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# Writing to Learn: Blogging about Language Arts and Social Studies in a Grade 5 Classroom

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# Handbook of Research on Digital Tools for Writing Instruction in K–12 Settings

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## Chapter 2

# Writing to Learn: Blogging about Language Arts and Social Studies in a Grade 5 Classroom

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### ABSTRACT

*Research has shown that writing to learn can support discipline-specific learning and thought development. Traditional writing strategies such as essays and journaling have been found to have a positive impact on recall of information, concept analysis and application. However, interaction with readers is not immediate with these methods. An environment where writers can immediately adapt to their readers' feedback and become conversation partners for one another is the blogosphere. The purpose of this chapter is to describe how fifth-grade writers engaged in blog conversations with an audience beyond the classroom walls about their learning in language arts (LA) and social studies (SS) classes. The chapter also analyzes the ways in which feedback from the audience facilitated the fledgling writers' "learning to write and writing to learn."*

### INTRODUCTION

In the opening statement of her landmark essay, "Writing as a Mode of Learning," Janet Emig proposed that "Writing represents a unique mode of learning—not merely valuable, not merely special, but unique" (Emig, 1977, p. 122). It is unique because it is active and it engages the whole person, argued Emig, and it is both a process and product that takes into account the individual

writer's needs. Research has shown that writing to learn can support discipline-specific learning and thought development (Bazerman, Little, Bethel, Chavkin, Fouquette, & Garufis, 2005), critical thinking (Gammill, 2006), metacognition (Sinatra, 2000), reflection (Cwilka & Martinez-Cruz, 2003), vocabulary development (Janzen, 2008), and reading comprehension (Baleghizadeh & Babapour, 2011; Fordham, Wellman, & Sandman, 2002). Writing strategies such as note taking,

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composing essays, short-answer responses, journaling, and summary composition, among many others, have been found to have a positive impact on recall of information, concept analysis and application, and helping learners in making connections between new ideas and prior knowledge in language arts and other content area classrooms (Friend, 2000/2001; Graham & Hebert, 2010; Scales, 2000; Tan de Ramos, 2010).

In the above-mentioned essay, Emig noted that “with writing, the audience is usually absent; with talking the listener is usually present” (1977, p. 122). However, that was then – in 1977. Today’s advancements in information and communication technologies such as blogs, wikis, and other social networking applications have removed the barrier between writer and audience (Parisi & Crosby, 2012). In fact, these applications have been developed for and rely on the writer’s interaction online with the audience (Jenkins, 2006; Penrod, 2007), whether it is in a synchronous or asynchronous format (Andrews & Smith, 2011). Given these affordances, “writers and readers can become active listeners and conversation partners for each other” (Magnifico, 2010, p.168).

One such environment where writers and their readers can enter such conversations and become ‘conversation partners for each other’ is the blogosphere, and two areas where writing fluidity and content area knowledge are key are language arts and social studies. Two questions might then emerge: What would writing done by a student to learn about social studies or language arts using a blog look like? How then, might blogging prepare students for conversations with interactive digital audiences as they share content knowledge?

The purpose of this chapter is to describe how fifth-grade bloggers engaged in conversations with an authentic audience (that is, an audience beyond the classroom walls) about their learning in language arts (LA) and social studies (SS) classes. The chapter also analyzes the ways in which feedback from the audience facilitated our fledgling writers’ “learning to write and writing to learn.”

The literature review provides the context and the reasoning behind the blogging program that is presented; the methods explain the research context, the participants, and instructional interventions.

## BLOGGING IN THE LA AND SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOMS

Abundant practitioner literature has been published endorsing blog use in the classroom and offering strategies and resources for differing content area teachers. Two recent examples of such resources for teachers are these books: *Making Connections with Blogging: Authentic Learning for Today’s Classrooms* (Parisi & Crosby, 2012) and *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and Other Powerful WebWeb Tools for Classrooms* (Richardson, 2010). While Parisi and Crosby’s book (2012) focuses primarily on blogging for content area learning, Richardson’s (2010) text covers a broad range of technology applications, with WebWeblogs being only one of them. Both books provide sample teacher assignments and resources, in addition to classroom ideas. We were interested, however, in reviewing literature more closely relevant to LA and SS classrooms.

There has been made available much professional literature for language arts teachers, describing how to integrate blogging into literacy instruction (Boling, Castek, Zawilinski, Barton, & Nierlich, 2008; Curwood, 2011; Gelbwasser, 2011; Johnson, 2010; Zawilinski, 2009). Some blog uses recommended in this literature include practices such as literature reading in book clubs and writing assignments such as reflective writing, report writing, argumentative writing, creative writing, and even tweeting and instant messaging; the last two are examples of microblogging (Greenhow & Gleason, 2012).

Other benefits of blogging in support of student learning include gains in vocabulary and language use (Lamonica, 2010), improvements in narrative writing (Wong & Hew, 2010), and growth in

audience awareness and connection to the audience (McGrail & Davis, 2011; McGrail & McGrail, 2013; Lapp, Shea, & Wolsey, 2010/2011). Achievements in community development have also been observed (Glogowski, 2008).

Blogging, especially with carefully orchestrated prompts, can also improve critical thinking about content that students actually learn. In a case study examining the impact of blogcasts (a mélange of blogging and podcasting), which featured Socratic questioning in secondary school students' critical evaluation of controversial topics in social studies, Sharifah and Hew (2010) found that blogcasts had a statistically significant impact. The ability to think critically was evaluated using a pre/post test metric to measure students' exposure to the blogcast using the Socratic method. In addition to the positive finding, the researchers found that students had enjoyed working with new technology to improve their critical thinking.

