Keeping up with the 'digital natives':

Integrating Web 2.0 technologies into classroom practice.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the

Degree of Master of Education

at the University of Waikato

by

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The University of Waikato
2008

Abstract

This report describes a self-study using an action research spiral of problem analysis, intervention design, trial, reflection and analysis. The main purpose of the study was to investigate and evaluate whether Web 2.0 technologies and, in particular, social software could be effectively integrated into a senior secondary English classroom.

The methodology used in the study, while mainly qualitative, did include a degree of quantitative data-gathering. The study took place over two terms of the 2007 school year in a semi-rural school south of Auckland.

My Year 12 English class of twenty-four students were participants in the study and I was the teacher-researcher. As part of the study the students responded to my 'blog' and created and maintained their own 'blogs'. These 'voices' are important threads in this narrative. Two of my colleagues acted as 'critical friends' in this process.

During the study my own beliefs regarding new technology and the descriptor 'digital natives' were challenged. While the data collected and the interpretative analysis of it created further questions that need to be addressed, the findings indicate that there is a place for Web 2.0 technology and social software in English classrooms. The findings also show that in order for these applications to be integrated effectively, a number of issues need to be addressed. My recommendations as teacher-researcher at the 'chalk-face' attempting to keep up with the rapidly changing lives of our students concludes this report.

Blergito ergo fun

I blog because it's fun (Penrod, 2007, p. 6)

What needs to change about our curriculum when our students have the ability to reach audiences far beyond our classroom walls? What changes must we make in our teaching as it becomes easier to bring primary sources to our students? How do we need to rethink our ideas of literacy when we must prepare our students to become not only readers and writers, but editors and collaborators as well? (Richardson, 2006, p. 5)

Acknowledgements

I owe a great deal of thanks to the following people:

My supervisor, Terry Locke, who patiently accepted the fact that I work best under pressure, and allowed me the time and space to work as I saw fit.

My colleagues, in particular my Assistant Head of English, Catherine Hucker, and Head of Computing, Val Venimore, for acting as 'critical friends' throughout this journey. Their common sense and practical advice was invaluable, even if they did not know it at the time.

To the students who made up my Year 12 class in 2007, for being such willing participants in the learning activities that took place during the period of the study. Their voices are an integral part of this narrative.

The Board of Trustees at my school for allowing me to take part in this research project.

The vast number of friends who continually kept telling me that I just had to get it done!

And finally to my family: Callum, Connor and Dominic who have become so used to Mum being 'tied' to the computer, and Peter, who is a far better proof-reader than I will ever be!

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Errata

The following footnotes have been printed on the incorrect pages –

Footnote 14 – Te Kotahitanga (p.104) should appear on p. 105.
Footnote 16 – The only Excellence grade…(p. 110) should appear on p. 128

Chapter 1 – Literacy in the 21ˢᵗ Century

In 2006, while completing my Postgraduate Diploma of Education (Literacy and Language) I became increasingly interested in the relationship that existed between literacy, or rather the 'new literacies' (Snyder, 1997), technology and my classroom practice. In fact my interest became somewhat of an obsession – I was determined to look at if and how these new literacies could be incorporated in the English programmes that I had been teaching. This was the 'spark' that ignited the 'fire' of this research project.

1.1 What constitutes literacy in the 21ˢᵗ century?

> We need to build an education system for the 21ˢᵗ century; a system where every child and student is stimulated to learn. Students today are different from those of yesterday. They think and engage differently (Maharey, 2006).

> We want students to achieve to a high standard while at school and to leave equipped with the knowledge, competencies and confidence that they will need in a constantly changing world. We want teachers to be motivated and enjoy their teaching (Fancy, 2006).

In 2006 the Minister of Education, the Honorable Steve Maharey launched the draft *New Zealand Curriculum* for discussion and feedback. In his accompanying, introductory letter he made it clear that students of today, students who Prensky (2001) refers to as the 'digital natives', are very different from those who sat in

very similar classrooms 100, 50 and even 20 years ago. The world that they are growing up in and being educated for, is rapidly changing and continually evolving. New technology is changing the definition of what it means to be literate in the 21st century. Students are growing up in a world where new technologies are changing the ways in which they receive and produce texts. The very definition of the word 'text' has been expanded to incorporate 'multimodal' productions that have changed the meaning of what it is to read (Kress, 2005; Snyder, 1997, 2003).

> While basic skills of reading and writing are as important as ever, students must be able to 'read' visual media; they need to develop research skills, technical skills and a critical understanding not only of the message but of the media; and they need   socialization skills to participate in a connected community (Jefferies, 2007).

The term 'silicon literacies' (Snyder, 1997, 2003) has emerged as a descriptor for the range of literacies and literate practices that the learners of the 21st century will need to be skilled in. According to Snyder (1997, 2003), new technologies, or the 'silicon literacies' as she refers to them (that is, screen-based, collaborative and multimodal activities such as 'txting', word processing, hyper-linking and netting, gaming and so on) must be incorporated into classroom practice as students are in fact already using these technologies successfully outside of the classroom. Boys, in particular, benefit from, or are engaged by, or are highly skilled and therefore literate in the use of them (Daly 2002; Beavis, 2001; Rowan, Knoebel, Bigum & Lanskhear, 2002). Commentators like Mark Prensky (2001)

view teachers who trained before the year 2000 as 'digital immigrants' in a world that their students are more comfortable and more skilled in, putting teachers in a position that some may find uncomfortable, that is *not* being the expert (Crovitz, 2007).

The world of today's learners is ever increasingly a digital world, a world where 'digitally mediated dialogue is a way of life' (Crovitz, 2007; Davis, 2007). 'Txting' and other forms of instant messaging require the participants to both read and write. For many young people, computer games and related texts form the bulk of the texts that they 'read'. For others, 'blogging' and 'pod-casting' are becoming important modes of communication. On-line study forums are experiencing huge growth in client bases (Ingrey & Marlow, 2006) . However, for many of these 'digital natives', the classroom is a place where they are expected to 'power down' (Prensky, 2005) in order to learn in an environment dominated by 'digital immigrants', us their teachers. Teachers need to embrace this changing world not only to stay in touch with the world of their students, but also because I believe that the students' world offers English teachers such as myself rich opportunities for both the production and reception of 'real life texts'.

What can these 'digital silicon literacies' and the new applications developed from them offer to the English classroom? Do they pose a threat to the traditional 'print-based canon' of the English classroom? As teachers do we continue to serve up 'yesterday's education for tomorrow's kids' (Prensky, 2005, p. 62)? Or do we accept that Web 2.0 applications can provide opportunities to create and receive exciting and engaging 'texts', which could in turn lead to a whole raft of

literacy activities, that we should be making use of in our English classrooms (Crovitz, 2007; Richardson, 2006)?

As a teacher I am looking for ways in which to successfully incorporate new technologies such as 'blogging', web design, 'txting' and instant messaging, computer games and online forums into my classroom practice. Not because these are 'fads', but because they are the 'popular culture' of the learners of today. As such they provide strong vehicles for classroom learning and interactions. They provide opportunities for the learners to act as experts and for teachers such as myself to 'co-construct' learning experiences (Johnson, 2005). This role reversal, where the traditional learners are the experts in 'their space' may pose interesting implications for school structures and in fact some teachers themselves may find it challenging to come to terms with the fact that they are not the experts when it comes to digital technology (Crovitz, 2007). However, this arrangement is in line with one of the eight key principles of the new curriculum which is *inclusion,* where 'student's identities, languages, abilities and talents are recognized and affirmed' (Sewell, 2007), lending even more weight to the importance and relevance of these new technologies. The idea is further developed in the drive for personalized learning, where ideally students will have more control over their own learning pathways (Ministry of Education, 2006b).

Emerging research is telling us that just because some students are not successful at traditional reading and writing tasks they are confronted with in the classroom, it does not mean that they are not successfully reading and composing texts in their own social and cultural domains – domains that are far removed from the

traditional, English classroom setting (Beavis, 1997, 2000; Blair & Sanford, 2003; Green & Hannon, 2007; Snyder, 1997). However, a key challenge for teachers such as myself, who are willing to attempt incorporating the world of the students into their classroom practice, is the very structure and nature of the schools we work in. In many schools, access to social networking sites fall under a blanket blocking policy (Jefferies, 2007). The use of mobile phones is at the least 'controlled' and allowed only outside the classroom; at the worst they are banned totally. Students are expected to keep their world, 'their space' (Green & Hannon, 2007) as a quite separate domain to the world of their school and education.

This is the crux of the issue here for, as we know, literacy today involves a lot more than simply reading and writing print-based texts. If the new or 'silicon literacies' of the 21st Century, such as screen-based, multi-modal, online applications, were reflected in schools' definitions of literacy and literate practices, then we might find that many students are actually highly skilled practitioners. My research aims to both discover what practices the students are already using and are familiar with and how they can be incorporated into my classroom teaching. By doing so I hope to show that the digital world of the students does have a place in English classrooms.

By accepting that students of the 21st Century are faced with a vastly different world to the one that their parents grew up in, we are accepting that digital technology has been in fact become 'completely normalised by them' (Green & Hannon, 2007, p.10). Technological developments in the last two decades have

changed the reality of what constitutes literacy. English classrooms have to adapt

to that change. Literacy, in the 21st Century, is much more than just reading and

writing print-based texts; texts are changing radically, becoming multi-modal, all

of which means a change in the way we 'read' them (Kress, 2005). However,

English classrooms in general (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007), government

documents, and national examination systems still tend to emphasise conventional

forms of reading and writing. Students with access to the Internet are faced with

an 'explosion of information' (Richardson, 2006) and therefore they need to be

not just skilled in reading and writing, but in critically viewing and editing – they

need to be 'critical consumers' (Crovitz, 2007; Richardson, 2006). English

teachers traditionally have been the 'gate-keepers' of literacy in schools. The gate

has just been widened.

1.2. The possibilities of Web 2.0

Some researchers in the field of information technology present the view that

many classrooms and teachers today continue to offer up 'yesterday's education

for tomorrow's kids' (Prensky, 2005, p. 62), an education that is still situated

inside a four-walled classroom (Gee, in Foreman, 2004), an education not geared

towards engaging the students in active, critical learning:

> 'By the time many students enter high school, disengagement from course
>
> work and serious study is common' (National Research Council, in
>
> Ramaley & Zia, 2005, p. 82).

As such, they are presenting an education that may well be far removed from the interactive, collaborative and networked world that is the students' 'space'. A space that exists, in the exciting and ever-changing, interactive world of Web 2.0.

1.2.1. What exactly is Web 2.0? What is meant by the term 'social software'?

Recently Web 2.0 has become a 'buzzword in education and wider circles' (Jefferies, 2007). However defining what Web 2.0 actually means is not a straightforward task. The term came into existence following the first Web 2.0 conference in 2004 hosted by O'Reilly Media Web (O'Reilly, 2005). O'Reilly describes Web 2.0 as set of 'principles and practices that tie together a veritable solar system of sites' (O'Reilly, 2005). It is also both a platform for a vast number of applications and the applications themselves. It is also defined as at least 'six powerful ideas or drivers that are changing the way some people interact' (Anderson, 2007). For the purpose of this research project, Web 2.0 has been defined by what it allows users to do – 'connect, add to and edit the information in space' (Anderson, 2007). As such it has also become known as the Read/Write Web – finally aligning itself closely to the very idea the original web developer, Tim Berners-Lee had in mind when the World Wide Web was initiated in 1989 (Carvin in Richardson, 2007). Collaborative social software, that is software that supports group interaction (Alexander, 2006; Owen, Grant, Sayers, & Facer, 2006) namely reading, writing, sharing, and connecting has arrived.

The transformation of the asynchronous World Wide Web into Web 2.0 has seen the exponential growth of interactive 'shared' activity. The 'web' is no longer a place to merely gather information; it is a place where users share and co-

construct texts and meanings. It is a 'third space – neither home nor school/work, a space where skills such as computer literacy, identity creation, collaborative learning and even mentoring' (Godwin-Jones, 2005, p. 17) take place. It has become a space where those who may be marginalised in the classroom can be encouraged, supported and assisted (Godwin-Jones, 2005). There is, then, a clear social dimension or networking attached to the electronic literacy that is Web 2.0. Reading and writing online offer collaborative activities that need to be mirrored in classroom learning situations (Godwin-Jones, 2006; Green & Hannon, 2007). In particular, 'blogs' can: encourage thoughtful discussion in an anonymous environment; allow for differentiation; encourage reading as previous comments must be read before a response is made; and provide an authentic audience for writing which has the possibility of moving beyond the world of the classroom to a potential world (cyber) wide audience. As well as this, 'blogs' also offer an opportunity 'for teachers and pupils to interact more spontaneously' (Green & Hannon, 2007, p. 59).

1.3 A 'blogsplosion'[1] of 'blogging' in the 'blogosphere'.[2] Are we talking English here?

> Just as email has made us all writers, weblogs have made us all publishers (Blood, 2002).

The term 'blog' evolved in the late 1990's from the original noun 'weblog', and today has double meaning. Firstly, the noun is used to refer to a personal, online

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[1] Blogsplosion – vast increase in the number of blogs created
[2] Blogosphere – the world of bloggers and blogging

publication. Originally this publication was a collection of links on a particular topic. More commonly today it is in the form of an online journal or diary. Secondly, the verb 'to blog' describes the act of posting comments, that is writing, in one's blog (Mortensen & Waller, 2003).

Blogs are 'easily created, easily updateable websites that allow an author (or authors) to publish instantly to the Internet from any Internet connection' (Owen et al., 2006) As such there has become a 'blosplosion' in the 'blogosphere' – both neologisms that have entered blog user vocabulary in the last two years and brought about by the fact that 'over 70,000 new blogs and a million 'Weblog' posts (are added) *each day*' (Richardson, 2006), and that 'in February 2006 there were 28, 000, 000 blogs indexed' (Godwin-Jones, 2006).

Blogging represents a move from being simply a passive user of the Internet, where information retrieval is the goal, to interactive user (Holden, 2007). To blog is to read (Adams, 2007; Braun, 2007; Downes, 2004; Richardson, 2006); to critically analyse what has been read (Godwin-Jones, 2006; Richardson, 2006); to comment on what has been read (Adams, 2007; Godwin-Jones, 2006); to link to other related texts (Owen et al., 2006; Richardson, 2006); to make decisions about arrangement of images, choice of colour, sound and graphics (Jefferies, 2007; Lankshear & Knobel, 2007; Penrod, 2007); to create an identity and personal voice (Braun, 2007; Downes, 2004; Lankshear & Knobel, 2007; Owen et al, 2006; Penrod, 2007); to encourage feedback (Godwin-Jones, 2006); and to publish instantly (Blood, 2002; Braun, 2007; Downes, 2004; Jefferies, 2007; Richardson, 2007). Students' blogging equates with students being more in

control of their learning and being more active learners (Braun, 2007; Penrod, 2007; Richardson, 2006). It means moving learning outside the walls of the traditional classroom (Daanen & Facer, 2007; Oatman, 2005). A blog is clearly a multimodal text, a text that requires students to 'think in complex ways about creating and organizing elements of language, image, sound and interactivity' (Crovitz, 2007, p.55). Blogging presents a text that requires a new view of literacy.

