That makes my yearning for learning fever higher.

> At other times, it was just enough for our student bloggers to know that someone out

there was reading their posts and was ready to comment back. M.V. found this form of encouragement invigorating and uplifting, or as he put it, "I feel recharged and energized with comments."

Yet another way student bloggers experienced emotional reinforcement in our study was through recognition they received from both teachers and their readers from the larger blogger community. To illustrate, to recognize and to celebrate student individual accomplishments, the blogging teacher posted on the class blog weekly updates about specific achievements by individual students. Commenters beyond the teachers recognized student bloggers' academic successes too. In this post, Stella, a peer commenter from Canada, commended Tina, a blogger in our study, on conciseness in her writing and use of pictures in her reflective piece on blogging:

> Heyy Tina.

> I am one of the kids from Mr. Fisher's class. I decided to comment on this post because it was interesting the way you did it. You kept it short and simple by using one picture with a few paragraphs on it. It's also very true the things you said about blogging. keep up the

good work Tina!=)XD

Xxx, Stella

Emmy received from Virtuous, a college student, many compliments on her blogging reflection as well. Virtuous liked her opening and the use of the question and answer framework to structure her post. Virtuous wrote:

Hello Emmy,

You have an astonishing opening. I just love it when students make use of their vocabulary. You asked some superb questions and received some extraordinary answers. I truly enjoyed your reflective response…. Yes, blogging is great; you get to share your life and experiences. However, I agree with your feeling of it being scary too. Just thinking of the whole world, near and far, knowing personal things about you can be scary or simply knowing that you are able to reach and touch the lives of many can be scary. I believe that your insight on blogging is very refreshing and genuine.

Posted by: Virtuous

Both the celebratory and other kinds of reinforcement discussed above recognized our student bloggers as writers and communicated to them that their voices mattered. They also served as an emotional and cognitive safety net that encouraged our student bloggers to take risks in their thinking and to be playful and to experiment with language and writing conventions. This, in turn, gave our student bloggers confidence, and a feeling of being supported and valued members of a blogging community in our study. These feelings are also reflective of what McMillan and Chavis (1986) saw as critical to nurturing the sense of "belonging" or "personal relatedness" in a given community (p.9).

Pedagogical support of student bloggers. Since students in this study were new to blogging, the blogging teacher introduced them to blogging using a webquest activity that discussed the blogging basics including such aspects of blog writing as questioning, thinking, writing, collaborating, reflecting, commenting, linking, and proofreading. The blogging teacher also used a wiki activity to review guidelines for safe and responsible blogging. Both explorations inspired the blogging teacher and the students to develop together procedures and strategies for meaningful and responsible communication online. These included:

• Accepting the challenge of blogging and striving to do their best

• Understanding the conventions of public writing

• Giving credit to others' words by linking and quoting

• Respecting others by developing the ability to write responsibly

• Understanding the power of communication with a larger audience

• Developing their own unique voice and not being afraid to take risks

• Celebrating their own and their peers' successes

• Recognizing the contributions of their readers.

It is important to note that the blogging teacher used these explorations as "social events" and as "social practices" (Fairclough, 2004, p.226), rather than as mere technology or learning tools to deliver information or to make things easier. Critical to learning about blogging as a social event in the blogging teacher's classroom were interaction with and among students and teachers, and sharing of bloggers' impressions and thinking during the learning process. The blogging teacher used examples of blogs and other students' blog posts, and the *Blook on Blogging* as conversation starters. This gave students concrete models to further their understanding of blogging. The blogging teacher's modeling of blogging as a social event

assisted students in developing the writing conventions and the social practices necessary for participating in the larger blogging community.

In addition, the blogging teacher developed a class blog to model specific aspects of writing development, such as using descriptive words to provide detail, utilizing linking words to make writing sequential and to connect it to others' writing, and asking questions to sustain dialogue with the audience. The blogging teacher used the class blog also to initiate conversations about students' earlier posts, to brainstorm writing ideas, to answer questions, to celebrate student accomplishments, and to set learning goals for the next sessions.

