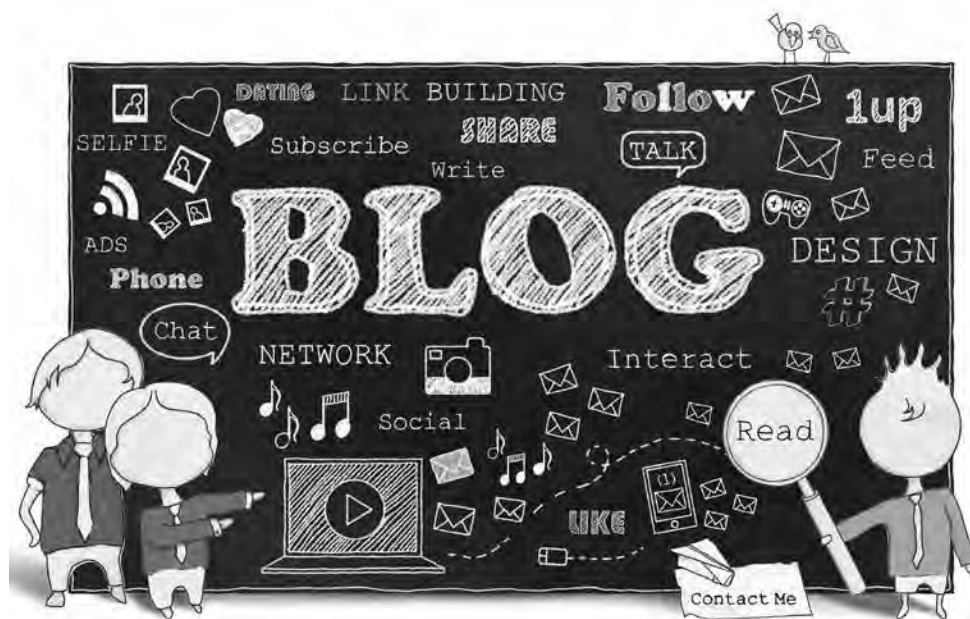


Eliza Allen &amp; Amy Seely Flint

# "I thought it was fake": Critical Engagement With Blogs



If response journals were to be a place where students could relate text to their prior experiences and pose their opinions, why not offer students the opportunity to engage in a setting where they could respond and share their opinions and feelings with a wider audience and not just with the teacher.

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When Eliza Allen first introduced blogging to her third grade students, she wanted to give them an alternative setting to interact with their peers and respond to literature. Reader's response journals had been a common form of responding to literature in her literacy curriculum. However, she still believed that her students needed a different way to express their thinking about the material they read during independent reading, interactive read-aloud, and guided reading. If response journals were to be a place where students could relate text to their prior experiences and pose their opinions, why not offer students the opportunity to engage in a setting where they could respond and share their opinions and feelings with a wider audience and not just with the teacher.

Critical literacy and computer-mediated literacy practices are considered powerful vehicles to help learners explore issues related to their personal lives. Engaging her students in digital literacies, Eliza also understood that the topics and stories that her students read had to be significant to their daily lives if literacy was to be meaningful to them. As she became familiar with her students and their families, she realized that their unique stories of immigration and deportation were not isolated, but were trials experienced by many students sitting in her class. She witnessed a struggle over "parents' departures"; the fearfulness they experienced with newly enforced immigration laws; and their desire to know how to help their parents. Thinking of the work of Paulo Freire (1970) who suggested that readers should not passively accept information in texts but "read the world," Eliza wanted her students to read from a critical stance. She implemented critical literacy as an additional layer of critical engagement and inquiry within her classroom for students dealing with serious topics as children of

immigrant parents. As her students began to write about their understanding of themes, characters, settings, and plots during a unit on immigration, Eliza noticed that they began to challenge the opinions and ideas of their peers around topics of immigration and deportation. Students shared individual stories with others and engaged in discussions around the stories that paralleled their lives.