1.4 Skrbls – multimedia sharing and collaboration

O'Reilly (2005) states that one of the key principles underpinning Web 2.0 is it's power to 'harness collective intelligence' via media sharing. *Youtube* (video), *Wikipedia* (information) and *Flickr* (photographs) are popular large-scale examples of such collections. In my school and many others, these sites are blocked by a watchdog network or site. However, the idea of collecting and sharing data simultaneously online, I believe, offers real possibilities for the English classroom. While Anderson (2007) suggests that the preserving, retrieving and sharing of content online needs further investigation before it is fully embraced by the educational world, trial applications such as *skrbl*[3] are providing possibilities for teachers to bring an important part of the world of Web 2.0 into the classroom. The *skrbl* application allows multiple users to log on to the same page, known as a *skrblboard,* where they can write, read, edit and draw simultaneously. The application promotes itself as being particularly useful for online brainstorming and as team-building tool.

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[3] *Skrbl* – a neologism for a Web 2.0 application which allows users to write and draw collaboratively

1.5 The Project

1.5.1 My teaching environment – access to ICT

The school I teach at is a Decile 3, Year 7 – 13 co-educational school on the borders of Franklin and North Waikato. The school roll comprises 64% New Zealand European/Pakeha, 32% Maori, 2% Asian and 1% Other. The school has gone through a period of rapid growth in the last five years, growing from 500 students in 2003 to 760 students in 2007. This growth has naturally put pressure on a number of key resources and services at the school. Currently the school has three computer classrooms or labs – two with relatively new computers, one with older and much slower models. Any task requiring fast Internet connection makes the latter venue undesirable, as the older models do not cope with websites that require fast Internet connection. Unfortunately, due to timetabling issues, the Year 12 English class I had chosen work with for this research was able to access only *one* of the newer computer rooms for *one* of the four periods that the class had English. This also meant I needed to pre-book the room well in advance in order to ensure availability.

1.5.2 My target class and programme

The Year 12 English class that I used for my research began 2007 as a class of 35 students. By the end of the year numbers had dropped to 24. On average, class members had achieved 15 credits or more in Level 1 English the previous year, though there were a number of students who were in the class due to option clashes, without the required credit allocation. The class was largely made up of New Zealand European/Pakeha (15), with a lesser number of Maori (6), South African (2) and Other (1) students.

The Year 12 programme that I teach is organised thematically. This is an attempt on my part to move away from the 'teaching to the achievement standard' approach to English. Since the introduction of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (the NCEA) in 2003, senior English classes, that is Years 11 to 13, are assessed against a series of either Achievement or Unit Standards for which they are awarded credits. There has been a tendency for courses to develop around the actual assessment tasks rather than being developed from the curriculum statement. Over the last two years, I have worked towards developing English programmes that the assessment tasks fit into, as opposed to simply teaching a series of assessments tasks. This has seen the move to a thematic approach (Fig.1). The theme for Term 2 is 'Will's the Word'. The class read, view and respond to excerpts from *The Taming of the Shrew.* Three assessments tasks are linked to this theme – creative writing, formal writing and oral presentation. The pre-study questionnaire (Appendix 4) showed the majority of students view Shakespeare as difficult text and that they were apprehensive about the number of tasks and credits linked with the text. The creative writing task required the students to write, in modern English, as if they were a character in the text retelling their thoughts and feelings about the events that have occurred. This is presented as a monologue for oral presentation and is worth 3 credits. The formal writing task, also worth 3 credits, required the students to discuss why Shakespeare's play is still relevant today by looking at a key theme. The students go 'beyond the text' to find evidence that themes such as sibling rivalry or marrying for money are still relevant ideas in today's society. The film *Run Lola Run* and extended text *Five people you meet in Heaven* (Albom, 2003) studied in Term 3 were linked by the theme of 'Fate'. All of these would be

viewed as traditional texts (I am including film in this traditional text category as I believe film has been 'normalised' into what teachers would consider to be a traditional text form). It has been studied and assessed as a literary text, alongside novels, short stories and poetry for the last twenty years) .

Fig.1 Year 12 English Programme 2007

Term 1	Term 2	Term 3	Term 4
Women Writers – a selection of short texts will be studied. **Where there's a Will** – Shakespearian Study	**Wills the Word**– Shakespeare Oral Production and Writing Folio **Watch This Space** – The Language of Advertising	**Fate – Theme Study – Extended Text and** Film	**Countdown to Exams**
<u>*Assessment Opportunities*</u> ***Response Journal*** – ongoing response to class texts and personal reading – selection presented for US 12905 after consultation with teacher (4 credits[4]) ***Writing Folio*** – as part of the textual studies, a variety of writing tasks will be completed in the journal – after conferencing with teacher a selection of these will be presented for assessment – Achievement Standards 2.1, 2.2 (6 credits total) ***Research Language* analysis** will be discussed in the critical analysis of class texts. This will be assessed internally using US 12419 (4 credits) ***Close Reading*** – as part of the year's programme Unit Standard 12419 (4 credits) will be completed ***Literary studies*** – over the course of the year all students will have studied from a critical perspective a wide range of texts. They will use these studies to complete Achievement Standards 2.3;2.4;2.5 in the external examination (9 credits)			

How to incorporate relevant and appropriate Web 2.0 applications such as blogging and media sharing in the form of *skrbl* boards into my Year 12 English programme were the focussing concerns of my self-study project.

1.5.3 Research hypothesis and importance of study

This research study has investigated how collaborative Web 2.0 applications such as 'blogs' and 'skrbl boards' can be incorporated into classroom practice as an

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[4] Credits – In NCEA credits are what the students are awarded with when they achieve or pass a section of work. Each subject offers between 15-24 credits and the students need 60 accumulated credits to be awarded a Level 2 NCEA Certificate

example of popular culture, and how they can be used as a motivational, active and critical learning tool in an English classroom. I hypothesised that the use of online, collaborative, Web 2.0 applications as texts in an English classroom would engage students and provide a variety of literacy tasks and challenges that are valid in terms of the new English curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) and assessable in terms of the current NCEA qualifications framework.

The research sought to answer the following questions:

1. What online, collaborative Web 2.0 applications are students familiar with?

2. What literacy practices can online, collaborative applications such as 'blogs' and '*skrbl'* boards support?

3. How can these applications promote effective learning in the classroom?

4. How can these applications be integrated into classroom practice?

5. What are some problems associated with the use of Web 2.0 applications in the secondary, English classroom and how can these be overcome?

I saw the research as important for two reasons. Firstly, by incorporating the out-of-school lives of the students into the literacy activities of an English classroom, I hoped to provide evidence to support the inclusion of the literacy practices that have developed from new technologies into high school, English programmes. The popular culture of the students of the 21st Century is a 'digital culture', and if teachers choose not to include the literacy practices that develop from these

applications, I believe, they risk losing the interest and enthusiasm of their

students.

Secondly, school managers are willing to spend more and more of their financial

piece of the 'education pie' on hardware and software for ICT classrooms. Far too

often these ICT 'labs' or 'suites' are filled with word-processing classes. Subject

teachers like myself struggle to get regular and ongoing access to these rooms. I

believe that the new 'silicon literacies' of the 21st Century need to be embedded

across curriculum areas and not remain solely in the domain of the ICT

departments in schools. By providing evidence for both the engaging and

motivational use of Web 2.0 applications in the classroom, and the authentic

literacy and learning experiences they contain, I hoped to shift the focus (in my

own school anyway) away from the computer room as an assemblage of hardware

than can enable students to process a document or format a worksheet, towards a

site where students can use collaborative and synchronous applications to produce

and receive authentic 'texts' that have value in the digital world that students

belong in.

There is no guarantee, of course, that self-study research will answer all the

questions that teacher-researchers like myself want to know (Austin & Senese,

2004). In fact, the research may pose even more questions. In this respect the

action research process is much like Web 2.0, the subject matter of this research

project – continually evolving. Self-study action research was selected as the

methodology for this research project as it allowed me the researcher to respond

to the events as they occurred in my classroom over the period of the study, to reflect on what had occurred and to take action in order to modify my practice.

1.6 Time frame and scope of the study

The study was carried out over Terms Three and Four of the 2007 school year. Pre-study documentation and data were collected during Term 1. These included approval from the school's Board of Trustees for me to carry out the study (Appendix 1); letters requesting parental and participant consent (Appendices 3a and 3b); and pre-study questionnaires regarding the technological practices of the students (Appendix 5). Questionnaires determining the students' participation and attitudes to the tasks that formed part of the study were collected both during study and after the study (Appendices 6 and 8).

This chapter forms the beginning of the narrative of my self-study. It has introduced my belief that as teachers we need to understand that the very nature of the word "literacy" has changed and will continue to change. The very nature of what we view and value as texts therefore needs to adapt. It has also introduced the idea that the 'popular culture' of learners of the 21st Century is a 'digital culture' and that the popularity and growth of 'Web 2.0 social software' needs to be acknowledged and made use of in our classrooms. The following chapter will discuss the methodological theories that underpin the study that I carried out in my classroom during 2007. Chapter 3 narrates the journey that my class and I embarked on into the wonderful world of 'blogging'. Similarly, Chapter 4 tells the story of our somewhat rockier interaction with the trial application '*skrbl*'. The teacher-researcher in any self-study has to critically reflect on decisions made,

choices taken and the resulting outcomes of those actions. The narrative

concludes with my findings in Chapter 5 – which, as readers will discover, were

not totally as I had expected.

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 Self-study as a methodology

> Self-study is the study of one's self, one's actions, one's ideas
> as well as the 'not self'. It is autobiographical, historical and
> cultural and political. It draws on one's life; but it is more than
> that. Self study also involves a thoughtful look at texts read,
> experiences had, people known and ideas considered
> (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 1998, p. 236).

The research project was carried out as a self-study incorporating an 'experiential learning spiral' (Cole & Knowles, 2000, p. 94) approach to action research. Self-study research addresses the 'global question – how do I improve my practice?' (Whitehead, 2000, cited in Tidwell & Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 78) by the teacher-researcher examining their own teaching practice in the classroom. As Stenhouse (1975, 1983) states, teachers as researchers are vital to the development of knowledge about teachers and teaching (cited in Kirkwood & Christie, 2006). Self-study research has led to the 'emergence of narrative autobiographical research methods in education' (Clarke & Erickson, 2004, p. 59).

Self-study as research methodology can be defined as: 'teaching and researching practice in order to better understand oneself; teaching; learning; and, the development of knowledge about these', where teachers 'attempt to understand the problematic worlds of teaching and learning' (Loughran, 2004, p. 9). As such, self-study research 'holds valuable promise for developing new understanding and producing new knowledge about teaching and learning' (Hamilton & Pinnegar,

1998, p. 243). Self-study action research 'promotes teachers to take a close, critical look at their teaching and the academic and social development of their students' (Lewison, 2003, cited in Clarke & Erickson, 2004, p.55) and to 'check that it is as you would like it to be' (McNiff, 2002, p.6). The students are a vital component of a self-study, for there can be no study of teacher or teaching practice unless it is to be of benefit to both the teacher *and* the students, the latter being what matters most to the teacher (Austin & Senese, 2004). Self-study allows the teacher to 'maintain a focus on their teaching and their student's learning – both high priorities' (Loughran, 2004, p.31). According to Feldman it is the 'natural direction for all of us who seek ways to improve schooling' (Feldman, 2003, p.27). Alongside action research it has become 'an empowering way of examining and learning about practice' (Loughran, 2004, p.7).

Action research is similarly concerned with researchers who conduct enquiry 'by the self into the self' (McNiff, 2002, p.6). The social intent of action research is interwoven with self-study methodology in that the action researcher aims to improve their understanding of what they are doing 'for their benefit and the benefit of others' (McNiff, 2002, p.9). The action research cycle of 'plan, act, observe, reflect' as described by Kemmis & McTaggart (1988) involves the teacher-researcher in a cycle ongoing reflection of their actions and interventions in the classroom. The aim of this is to generate knowledge about teachers and teaching and ultimately improve our practice and the experiences that students have on our classrooms. Hamilton & Pinnegar (2000) suggest that improvement in teaching practice and student learning cannot take place without teachers studying their own practice. Self-study methodology operates on the premise that

what we do as teachers stems from what and how we think. A change in practice only occurs when the thinking that underpins practice is modified in some way. One of the aims of self-study is to produce such a modification.

The 'experiential learning spiral', as described by Cole and Knowles (2000), begins, in my case, with the experience, of the classroom teacher. These experiences may include the interactions that occur between teacher and student and amongst the students themselves. Class discussions of texts and production of a range of texts are the focus of many of the interactions that take place in an English classroom. The spiral develops from experience, and moves through reflection to increased and enriched knowledge that informs future action. Action research, as defined by McNiff (2002), is grounded in continuous self-evaluation. Similarly, Tidwell& Fitzgerald, 2004, in their discussion of teaching as self-study, also refer to a learning spiral:

> As the teacher/researcher learns from observation, that learning changes what the teacher knows, which challenges the beliefs and values held and ultimately affects the planning of instruction, which begins the process all over again (Tidwell & Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 86).

In this respect self-study action research is also reactive. The teacher-researcher reflects on the events that have taken place in the classroom and acts on them. As such each study is unique and the methods of data collection are 'tailored to suit the circumstances' (Bartlett & Burton, 2006, p.397).

2.2 Rationale for the use of self-study action research methodology

> All students deserve teachers who are primarily guided by student needs and interests who are willing to construct and examine their practice in conscientious, principled and judicious ways (LaBoskey cited in Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2000, p. 239).

As Loughran (2004) clearly states, the term self-study defines the focus of the research, not the way in which the research is carried out. Pinnegar (1998) argues that self-study is methodologically unique in that it blends a number of research practices into a methodological 'mongrel' (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p.15). Self-study being 'grounded in social constructivist learning' (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 820), relies largely on qualitative research methodology as they are 'designed to help researchers understand people and the social and cultural contexts within which they live' (Myers, 1997, pgs.241-2).