Woo and Wang's (2009) study that examined critical thinking along with the learning of historical knowledge supports the belief that blogging can help students improve critical thinking. However, the researchers noted that the topic for blogging determined "the types of critical thinking employed by the students" and that "students' criticalness is more profound when the information for writing a topic is readily available. Otherwise, they tend to be less critical and subjective" (p. 431).

Mafra, Gray, and Lee (2010) also found blogging helpful in addressing in-depth thinking among low achieving students in a high school history classroom. Besides this benefit, the researchers observed that "integration of blogs into instruction was more responsive to the learning styles of the students by providing access to tactile and visual materials" (p. 121). Similar to Sharifah and Hew (2010), studying U.S. history using blogging activities also engaged low achieving students, who "found a 'voice' in this online environment" (p. 121).

Wilson, Wright, Inman, and Matherson (2011) discuss how social studies teachers can

use Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, wikis, and digital media sharing in the classroom, and how to use these applications in support of specific goals and curriculum objectives. These authors argue that integrating these tools into social studies instruction prepares teachers for the next generation of students who are using these and other technologies daily, and that teaching with these tools also reflects the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) guidelines for technology infusion in teaching social studies.

As a group, all these studies highlight the potential of blogging for the LA and SS classroom. However, the majority of this research has been undertaken with secondary and even college students. This study, however, explores blogging in the elementary school context. Thus, the most salient way that this study contributes to this body of research is by examining the conversations younger writers have had about their learning in language arts and social studies. It also brings the voices of yearling authors to the forefront in a variety of ways. We see, in a contextually valid way, the true voice of the fledgling writer as they relate the struggles, challenges and precious victories in acquiring knowledge in these crucial content areas.

## **METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS**

### **The Blogging Program, Student Bloggers and Context**

The students who participated in the blogging program were fifteen fifth-grade students - ten girls and five boys. In terms of racial and ethnic background, nine were Caucasian, five Hispanic, and one African-American. One student was in the special education program and two students were in the gifted program. The student ethnic and socioeconomic background was comparable to the school student population's ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, with 81% considered

economically disadvantaged, 36% Hispanic, 16.5% African American, 21.3% White, and 3.1% multi-racial.

The school was a Title I school located in a southern state of the United States that had received recognition for academic achievement in reading, math, and English language arts. Although blogging was new to all students, many were comfortable with word processing and searching the Internet. The school was selected for the blogging program because the classroom teacher was interested in blogging and she communicated this interest to the research team. The blogging instruction described in this work was provided by a member of the research team who was a university information systems training specialist at the time of this study. This university specialist (the “blogging teacher,” for the purposes of this work) consulted frequently with the classroom teacher to align her instruction with the existing curriculum requirements and to address the classroom teacher’s expressed interest in advancing the writing and critical thinking skills of her students through blogging.

The blogging program described in this work was incorporated into language arts instruction once a week for four hours over a period of one year. The instruction took place in a computer lab and the blogging program was developed in consultation with classroom teachers to reflect the classroom curriculum. Teachers recommended areas of focus for writing instruction and activity ideas as well. Students practiced narrative and persuasive writing, report writing on subjects from various content areas, honed their language and critical thinking skills, and engaged in numerous conversations with readers and commenters about self-selected topics. Many, though not all of their blog conversations concerned what they were learning in LA and SS classrooms.

Student bloggers learned about blogging through a series of activities and explorations, including a WebWebquest (Internet-guided group research activity). This introduced them to blog

writing practices such as questioning, thinking, writing, collaborating, reflecting, commenting, linking, and proofreading. They also used a step-by-step “*Blook on Blogging*.” The *Blook* book was a guidebook on blogging, written by peers from the previous blogging program. While the teacher’s WebWebquest described the key processes involved in blogging, the *Blook* book offered explanations and illustrations of blog communication and blog writing from the elementary student’s perspective. In addition, issues of Internet safety and privacy were introduced to student writers through a class wiki that provided specific guidelines and ways to respond to inappropriate comments or behavior online. A class blog was created for students that modeled blog writing and communication with audiences that extended beyond the teacher and peers. It showed how to give credit to others for their work and how to value different voices and opinions. The class blog provided overviews of daily learning in the blog writing program as well as direction and assignments for future sessions. Student writers created their own blogs and links to these blogs were posted on the class blog for easy access.

The Typepad blogging platform was used for creating the teacher and student individual blogs. Student bloggers selected names for their blogs and an instructional technology instructor helped to establish blog accounts using the school district email domains. Some blogging sessions incorporated podcasting, Gizmo, and Google Maps applications for communication with readers and commenters in other states, countries, and continents.

The authors of this work are university professors, one of whom helped create the design and implementation of the research study that focused on the blogging program reported here. The other acted as the primary methodologist for this work. In addition, a coterie of graduate students left comments in response to student blogs and in this way served as mentors to the young blog writers. Other commenters initially recruited for



this research included retired teachers and bloggers interested in using blogs in the classroom. Beyond the recruited commenters and readers, further readers came from the blogging community at large and included commenters from various countries and continents (Canada, Scotland, New Zealand, Australia and the US).

## **DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

In this work, the sources of data were young writers' posts and student writers' comments posted in other blogs as well as their readers' comments, for a total of 659 single-spaced pages of blog scripts. The data were analyzed using a qualitative content analysis method (Creswell, 2007). This method involved reading blog scripts closely in order to identify the codes and clusters of codes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006) that described content knowledge learning and writing in order to learn about what these young writers experienced.

To illustrate, the following are two sample clusters of codes that describe student learning in content areas and student growth in writing about what they had learned on the blog. Cluster One was labeled "CONTENT KNOWLEDGE" and was comprised of such codes as "conversation topic"; "content area"; "lessons shared"; "new concepts/vocabulary in posts"; "critical thinking/mindset"; and "asking for support with content from adults." Cluster Two, "THE WRITER'S CRAFT" included codes such as "writing type"; "readers' awareness/attention to their needs"; "voice/agency"; "conversations/dialogue with readers;" mechanics"; and "self-evaluation."