### Critical Literacy

Critical literacy, based in the work of Freire and Macedo (1987), Luke (2004), and others (Comber, 2001; Flint & Laman, 2012; Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2013), challenges personal, sociopolitical, economic, and intellectual ways of thinking. Students examine the politics of daily life with a view to understand what it means to locate and actively seek out contradictions within modes of life, theories, and intellectual positions (Bishop, 2013). Words and their meanings are always placed in a social and cultural context. How we use language—to read, write, speak, view, and listen—is never neutral or value-free. Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) reviewed 30 years of literature on critical theory and identified four dimensions of critical literacy: (a) disrupting the status quo, (b) taking multiple perspectives, (c) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (d) taking action. Integrating these dimensions into literacy practices invites students to make sense of important social issues and historical events. When teachers and students engage with critical literacy, they problematize issues related to “language and power, people and lifestyles, morality and ethics, and who are advantaged by the way things are and who are disadvantaged” (Comber, 2001, p. 271).

A critical literacy curriculum often includes children’s literature that takes up socially significant issues, such as immigration, homelessness, race, gender, socioeconomic issues, fairness, and justice. Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison, and Vasquez (1999) note that these types of texts highlight differences, give voice to those traditionally silenced or marginalized, and show how people can take action on issues that matter and don’t have “happily ever after” endings. Books that meet these criteria provide opportunities for children to critique the text and challenge the status quo. As children read across texts in literature discussion groups and in read-alouds, they begin to question positioning and identity (e.g., What is this text doing to me as a reader?, Why did the author write the text this way?, and Whose voice is included and whose voice is left out of the text?). Understanding that texts are not neutral is a significant aspect of critical literacy work.

### Blogging to Support Meaning Making in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Twenty-first century literacy practices demand that children are actively engaged with technology as they participate in a wide variety of literacy activities. There are various ways states are taking up this demand. For example, the recently implemented Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center, 2010) do not offer stand-alone media and technology standards, but rather infuse *digital* into what it means

Blogs encourage students to share initial ideas, challenge others’ thinking, and offer revised insights in public forums. Students respond to blog posts, looking for ideas to comment on and questions to ask. Ideas are fluid and permeable as new entries are supported and debated.

to be literate: “Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others” (CCSSA.W7) and “integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words” (CCSSA.R7). Because digital platforms are included in the reading and writing anchor standards, teachers and children find themselves expanding their own understandings of what it means to be literate in a global community. In states that do not implement the CCSS, such as Texas, Oklahoma, and Virginia, there are stand-alone technology standards based on the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) that attend to the integration of reading and writing: “use creative thinking and innovative processes to construct knowledge and develop digital products” as well as “collaborate and communicate both locally and globally using digital tools and resources to reinforce and promote learning” (ISTE, 2007). Such standards rely on access to technology, including Web 2.0 authoring tools and the Internet (e.g., wiki sites, blogs, YouTube). Students are expected to use digital tools to write, analyze, revise, and share their ideas with others, expanding their participation in an increasingly global and digital world. Engagement and participation are central to the social practices that define these new literacies.

Technology-enriched environments, such as using blogs to further discussions on socially significant issues, create opportunities for broader, authentic audiences for students’ thinking, encourages student ownership of texts, and promotes critical analysis (Boyd, 2013; McGrail & Davis, 2011). Blogs encourage students to share initial ideas, challenge others’ thinking, and offer revised insights in public forums. Students respond to blog posts, looking for ideas to comment on and questions to ask. Ideas are fluid and permeable as new entries are supported and debated. They engage and interact with each other on their writing, which expands the audience from just the teacher to the classroom community and beyond. This broadening of the audience creates greater investment and ownership in the process.

### Problematizing Constructs of Immigration in a Third Grade Classroom

Students in Eliza’s third grade classroom actively read, discussed, and wrote about issues related to immigration. This was a topic of interest as many of the students and their families had firsthand

experiences with immigration and deportation. Immigration policies throughout many of the southern states (e.g., Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama) were shifting, becoming more punitive for those of undocumented status. For example, state officials in Georgia passed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Enforcement Act of 2011 (Georgia Assembly, HB87). Under this law, businesses are required to verify that new employers have proper documentation, enable law enforcement to question the legal status of Latino/as, and provide for criminal penalties. Moreover, the same stringent laws taking effect in Alabama appear to provide an additional layer of hostile attacks on immigrants by giving schools the authority to question the legal status of students (Hing, 2011).