I have been a teacher in New Zealand secondary schools for over twenty years. Like many teachers, I subconsciously and informally reflect on my classroom teaching practice. I make judgements as to how individual lessons have gone, how successful certain texts and units of work have been and whether assessment outcomes have reached expectations. Over the years, I have discussed these issues with members of my department or other Heads of Department. Self-reflection is an informal part of my school's appraisal process. Somewhere hidden away in my filing cabinet or scrawled in the margins of my plan book there may be rough

jottings or anecdotal evidence of these musings. All of these fall under the broad umbrella of self-study action research (Barnes, in Hamilton, 1998; McNiff, 2002). But this is not enough. Recent Ministry of Education research, *Consider the Evidence* (Alton-Lee, 2005), has highlighted for me the importance and value of formalising these judgements, by using evidence to inform the decisions I make as a classroom teacher and Head of Department. For the teacher-researcher, the students themselves are providers of rich and varied data or evidence. Their informal verbal responses to classroom activities, tasks or assessments; their work samples; pre and post-topic questionnaires all have the potential to provide evidence that can be used to inform classroom practice. Alton-Lee's research is reflective of a wider trend accepting the importance of self-study being 'an important component in the push for closer scrutiny of an individual's pedagogy in teaching and about teaching' (Loughran & Northfield, 1998, p. 7). Implicit in this is the belief that by reflecting on, being self-critical about and attempting to improve my own practice, I will not only develop a better understanding of how to teach, but others – members of my department – may also be influenced in some way (McNiff, 2002).

Self-study allows the teacher to learn from the experiences that they already have, and is 'embedded within teachers creating new experiences for themselves and those whom they teach' (Russell, 2004, p. 6). It is from these experiences that further actions will develop, via the experiential learning cycle discussed earlier. These ongoing cycles of improved understanding will, it is hoped, in turn lead to improved practice (LaBoskey, 2004).

The self-study approach to action research may involve teachers enquiring into their own lives (McNiff, 2002) and 'doing it for themselves' (Harm & Kane, 2004, p. 108). However, it is not, as Feldman so aptly states, simply a matter of 'navel gazing' (Feldman, 2003, p. 26), nor is it 'idle self-contemplation' (McNiff, 2002, p.25). Action research is appropriate in this context as the research proposal is designed to improve classroom practice where improvement is seen to be required (Bell, 2005; McTaggart, 1991). It is initially a way for me as a teacher to understand my own practice. By investigating one's own values, beliefs and methods, teacher-researchers need to closely question their own practice by asking such questions as:

- What do I really teach (what characterises my professional work with students)?
- How do I teach (what are the forms, patterns and rhythms of my teaching)?
- How do others view my teaching?
- What methods are most appropriate for my students?

(Cole & Knowles, 2000, p. 24).

My rationale then is driven by two main goals. Firstly, a desire to understand and improve my own classroom practice, my teaching; and secondly, in doing so, enhance the learning opportunities and outcomes of the students in my classroom. Self-study research allows the teacher-researcher to focus on both of these high-priority and, I believe, inseparable goals. As Tidwell & Heston put it, the

'foundation of good teaching is based in making connections between practice (actions) and beliefs (knowledge)' (cited in Hamilton & Pinnegar, 1998, p. 45).

In addition, self-study action research allows for me as the teacher-researcher to have a voice, one that can be powerful and influential. As a teacher-researcher, I hope to be a key source of knowledge generation, about both my own practice and the learning needs of the students in my classroom (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992; McNiff, 2002) and in my school. Needless to say, this hope will only be realised if other teachers accept the findings of my self-study has having some validity for them, an issue I will be discussing later in this chapter.

Specifically I looked at Web 2.0 technologies and the applications that have developed and made the Read/Write Web what it is today. This involved me finding out more about the students in my classroom, and their current technology uses and levels of proficiency. From here I integrated one of the most popular Web 2.0 tools, the *blog*, and a relatively new beta or trial application, the *skrbl*, into my classroom practice. Both these applications are multi-modal texts and are representative of what literacy has come to mean to students in the 21st century.

2.3 Data collection methods.

> The value of self-study depends on the researcher/teacher
> providing convincing evidence that they know what they claim
> to know. (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 1998 p.243).

Self-study action research can be a powerful tool to inform professional, teacher-practice (Feldman, 2003; Hostetler, 2005; McNiff, 2002). However, it is obviously not enough for teacher-researchers to simply tell their story. Evidence must exist to support the claims that they make. Providing 'clear and detailed descriptions of how we collect data' and making 'explicit what counts as data' (Feldman, 2003, p. 27) are essential if self-study action research is to be seen as trustworthy.

In self-study action research knowledge is *constructed* in collaboration with the learner and this is naturally reflected in the methods of data collection. In this study, a variety of data collection methods were used.

At the beginning of the study the students completed a questionnaire to establish their current technology practices; their attitudes to participation in classroom discussion; their attitudes to and knowledge of Shakespearian texts, as this formed one of the key texts for the period of the study; and their attitudes to in-class writing tasks they had experienced in previous years.

Post-study questionnaires and/or interviews were completed to gauge the students' responses to the learning tasks that developed from Web 2.0 applications and associated class activities. These covered ease of use, interest level, focus of learning and perceived learning outcomes. A questionnaire also covered the choices that the students had made regarding whether or not to use Web 2.0 tools during their English course during the period of the study.

Two colleagues acted as critical friends during the research process. One colleague who acted as a 'critical friend' observed sample lessons and activities involving Web 2.0 applications. He is currently the Head of Computing at the school and works in the computer room I used for a number of the lessons and activities. He provided feedback, written and oral on things such as student engagement, suitability of task design and issues arising from the use, or attempted use, of Web 2.0 applications. He also acted as an advisor to me on any issues that arose at various times regarding both software and hardware associated with the activities I wished to use. A member of the English Department reviewed and discussed student work with me. Work samples discussed included the students' responses to the class activities and their individual blogs. The use of a critical friend is a valuable aspect of self-study research, as it is important to hear a viewpoint other than one's own (McNiff, 2002), even though the researcher may find it difficult to accept a different perspective (Loughran & Northfield, 1998).

I kept an ongoing reflective journal during the period of research. This served a number of purposes including a record of activities carried out and my reactions and post-lesson thoughts on classroom activities. In it I also recorded any problems that arose in regard to the hardware and software I used (or in some cases *wanted* to use) to carry out the study. Reflection is an integral part of the self-study action research process (McNiff, 2002; Robertson, 2000). The journal was a place to 'pause, reflect and re-energise' (Cole & Knowles, 2000, p. 49). In itself the journal formed a text created in the research process and as such was worthy of examination (Sandretto et al., 2006). In turn it formed part of the narrative that told the story of my self-study, as it became a 'vehicle for understanding oneself as a teacher' (Cole & Knowles, 2000, p. 49).

Work samples where relevant were used to provide evidence of the suitability of the tasks. These added 'important contextual details' to the data (Lankshear and Knobel, 2004, p. 235) and included the following:

- print-outs of 'skrbl board' brainstorming activities

- excerpts from my blog – both my posts and the students responses to them

- excerpts from the students blogs – including practice essays posted for comment

- excerpts from the students written logs

- essay tasks developed from 'skrbl board' planning

Student responses to tasks, activities and assessments were collected in a variety ways. These included:

- the 'blog' where students can post comments anonymously

- classroom tasks and specific responses

- individual/small group interviews with students

2.4 Data analysis

I embarked on the self-study with the conviction and belief that Web 2.0 technologies naturally had a place within my teaching programme and the data would show this to be true. Data collected in self-study action research is largely qualitative and analysis is therefore interpretive. Both qualitative data, in the form of self-reflective journals, observations, response logs and work samples and quantitative data, in the form of questionnaires, surveys and student participation were collected as part of the research.

The data collected were analysed initially as part of the action research cycle. In regularly reviewing the self-reflective journal, I was able to identify emerging themes and patterns, and gauge the level of engagement of the students and attitudes to tasks, as well gain an understanding of the students' experience with and ease of use of Web 2.0 technologies. As I reflected in and through my journal, I was able to identify emerging issues associated with my attempts to use Web 2.0 technologies in my programme.

Qualitative data in the form of participant observations and individual student response logs were also analysed to reveal emerging themes and trends. This kind of analysis, coupled with my reflections in my journal, allowed for the emergence of a multi-faceted picture of how my students were responding to the interventions I was engaging them in.

At times this reflective practice led to a change in the programme or variation in the texts being studied. This is a natural part of the action research cycle (Bell, 2005). The cycle – plan, act, observe, reflect, plan (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) – allowed for flexibility and adaptation of the programme, for ongoing feedback and response from the participants (the students) and continuing evaluation of the programme by me, the teacher. The process of analysis, then, was an ongoing one and an integral part of the action research cycle.

The pre-study questionnaires provided quantitative data with regard to the students' technological practices. The student 'blogs' also provided quantitative data. A simple numerical analysis of such data provided information on such

things as the number of times the students responded to my postings and the number of times ongoing conversations took place on the 'blogs'. The length of students' comments in both 'blogs' and paper response journals could also be compared numerically.

2.5 Presenting the data – telling the story

> A self-study is a good read, attends to "nodal moments" of teaching and being a teacher educator and thereby enables reader insight or understanding into self, reveals a lively conscience and a balanced sense of self-importance, tells a recognisable teacher or teacher educator story, portrays character development in the face of serious issues within a complex setting, gives place to the dynamic struggle of living life whole, and offers new perspective (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001).

The following chapters relate the narrative of the journey I undertook by doing this self-study. The term narrative brings its own connotations of a story-telling tradition. But here this does not equate to a fictional story, rather to the written account of connected events that make up a method of research that is 'now more and more commonplace' (Lagemann & Shulman, cited in Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p.13). As such my skill as a writer is as important as my skill as a researcher (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). The use of narrative provides ' a powerful way for teachers' voices to be heard' (Doecke, n.d., p.1).

While Feldman (2003) argues that by telling their stories as autobiographical narratives, teacher-researchers cannot be sure of what they are seeing, for me it is the students' voices that opened my eyes to the events that unfolded during the period of research. The students' voices in the form of their on-line blogs and response journals form one of the central threads of my narrative. Their texts are woven with mine to create not just one voice, but many. Chapter 3 relates our shared journey into the world of the 'blog' and the students' individual responses and approaches to 'blogging'. Chapter 4 presents the 'highs' and 'lows' of 'skrbling' in the classroom. In Chapter 5 I reflect on the journey that I took into the world of Web 2.0 technologies, highlighting both the possibilities that 'social networking' offers the classroom teacher; the problems that became apparent in the course of my journey and the ways that my own beliefs and views relating to the use of technology in the classroom have been challenged.

2.6 Ethical considerations

As teachers our research takes place within the confines of our schools and classrooms. Our participants are young people whose rights are safeguarded by the protocols and articles of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child, Principle 2, whereby 'The child shall enjoy special protection, and shall be given opportunities and facilities, by law and by other means, to enable him to develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially in a healthy and normal manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity' (United Nations, 1959).

Gaining informed consent for a research project in a secondary school system is a complex process (Pritchard, 2002), mainly due to the importance placed on

gaining qualifications and the need to reassure participants that their academic achievement will not be jeopardised during the research process (David, Edwards & Alldred, 2001). The participants and their parents or guardians need to be educated about the process and its effects before informed consent can be made (David et. al., 2001; Finch, 2005; Oliver, P., 2003).

Research using one's own group of students creates other ethical concerns for a teacher- researcher. They have to be aware that how they use their findings and research data may impact on the rights of the participants, and that there is a fine line to tread between respecting the rights of student participants and maintaining the rights of teachers to research and reflect on data gathered in the classroom (Pritchard, 2002; Zeni, 2001). While participants' privacy will have been assured during the informed consent process, the writer's publication of findings will more than likely compromise that privacy (Bell, 2005). The gender and ethnicity data that the school administrators gather and analyse as part of their review process will reveal further information about the participants and their identity. The community of the school will know *who* has carried out the research, they will know *which* students have been part of the class for the year, and they may know *how* the students have achieved over the course of the year.

A balance between 'procedural ethics' and 'ethics in practice' needs to be maintained and not compromised (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). This was particularly relevant in this research project where a number of the students chose to publish their personal details and identities, albeit in varying degrees, along with their work, online. The students *chose* to put their identities into the public

arena. Including textual extracts from these public sources is appropriate and does not breach the ethical contract entered into with the students.

The research proposal involved a targeted class of students at Yr 12 level – targeted in that it was the class that I taught at Year 12 in 2007. The inclusion of students into the class and research project was based on informed consent (student and parental - Appendices 3a and 3b). They were aware that they were completing a Year 12 English programme of study, and that as part of that course of study I would be incorporating the use of Web 2.0 technologies into the classroom activities. The size of the school and the fact that English is compulsory at Year 12 meant that any students who did not wish to be involved in the study were unable to be placed in another Year 12 English class. However, any students who did not wish to be included in the research data were not disadvantaged in regard to their course of study. All information gathered (written or oral) from the students, when this was not created in the public arena, remains anonymous and students' names are not mentioned in this research account. However, where the students identified themselves in a public arena, that is, in an online environment, this has been taken as tacit permission to publish data. Student responses and formative writing activities in the online 'blog' response journal, while remaining in the possession of the students, are public texts. The information in the response logs, whether they were completed online or on paper was particularly relevant in regard to the issues of student motivation, engagement and critical thinking, and were used as data contributing to my evaluation of the success of an intervention.

2.7 Validity in self-study research

According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) the concept of validity is 'multi-faceted', and is a 'matter of degree rather than an absolute state' (Cohen et al., 2000, p.105). There is a concern that the term teacher-researcher 'seems to lack an authenticity' (Hill & Brindley, 2005, p.1). Validity, that is the accuracy and truth of the findings interpreted from the data presented, is an issue in self-study action research, with the burden of proof being 'on those who would conduct and hope to publish autobiographical self-study' (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 20). Feldman (2003) argues that defining validity in self-study is difficult. Self-study teacher-researchers are faced with the complex task of interpreting largely qualitative data and 'representing one's own experience as data' (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p.15). In addition, 'what constitutes adequate evidence may vary from researcher to researcher' (Hoban, 2004, p.1043).

According to Bullough and Pinnegar (2001), quality self-study autobiographical research should:

- ring true and enable connection

- promote insight and interpretation

- engage history forthrightly and take an honest stand

- be about the problems and issues that make someone an educator

- have authentic voice, but this alone does not give it scholarly standing

- seek to improve learning situations

- portray character development and dramatic action

- attend carefully to persons in context and setting

- offer fresh perspectives on established truths

In this study, I have been guided by the above criteria. The variety and authenticity of data collection methods used – work samples, student comment, a critical friend and reflective journal – helped achieve triangulation, as this is an assured way of proving for validity of any self-study (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Feldman, 2003). The teacher-researcher's reflective journal provided one authentic voice. However, the importance of a 'critical friend', who views these reflections from a different perspective, is also useful in providing validity and reliability of evidence (Loughran & Northfield, 1998). Authentic student voice was a key component in determining the validity of the data. Observation of student engagement, evidence in the form of student responses such as on the collaborative 'blog' sites, formed the basis for assuring the presence of this authentic student voice.