The class blog thus was a focal point to begin each session. It was a place to introduce activities and review previous learning. And it was a place to reflect and evaluate what was happening. The mechanics of developing perfect pieces of writing were not overly stressed, and a mindset of instilling the love of writing and supporting the developing motivation for writing was a priority. In one class blog post, the blogging teacher initiated a conversation on literacy for the students to consider. The post read as follows:

> When you are actually really blogging, it means that you have read something either in class or on some other blog or on some other website. And then once you read, you question and think about what it is that you have read. You do this first in your own mind. You think about it and then you blog about it. Then you collaborate, which means you network with other kids, other students, other teachers, other bloggers and you think some more about it. You reflect, then you may comment on another blog. You may do another post. You may provide some links to extend the learning. Further conversations may develop on blogs. Those are the basic steps. Think about how we can use blogging most beneficially in the classroom. That's why you're using your blog to talk about your

learning, to learn more, to share, to reflect, to let your teacher and others know your

understandings, what you need help on and what you'd want to learn more about.

It is about literacy....Learning about literacy is our next quest. I will see you in one hour

or so and we will put our heads together and come up with our own understandings. I

can't wait to see you!

This post led to conversations, comments, and deeper understandings of the blogging experience

as a literacy social event and how it could affect their learning.

Furthermore, the blogging teacher built in opportunities for reflection and evaluation.

Providing students with a choice in making their own connections about their learning was

another aspect of the pedagogy that paved the way for blogs to be constructivist tools for

learning (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). Reflections let all students talk or write their way into their

own understandings and pose questions about how and what they were learning. For Eddie, self-

expression and reflection on the blog served a transformative function. Eddie elaborated on this

powerful influence in this way:

…it's like, it's like, it's like, writing but you don't write it on the paper. It's like

expressing yourself, but you don't even know it. You think outside of the box. You can

let out what you have inside, and like you can transform your negative energy into the

positive energy.

These are but a few examples of how the class blog, and accompanying blogging teacher

activities, were used to provide instructional support these young writers needed as they were

learning to blog and to think critically about their writing and the processes they employed.

Pedagogical scaffolding came from other readers as well, in different form and shape. Some commenters offered specific guidelines for strengthening student blogger writing; others used less direct ways. Lindsey clarified this distinction:

> Another why I know if I make mistakes is on my blog when people type to me. Some of the people that type to me ask me questions on the mistake, and others tell me the mistake I have. That is really friendly I think. I am glad that they do that.

Readers also provided tips on grammar and mechanics when they noticed these areas needed attention.

Teaching new concepts was a different way in which the readers supported student writers' growth in our study. In this post, for example, Lani educated Mia about winters in Ohio:

> Hi Mia,
>
> People don't usually suffer when it snows unless it snows alot all at one time. Around here, everyone plans and gets prepared for winter! Whoa, ice in your hair doesn't sound good. I'd rather have snow than ice. What a good question on why it's called the snowbelt! It's because the heavy snows fall in an area that is usually long and narrow; you can drive 20 miles east and there is no snow and you can drive 20 miles west and there is no snow; so some might say it looks a bit like a belt. Do you have a favorite time of year?
>
> Best, Lani

Probing and inviting to answer further questions were other methods commenters utilized to encourage elaboration and further research from blogger writers to add depth to their ideas and writing. For example, Ed, a commenter from college, wanted to learn about "tamagotchi" from Michael. "Michael- I'm glad to hear that you enjoy working on the computer and exploring the

internet. What, however, is the "tamagotchi connection?" How does it enable you to get prizes?...." Virtuous, a college blogger, wanted Emmy, another student blogger in our study, to elaborate on this question," Emmy, would you further explain why you think the world knowing how your life works can be scary? What are some other topics, other than how your life work, that scare you?"

Laura, like other bloggers, liked when, as she put it "they ask[ed] me good questions that make me think." In her interview, Laura gave an example of such reinforcement that she received from a commenter, Lani, which forced her to do some additional research as well:

Like I make this blog called D* Species, and she asked me where in Canada they found a fossil, and I said I have to look it up, and now I am working on them looking up where in Canada it was.

Mary, another student blogger, concurred that such communication pushed her thinking and promoted further conversation, "…it just gets my brain going to see more and more comments because those are just comments to get answered." M. V. shared the same sentiment: "I like thought provoking questions from people and then I give them to them."