Working from a critical literacy perspective, Eliza and her students engaged in a six-week unit on how immigration policies were impacting their families and their livelihoods. Eliza selected texts on the topic of immigration and migrant workers that aligned with many of the criteria noted by Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison, and Vasquez (1999), including *Harvesting Hope* (Krull, 2003), *Waiting for Papa* (Lainez, 2004), *America Is Her Name* (Rodriguez, 1998), *That's Not Fair!: Emma Tenayuca's Struggle for Justice* (Tafolla, 2008), *Let's Go See Papa!* (Schimel, 2011), and *My Diary From Here to There* (2009). (See Appendix for a description of these books.) Images that mirrored the illustrations in the texts and videos of Cesar Chavez and Emma Tenayuca and a talk by a local community member who shared personal stories as a migrant worker in Texas supplemented the unit. The resources were available throughout the day for students to access for follow-up reading and discussions.

Eliza engaged the students in a variety of activities, including whole group read-alouds and discussions, partner talk, small group discussions, sketch to stretch (Short & Harste, 1996), reader response journals, and blogging. The whole and small group discussions focused on clarifying events in the story, responding to personal experiences, and posing questions. Eliza asked students to write responses to the literature in their reader response notebooks and on the blog site. The reader's response notebooks were a common component of her daily reader's workshop and curriculum. Many of the questions posed in the discussions and response journals were later picked up and discussed on the blog site. The continuity between the discussions and the blog site enabled students to work across various modes as they challenged taken for granted assumptions about immigration and migrant workers.

Kidblog.org, a trusted website designed specifically for K-12 teachers to implement and facilitate blogging in their classrooms, was used. Discussion prompts on the blog were constructed in a manner to encourage students to make a variety of connections (e.g., text to text, text to self, and text to world). To enhance the discussion and ensure that each student had the opportunity to participate, Eliza asked each student to respond to the initial prompt and to respond to two other peers during the week. Students were provided many opportunities to blog

while at school including before school started, after completing independent assignments, and during independent reading time during reader's workshop. A couple of weeks into the unit, Eliza decided to remove the requirements on how many times students needed to respond on the blog.

## Findings

The purpose of this article is to highlight how students in Eliza's third grade classroom navigated a blog site to foster a critical inquiry stance, offer alternative perspectives on salient topics, and display group solidarity as they worked to make sense of issues related to immigration and deportation. On the blog site, students had access to a variety of texts (e.g., comments, images, video clips, etc.) that invited them to make connections across and among the stories shared in class and their own personal experiences. McGrail and Davis (2011) and others (Lacina & Griffin, 2012; Lenhart, 2008) note that by integrating blogs into classroom instruction, students participate more fully in discussions and the writing process. Blog entries support students writing for audiences beyond themselves and the teacher.

## Taking Up a Critical Inquiry Stance

Reading, writing, viewing, and talking about issues related to immigration created opportunities for students to adopt a critical inquiry stance. As Eliza and her students constructed understandings of immigration and related policies and practices, they engaged in the process of "building, interrogating, elaborating, and critiquing conceptual frameworks that link action and problem-posing to the immediate context as well as larger social, cultural and political issues" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, pp. 51-52). The blogging space encouraged students to ask questions of the texts and each other in order to better understand the impact of immigration. It was through blogging that students developed more autonomy and were able to use the blog as a space where they asked difficult questions and took on more facilitative roles. Students appeared to demand that their peers think deeper about their responses and perspectives.