The validity of this self-study is supported by the very nature of the texts that were constructed by the students in my classroom. The texts that were created do not exist within the confines of my classroom. The texts were created and exist on the *World Wide Web* and as such are open for all to view, interpret and respond to. Trustworthiness, authenticity and validity, vital aspects of quality self-study (Feldman, 2003) exist 'online'. These texts were created within the context and conditions of my classroom[5]. The conversations that took place online, the issues that arose, the problems that were overcome or not overcome, the 'buzz' created by successes, all of these evoke the reality of the classroom experiences and in doing so create ecological validity.

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[5] 'Within my classroom' here is extended to include tasks and activities that the students may have completed online, outside of normal classroom hours.

Finally, one can think of this research as a case study with my students and myself as subjects. Because the data is rooted in an actual classroom, with students pursuing normal educational goals (for a Year 12 English programme) it has ecological validity. Ecological validity in educational research is important in showing accurately what is happening in the classroom, or 'at the chalk face' (Brock-Utne, 1996, cited in Cohen et al., 2000, p. 110). These are the experiences that drive the narratives of Chapters 3 and 4 and tell the story of my journey through the self-study of my classroom practice.
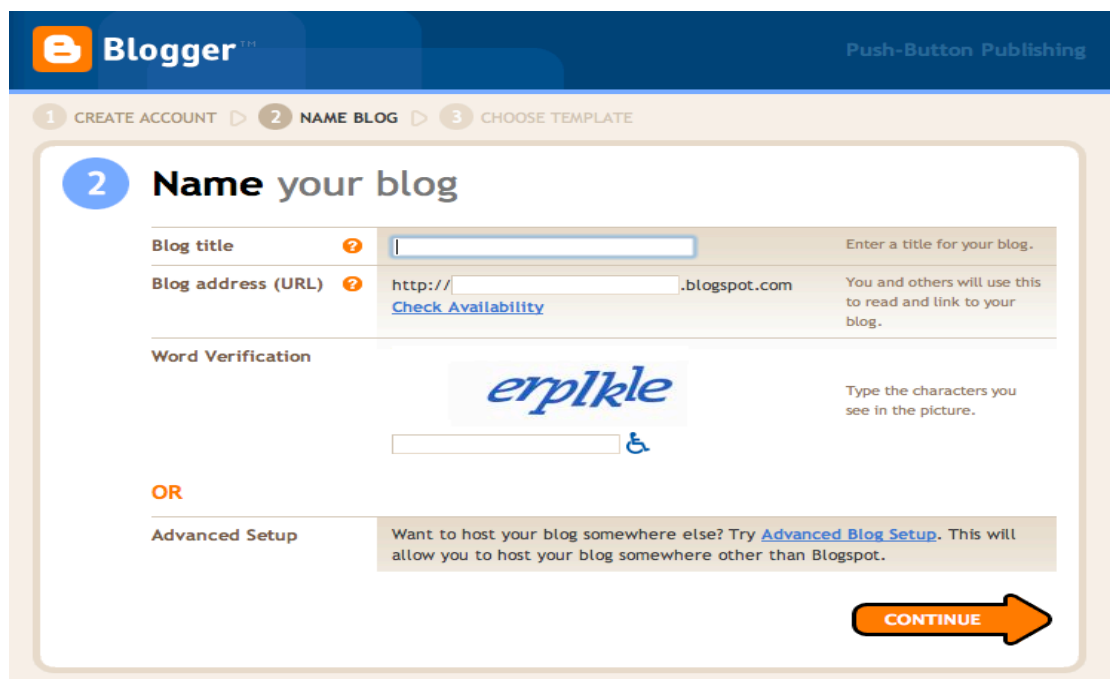
Chapters 3: The journey into blogging – Web 2.0 in the classroom

3.1 Getting Students Blogging #1– Mrs C's Blog

3.1.1 Creating the Blog

As I indicated in Chapter 1, the number of 'blogs' in cyberpsace is growing an almost unbelievable rate (Godwin-Jones, 2006; Richardson, 2006). As a teacher my practice has always been to work through any task first in order to work out what issues or problems, if any, students will encounter when they carry out the task themselves. This is even more important when it comes to using technology that can be somewhat unreliable in any school setting. My first task, then, was to create my own 'blog', where I envisioned the students logging onto and engaging regularly in discussion with myself and with each other. The platform I chose to use was blogger.com, a free blog-hosting site that provided clear and simple instructions for new 'bloggers' like myself (Fig. 3.1).

Fig. 3.1 Creating a Blog

Already having a Google email address was not essential but made the process easier. This was something that I would have to consider if I wanted the students to create their own blogs at any stage. Three simple steps formed the process – choosing a name for the blog (blog-mrs-c), checking the availability of the blog address (blog-mrs-c.blogspot.com) and loading the address. Within five minutes Mrs C's blog was on the web and open for business at http://blog-mrs-c.blogspot.com/ **(Fig. 3.2).**

Fig. 3.2 Mrs C's blog

One of the first things that I had to decide was whether the blog would be public, that is, viewed by anyone, or private or members only. This was done by following a simple process and using the permissions tab (Fig. 3.3).

Fig. 3.3 Formatting Bar

The blog became available for anyone to see and comment on (Fig. 3.4).

Fig. 3.4 Permissions
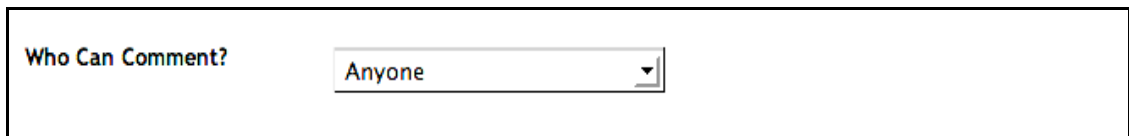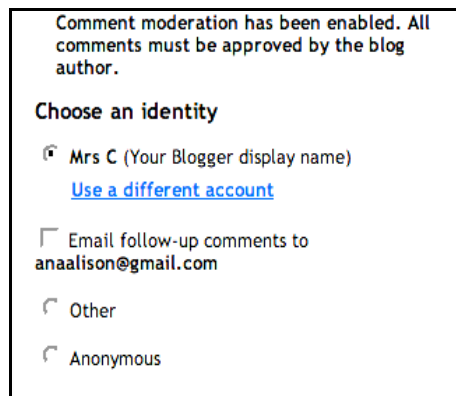
This meant that comments would only appear on the blog after they had first been approved by me as the blog owner (Fig. 3.5).

Fig. 3.5 Moderating Comments

I also allowed anonymous comments. This meant that the students would not have to be a member of *blogger.com* in order to make comment as I felt that this could be a barrier to student engagement in the activity. They would make comments anonymously, but as stated above all comments had to be approved by me as the blog 'owner' (Fig. 3.6). This was to cause an unanticipated 'headache' for me during the first, class-blogging lesson.

Fig. 3.6 Approving comments

While the backbone of a blog is the posts and responding comments, many extra elements can be added with ease (Fig. 3.7). Adding elements such as the animated avatar of myself created at another free site – www.meez.com – was the first step towards personalising my blog. Personalizing Web 2.0 applications, such as blog sites is what makes them such a powerful tool – ownership and individuality is established. This is what, according to advocates of blogging makes blogging and other Web 2.0 tools such a powerful and motivating learning vehicle (Penrod, 2007; Richardson, 2006), the fact that the students have ownership. As well as this, it was fun! It was fun to see *Mrs C's* own blog developing, but time-consuming working through each tool, mainly using trial

and error, until the page was formed. This time factor is an aspect of the study that

I will return to when I discuss my findings in Chapter 5.

Fig. 3.7 Personalising the blog

The page elements I added were chosen to emphasise the nature of 'blogging' and

the relevance of 'blogging' to the class's English programme. These elements

included links to a selection of study sites related to the texts we had studied; a

link to a list of books that I had read and rated; and links to the school library blog that I had also created. Over the course of the following few weeks I added links to other sites, lists of websites that I regularly browse, study sites and what I had been reading lately – all extras since its inception on February 10, 2007. That is part of the power of a blog – readers can track back through their comments and trace their thoughts or journey through an event, or in the case of my students, through a text (Richardson, 2006). This formed a vital part of my journey into blogging and put me to a certain extent in the place of those who 'learn by doing' (Gee, 2003; Prensky, 1998 & 2005). While there was a contact or help line available, I learned as I went along, by trial and error, by rearranging elements of the blog.

3.1.2 First posts and responses – or lack of!

My first posting, a general introduction to my blog, included a set of questions that I wanted the class to respond to, which were focussed on the first texts we had studied – short stories and poetry (Fig. 3.8). However, I did not show the class the blog site; I merely told them about it and wrote the address on the board and encouraged them to log on and 'blog'.

As all but one of my students had Internet access at home and were, according to the initial questionnaire confident about their use of technology (Appendix 5) regular internet users, I anticipated a flood of responses to my first posting. This was the first assumption that was to be proven wrong.

Welcome

So, you are in my English class and you have found my blog. What now?? Well keep in mind that this is a place where we can think out loud (so to speak) about what has been going on in our classroom. Where we can discuss the texts that we have been reading. Where we can comment on ideas that have been raised in previous discussions that you have had more time to think about.
It is also a place where English students from other classes can also comment on texts and the ideas that they may have raised.

First of all the introductory texts : Stealing and Valentine - thoughts and comments?

I've been a bit slow setting this up - sooooo - include any thoughts on War Photographer, Dossy and Internal Assessment (Yr 12).

Which texts did you enjoy or not enjoy? Which texts had the most impact? Which was the hardest to understand? Why?

Any questions you'd like to ask about the texts?

Go for it....

Posted by Mrs C at **Saturday, February 10, 2007 8 comments**

Fig. 3.8 First posts

> *Highlighted the blog in the school newsletter and have the blog address*
>
> *posted on my board. No comments/posts to date .*
>
> *(Reflective journal, March 9, 2007)*

> *To date no students have accessed the 'blog' – I think I will need to take*
>
> *them to a lab and take them through it the first time – I have prepared a*
>
> *handout about the blog.*
>
> *(Reflective journal, March 15, 2007)*

I was surprised at this and by the time I reflected on it we were ready to move onto the next topic – Shakespeare. My initial assumption that my students would be challenged to engage in this new learning activity was not being realised. Reflecting on this, a change of approach was obviously needed. Attending a course run by Waikato School Support Services, entitled 'Social Software in the Classroom – Blogs and Podcasts', confirmed two things for me. Firstly, the absolute value that tools such as blogging have for the English classroom as publishing and production tools; and secondly, that I needed a more direct approach to get the students 'on blog'. It seemed that the students were not going to initiate accessing the blog themselves simply by being given a piece of paper with the blog address on it. Blogging is a visual and interactive process and, therefore, the students needed to see and 'feel' it (Downes, 2004; Richardson, 2006).

My second posting was based around the pre-reading activities we were doing as a lead-in to our study of *Taming of the Shrew*. I had used a number of co-operative learning activities and had arranged for a teacher to talk to the class about his arranged marriage. These activities included co-operative learning tasks such as folded line-up, expert groups, treasure hunt quote activities and a bus stop theme discussion[6]. I wanted feedback on these activities, none of which I had used before and on their thoughts on the discussion the teacher had presented them with (Fig. 3.9).

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[6] Co-operative learning activities involve the students aligning themselves in mixed ability groupings and working through activities in a co-operative manner. The aim is for expert students to take an active role in assisting other students learn.

Thursday, March 22
Yr 12 Taming of the Shrew...
Sooooo - what are your thoughts on relationships, marriage and parents after our pre-reading activities?

Posted by Mrs C at Thursday, March 22, 2007 10 comments
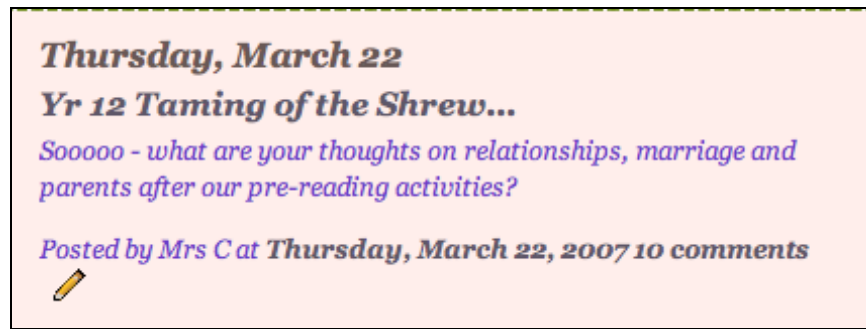
Fig. 3.9 Identity

As a teacher I tend to have a somewhat 'dramatic' approach to classroom teaching. In my posts on the blog I attempted to infuse a sense/feeling of my 'voice' and 'me', the teacher that the students know – hence the 'Sooooo' of the first line above (Fig. 3.9). Being able to create a personal voice in a blog is an empowering tool and is one of the aspects of blogs that have made them so popular (Penrod, 2007). Evidence of this was made apparent when the students created their own blogs.

As stated earlier, access for me to a computer room is limited. Anticipating that a short introduction to blogging and my blog would suffice, I made the decision to introduce it to them as a 'show and tell'. So in order to show the students how to navigate the blog, I used the data show and classroom internet connection at the end of a lesson. This was an eye-opener to some of the students.

> *The downside of technology – carrying laptop, data projector, connector*
> *cables and power board to room to set up for a very quick show!*
> *(Reflective journal, March, 26, 2007)*

The class were interested in the visual aspect of the blog and the fact that I had appeared to have spent an inordinate amount of time setting up the equipment to show them something that took only a few minutes viewing time.

>*'Do you get paid extra for doing that?'*
>
>*(Student 1, Reflective journal, March 26, 2007)*

They had no opportunity to use the blog themselves; it was merely a visual presentation that required them to passively view my blog on the data show as I talked and pointed them through the post and comment tools – my assumption being that seeing would encourage them into doing. Once again, my assumption was to be incorrect. I was surprised that no comments were posted on the blog. School camps and holidays broke the flow of the study but provided me with time to reflect once again on why this was not going as I had anticipated.

>*I think I will need to book them into a room to encourage contributions.*
>
>*(Reflective journal, April 21, 2007)*

What I had been expecting the class to do was to exactly what Prensky (2005) refers as 'powering down', that is, to passively sit and watch as I showed them the activity that I wanted them to do. That was my mistake. They needed to *do* the activity and learn themselves by doing (Gee, 2003; Prensky, 1998 & 2005). For me this meant being a lot more organised and ensuring that I booked the computer room for the one period that it was available each week for the duration of the term. As we had almost finished the initial work on the *Taming of the Shrew,* I

posted two more sets of questions for the class to respond to (Fig. 3.10 and Fig.