These codes consisted both of exemplar words and phrases (content knowledge) that were indicative of growth, and the placement and juxtaposition of comments and responses that indicated that our bloggers were truly responsive to their audience (writer's craft, or form). In the earlier stages of open coding and analysis we successfully isolated writing that concerned the LA and SS disciplines

as well as critical conversations about learning within these disciplines. Each piece of data was then scrutinized using the following questions:

- What kinds of conversations about learning in these content areas occurred?
- What kind of support did readers and commenters provide to facilitate student learning?
- What kind of writing was used in the conversations?

This analytical process also allowed extracting the themes for each question for each participant. The next step was axial coding, which included relating the themes to each other for each participant and across all participants, paying attention to content area knowledge being discussed in blog posts and comments as well as the support that the young writers received from readers and commenters during these conversations.

The major themes that emerged from this analysis include: conversations/dialogue about learning in content areas; writing to learn; and writing support/feedback, and these are reported in this work. Analytical memos were used throughout this stage of analysis to provide brief descriptions of the themes and to record additional comments about the themes. For example, in one researcher's memo, critical conversations were described as "the moments/situations in which the students engaged in conversation with the readers about what they were learning in the content area classroom and [in which they] also had a desire to learn more about it." The researcher noted that the desire to want to learn more is difficult to capture but decided to use the following two categories as possible indicators: "asking questions," and "expressing confusion or excitement."

Finally, through the process of selective coding, critical conversations within each discipline were chosen (see Table 1), based on either their frequency or tendency to encompass other critical conversations that were representative of the data



*Table 1. Conversation types in blog writing about learning in language arts and social studies*

Content Area	Critical Conversations	Writing
<b>Language Arts</b>	Events at home, school, in the nation or around the world (e.g., birth of a baby; vacation trips; dog loss; national dog competition; war in Iraq)	Free verse poems Story/narratives with or without images Report Reflection
	Personal interests, passions, ambitions (e.g., drawing; playing computer games) or concerns (e.g., obesity, cutting down trees; immigration)	Science fiction Reflection Free verse poems Persuasive argument
	Language work and vocabulary development (categorizing words based on a similar concept or speech part)	Concept maps Sentences or stories with idioms Definitions with/without illustration
	Proofreading	Podcast recording
<b>Social Studies</b>	Archeology (e.g., dinosaur species; ancient tribes or villages)	Article report
	History (e.g., historical figures such as Harriet Tubman or George Washington; 14th century kings; Revolutionary War, Civil War, or World War II)	Mini biography Report from a field trip to a museum Personal commentary
	Geography (e.g., locations where commenters and student bloggers live)	Annotated Google maps
	Political science (e.g., a day with legislators; current events such as war in Iraq or issuing of new coins)	Event reporting/news article with photos and/or podcast interviews
	Resources (e.g., population growth)	News article with/without photos Personal reflection
	Government (e.g., immigration)	Personal commentary

across all participants. The critical conversations for each discipline and their support systems, as related to the above listed questions, are reported next. [Note: Quotations in the findings preserve the idiosyncratic spelling and writing produced by the young writers in this study. All student names are aliases.]

## CONVERSATIONS ABOUT LEARNING LANGUAGE ARTS

This section describes critical conversations in the language arts classroom and is organized around the writing activities that informed these conversations. These include Self-Expressive Writing, Creative Writing, Story Writing, Persuasive Writing and Report Writing. We conclude with Conversations about the Writer's Craft.

## Self-Expressive Writing

The conversations of personal import that were communicated through self-expression were rich and on diverse topics. Young student bloggers shared their passions, interests, ambitions, and reported on events in their school and personal lives. This is how Lindsey introduced her interests to her readers: "I love to talk to friends and family. My favorite thing to do is play video games. My other favorite thing is to eat food. Food is very tasty!" Other students discussed their favorite subjects. Michael wrote: "My favorite subject in school is science." Eddie, as many others did, echoed this sentiment and also announced to the world his future career plans that reflect his interest in science: "When I grow up I want to be a scientist in marine biology, chemistry, and health science." Another example of self-expressive

writing (Graves, 1983), is Tina's reflection on her dog's death. In her post, Tina grieved over this loss in her life in this manner:

*I enjoyed getting to see Harley your dog I used to have a dog just like him but he died last year. When he was little I was a baby and when I cried he came running to me to check on me. He was always the first thing I always saw when I came home from school. He also slept with me in my bed at night when I went to bed. He was a good dog and last year on his leg it hurt him and his bone was showing so my grama took him to the vet and they said he would die that night. All I have of him now is a picture.*

## Creative Writing

Creative writing assignments, on the other hand, included free verse poems such as the "I am" poem (in which students engage in metaphorical self-description) or poems inspired by a certain event. For example, Victoria celebrated the birth of her teacher's baby with a poem she titled, "The baby" while Rosalinda wrote the "Easter Bunny!" poem to wish everyone "wonderful easter!"