A number of the stories presented characters that recently immigrated to the United States and left family members in the home country. Students read *Let's Go See Papa!* (Schimel, 2011), a story of a young girl who hasn't seen her father in over two years because he works in the U.S., and *Waiting for Papa* (Lainez, 2004), the story of a young boy who relocates to the U.S. with his mother, leaving behind his father in El Salvador. After reading these texts, Patricia (all student names are pseudonyms) asks one of her classmates, Marcos,

*What would you do if you were separated from your dad?* (Blog entry, 4-29-13)

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In a later post, Andrea challenges Jose,

*Why don't you get it Jose? How would you feel if your dad wasn't with you?* (Blog entry, 5-15-13)

Students also critiqued commonplace assumptions about how one should respond when separated from family members. To illustrate, Sophia, who had no direct experience with deportation and separation, tells her peers that they should wait patiently, stop panicking, and learn to be happy. This draws a large response from others:

Sophia: *To wait patiently. To stop panicking and complaining. To be happy NO SADNESS.* (Blog entry, 5-15-13)

Arielle: *I agree with you. Do you like this book Waiting for Papa? I think it was kind of sad because the boy had to leave his father. I wish his dad would have come sooner.* (Blog entry, 5-16-13)

Patricia: *Why no sadness? It's ok to be sad isn't it?* (Blog entry, 5-16-13)

Sara: *I agree with you Sophia.* (Blog entry, 5-16-13)

Mark: *WHAT?* (Blog, 5-16-13)

Joy: *I agree with you. Do you like this book 'cause I do but it is sad because the little boy wants to see his dad but he can't see him. Why can't he be sad?* (Blog entry, 5-20-13)

Marcos: *Why shouldn't she [sic] be sad? It's ok to be sad.* (Blog entry, 5-23-13)

Araceli: *I don't have a person in my family that had that but if I did I think they would do the same.* (Blog entry, 5-15-13)

In a follow-up conversation, students shifted from being sad to considering other responses and actions when separated from family:

Marcos: *I would just move on with my life and if Beto's dad [character in the story] was my dad and he was coming to see me I would just be happy to see him.* (Blog entry, 5-15-13)

Patricia: *Is that the only thing you would of done if you were him.* (Blog entry, 5-16-13)

Marcos: *No I would do parties and give presents.* (Blog entry, 5-17-13)

Ciara: *I know right. Wouldn't you give him big hugs? Cause that's what I would do if I was him.* (Blog entry, 5-19-13)

Mark: *WHY WOULD YOU MOVE ON WITH YOUR LIFE? I WOULDN'T.* (Blog entry, 5-20-13)

Through the blog and other literacy activities, the students embraced a critical inquiry stance. They posed and explored questions of the texts and each other as they sought to understand the complexities of immigration and deportation. They thought about how different problems were framed and possible actions for different outcomes.

### Perspective Taking

Important to fostering a critical inquiry stance is the dimension of taking on multiple or alternative perspectives (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). As students read and discussed ideas across the text set, they offered diverse perspectives on immigration and separation. In some instances, their feelings and experiences matched up with the characters in the books; at other times, they challenged classmates' perspectives. When reading the story *My Diary From Here to There* (Perez, 2009), Patricia shares how she sees the benefits and the difficulties of moving to a new country:

*Sometimes I feel like it is good because if he gets a job he can make money to help his family with bills or food or clothes or something that they need. I also feel that it is bad because the dad just left his family behind in Mexico.* (Blog entry, 5-6-13)

Moving across borders was a familiar topic for many of the students. Sadness and loneliness were common feelings invoked in the stories as well in students' personal accounts. Students sympathized with the characters in the various stories by noting how characters would feel as a result of injustices in the workplace (*That's Not Fair!* and *A Day's Work*), separation from family members (*Waiting for Papa*) and challenges with the immigration processes (*Let's Go See Papa!*). For example, Maria, a more reserved and infrequent contributor to whole-class discussions, used the blog site to share her thinking about separation from family members. Maria had recently experienced a family member's deportation and in a response to a character's feelings about leaving El Salvador without his father in *Waiting for Papa* (Lainez, 2004), she wrote:

*I would feel sad because I felt like that too.* (Blog entry, 5-15-13)

Maria's level of engagement began to increase as she read texts that directly related to her experiences as a child of a deported immigrant from Mexico. She talked about how the blog entries enabled her to see how others were thinking about the issues, which furthered her own understandings. The blog served to link Maria's own experiences, the texts, and classmates' perspectives in meaningful ways.