3.11).
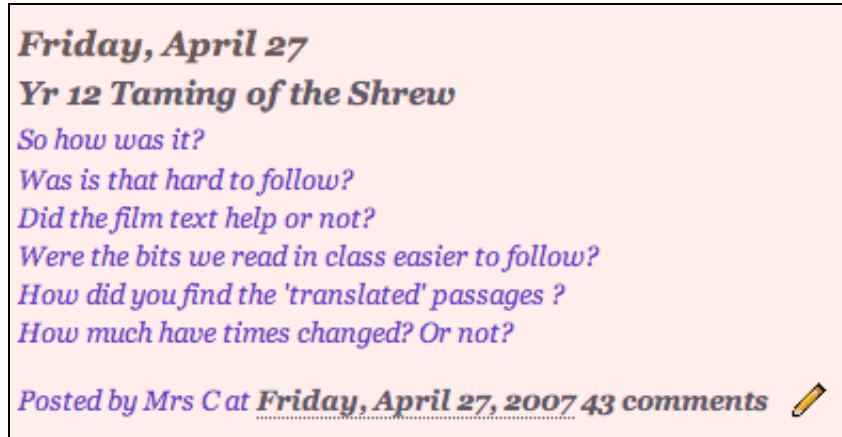
Fig. 3.10 Response questions
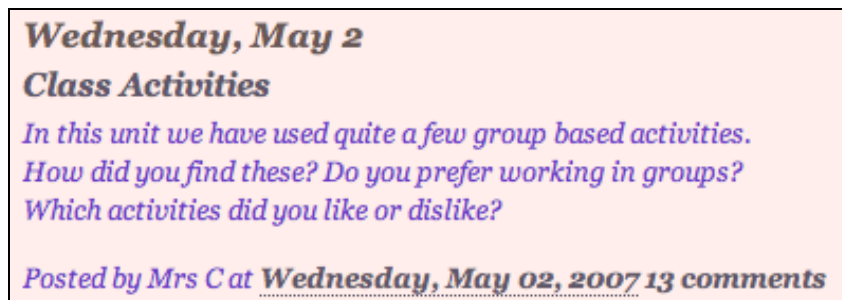
Fig. 3.11 More response questions

I asked the class to respond to as many of the questions as they could. They were

asked to be honest, to respect the thoughts of others and to be appropriate. They

were also reminded of the Internet Use contract that they sign at the start of year

highlighting appropriate Internet protocols and behaviours. One thing I did not

discuss with them was the use of correct English. My journal details how the

lesson went.

The 'blog' activity. Finally got the class into the 'flash' [students' term] computer suite – all had to have their passwords changed as a new server had been installed over the holidays. Luckily the TIC Computing was in the room on a free and he assisted all the kids who had to change. Students directed to the blog and asked to work through the questions I had posted, from most recent down.

One thing I hadn't thought of was that I needed to approve each post ASAP so that they could see their words on screen. This meant that I was tied to one computer for most of the lesson.

Unsurprisingly I had to 'not approve' a couple of posts – two where one of the students had just typed random letters, another where the play was referred to as the Taming of the Jew. These posts appeared on the blog as 'not approved' by the postmaster.

VV stayed in the room for the lesson and was interested in what was going on. He asked for a copy of one of the question postings. I asked him to write a reflective response to the lesson that he saw.
(Reflective journal, May 5, 2007)

The lesson highlighted a number of interesting issues for me to think about. One of the values of blogging is its immediacy and the fact that there is an authentic audience (Penrod, 2007; Richardson, 2006). In order for the students to see their

ideas and comments being posted they needed to be approved. This meant I had to stay at one computer approving student comments as I received notice of them in my email account. In spite of being asked to name their posts, only a few (2) did. This meant that there were a few inappropriate comments I had to delete. While this was simple to do (Fig. 3.12), I had no ability to 'track back'. I did not have the ability to identify who was posting the comments. This was an aspect of the activity that I would have to think through more clearly before the next session on blogging.

comment deleted
This post has been removed by the blog administrator.

3/5/07 9:57 AM
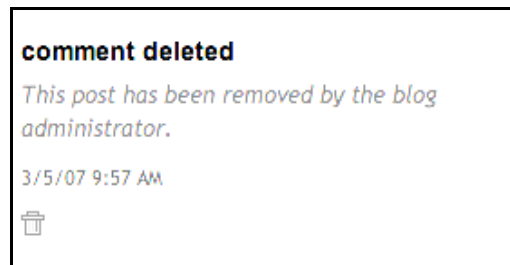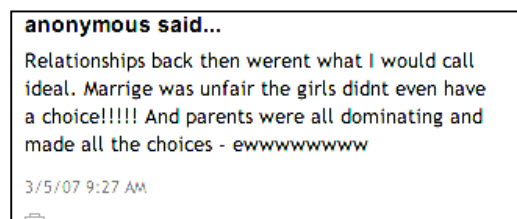
Fig. 3.12 Deleting comments

Interestingly, in the post-topic questionnaire, one of the students noted that they did not feel that they could respond honestly on the blog as their comment had been deleted. Further discussion with the student highlighted the fact that he did not initially see the task as 'real work' and therefore he thought that his comment was OK. This comment is in direct conflict with the idea that 'blogging' allows the 'blogger' to address a real audience and therefore have a real purpose for their audience (Richardson, 2006). The student saw no real value in the task and therefore felt that he could write whatever he wanted – appropriate or not. This was the only comment of this kind from a class of 24 students. However, on

reflection, more detailed guidelines regarding 'blogging' protocol may have been useful.
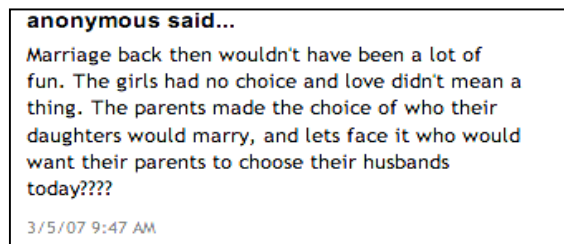
Despite this, the general engagement level of the class was high, and the rich comments on both the tasks and activities I had used in class provided me with a lot of data for future teaching and learning experiences, as well as for this research. This is the value of the reflective nature of self-study research. It enables the teacher-researcher to ground future action in rich knowledge (Cole & Knowles, 2000).

It was apparent that a number of students had strong opinions on the text and the ideas presented by it (Fig. 3.13 and Fig. 3.14).

anonymous said...

Relationships back then werent what I would call ideal. Marrige was unfair the girls didnt even have a choice!!!!! And parents were all dominating and made all the choices - ewwwwwwww

3/5/07 9:27 AM

Fig. 3.13 Student voice 1

anonymous said...

Marriage back then wouldn't have been a lot of fun. The girls had no choice and love didn't mean a thing. The parents made the choice of who their daughters would marry, and lets face it who would want their parents to choose their husbands today????

3/5/07 9:47 AM

Fig. 3.14 Student voice 2

Other students could make connections between a text written over 400 years ago and their lives today (Fig. 3.15 and Fig. 3.16). I found this very encouraging.

> **anonymous said...**
>
> Sooooo - what are your thoughts on relationships, marriage and parents after our pre-reading activities?
>
> I think that parents should not have had the right to choose who their daughters married those days, as if they didnt want to they would be treated as Katerina was and these days that is not right and basically against the law. Young people should be able to choose who they like and if they make the wrong deal they should have to deal with the consequences of their actions and learn from their mistakes.
>
> 3/5/07 9:37 AM

Fig. 3.15 Student voice 3

> **anonymous said...**
>
> It is interesting to note that there are more marriage breakups now than there were then - and we now chose on the basis of what some call love. We have the choices in our hands yet we still struggle to make marriages last. Maybe some societies who still have parents having input into choosing marriage partners have something to teach our supposedly enlightened western society.
>
> 15/5/07 10:26 AM

Fig. 3.16 Student voice 4

Both of these comments put forward reasoned and, I would suggest, relatively sophisticated arguments. In particular the comment, 'We have the choices in our hands yet we still struggle to make marriages last', implies a wide general knowledge of current marital statistics. Would the student have put forward this point of view in an oral classroom discussion? This idea will be dealt with later in this chapter.

But it was the student comments on the activities I had used that most caused me to reflect on the purpose and outcomes of the co-operative learning activities I had

used with this group. While some of the comments reflected the positive side of cooperative learning, that is having a range of abilities in the group (Fig. 3.17), others saw this in a negative way (Fig. 3.18):

> **anonymous said...**
> In this unit we have used quite a few group based activities.
> How did you find these? Do you prefer working in groups?
> Which activities did you like or dislike?
>
> it was good working in the groups because you get more opinions from other peoples and i learnt some stuff that i didnt knw from other people in my group. i prefer to work in groups because it is fun way of learning rather then doing it by myself. i liked all the group activities but didnt liked the ones that i had to work by my self
>
> 3/5/07 9:27 AM

Fig. 3.17 Positive response

> **anonymous said...**
> I didnt really like working in groups because i found it difficult to get along with the group of people that i was assigned to.
>
> 3/5/07 9:42 AM

Fig. 3.18 Negative response

The honesty of some of the comments was both thought-provoking and entertaining (Fig. 3.19):

> **anonymous said...**
> i found working in grops easy as i didnt have to do as much work as i would usually have to do, it was just good luck that i had a group with a brainy prerson in it.. next time though it would be funner to work in bigger groups, but not on a shakespers play
>
> 3/5/07 9:53 AM

Fig. 3.19 Group work

The social aspect of working in a group does not suit every student. I particularly enjoyed the comment 'it was just good luck that I had a group with a brainy person in it'. This comment, I believe, justified my use of 'expert groupings' or the 'folded line-up' to create groups of mixed abilities rather than allowing groups to form themselves.

A member of the English Department who acted as a critical friend commented on the printouts of this first 'blogging' session.

> *They've hit the nail on the head – that's the whole purpose of group work – to get the brainy ones mixed up (Reflective Journal, May 5, 2007)*

She also commented on the how she saw the students' approach to the idea of writing on the blog.

> *Well it's real writing isn't it – for a specific purpose. (English teacher, Reflective Journal, May 5, 2007)*

The school's ITC teacher, who also acted as a critical friend and observed this and other lessons, reflected on the learning activity that had taken place.

Here (Fig. 3.20) Val highlights a number of points that Downes (2004), Penrod (2007) and Richardson (2006) state are the benefits of classroom blogging.

In your blog lesson the students were engaged the full session. It was a new concept to most and it was pleasing to see that they were stimulated by the interactive nature of the web. The fact that you were monitoring the blogs as part of the posting process was a moderating influence that ensured most of the students were thoughtful in their responses.

Sharing the opinions and considerations of a large class was very effective via this medium. Attempting to do the same on a traditional verbal level, I feel would not be so effective for at least four reasons.

1. People tend to develop and edit their thoughts more thoroughly when writing.
2. The spoken word is transitory and readily forgotten, written can be re-read.
3. No-one has to "wait their turn" to air an opinion. In verbal situations there are always some who are reluctant to offer an opinion.
4 The anonymity allows participants to be courageous, outrageous or divergent without fear of ridicule.

In summary a great lesson.
Cheers.Val.
Valentine Venimore
ICT Manager

Fig. 3.20 Observation

The students have time to think about their responses before giving them 'voice'; they can reflect on what they have written and can edit before posting; they can read and respond to the comments of others safely. As well as this, they have immediate access to an audience that is far wider than the traditional classroom. This was apparent from posts made by participants who were not members of the class or school community (Fig. 3.21).

terry locke said...

Hi, it's Terry here. (I teach teachers at Waikato University.) It strikes me that girls are much more badly behaved these days than they were when I was in my teens and twenties. Some are real "shrews" and I think need to be curbed (by whom, by what?). How would you define a modern-day shrew???

2/5/07 5:48 PM
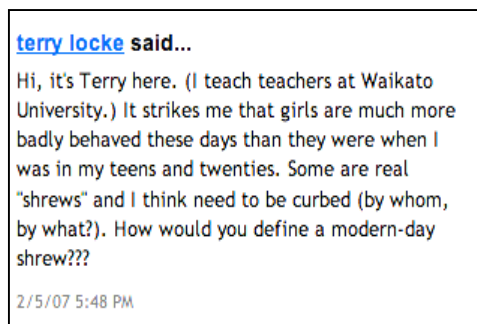
Fig. 3.21 Non student post

In this posting by the Waikato lecturer overseeing the TLRI project that the class were also involved in, one student did not hold back from presenting an alternative or opposing point of view to the to the one that had been put forward. The student interacts and discusses as an equal participant in the discussion (Fig. 3.22):

> **anonymous said...**
> I dont think that girls are more badly behaved these days. Since times have changed so has the way people act but in modern days it's not classed as behaving badly, its just living life the normal way. and since it's now a womens choice who she marries why should people judge??
>
> 3/5/07 9:41 AM
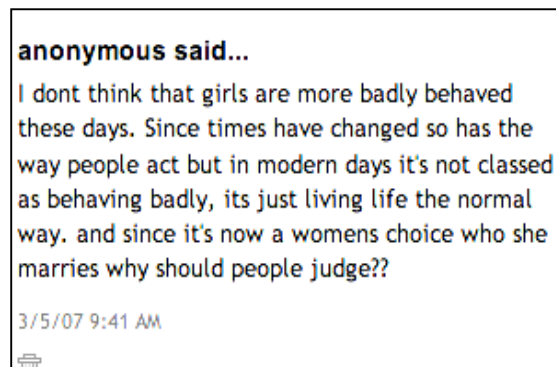
Fig. 3.22 Student reply

The students were also amazed to see at a later date that a teacher in America had commented on the blog (Fig. 3.23) and that he made reference to their thoughts and concerns regarding the studying of Shakespeare. While this illustrated to the students that the texts that they created reached an audience far beyond the walls of our classroom, they did not take up the opportunity of developing this connection further. Unfortunately, the immediacy of the task meant that such opportunities soon passed. Three months had lapsed since the initial discussions on Shakespeare and the students had moved onto other texts and issues. This highlighted that the value of the blog lies in its immediacy.