## Story Writing

Another open-ended assignment that encouraged student bloggers to explore their personal opinions on self-selected topics was story writing, with or without a visual prompt. Here is an excerpt from Michael's science fiction story about an invasion of monkeys on a small village:

*The fight of the monkeys.*

*Once upon a time there were 50 cars were flying with magic and then an asteroid flew and blew one up to smithereens. Then an ice cream man threw cones at people and they threw monkeys at him. Then a car just made fireworks and the people saw a candy cane in the air made of fireworks and*

*said look! The farmers are planting and stopped to make a nacho stand for us to eat at. What! They are charging us 1,000,000,000,000,000,000\$ for one pack of nachos. "Let's form an angry mob!" Said the ice cream man as people threw more monkeys at him (and the monkeys ate the ice cream man's banana burster pops) "sure," said the ripped off of there money towns people...*

In response to self-expressive and narrative writing, student bloggers received two response types: a) a reaction to their experiences, and b) advice on how to improve their writing craft. For instance, responses from Ms. Best and Colleen to Michael's science fiction story, *the fight of the monkeys*, illustrate both kinds of feedback. Both readers found that Michael's story needed elaboration and suggested the ways he could address this concern. These readers also shared their personal reactions to the story and complimented Michael on his imagination:

*This was a great narrative. Maybe there could be another asteroid at the end to cause more destruction. What do you think? OR maybe the asteroid could be made of candy and could fill the world with all kinds of different candy? Hmmm.....*  
Posted by: Ms. Best

*Michael,*

*...You have a great use of imagery in your story, especially in the mob scene. I am glad that the monkeys didn't overthrow the town in your story, but I wonder will they be back for revenge after coming back from Antarctica?...*

Posted by: Colleen

## Persuasive Writing

Beyond personal narrative or fiction writing, student bloggers engaged in argument development and report writing. Some of the issues the young

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writers invited the readers to endorse were Mary's call for implementation of a recycling program, Lindsey's plea for more recess, and Anni's request for water fountains in all elementary schools. On the health front, Emmy demanded feeding healthy food to all children and Mia argued for more physical education in schools. Environment-minded student bloggers Anni, Dulce Maria, Victoria, and Mary urged people to save the trees, and to protect from extinction polar bears, fish, and other types of wildlife and living organisms.

Although responses to persuasive writing such as presented in the examples above evoked strong emotions among readers, and some of whom had responded with equal passion to these calls for change, many commenters provided additional information on various proposals, expanding these young writers' content knowledge on these topics. A response from Cordelia to Mia's petition for having more P.E. in schools reflects this kind of feedback. In the post, Cordelia indicated the link between extensive TV watching or playing games and weight and health problems:

*Mia, you have some very good points here! It is so sad that kids are struggling with their weight simply because they aren't exercising. I have a strong opinion about this subject. It seems that TV and video games can really be an enemy to kids and their health. Sitting on the couch in front of the TV has become much more popular than going outside and riding a bike or kicking a soccer ball. P.E. [physical education] at school is some of the only exercise kids get now.... Did you also know that it is proven research that exercising and getting the blood pumping helps greatly with concentration in school and self esteem? Posted by: Cordelia*

## Report Writing

Report writing was another writing strategy that provided young writers with the opportunity to discuss with their readers a diverse range of top-

ics from different disciplines and perspectives. Accordingly, student bloggers provided updates on the war in Iraq, as in Victoria's post, *The terrible things in Iraq*, or treated their readers to less serious topics, such as celebrating Chinese New Year, as in Mary's post, *Hurray! The Year of the pig is here!*

## Conversations about the Writer's Craft

In addition to responding to ideas in student writing, providing recommendations for improving argumentation and narrative development, and expanding student content knowledge, the readers often offered advice on style, language use, mechanics and vocabulary development. For example, in this exchange, Mia and her commenter, Lani, engaged in a friendly chat about the use of idioms in their writing, which helped Mia to expand her own idiomatic word bank.

*Hi Mia,*

*I hope you didn't have to go back to square one on this post! Your idioms painted some funny pictures for me! I love them! Best, Lani*

*Lani,*

*No, I didn't have to go back to square one. I love the idioms myself too. Do you ever use idioms during your day? Love, Mia*

In this exchange between Eddie, a student blogger, and her reader in Glasgow, Eddie, on the other hand, honed his use of descriptive words. Chris's writing served well as an exemplar of such colorful writing, which was filled with many descriptive words and phrases. The exchange posted here begins with Chris's response to Eddie's post that mentioned "the sweet cotten candy from the county fair":

*I've just realised that what you call "cotton candy" we call "candy floss"! As for desserts that we have - Glasgow is famous for deep fried Mars Bars - honest! Posted by Chris*

Chris,

*How does depp fried mars bars really taste? I've found a picture of it on wikipedia. where I live in Georgia we have something A Twinkie is a that looks similar to it. They are called twinkies. Do you guys have twinkies where you live? Any ways A Twinkie is a "Golden Sponge Cake with a Creamy Filling." What do you guys put in mars bars? Eddie*

*I have to confess I've never eaten a deep fried Mars Bar - just thinking about it makes my teeth ache! They are very sweet and heavy, with a sort of gooeyfawn coloured layer and a thin toffee one, all inside milk chocolate. When you bite one, the toffee pulls out in a long string and sticks to your face when it breaks. I can only ever eat a small bit of one - maybe half an inch! Posted by Chris*

## CONVERSATIONS ABOUT LEARNING SOCIAL STUDIES

This section describes conversations about learning in social studies. The disciplines within this field provide an organizational framework. These include History, Population Ecology, Civics/ Government, and Archeology. We conclude with Writing Assignments that facilitated conversations in these diverse areas of social studies.

### History

Although the conversations about learning in social studies spanned across different disciplines and concerned various issues within these disciplines, history was the most popular subject, as many student bloggers seemed to enjoy the drama

of past events and were eager to discuss them with their readers. Numerous conversations emerged about different wars and other vivid occurrences in U.S. history. For example, Johnny shared what he had learned about historic Jamestown, Virginia.

*Before the revalutinary war the settlers founded James town. As soon as they got there the British took over. Then they heard about Wilsburg a town In Virginia. They moved there.2 years later the British took over. They stayed under control of the British. The settlers soon moved back to James town and stayed under control of Britin.*

In response, one of the commenters, Ms. L., asked Johnny to reconsider the way he had portrayed the British soldiers in his writing. Ms. L wrote:

Jhonny,

*It's wonderful that you are interested in Jamestown. You mentioned that the British came in and took it over, but you might consider that these people were also British. I guess they still did not like someone else coming in and taking over what they had worked so hard to build. If I were them, I probably would have moved to Williamsburg as well!*

Lani too helped Johnny expand his knowledge of the events that led to the American Revolution by providing a link to an image from this time period and asking him to report back "anything about how people lived at that time from the picture at this WebWebsite." Johnny did his homework and wrote back with this information: "They look like the are in a theature. I did not see any guns in the picture. Maybe it was early before the puritins come."