Even though the majority of the bloggers in this study found most supports helpful, some bloggers wished a few things could had been done a bit differently. For example, M. V. listed the following criticisms: "Some things I didn't like was the fact that we had a limited amount of time, the internet was slow, and sometimes we didn't even go to blogging." These concerns did not stop him however from enjoying blogging, in general, and he was eager to recommend it to other students: "Overall it is great so don't give up on it." Victoria, on the other hand, realized that learning to blog was not always an easy process, particularly when she suffered from writer's block. Victoria explained this challenge on her post in this way: "For example, one hard

time that I've had in blogging is not knowing what I should write about. Doesn't it frustrate you when you don't know what to write about?" Another challenge she mentioned was not having enough time for writing at times when she experienced the complete opposite, that is, when she felt writer's inspiration. Like M.V., Victoria too, on the whole, liked blogging, appreciated the supports she received from the commenters, and desired for others to blog as well:

> But overall, I think that we should continue blogging in schools because you are learning as your blogging. And because you are being rewarded with comments from your good stories you want to continue blogging. I hope blogging continues in schools.

Overall, the specific suggestions to improve content of their writing, and requests for correction and additional research, as illustrated above, can be viewed as scaffolding within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Within this framework, the commenters and readers served as the more knowledgeable "other" who modeled and guided student bloggers toward more thoughtful, sophisticated and polished writing than that which they were currently producing.

Discussion and Implications for Pedagogy

Audience

Audience is an abstract and therefore difficult concept for young writers to grasp (Carvalho, 2002). This is true on a variety of levels, from cognitive and social skills, to developmental perspectives (Magnifico, 2010). In general, children in middle childhood still exhibit high degrees of egocentrism, which means that they process the environment primarily from their own point of view (Piaget, 1954). Likewise, children from this age group seem to be less interested in other people's ideas and worlds (Steinberg, 2005). These developmental attributes are evident in their writing as well. That is, during this period of emotional and

cognitive growth, young writers tend to be self-centered (Moffet, 1968). As a result, they often "simply and briefly report an experience without regard for the reader, the readers' perspectives, or the need for engagement" (Lapp, Shea, & Wolsey, 2010/2011, p. 33). Our data corroborate the findings on egocentricity from previous research.

To overcome this challenge, research (Barbeiro, 2010) recommends connecting young writers to the real audience, the members of which they can get to know on a personal level. The blogging project in this study provided fifth- grade students with access to such an audience. Because of regular interaction with this audience, our student bloggers acquired a strong sense of the reader. Their readers became their best friends and allies and these student bloggers got to know them rather well. They became familiar with their interests and passions. They learned a great deal about their thinking and writing craft too. Research (Kellog, 2008; Lapp, Shea, &Wolsey, 2010/2011) has shown that skillful writers use such deep knowledge to evoke the picture of their readers in mind and in doing so to be able to address their specific needs during writing.

Our student bloggers also realized that writing in fact is an interaction that involves both the reader and the writer as participants. They learned to appreciate the benefits of this interactive communication with the reader. It opened them up to new ideas and thinking. It also allowed them to share with readers their own thinking, ideas, and lessons learned at school and beyond. Thus, this interactive experience with their readers and commenters helped these student bloggers to embrace the communicative and expressive functions of writing (Boling, 2006).

This was an important lesson for these student bloggers, for it helped to solidify their newly acquired perception of writing as interaction (Deaconu, 2011) and writing as being both a readerly and writerly process (Swenson, Young, McGrail, Rozema, & Whitin, 2006). Such an

understanding was critical for these writers to be able to recognize and to meet their readers'
needs and expectations. Although there is research that explores young writers' conceptions of
the reader/writer relationship in online writing (Lapp, Shea, &Wolsey, 2010/2011; Penrod,
2007), a strong contribution of this study is the examination of the ways our student bloggers
applied a range of strategies to address the reader's needs. Some of the strategies they employed
included experimenting with figurative language, seeking interesting topics and attention
grabbers, trying out different vocabulary, sentence, and paragraph structures, as well as
organizational frameworks.