> **tony** said...
>
> I understand Emma's complaint. We speak a different form of English, today. Amazingly, many of Shakespeare's phrases have made their way into modern usage. Reading and understanding Shakespeare's use of language is difficult. To help us access it, my teacher played an audio recording of Henry IV, Part 1. Listening to it helped us to visualize the action.
>
> What makes Shakespeare relevant to us today is that his characters deal with the same emotions with which we struggle. What's it like dealing with someone who has a hot temper? Do you know people who will do many things because they are motivated by money? How many times have you broken the "rules of society" because you wanted to behave in a way that pleased you? These examples are some of the many conditions human beings have managed since the dawn of time and will continue to face until the end of time.
>
> Find the fun in Shakespeare. Look for examples of behavior that remind you of people you know.
>
> Thanks for sharing your thoughts.
>
> Cheers,
> Anthony Powell, Delaware, USA
>
> 17/8/07 4:01 AM

Fig. 3.23 Response from across the globe

While these comments by Tony in Delaware were thought provoking and very relevant, none of the students had actually looked 'back' to previous earlier posts. This 'track-back', as mentioned earlier, is seen as one of the positive aspects of early 'blogging' (Penrod, 2007; Richardson, 2006). I naturally found myself frequently reviewing early posts and comments looking for the best 'snapshots' of material to use. The students did not see the need to do this. The issue of immediacy of the medium is one that will discussed in the findings in Chapter 5.

I was excited by this first foray into student blogging. Up until this point my blog had really been just that – *my* blog! It was exciting to see the students engaging in relatively open and honest discussion. I did not criticise poor punctuation, spelling or grammar (though this is something that I may change in the future[7]) and I accepted anonymous comments, though some students were more than willing to share their ownership of comments after they had made a comment.

> *The students could add their name if they wanted to, or they could remain*
> *anonymous. Some were quite willingly to tell me which post was theirs*
> *afterwards 'I wrote that Miss'*
> *(Student 2, Reflective journal, May 3, 2007).*

The focus of this activity was simply to get them blogging, to get them used to the concept and to show them how simple it was to become a blogger. I was interested to note that while a few students took the opportunity to write in 'text talk' (Fig. 3.24) they were in the minority.
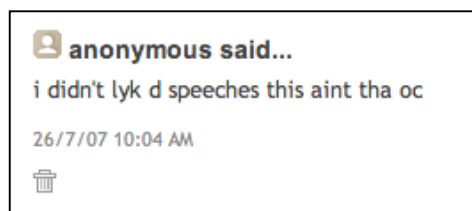
Fig. 3.24 'Txt' talk

While there were obvious issues surrounding capitalisation of the letter 'I' and obvious spelling errors, generally the students wrote in standard English. The use of standard and non-standard English became even more interesting when the

---

[7] Other colleagues, who I have come into contact with since I started blogging, have set more stringent guidelines for their classroom blogs. Some have stated that since the blog is an extension of the classroom, then the same writing rules apply in the online writing environment.

class moved onto collaborative essay writing on the skrbl boards and will be discussed in Chapter 4.

In order to capitalise on this initial enthusiasm, I used the next task set out to review and appraise the assessment activities linked to the Shakespeare study. A focus of self-study is to improve teacher practice (Loughran, 2004). The post-study, blog-based appraisal and review of the term's work (Fig. 3.25) provided valuable data in the personal comments for me as a teacher to reflect on. I wanted this to help inform my future practice in number of ways, from course and assessment design to how I select in-class activities.

Thursday, June 21
Bye bye Shrew (for a while)
We have completed most of our work on Taming of the Shrew.

Which of the three assessment tasks did you find the most difficult? Why?

Which of the three assessment tasks did you find the most straightforward? Why?

Posted by Mrs C at **Thursday, June 21, 2007** **29 comments** ✏
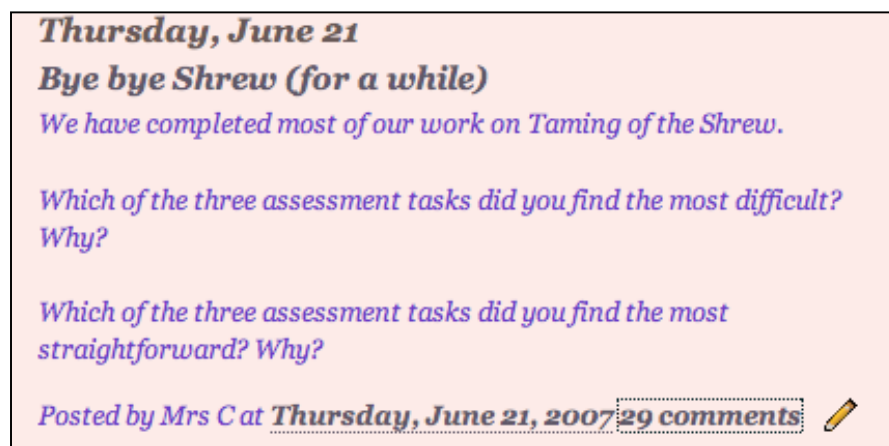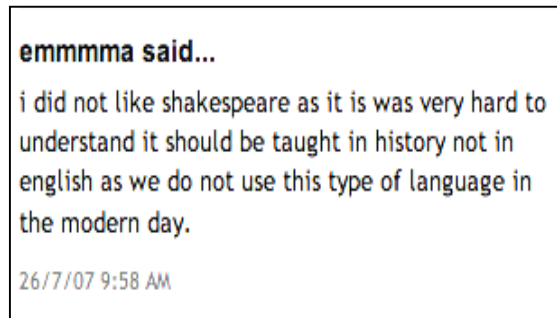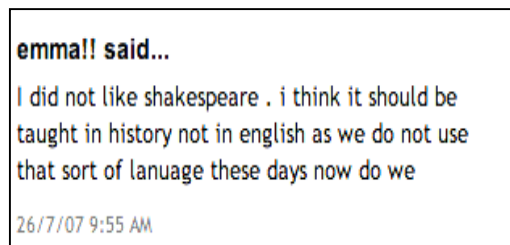
Fig. 3.25 Course appraisal

Not surprisingly, a number of the class found the language of the text difficult. Just under half of the comments posted reflected on the difficulty of the language, with one student feeling so strongly about it that she posted twice with her name attached both times (Figs. 3.26 & 3.27).

emmmma said...

i did not like shakespeare as it is was very hard to
understand it should be taught in history not in
english as we do not use this type of language in
the modern day.

26/7/07 9:58 AM

Fig. 3.26 Emma's attitude

emma!! said...

I did not like shakespeare . i think it should be
taught in history not in english as we do not use
that sort of lanuage these days now do we

26/7/07 9:55 AM

Fig. 3.27 Emma's attitude 2

The use of exclamation marks after her name emphasised her strength of feeling
and created her own personal voice. It is this ability to present personal voice that
has made the blogging one of the most popular Web 2.0 tools (Penrod, 2007;
Richardson, 2006).

What was most surprising to me was that just over a third of the class found the
oral presentation the most challenging task and the formal writing the most
achievable. As a teacher I have always viewed the dramatic monologue activity as
one where the students can actually have a bit of fun – they get to dress up and
represent their character however they wish. It is written and presented in modern
English in front of a small group of their peers. It is also one of the more
successful standards in terms of achievement – with 73% achieving the standard.
11% of those who achieved gained an Excellence grade and 27% achieved Merit.

The student's appraisal comments on the blog suggested that despite the success rate of the assessment task, this was a part of the programme that might need further development, possibly with the introduction of an element of choice. Anonymity, it seemed, gave the students a powerful voice.

Ultimately, however, this was 'my blog'. Teacher-researchers and social software enthusiasts such as Richardson (2006) identify the value of blogs as being the ownership, the instant publishing of text and the wide and authentic audience that they have. While anonymity was fine for the introductory tasks I had initiated, I also envisaged the students creating their own blogs with their own email address and blogger account – that would mean no anonymous comments as account holders' names automatically appear as a comment's author. Ownership and student voice would no longer be anonymous.

3.2 Getting students blogging #2 – student blogs

3.2.1 Allowing for student choice

As stated previously, it was always my intention for the students to create their own blogs. While the pre-study technology questionnaire showed that a high percentage of the students (16 of 24) had their own web page on *bebo, Myspace* or the like, very few (5 of 24) had ever created their own blog. Despite this most of the group (15 of 24) said that they felt confident with using a blog, an indication perhaps of their familiarity with social software in general and the belief that the skills are transferable between applications. Traditionally, a key part of my study of film texts has involved a task where the students keep viewing response logs when studying film. I have occasionally used reading response logs

when studying extended texts. The purpose of such logs is to reflect on what has been read or seen, to formulate ideas around key features of each text and to give students the opportunity to voice their opinions in their own way. These can then become part of their study of the text. I believe they are particularly useful when studying film as text, especially when students can reflect on what they have written after a second or even third viewing. Blogs as response logs seemed to be the natural progression from both the response log and tasks set on my own blog.

After introducing the idea and rationale of the Response Log to the class, I gave the students the choice as to whether they would 'blog or log', that is, whether they would keep an online blog, or a paper response log. My reflective journal notes my surprise that only half of the class (12 out of 24) chose to create a blog – but this did have an 'upside' to it.

> *A little surprised that only half of the class are going to 'blog' –*
> *maybe giving them the choice was not the best idea! I guess that*
> *means that using Rm9 is an OK option as I won't have to worry*
> *about whole class access – one bonus!*
> *(Reflective journal, July 27, 2007)*

Initially I was disappointed and 'kicked' myself for not making the task compulsory, but the post-study questionnaire (Appendix 8) highlighted an interesting point. Of the 12 students who chose to keep a paper log, six did so because of the unreliable nature of the school's network and the limited

availability of the 'flash' computers for them. Three of the six noted that the old computers took too long to connect to the Internet and required websites:

> *Logging onto to internet is sometimes slow and sometimes computers don't work (Student 1)*

> *It takes too long to connect to the server (Student 2)*

> *You have to logon it takes too much time (Student 3)*

The students' views regarding the nature of the school's network provided valuable information regarding their technology practices and how the school's systems met (or rather didn't meet) their needs. Five chose the paper log because they like writing:

> *It's not as personal, I like seeing handwriting (Student 6)*

Two said that if they had the choice again, they would blog. Other reasons for not blogging related to the actual processes of writing and thinking, including being too slow at typing:

> *Easy to write my thoughts by hand rather than having to think also about typing. (Student 5)*

Two noted that it was simply too much of an effort to change rooms! One student commented on the safety issues that arise from using social software such a blogsite:

Personal information being viewed, could be insecure. (Student 4)

The fact that all comments could be viewed by the entire class, was a concern that some students noted:

I don't like saying things with people being able to see. (Student 11)

The issue of Internet protocols and safety is one that I will return to later in this chapter.

The post-study questionnaire (Appendix 8) and the online blog feedback showed that the 12 students that chose to blog did so for a variety of reasons. Two felt that their notes would be easier to keep (Fig. 3.28):

> **anonymous said...**
> my reading logs were done on my personal blog made for this class. i chose to use this method of recording my logs because i cant loose it like i would with paper.
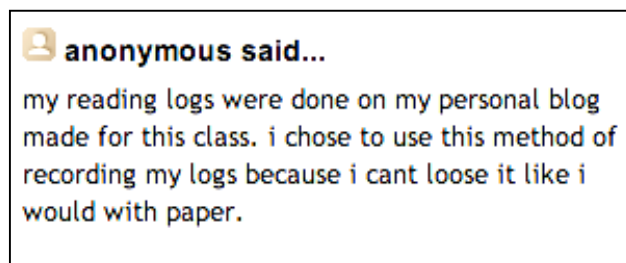
Fig. 3.28 To blog or not

> *It is easier and faster.you Don't have loose pieces of paper to*
> *carry around – can't loose your work. (Student 3[spelling and*
> *punctuation uncorrected])*

Two thought that it would be more interesting and different; three preferred typing to writing or found it easier to type than write; two felt typing was easier to read than writing; two felt it would be easier to write more on a blog than on paper. These all focussed an aspect writing as a process and that the quality and the quantity of the work would be improved:

> *..felt that I could produce more work of a higher quality (Student*
> *7)*

> *..better quality & quantity of work (Student 8)*

> *It was easily legible. I was able to write a large amount in a short*
> *amount of time (Student 9)*

Only two stated that they would be more likely to finish the work at home as they were always on the computer (Fig. 3.29):

> *You can say what you want anytime (Student 1)*

This surprised me as I had initially presumed that the students would be keen to access their blogs at home, especially as I was aware of their attitudes towards the equipment, and in particular to the hardware, that was available to them at school.

> **anonymous said...**
> i think using the blog meant i was more likely to finish writing at home because i can just finish it while im doing other things on the computer, rather than having to make more time get all my homework out and sit down and write it all on paper
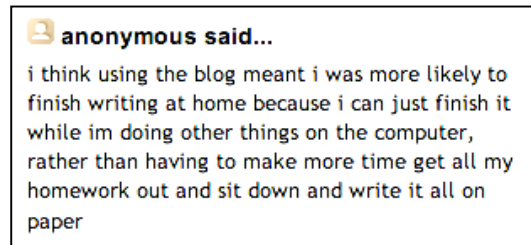
Fig. 3.29 Reasons for blogging

Brock's graphics seemed to sum up *my* attitude to the task and add emphasis to his thoughts (Fig. 3.30). This was one of the few times that a student added a graphic image to emphasise a point.

> **brocks english blog said...**
> computer blogs=GOOD:)
> paper blogs=BAD:(
>
> 23/8/07 9:50 AM
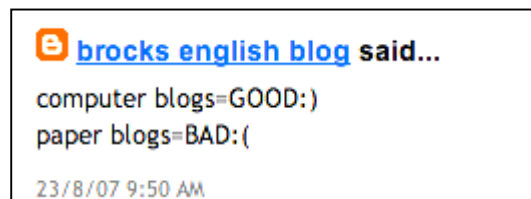
Fig. 3.30 Graphic emoticons

Being able to say what they thought without fear of other embarrassment was a factor in some of the students' choice of a blog:

> *..easy to express your point of view without the embarrassment of saying it in front of everyone. (Student 10)*

This made it apparent to me that rather than generalising and stereotyping all of my students by Prensky's 'digital natives' descriptor, I had to acknowledge that personal choice and individual identity needed to be addressed when it came to the use of technology in the classroom; and that individual learning styles still exist in the digital age. As a teacher I had fallen into the very trap and thought patterns that I try and educate my students about – gross generalisations. I will come back to this in my final chapter.

3.2.2 Student blogs – individuality and expression

As the students had used my blog on *blogger.com,* I decided that they should continue with this platform as they were reasonably familiar with the tools available on it and how it operated. The reading/viewing log/blog was to be a daily activity. As only 12 of the class had decided to blog, I had a dilemma over room use. My teaching classroom was across the corridor from the computer room that houses the oldest computers in the school. School policy dictates that students are not allowed in computer rooms unsupervised. I made the decision to attempt to use this room closest to my classroom as it meant that for the last 10-15 minutes of every lesson I could supervise the students in the computer room and at the same time be aware of what the rest of the class, who were keeping their logs on paper, were doing across the hallway. Though not ideal, this was the best option.