The Civil War was another conflict that the young writers wished to discuss with their readers. For instance, Mary wrote a passionate post about this war, asking the readers to help her understand the reasons for this war. The post included images

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from the war as well as excerpts from primary sources [Note: the image is not provided in this work.]. Mary explained:

### *The Civil War Beyond Slavery*

*A fire has been kindled which all the waters of the ocean cannot put out, and which only seas of blood can extinguish." Prophesied Howell Cobb a Georgian. This quote was said to express what happened to our young country in one Georgian's opinion.*

*The troubles of slavery insurrections was deemed great. The existence of slavery tended to debase and discourage free labor. Slavery one of the main causes of the Civil War. The profits from slave holding were illy earned. Except under the most the most favorable conditions, were uncertain.*

*The cotton's production always resorted to slavery. The North believed in having free "blacks" have jobs. NO slaves. It has changed my view of the south's past. SLAVES! WHY?!?! Slaves played an important part in the south's product ability. It just brings an endless waterfall of tears to my soul... snivel*

*It is inhumane to rip an innocent family apart. I wish it would never had happened. So many causes so few reasons... WHY did they resort to kidnapping unknowing people????*

Lani who, like Mary, had identified with the victims in this war, reacted very emotionally to the events described in the post. She also asked Mary to elaborate on how studying this war had impacted the way she perceived "the south's past." This is how Mary responded to Lani's inquiry:

*Lani I never knew just how bad the slaves had it. Now I'm really glad none of my ancestors were born in Georgia. It will change my view of the south because it broke my heart I thought the*

*south was good, but I was wrong. I don't like what happened, but it is in the past.*

Other student bloggers had an equally emotional reaction to what they had been learning about the Civil war. Another example of such response was a post written by Dulce Maria:

### *Civil War was horrible*

*I learned that slaves fought for their freedom because they picked up a lot of crops and they didn't even get paid. Sometimes slaves got wiped and their master didn't respect them usually....The thing I didn't understand was why some masters hated black people and don't they know how they will feel if they were slaves. I think slaves were wrong and I wished masters never had owned slaves*

Similarly to Lani, Mrs. C was trying to help Dulce Marie to process this difficult-to-understand event in American history. She also provided a link to the resource to answer some of the questions that Dulce Marie posed in her post:

*Hi Dulce Maria,*

*This post is relevant because you asked so many good questions - questions that are difficult to answer. I agree that the Civil War was a horrible time. Here is a link to a site that you may find interesting -<http://www2.lhric.org/pocantico/civilwar/cwar.htm>*

T.K. also had some questions about the war, as is evident in this statement: "The thing that I didn't understand is how Lincon stoped slavery. He is onley one person does he tell the u.s Army go fight and they do?" Lani came to the rescue and provided clues within her response to help T.K. find the answer for himself. Lani wrote:

*You asked how does one person just tell the army to go fight and they do. Do you know what job*



*Lincoln had? And what part of his job was? The words below might give you a hint—*

*Section 2, Clause 1:*

*The President shall be Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, and of the Militia of the several States.*

*Does that help answer your question?*

Like TK, Ashley, a reader from Canada, had a question about the Civil war. TK's post on the war made Ashley ponder over this question:

*Hey!*

*This is a good piece. It made me think about what wars would actually look like or family's who lost dads, moms or anything. I feel really bad for the people who were fighting in the wars. I don't really know things about the civil wars. We never learned about it yet down here in Canada. But it seems interesting to learn a little bit about it.... Ashley M.*

Note how T.K.'s writing about the Civil war proved to be very educational for his peer from Canada as well.

## Population Ecology

Population ecology was another area of interest that the student bloggers explored with their readers. For example, Victoria was fascinated by the 2006 Census Report and asked the readers for their opinion on this subject:

*Up! Goes Our Population*

*....Our population in the U.S. has grown so much in the couple of years. Can you believe that there are more than 3 million people just in the United States of America? Do you think it is a good thing*

*that our population is growing so fast? Why or why not?*

Despite the obvious error in the population figure given by the blogger above, her readers were eager to share their views, helping Victoria see both advantages and disadvantages of population growth. For instance, Ms. S. recommended being judicious in development plans as well as appreciative of the diversity that comes with it:

*I think our population growth could mean we need to be smart about our country's plans for schools and jobs for all our residents, but I don't think that is a bad thing. For one, the population growth means we have lots more ethnic groups and cultures ad religions in our melting pot, and that makes us more extraordinary! No other country has our variety of food and language and culture! Ms. S.*

Ms. Best, on the other hand, focused primarily on the benefits, acknowledging the government's ability and responsibility for responding to a population's growth:

*The reality is that with an increase of population comes an increase in housing, economic, and other social needs. If a country is to be successful it must accommodate its inhabitants.... We have been blessed with a flourishing economy and a stable government. I am confident that the increase in population will be handled in a responsible and orderly manner. Thanks for sharing your thoughts Victoria!*

Dulce Maria chose to discuss the topic of population growth with her readers as well; however, her focus was on minority groups. She reminded the readers about this group of people in this way: "They might be 400 million people live in U.S. Non-Latino people will be the majority, but not much. About 25% are going to be Latinos, 14% African, and 7% Asian of total group." Ms. Best, who shared with Dulce Maria Latino background,

thanked Dulce Maria for being concerned about “Latinos in this country.” Ms. Best provided additional statistics on these individuals in America, and also recommended checking the most recent statistics, using Google to find the information in this post:

*Hi Dulce Maria! I really am proud of the way you are interested in amount of Latinos in this country. I am Latina myself and am very proud of my culture. It's so important to spread an awareness and love for people from different countries. I can see that you are interested in finding out more about Latinos in this country. I've discovered that there are 12 million Mexicans living in America right now and 34.7 million Latinos in the nation. That is a lot of people! Check out the 2000 Census (just google it) if you wanna see the numbers first hand. Have a great day and GRACIAS!!!!*

As evidenced above, the conversations with the readers that the student bloggers had about population growth helped these young writers learn not only the facts and statistics about the trends in population growth, but also the value of differing perspectives on this topic, perspectives that included voices from representatives of different cultures and racial or ethnic groups. This seemed to be a very successful way for the bloggers to learn civics and democracy lessons.