The sentiments about the writing experience with the real audience by these student
bloggers have implications for teacher education and professional development. First, writing
instruction in these contexts should consider models of writing instruction that will provide
opportunities for teachers and students to interact with authentic audiences through blogging or
similar venues. Gilbert and Graham (2010), who found that a majority of writing assignments in
elementary school are not allowing young writers to engage with transactional writing and thus
to consider audience, would probably support this recommendation. Teachers will also need to
see model approaches to support young writers with activating and/or developing alternative
schemata (Rumelhart, 1980) of writing, the writing process, and the reader/writer relationship,
and teacher education and professional development can provide these models as well.

Second, analogously to activating new schemata (Rumelhart, 1980) for writing and
writing processes among young writers, teachers themselves might consider different
conceptions of writing, the reader-writer relationship, and the role they should assume in this
process. The blogging teacher in this study had already acquired such a new understanding and
acted upon it as she implemented writing instruction through blogging that capitalized on student

interactions with real audiences. By forging these connections, the blogging teacher opened the classroom door to the interactive and connected world. This teacher, too, joined the community of commenters, readers, and writers, which reflected a philosophical shift as well (Luehmann & MacBride, 2008). Teacher education and professional development programs are ideal spaces for interrogating teachers' current epistemological views about writing instruction and technology integration and introducing them to new possibilities for supporting and improving student writing. To facilitate this process, teacher educators may wish to introduce teachers to the concepts of participatory pedagogy and participatory student learning (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robinson, & Weigel, 2006) and frameworks such as TPACK that provide guidelines on how to integrate knowledge of technology with knowledge of content and pedagogy (Harris, Mishra, & Koehler, 2009).

Community

Student bloggers in this study developed what McMillan and Chavis (1986) described as a "shared emotional connection" to their readers and feelings of "belonging" to the blogging community in which they participated (p.9). Even though the blogging community served as a literate community (Young & Beach, 1997), since the community was established to facilitate conversations about literacy- related matters, student bloggers had a strong desire to get to know the members of this community as people first. This was reflected in numerous blog posts that asked the readers to introduce themselves as people, to share information about their lives, their places, as well as their passions and aspirations. Student bloggers also wished their readers to get to know them as people before they learned about them as students, bloggers, readers, or writers.

Student bloggers' desire to hear other members' personal stories about themselves and their lives and their own needs to tell stories about their inner selves and their lives are

understandable from both the child's development and social development theory perspectives (Davis, 2005). From the child's development point of view (Davis, 2005), storytelling is a common means for teaching children about new ideas, thinking, and the world around them. These student bloggers were learning to appreciate stories about others and to tell stories about themselves in the blogging context as well.

From the social development theory perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), stories are particularly effective in creating a sense of community and developing personal connections to their members (Huffaker, 2005; Zipes, 1995). The commenters, who came from the outside into the blogging community, also helped student bloggers in this study to gain insights about themselves as the bloggers' lives, events, and stories came to be compared and contrasted to the commenters' own lives, events, and stories. Zipes (1995) argues that "it is the alien figure, the mysterious stranger," who comes from another place that helps children to learn "who they are and what their school is" (p.7). In our study, the commenters represented such alien figures that helped our student bloggers to realize who they were as people and learners. As such, personal storytelling served too in this study as a medium of socialization (Miller, Willey, Fung, & Chung-Hui, 1997) into the blogging community for both the student bloggers and their commenters and readers.

A community constructed on such strong foundations encouraged learning as well as influencing of the behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge among the members of the community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The areas of influence were many and varied, ranging from language use, writing conventions, and idea development. Sometimes the influence was indirect, that is, it was either through what other studies described as observation or association (Rijlaarsdam, Braaksma, Couzijn, Janssen, Raedts, Van Steendam, Toorenaar, & Van den Bergh,

2008). At other times, the influence was direct. In the latter case, the blog writers received a specific recommendation or question from their commenters and readers. While student bloggers enjoyed positive comments from readers, they struggled with critical feedback, feeling at times discouraged or even hurt.

The first implication from the community as experienced by student bloggers in this study is the need for providing students with opportunities to get to know and connect to community members through personal storytelling. Assigning a special area on the teacher and student blogs for this kind of story telling can be helpful. The second implication is the need to help young writers to embrace criticism. They will also need to learn how to use such feedback to reevaluate and improve their own writing and strategies.