12 students created their own blogs on 27 July, 2007 during a remarkably smooth and 'hassle-free', fifteen-minute session in the computer room. Interestingly a similar session I ran in staff professional development meeting a few days later on

creating blogs did not run so smoothly[8]. For the students that already 'owned' a *gmail*[9] account the process was straightforward. Others had to wait to access their alternative email addresses in order to verify their passwords. The students were very adept at circumventing the school's watchdog site to access sites that they were not meant to be on. This initially caused me some concern as I fully support the need to have an external agency act as a watchdog and monitor student access and site content.

> *I need to talk to VV about accessing blocked sites. I know that the kids are*
> *not supposed to access private email accounts from the school network –*
> *but I'm thinking the ends justifies the means today!*
> (*Reflective journal, July 27, 2007*)

The blogging platform *blogger.com* provides users with a selection of templates (Fig. 3.31). The students created their blogs independently. They chose their blog names and formats including colour and layout. As blog names are at the top of a blog, they are important for stamping identity and authority on it. I had gone through a number of trial and error selections when setting up my own bog, but was surprised at how quickly the students selected their own templates.

---

[8] I took a small group of my colleagues for an IT professional development session on how to set up a blog. A group of seven staff needed more assistance that a group of 24 students. My overall impression was that the students just got on with the task and worked through the instructions,that is 'learnt by doing'. The group of staff wanted more one on one attention to get them through the process. I was more exhausted after the staff session than I was after the set up lesson with my students!

[9] gmail – an email account attached to the internet provider Google, hence the 'g' in gmail.

Fig. 3.31 Blogging templates

I was intrigued by the variety of the blog formats selected and also at the different ways by which the students had selected their blog names. As already noted, individual identity and ownership are a key factor in the popularity of blogging. (Figs. 3.32 and 3.33):

Fig. 3.32 Cody's blog
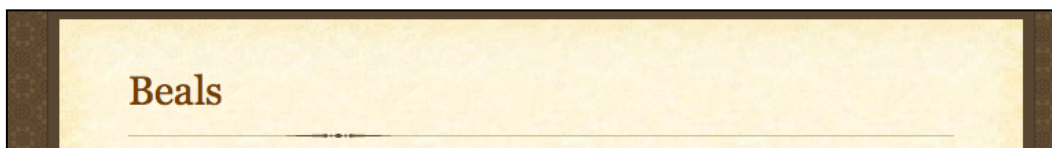
Fig. 3.33 Jessica's blog

Blog names varied from simply being titled according to the name of the student to others that presented an image of themselves or an attitude in some manner (Figs. 3.34 and 3.35):
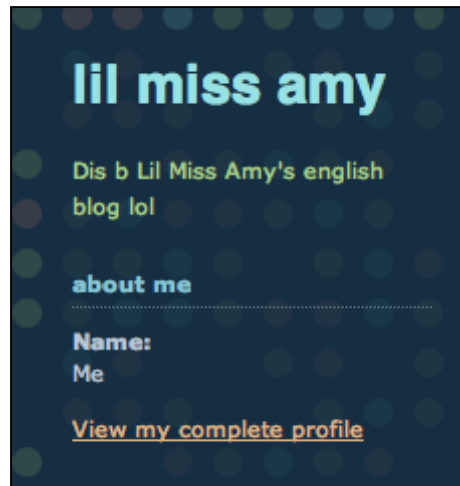
Fig. 3.34 Amy's blog

lil mis amy's use of non-standard English in her blog (Fig.34) descriptor makes an interesting statement, but not one that she could explain clearly. During questioning the student stated that 'she liked the sound of the name' as it had an 'unusual thing about it'. Whatever the reason, she creates an individual image of herself.
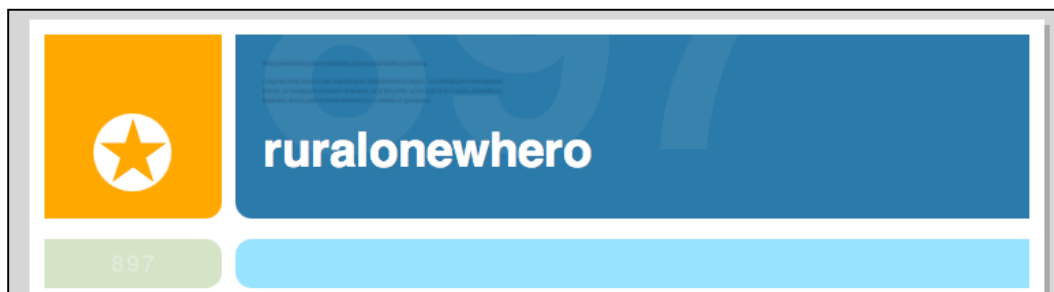
Fig. 3.35 ruralonewhero's blog

Ruralonewhero's descriptor (including the use of lower case) proudly states his place in the world. At my school students from rural Onewhero have a definite and recognisable identity and 'sub-culture' that they are incredibly proud of. This student chose to emphasise their identity through their blog name.

Fig. 3.36 TKU DAIRY's blog

The blog name *TKU DAIRY* (Fig. 3.36) also presents an interesting identity. The blog owner was a new student to the school and the only student of Indian nationality in the class. During the period of the research project, his family owned one of the local dairy businesses. The blog name chosen reflects both this identity and also the student's attempts at integration into local life – TKU is the accepted school slang for Tuakau and is often the 'tag of choice' for taggers in the district.

The issue of online identity is one that I will return to later in Chapter 5, when I discuss the findings of this study.

The students also made independent decisions on exactly how much information to include in their profiles. Of the 12 students, one gave very detailed information on her personal profile – including full name and other family details, links to her email account and her web page (Fig. 3.37).
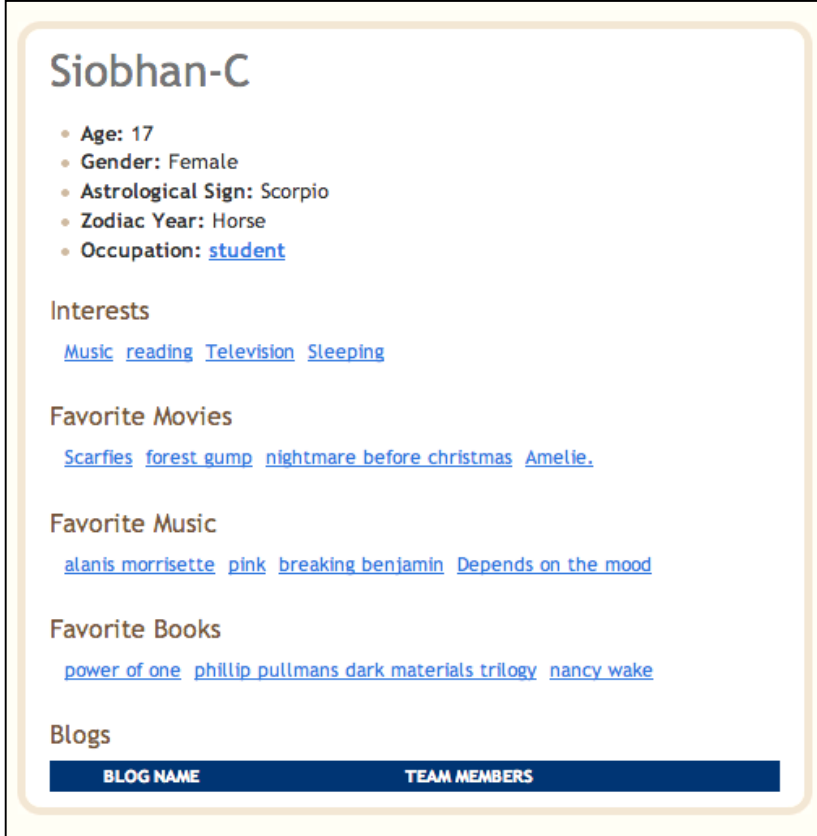
Fig. 3.37 Heather's blog

Initially I was concerned that this was too much information, especially the use of her full name, and discussed these concerns with the student. She showed me the links to her other sites – *bebo* and *Myspace*. She was already well versed in 'social networking' and was comfortable with her online identity. Three students provided information about themselves but in a far less obvious manner as exemplified in Fig. 3.38. In this profile there are no real indications of just exactly who this student is to a public audience, though members of the school community could easily identify the blogger from her name. I was far more comfortable with this type of profile. In a subsequent discussion with the students
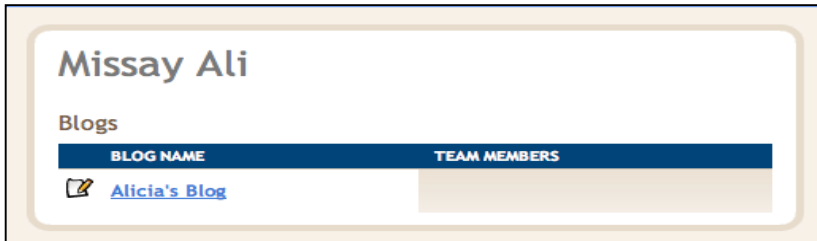
regarding this issue of safety, a number of the students felt that I was overly cautious (the implication being that I was totally out of touch with the times!) and that in general they gave far more information on other social networking sites that they belonged to.

Siobhan-C

- **Age:** 17
- **Gender:** Female
- **Astrological Sign:** Scorpio
- **Zodiac Year:** Horse
- **Occupation:** student

Interests

Music reading Television Sleeping

Favorite Movies

Scarfies forest gump nightmare before christmas Amelie.

Favorite Music

alanis morrisette pink breaking benjamin Depends on the mood

Favorite Books

power of one phillip pullmans dark materials trilogy nancy wake

Blogs

BLOG NAME	TEAM MEMBERS

Fig. 3.39 Siobhan's blog profile

The remaining students provided no information other than the name of their blog (Fig. 3.39).

Missay Ali

Blogs

BLOG NAME	TEAM MEMBERS
Alicia's Blog	

Fig 3.39 Alicia's blog profile

From these samples it is apparent that the students created the profile for themselves that they felt comfortable with. Some created a blog name and profile that reflected an attitude or image that might or might not be the reality, that is, they projected an attitude or image that in some ways diverged from the 'face' the student presented in their normal interaction with their peers and with me, their teacher. Others simply 'told it as it is'.

3.2.3 Laying down the law – students in control

As blog owners the students had a number of decisions to make regarding how they wanted their blog to operate, just as I had done when I created my blog. They were in control of just who could view their blog, who could comment, whether comments had to be moderated before they were posted and whether to delete comments or not. Only three of the students activated the 'comments moderation' facility of the blog – a tool that I had found very useful (Fig. 3.40) for ensuring all posts were appropriate.
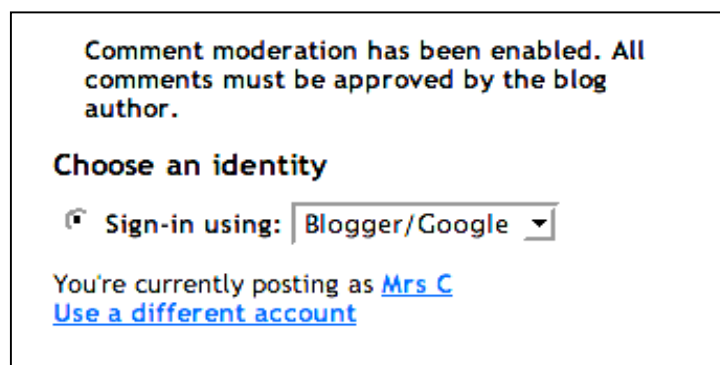
Fig. 3.40 Moderation in action

All nine of the students who chose *not* to enable moderation said that they did not really see the point to it. Those that belonged to similar socially networked sites

stated that they did not moderate comments on those and saw this as no different. Their attitudes to this aspect of the blog were quite different to mine – a generational attitude? Or one created by the fact that I was very conscious that I wanted the activity to be a success? I did not want any content to be posted that could lead to criticism from within the school's management structure. I was also 'competing' with other teachers for use of the computer rooms and was very aware that I wanted the tasks I was engaging the students in to be seen as in keeping with official school policy. As well as this, the purpose of the activity was for the students to create their own blogs, their own way, in their own space, I accepted the fact that the students needed to also have control of their own blog and content, but realised that this was an aspect of the study that I would need to consider carefully before using the same tasks again. I will return to this issue in Chapter 5.

One of the three students who enabled comment moderation activated the word verification function (Fig. 3.41). This tool verifies for the blog owner that the reader posting a comment is actually a person and not an electronic virus. It meant that the blog owner has a double layer of protection on their site.

Fig. 3.41 Double protection moderation

The three students who enabled the comment moderation tool all stated that they liked the fact that even my comments had to be approved by them:

> *So Miss if we don't like what you write we don't have to have it?*
> *(Student 1)*

The element of control was a powerful one, as the power of the blog is in the fact that the students have ownership (Richardson, 2006). My answer in response to this question was that while they did not have to approve my comments on their blogs, it would be useful for our ongoing discussion of texts if they did. I was relying on their maturity and common sense here. I explained that I would be commenting on the students who had chosen to use paper logs and I expected to be able to give the 'bloggers' the same feedback, as this was part of their class work. Every one of my comments on their posts was approved and as section *3.3.4 "Conversations with Mrs C"* will show, ongoing dialogue did take place. In future I would need to make sure that I had a contingency plan in place for any students who did choose to 'not accept' any comments that I posted on their blogs, something I had not thought about at the time. I am not sure what would have happened if the bloggers had decided to 'not accept' all of my comments and postings.

In order for me to have easy access to the student blogs, I listed them as a blogroll[10] at the bottom of my blog (Fig. 3.42). This way I could link directly to

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[10] Blogroll – a live link of blogs connected to my blog

their blogs from mine so that I could respond to comments that they had made. The students could also access each other's blogs in the same way:

12 English Viewing/Reading Blogs

- http://siobhans-bloggy.blogspot.com/
- http://heather-addison.blogspot.com/
- http://aicila07.blogspot.com/
- http://j-beals.blogspot.com/
- http://codycalder.blogspot.com
- http://mylog-me.blogspot.com/
- http://tkudairy.blogspot.com/
- http://kal241.blogspot.com/
- http://ruralonewhero.blogspot.com/
- http://brocksenglishblog.blogspot.com
- http://courtneys-bloggy.blogspot.com

Hit Counter

001864

Fig. 3.42 Blogroll on MrsC's blog – hits 001864[11]

The blogs were now ready to become a part of the course work and be used as Response Logs.