## **Civics and Government**

The student bloggers were also interested in various matters of government and governing. For example, Lindsey educated her readers about coins being issued in remembrance of former presidents. She explained the functions of such coins and when presidents qualify for having issued a coin with their name on it. Lani found the post indeed educational but she also advised that Lindsey proofread it carefully. In this way, Lani

was also teaching Lindsey how important good spelling was for readers and writers alike.

Johnny and Emmy, in turn, reported on an event that they participated with local legislators and educators. This is what Johnny wrote about his conversation with one of the representatives. The post included a link to the state's general assembly WebWebsite and also a podcast and a transcript from the interview for his readers to access and review.

### *Interview with Allen Freeman*

*Representative Allen Freeman Hey I had a lot of fun speaking with Allen Freeman. He said that he speaks for them in debates he also said he helps pass laws. And makes sure they help keep us safe and provides jobs and transportation. He makes sure they have what they need.*

*Download FreemanJohnnyPodcast.MP3*

*Download FreemanJohnnyTranscript.doc*

A peer from Canada responded with a request for additional information: “This makes me wonder why you had an interview with Representative Allen Freeman. As a Canadian, I don't know him very well. Who is he? What has he done?” Although Johnny did not have an answer to Derek's questions, he responded promptly and recommended that Derek consult the WebWebsite that he had mentioned in his original post.

*Dear Derek I am new at the representatives and legislators but i know that they are important that is about it. see ya Derek By the way why dont you do some reaserch at a WebWebsite.*

As such, this exchange is an evidence of an effort to help each other learn the answer about something that they had not known at that point of time.



## Archeology

One other area of social studies that the student bloggers discussed with their readers was archeology. For example, Rosalinda introduced the readers to a new dinosaur species in this way: “This dinosaur’s name is Albertaseratopsnesmoi. this dinosaur was about 20 feet long and weighed over one-half ton. Hopefully they can find some more of this fossils soon.” Mary, another student blogger, updated the readers on yet another find and that was the discovery of prehistoric fish fossils. She accompanied the post with a photo that showed this interesting finding and provided the link to the original article. Tina, in turn, communicated with the readers about the unearthing of an ancient village. Her post, *Mysterious Ancient Village*, provided a great deal of detail about this finding:

*In a site called Durrington Walls in England researcher Mike Parker Pearson found a village and artifacts on 2-27-2007. The ancient Stonehenge might have been built by some people in a village near Stonehenge. Lots of stone tools, arrowheads, animal bones, and other artifacts were also found through the village. This area probably was built in 2600 B.C. Two out of all the other homes were separate from them. They might be the homes of the community leaders. They didn’t have the debris or household trash like the other houses. What do you think of this post*

Lani found the post “really informative.” She also posed this question for Mary to consider:

*It made me wonder what researchers far in the future might think about our culture if they find lots of our pollution and junk! What kinds of artifacts do you think researchers 2000 years from now would find in Georgia from our culture?*

Although Mary did not have an elaborate answer, she did write back to Lani to share her opinion: “I think they would find lots of junk like you said.”

## Writing Assignments

The assignments that facilitated the numerous conversations about various topics in social studies were of two types: article reporting and personal reflection. When sharing article reports, many student bloggers made an effort to provide the article’s author or a link to the original source. They also tried to pull in the reader by choosing a catchy title or a strong opening. Another strategy these young writers used was to include images or fun facts from the stories they reported on. The personal reflection that student bloggers had often woven into the narrative of their reports had a purpose too. Such reflection represented their own understanding of the issues on which they had been reporting. Report writing introduced young student writers to more formal writing, characteristic of discourse in disciplines such as science, math, or social studies. Both forms of writing served well to support student learning of content knowledge and writing development.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The conversations that the young writers engaged in with their readers through blogging in this study were many and diverse in subject matter, in both English language arts and social studies. Some of the topics the students discussed included accounts of personal or school events, writing poetry, how to improve spelling and grammar, the appeal of their pets and other animals they encountered, appeals to protect nature or environmental causes and insights gained from exploring different governments, politics, and wars. Notably, the majority of the conversations on the blog concerned student self-selected topics or content areas, which gave students autonomy and motivated them to want to learn. Having the audience who indeed became “active listeners and conversation partners” (Magnifico, 2010, p.168) for these bloggers provided a meaningful context for these conversations as

well. As shown here and also evidenced in previous research (McGrail & McGrail, 2013; Luehmann & MacBride, 2009; Sharifah & Hew, 2010), the integration of choice and authentic audience into blog activities engaged students in learning; teachers should make the most of these strategies in their own content area classrooms to help students stay motivated and engaged.