Teacher candidates and teachers will benefit from exploring exemplars of constructive feedback, including critical remarks along with positive comments. Such instruction will help their students to understand that writing is a craft and that as such it needs to be analyzed and evaluated critically. Successful adult writers use such skills to revise and produce quality writing (Kellogg, 2008). Teacher candidates and teachers will benefit too from learning how to use exemplar blog posts to help students evaluate writing and writing processes of other blog writers, particularly successful writers that come from the real audience, as pre-writing and post-writing instructional activities. Teaching to write by observation, exploration, and social interaction should thus be considered in teacher education and professional development.

Reinforcement

The reinforcement that student bloggers benefited from in our study consisted of emotional and pedagogical assistance, both of which, for the most part, addressed their needs as writers, learners, and people. Emotional encouragement took different forms and ranged from

reassurance, praise, recognition and celebration of individual accomplishments, to inspiration in support of further endeavors. It came from different commenters and readers such as teachers, peers, and most importantly, members from the authentic audience at large. Numerous studies have indicated a relationship between the emotional state of the mind of the learner and the learning outcomes (Knudson, 1995; Kos & Maslowski, 2001), reporting positive experiences to result in successful learning and negative experiences to hinder or even prevent learning (Kaufman, Robinson, Bellah, Akers, Haase-Wittler, & Martindale, 2008), particularly for struggling and disadvantaged writers (Mavrogenes & Bezruczko, 1994). This study provided several ways to offer encouragement and inspiration for young writers and ways to support emotional challenges associated with risk taking and exploring new learning.

Similarly to previous research findings (Englert, Raphael, & Anderson, 1992; Fairclough, 2004), in this study too, in-class and online discussions, which followed blog writing explorations, served as socially mediated instruction and as social events, where the student bloggers and commenters were learning social practices, as appropriate for blogging. This approach to blogging instruction reflects the concept of learning as an activity and discourse too. Rowe (2004) explains that such an approach "sees development and learning in terms of the appropriation and mastery of physical and psychological tools as part of participation in collective and individual activities" (p. 81). In this study, the blogging teacher's modeling of activities, values, attitudes, and social practices as well as inviting the students, teachers, and commenters at large, to be involved in establishing of the blogging community and the social norms to govern it, were a collective appropriation of the physical and psychological learning and technology tools, to which they all had access. Teachers may need help preparing to work in

such communities, by learning about writing as online participation and integrating such practice into their own instruction.

Like the emotional support, the pedagogical reinforcement in this study came in different form, from many readers, and served diverse purposes. Student bloggers received advice on their writing craft, with specific suggestions for improving their language use, vocabulary choice, grammar and spelling, or readability and comprehension. Such instructional support reflected teaching direct writing strategies; the approach that research indicates can enhance the writing of all primary-grade writers (Tracy, Reid, & Graham, 2009). Teaching writing for real audiences using student writing and direct strategies in teacher education and professional development can assist teachers in supporting young writers become aware of their readers' real presence and their needs as readers.

Implications for Research

Since student bloggers in this study experienced writing as an interactive and social process (Kellog, 2008) with access to the real audience, it is important for research to explore how this process happens in an online environment such as blogging and how the readers and writers alike negotiate it. Since the focus of our study was on student bloggers' experiences, understandably, the voice was given to student bloggers' perceptions as readers and writers. Even though these voices included both girls and boys, gender differentiation was not a focus of this study. Nevertheless, factors such as gender or other demographics (Graves, 1975; Hudson, 1986) are likely to shape the perceptions of bloggers themselves as writers and learners. Will boys' and girls' experiences of blogging differ? Will gender of the audience and the writing community members influence student blogger perceptions of themselves as writers? These are some of the questions that remain still unanswered. It is equally important to hear the perceptions

and experiences with the blogging programs like the one featured in this study from the commenters' viewpoint as well, and to examine the ways their gender, culture, or other demographics shape interaction with young blog writers.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the field on importance of authentic audience to advance student writing in school. The findings indicate these student bloggers' reader awareness and a shift in thinking about writing and the reader and writer relationship. With an ever-increasing presence of online venues such as blogging, the potential of such interactive technologies and spaces should be considered in teacher education and professional development to support teachers and their young writers to develop audience awareness and to hone their writing and communication skills.

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