In a similar vein, another student, Jesus, shared that like the character in *Waiting for Papa*, he, too, had written a letter to his father in hopes that he would return soon. Andrea responded to this comment in her blog post:

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In particular, the interactivity of the blog site further enhanced students' ability to build interpretations of texts; recount their own personal experiences; make connections between and among texts, experiences, and world knowledge; and problematize taken for granted notions that surfaced in classmates' responses.

*I thought it was sad because Jesus's dad left him and his family because he was caught.* (Blog entry, 5-23-13)

Later Jesus shared a letter written by his father that talked about what it meant to be separated from his family. On the blog site, several students made reference to the letter and the "realness" of Jesus's story. To illustrate, Francisco identified how the letter details important life events, while Miguel was surprised the story was true:

Francisco: *Jesus your dad's story is very good and tells what happens all through his life.* (Blog entry, 5-23-13)

Miguel: *I think he went through a lot of trouble. The thing that I was surprised about was that the story was real. I thought it was fake but it wasn't.* (Blog entry, 5-23-13)

Creating a space for students to dialogue and react to their peers offered a number of opportunities for students in Eliza's class to hear diverse perspectives on a range of topics associated with immigration. Students listened to stories being read, shared firsthand accounts, and read a number of blog entries. However, in this dialogic space, students also had the opportunity to problematize the need to hear immigrant stories. One such student, Sam, was clearly not interested in these discussions. In a series of blog entries related to *That's Not Fair!*, a story that profiles the work of Emma Tenayuka, students were asked to consider injustices they have seen the world. Sam indicated that he saw no injustices in the present world:

Sam: *I would like to change nothing because i think nothing needs to change.* (Blog entry, 4-29-13)

Andrea: *You wouldn't want to change anything? Why don't you feel anything should be changed?* (Blog entry, 5-1-13)

Patricia: *What do you mean by nothing?* (Blog entry, 5-1-13)

Ciara: *I disagree because its really not fair.* (Blog entry, 5-6-13)

The multiple perspectives that students took up, based on their own lives and those of the characters in the stories, were made evident through the richness of the text selections, the whole group discussions, and the blog entries. The whole group discussions and the blog posts were public venues that enabled students to hear and read the experiences and thinking of their classmates. Unlike writing response journals that are usually read only by the teacher, the blog entries invited what Beach (2014) refers to as "interactivity" or "spreadability" of one's thinking. This visibility encouraged students to have empathy for those making difficult decisions when moving across borders as well as for classmates' positions on issues. In a follow-up conversation with Andrea, Eliza asked why she thought it was hard for Sam to find inequities in certain situations. Andrea replied, "Cause it's hard. He doesn't understand it." (Andrea's interview, 5-29-13).

### Displaying Group Solidarity

As noted earlier, many of the students shared similar experiences with the immigration process, with separation from family members, and with unfair work practices that family members encountered. While the blog provided interactivity (the spreadability of ideas), it also encouraged students to develop solidarity. Many of the blog entries confirmed that students understood and agreed with the positions that their classmates were taking. In the following episode, students compare the events in the text *Let's Go See Papa!* (Schimel, 2011) and *My Diary From Here to There* (Perez, 2009). Through their discussion, it is evident how students begin to challenge one another's thinking:

Patricia: *What would you do if you were separated from your dad?* (Blog entry, 5-15-13)

Bradley: *I think it is the same because it is about someone traveling and the difference in Lets Go See Papa, the little girl miss her PaPa.* (Blog entry, 5-13-13)

Patricia: *I agree cause you should be able to see your papa and it is ok to miss someone.* (Blog entry, 5-15-13)

Jose: *The father is going to America.* (Blog entry, 5-13-13)

Jesus: *I agree with everyone because they might have a better life.* (Blog entry, 5-14-13)