The conversations on the blog also helped students practice discipline-specific language and forms of discourse in an informal and supportive environment. Learning content in different subjects involves acquiring not only declarative knowledge but also the ability to use specialized language and discourse to communicate this knowledge to others (Janzen, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Blogging with readers about learning in different content areas allowed these young writers not only to absorb content knowledge, but also to acquire and use purposefully the language that represented the concepts that they were learning in language arts and social studies. Sometimes, students used words and phrases that were obviously not their own without adapting them. Such wholesale borrowing may indicate a lack of perfect understanding of the verbiage. An example is Mary's use of the phrase "to debase and discourage free labor" to discuss the issues of slavery in her post on the Civil War. Other bloggers seemed to appropriately learn from their readers' new constructs and new vocabulary, such that they would absorb and ask about concepts such as "census" or "Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States." Another example of the presence of such learning in students' writing and conversations was the use of terms such as "artifacts" or "fossils" to describe the discoveries in archeology on which they were reporting. In this way, the conversations on the blogs afforded these young writers the opportunity to hone the ability to explain to their readers new concepts using the terms and discourse of particular disciplines. Research indicates that "most students need explicit teaching of sophisticated genres,

specialized language conventions, disciplinary norms of precision and accuracy, and higher-level interpretative processes" (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, p. 43). If we may presume that there exists a present-day gap in such skills, there is a clear need to support students in developing them. Our findings show that blog-based conversations about learning in content areas provide teachers with a strategy to accomplish this goal.

Acquiring discipline-specific concepts and terms is a difficult task, and it will require a sustained effort over a longer period of time and a workable strategy throughout. One way to do this is to incorporate an academic language and discipline-specific vocabulary enrichment program to accompany student writing on the blog. Topic-specific word banks or word walls, combined with an online Work Log and a follow-up quiz, are some of the activities that would serve this purpose. The Online Work Log (Dalton, Proctor, Uccelli, Mo & Snow, 2011) has three components: 1) *Connect It!* (where the reader/writer is asked to make personal connection to a target concept/term, as in this example, "*Generation* [target concept/word]: I am the fourth generation in my family that's still living" (p.82); 2) *Web It!* (where the learner is asked to provide related words or phrases, as in this example, "*Unique* [target word]: Related word/phrase: different (p. 82); and 3) *Caption It!* (where the learner has the chance to insert photos or drawings to represent visually a given concept, term or idea).

Another area students may benefit from is studying the text structure and argument organization characteristic of expository texts in various disciplines. Knowledge of structural elements improves not only students' comprehension of such texts but also helps them to use such elements in writing (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). Our student bloggers relied on their knowledge of text structures when they were presenting the information they learned in content area classes on report writing, persuasive writing and narrative writing. Each type of writing requires different

structures and argument organization and may even look different in different subjects (c.f. a report in science class and a book report in an LA class). Going forward, blog writers will need a great deal of practice in using appropriate text structures, argument organization, and in connecting the main and supporting ideas of their blogs with proper linking words and phrases such as “and” “but” or “first,” “next,” etc. To teach expository text structures and argument organization, teachers should use graphic organizers to demonstrate “the rhetorical relationship of the ideas - main idea, major ideas, and supporting details” (Akhondi, Malayeri, & Samad, 2011, p. 368) and then help students organize their ideas in different kinds of writing as well. Once students become comfortable with structures in different types of writing, teachers can encourage them to create blog posts without graphic organizers.

Having to present sophisticated concepts to others in writing helped these young writers to “become conscious of their own learning” (Hungerford-Kesser, Wiggins, & Amaro-Jimenez, 2011, p. 333), and permitted their own metacognition and critical thinking skills to grow (Gammill, 2006; Sinatra, 2000). Two vivid examples are Mary’s question, “WHY did they resort to kidnapping unknowing people????” and TK’s attempt to understand Lincoln’s responsibilities during the Civil War, “I didn’t understand is how Lincon stoped slavery. He is onley one person does he tell the u.s Army go fight and they do?” Blogging conversations such as the ones discussed in this study facilitated the growth of reflective and information processing skills through both assigned writing, and through the opportunity to review and discuss ideas with their readers and commenters. Pursuant to the evidence above, we believe teachers should take advantage of blog-based activities to help students develop metacognitive thinking skills and processes in both of these content areas. Metacognition and critical thinking are, however, areas of challenge for young writers, who often struggle with synthesis and speculative

thinking about the information they read and write about. Such struggles are characteristic of this age group (Magnifico, 2010). To help students improve in these areas, teachers may wish to use “thick” questions, or questions that require a more elaborate response than a “few-word” or single sentence-based statement, as opposed to “thin” questions such as “What is...?” “When...?” “How many...?” or “Who...?” Thin questions usually solicit a yes/no recall of information or mere reporting of facts (McLaughlin & Allen, 2000). Thick questions, on the other hand, invite student bloggers to think more deeply about what they have been reading in the content area classes in preparation for reporting about this learning on their blogs. Using thick questions also provides the structure for finding and organizing students’ thoughts and the ideas supporting them. Such questions ask the “why,” “how come,” or “what if” questions in a more fruitful way, leading to insightful conversations about the issues raised by these questions.

Scaffolding and feedback from both readers and teachers supported the students’ learning to interpret and present disciplinary content in blog writing. Several kinds of scaffolding were consistently present in conversations across both content areas in this study. One form of response was simply reactions to content, including statements of agreement or disagreement (recall the readers’ passionate response to the students’ posts on the Civil War or in support of the environmental causes that the bloggers were arguing for in their writing). Another was entreaties by readers for more examples or illustrations of the ideas being discussed by young writers in their blog posts. Examples of such requests that we provided earlier included a commenter asking Dulce Marie to check the most recent statistics on the Latino/a population in the United States and another reader inviting Johnny to find how people lived at the time of the American Revolution, which he had discussed in his blog post. The purpose of these requests from the readers was,

on one level, to provide opportunities for these young learners to advance their content knowledge and skills. However, this kind of feedback had yet another purpose. It inspired participation and community nurturing, because it allowed both young writers and their readers to make personal connections both with the content being discussed on the blog and with those who participated in these conversations. Such sharing caused young writers and readers to get to know one another, and, consequently, a kind of community was formed. Research underscores the importance of community development in support of student learning. For example, a study by Ercan (2011) not only confirmed a connection between a sense of community and perceived learning in online environments, but also suggested that a sense of community is the “best predictor of perceived learning” (p.24). Following the results from this study, we believe that building a sense of community should be brought to the foreground in classes that incorporate blogging in instruction.

As we mentioned earlier, readers also posed questions or made requests for elaboration. At times, these readers themselves supplemented the available information with new data, clarified misconceptions or brought attention to other perspectives, such as, for example, seeing the American Revolution from the perspective of not only the Americans but the British. These latter forms of scaffolding thus invited students to provide more information for their readers and exposed them to new information and differing viewpoints on the content area topics they discussed with their readers. This form of support opened avenues for further learning and exploration. Hattie and Timperley (2007) described this level of scaffold as feedback focused on a product, that is, whether the content was “correct or incorrect.” These authors explained that the function of such feedback is to direct young writers to “acquire more, different or correct information” (p. 89).

One other form of scaffolding focused on student writing development and included advice

on matters of style, grammar, language use and mechanics. This occurred both in the blogs that concerned language arts as well as those that dwelt on social studies issues, although somewhat more often in the LA posts. According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), this type of feedback is process- or task-oriented, since it focuses on “the process used to create a product or complete a task” (p. 89). Although there was more emphasis on writing skills and language study in conversations about LA topics than in conversations about social studies, this is not to say that conversations about social studies never touched upon the writing process or language study; they sometimes did. Moreover, blog conversations within LA sometimes focused on discussing the ideas the students were writing and learning about in social studies.

Both forms of this latter kind of feedback, which aimed at process and product, are examples of “powerful feedback” (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Despite some initial discomfort with the criticism involved, the young writers in this study definitely benefited from this support for their learning in LA-oriented posts and ones that discussed social studies topics, particularly history. We think that teachers should be encouraged to incorporate these types of scaffolding in their own blog-based content area instruction so as to provide students with similar learning opportunities.

The writing that undergirded young writers’ conversations about learning in these content areas was thus manifold and diverse. Student bloggers composed highly expressive pieces about events in their school and home lives, and reflected on what and how they were learning. Other types of writing included creative and narrative writing such as poems, both factual and fictional stories, report writing, and argumentative pieces on various causes - environmental, political, cultural and historical. All of these writing assignments served one purpose - to help these young writers to use blog-writing, and the conversations that resulted from sharing and discussing their blogs with au-

thentic audience readers, in absorbing important concepts from these content areas.

Zinssner (1988) distinguishes two kinds of writing to learn: *explanatory writing*, “writing that transmits existing information or ideas” and *exploratory writing*, “writing that enables us to discover what we want to say” (p. 56). The young writers in this study practiced both explanatory and exploratory writing on the blog, as they engaged in sharing and discussing with readers what they were learning in these two content areas. More importantly, these forms of writing, combined with various forms of scaffold and feedback they received on it from their readers, assisted them in writing in their own way, and in understanding of the content knowledge they were acquiring and the ways in which they were acquiring it (metacognition).

Zinssner (1988) also posits that “writing good non-fiction (in comparison to fiction writing) is in many ways harder and more exacting work” (p.58). This is because

*[The nonfiction writer] is endlessly accountable: to the facts, the people he is writing about, to his ‘quotes’, the mood, the ethical nuances of the story. He is also accountable to his readers. They won’t put up with being delayed, lost, confused, bored or taken down unnecessary trails of failures of craft. (p. 58)*

As illustrated above, the scaffold that the readers and teachers provided to the young writers that concerned both the content and craft in their writing helped these writers to hone and improve their nonfiction writing. In addition, the blog writing of the readers and teachers in response to student writing served as models of quality writing for students to imitate and learn from.

## CONCLUSION

One might say that Janet Emig’s opening statement to her essay, “Writing as a mode of learning,” with which this article also opened, applies as well to blog writing, since blog writing too “represents a unique mode of learning—not merely valuable, not merely special, but unique” (Emig, 1977, p. 122). Unlike writing that was produced at the time in which Emig wrote her essay, the unique value that blog writing affords the writer today is the ability to interact and learn with and from her audience (Penrod, 2007). Such interactive learning of content knowledge was amply demonstrated in this study, and it is worth considering as a tool for all content area classrooms.

## FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This chapter discusses critical thinking, reflection, and writing development in student blogs, for the purpose of content knowledge development. Future research might explore other gains from learning content, especially discipline-specific concepts and vocabulary, through conversations with experts in respective fields. The questions to guide such explorations might include these ideas: What topics and subjects would experts in a particular field engage young writers in? How would these topics relate to the curricula the young writers are taught at school? How would such topics relate to blogging the student may be called upon to do socially, via Twitter or Instagram, or later on, professionally when they are asked to create content for a commercial WebWebsite?



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## **ADDITIONAL READING**

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Blog(s):** Websites that allow the posting of writing and responses to that writing in chronological order. Blogs also provide an opportunity for other readers and the reading audience at large to respond to blogs through the commenting feature.

**Blogging:** Writing on a blog and posting this writing, either originally or in response to comments.

**Comments:** The responses that readers leave in reaction to blog writing.

**Content Areas:** Areas of study in different subjects such as English, math, science or social studies.

**Content Knowledge:** Knowledge of concepts and terms that is subject-specific.

**Digital Writing:** Writing that originates using electronic devices such as computers, tablets or iPhone/iPads.

**Language Arts:** The study of language, literature and literary analysis, writing, reading, and other modes of expression and communication.

**Social Studies:** The study of human and social relationships involving different subjects such as history, geography, or civics.

**Writing to Learn:** Any kind of writing that enhances or is enhanced by learning of content in various subjects.