Patricia: *How do you mean they would have a better life?* (Blog entry, 5-15-13)

Laura: *They are the same because there dad was not there.* (Blog entry, 5-15-13)

Over the course of this discussion, students were able to share their thinking around the events that occur in the text; however, Patricia interjects to ask her peers to think more on how they would feel if they would be separated from a parent. She uses the blog and the

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When students read the various texts, viewed images and videos, listened to classmates' questions and stories, and responded in journals and on the blog site, they learned to "critically discuss and unravel tensions about their ideas, biases, and opinions connected to issues of social justice" (Fain, 2008, p. 207). The various activities enabled students to establish a sense of community and solidarity with each other, as well as become more facile in reading, writing, and discussing issues that directly and powerfully impacted their families and their childhoods.

discussion to include her peers on something she is very concerned about, her father's return.

Rallying to support a particular position was also made evident in the blog exchange with Sam and his classmates about what might be other injustices in the world. Sam's comment that he doesn't see the need to change anything pushes many of his classmates to actively disagree and question his lack of concern for issues that have deeply affected them. Andrea, Patricia, and Ciara displayed group solidarity as they challenged Sam's position. Therefore, writing on the blog is a means to reflect on one's own experience, evaluate the perspectives of others, and develop a sense of shared identity.

### **Discussion**

Adopting a critical stance around issues related to immigration policies and practices invited the students in Eliza's third grade class to challenge commonplace assumptions about immigration, deportation, and migrant workers. When students read the various texts, viewed images and videos, listened to classmates' questions and stories, and responded in journals and on the blog site, they learned to "critically discuss and unravel tensions about their ideas, biases, and opinions connected to issues of social justice" (Fain, 2008, p. 207). The various activities enabled students to establish a sense of community and solidarity with each other, as well as become more facile in reading, writing, and discussing issues that directly and powerfully impacted their families and their childhoods. In particular, the interactivity of the blog site further enhanced students' ability to build interpretations of texts; recount their own personal experiences; make connections

between and among texts, experiences, and world knowledge; and problematize taken for granted notions that surfaced in classmates' responses.

The recent proliferations of digital technologies and tools in classrooms (e.g., one-to-one laptops or tablet projects, Web 2.0 applications) have transformed how students access, engage with, produce, and redesign information. In Eliza's classroom, students accessed multimodal texts (e.g., images, videos) and wrote responses to the texts and their peers on a class blog site that encouraged further reflection and discussion. For many of the students, the blog site was a virtual space to share experiences and opinions, ask probing questions, and offer encouragement and solidarity on critical issues. Integrating a blog site into the critical literacy curriculum offered these third grade students a number of affordances, including access to multimodal texts; interactivity whereby students had exposure to alternative perspectives; and collaboration and dialogic interactions that led to broader understandings of audience and a re-contextualization of ideas and texts (Beach, 2013). These affordances amplified students' voices on issues that were important to them as readers, writers, and citizens, and they invited critical engagement in significant ways.

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## Appendix

<i>Harvesting Hope</i> (2003) Kathleen Krull	The story of Cesar Chavez and his dedication to fighting for migrant workers' rights.
<i>Waiting for Papa</i> (2004) Rene Colato Lainez	The story of a young boy who envisions his father's return to the U.S.
<i>America Is Her Name</i> (1998) Luis J. Rodriguez	An unhappy girl named America is inspired to express her emotions through poetry after dealing with an intolerant teacher and realistic problems of an urban environment.
<i>That's Not Fair!: Emma Tenayuca's Struggle for Justice</i> (2008) Carmen Tafolla	The true story of Emma Tenayuca, a Mexican American woman who fought for the rights of pecan shellers during the 1930s.
<i>Let's Go See Papa!</i> (2011) Lawrence Schimel	The story of a young girl who understands what it feels like to have an absent father and leave a home country and loved ones.
<i>My Diary From Here to There</i> (2009) Amada Irma Perez	The fears, hopes, and dreams of a young girl emigrating to the U.S. with her family from Mexico are chronicled.