3.3 Blogs as reading and viewing journals

In what follows, I am going to refer to those keeping response logs on blogs as 'bloggers' and those keeping written paper logs as 'loggers'. It is accepted that reader response logs have value as a tool to engage students of any age with the texts they are reading, to enhance student understanding and to develop critical thinking (Carlisle, 2000; Harris, 1991). The introduction of Media Studies to the New Zealand curriculum in 1983-4 saw viewing logs being used in the same way in Media classrooms.

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[11] Hits 001864 – the number of people who have viewed the blog

Using both reading and viewing logs with my senior classes is a regular part of my classroom practice. I use the response journals in four main ways. The first response is affective, that is, I ask the students what they think of the text and why. The students are then asked specific questions that relate to the narrative structure, techniques and character development. This is an essential element of any text analysis, as the students are expected to be able to discuss these aspects of texts in their NCEA external examinations. As I personally do not believe getting ready for an examination is the only reason for studying texts, the subsequent questions move the students beyond this. A further level of response moves them beyond the text by asking them to look for connections between the text and other texts they may have read or seen. This creates a link to wider reading and viewing and moves the students into higher-level thinking. The students are also directed to give their views on the author's purpose and the different levels of meaning that can be identified. This form of questioning moves the response log from being purely a description of what they thought of a particular text, to a more critical view of the text being studied.

> Critical literacy critics and teachers focus on the cultural and ideological assumptions that underwrite texts, they investigate the politics of representation, and they interrogate the inequitable, cultural positioning of speakers and readers within discourses. They ask who constructs the texts whose representations are dominant in a particular culture at a particular time; how readers come to be complicit with the persuasive ideologies of texts; whose interests are served by such representations and such readings (Morgan, 1997, p.2).

Critical literacy acknowledges that all texts are social constructs, that they represent the views of the time and place and purpose for which they were constructed and as such can be deconstructed, enabling the reader to create their own meaning (Comber, 1994; Green, 2001; Janks, 2000; Locke, 2003; Luke, 1992; Morgan, 1997; Street, 1995) and to distinguish differing points of view and versions of reality (Latham, 2000). While is it apparent that there are multiple theoretical perspectives underpinning the different approaches to critical literacy, it is also generally acknowledged that to a certain extent these overlap or interweave (Green, 2001; Morgan, 1997). A critical literacy approach that includes investigating the way that language choices are made and why; how language is used in different contexts to create power and an approach that recognises that there is no one single reading or meaning of any given text, would enable students to begin to question these choices (Comber, 1994; Green, 2001; Morgan, 1997).

I had selected the theme of 'fate' to link the texts I had chosen during the course of this study. I approached the study of these texts using a critical literacy approach, anticipating in advance that the very nature of the theme and the text themselves would provide many opportunities for response journal activities.

3.3.1 Conversations with MrsC – dialogue via the blog

This for me was the most exciting and rewarding aspect of this self-study. Every one of the 12 students who used a blog for their response journal engaged in an ongoing dialogue over at least one aspect work being studied. In comparison, not one of the students who used a written or paper response log, responded to or

developed any of the questions that I posed to them in their written record. While four of the 12 students who blogged did not maintain their initial level of interest, the remaining eight continued to engage in ongoing dialogue.

Regardless of whether the students were paper logging or blogging, the response questions or instructions were the same. The introductory question I posed was: What makes a good film? Brock's response and the ensuing dialogue that he engaged in with me is an excellent example of how the blog can operate.

Fig. 3.43 Brock's blog –first posting

Brock had very specific views that he stated briefly in his initial posting (Fig. 3.43). However, with further questioning on my part, he readily provided more detailed information and was confident enough in the online environment to give me advice. (Fig. 3.44). Reading over this conversation now, I am aware of other learning conversations that I should have made use of – such as what he meant when he wrote that the film was 'well constructed'. Just as in a face-to-face classroom, learning opportunities need to be picked up on and utilised.
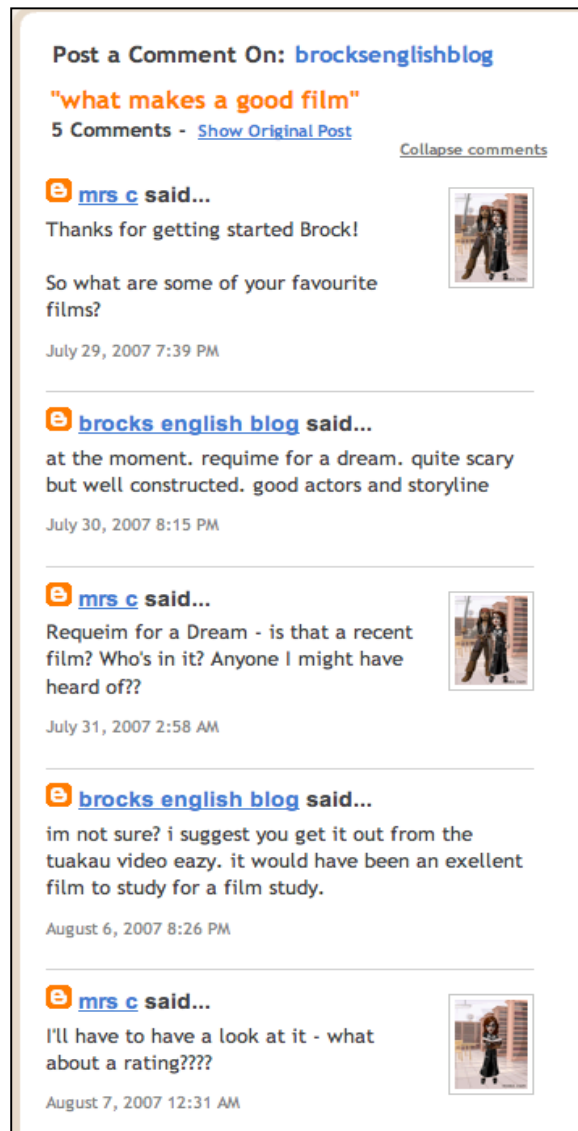
Fig. 3.44 Conversations with Brock

While Brock's original posting was relatively short, the posts of the rest of the 'bloggers' tended to be longer, more detailed and more structured than the written responses of the paper 'loggers'. The average posting on the blogs was 100 words.

On paper, the responses ranged from a list of six words to one that was 150. However not one of the 12 students who wrote on paper responded or replied to

any of the questions I asked on their logs after their first post. This was a direct contrast to the students who were blogging. All replied to any questions that posed on my comments, and some conversations continued over a number of postings (Figs. 3.45 and 3.46). The following conversation was initiated after a class group activity where the students first of all brainstormed all the elements they considered were important to making a 'good' film. In groups, they then ranked the elements and came up with what they considered to be the most important elements of a good film.
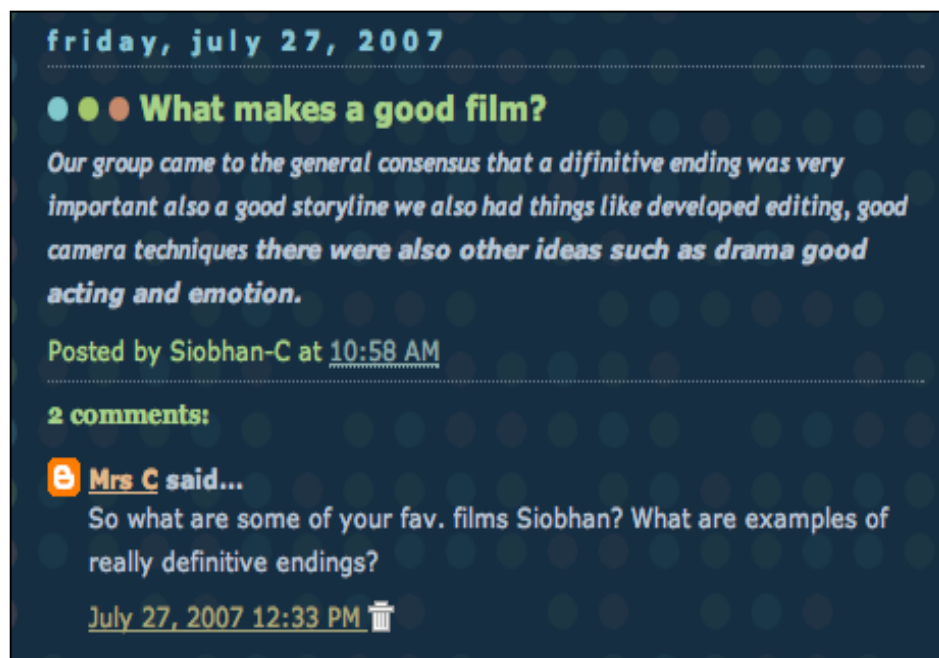
Fig. 3.45 Conversations with Siobhan

Siobhan-C's first posting highlighted the group focus in the choice of 'difinitive ending' [sic]. In my comment, rather than pointing out the misspelling, I hoped that by modelling the correct spelling the student would pick up on this. Unlike Brock's example above (Fig. 3.44), I also asked for further explanation of what

she meant by 'difinitive ending', as this was the only group that had used this

term. Siobhan-C responded with another posting, giving a detailed, 150-word

response to my question. The length of responses on the blogs compared to the

logs was something that I had not anticipated, and was mentioned by the students

in their post-research questionnaires.

While she did not pick up on the correct spelling of "definitive", she was well

aware of her own spelling limitations and added the (?) after 'rumplestiltskin'.

She continued to use this technique for the duration of the period of blogging. The

capitalisation of 'EXACTLY' was used to emphasise her understanding of the

term. She also made it clear how much film as text differs from written text. I
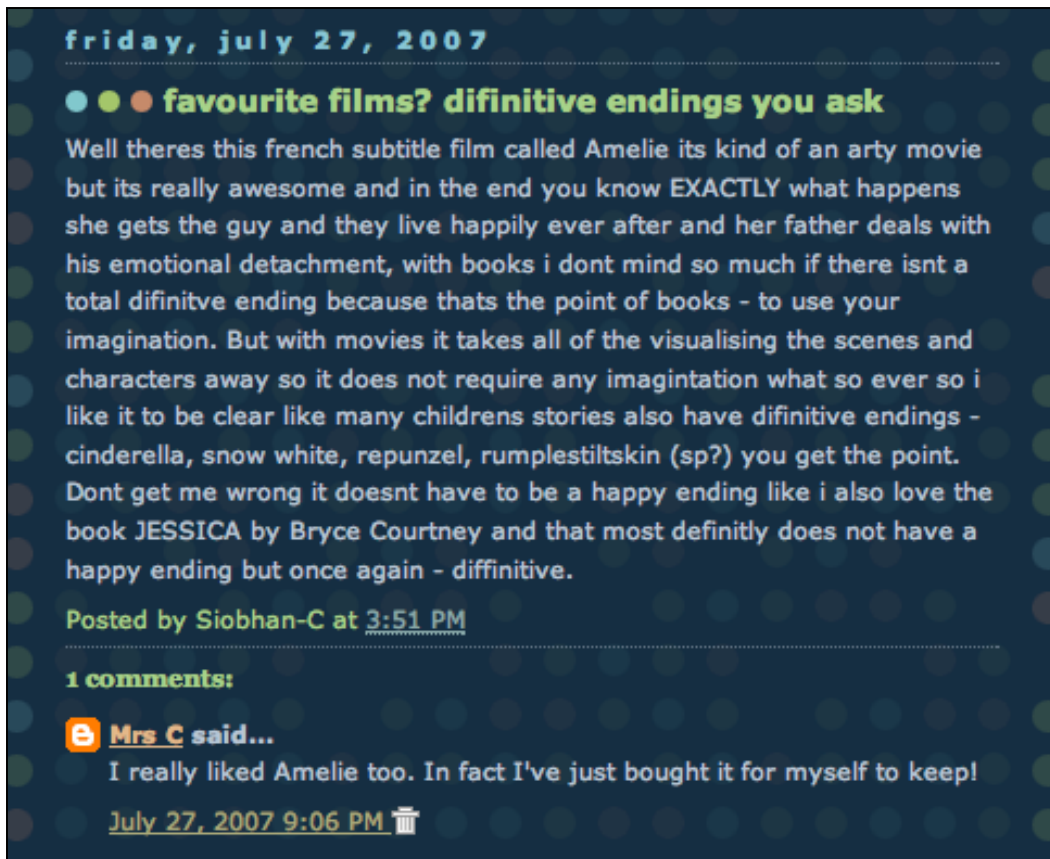
Fig. 3.46 Conversations with Siobhan 2

found the familiarity of the phrases 'you get the point' and 'Don't get me wrong' interesting – the use of direct address emphasising the student ownership of their postings.

4 comments:

🅱 **Mrs C said...**
So what is your favourite film and why?

July 27, 2007 12:30 PM

🅱 **Terry Locke said...**
Hi Beals

My question to you is: What makes for a good storyline. (For me, I rather like redemption stories. Now they have quite particular storylines, usually involving a character who may come across as "bad". There is usually a turning point which leads to a massive change in direction in their life.)

July 30, 2007 7:17 AM

🅱 **Beals said...**
a good storyline? in my opinion it can be anything that has a main point and does not rant on to try and make the movie last longer.

July 30, 2007 1:41 PM

🅱 **Beals said...**
my fav film, there are way to many to name there are many films that i like and i like them because they are easy to follow and have a main point and a good lead actor.

July 30, 2007 1:43 PM

Fig. 3.47 Conversations with Beals

Beals (Fig. 3.47) also expresses very definite views with regard to film and responded to both questions posed by myself and another blog reader outside of the immediate class and school community. This connection to a wider audience is a vital aspect of social software in general and blogging in particular. This conversation allowed Beals the opportunity to reflect on her own point of view and to realise that there are points of view that may differ from her own.

3.3.2 Student voice

I believe that in many of our classrooms, students today find it hard to hold an opinion that differs from those of their peers. This view was affirmed for me by a number of the student responses to the questionnaire (Appendix 8) asking them what they thought were the benefits of anonymous blogging in the English classroom:

> *..you could write what you thought as you know no one else will no who it was from (Student 5)*

> *The fact that the writing is anonomous helps as you don't have others commenting (Student 12)*

> *With the annoymos blog, if your opinion is different to others you can still express your views without other people making you feel wrong. (Student 10)*

> *I wouldn't have explained all my ideas to the whole class (Student 13).*

This is one of the reasons I use a variety of small-group activities in my classroom. I believe that online social software such as blogging provides an opportunity for some students to have a voice, when otherwise they might not have one. This does not mean that I see online learning or online discussion as a replacement for all classroom tasks, but that, for some students, opportunities or choice of other media for participation need to be investigated.

Of the 12 students who chose to blog, I would categorise seven as being reluctant participants in class discussion. By this, I mean that they rarely contributed to any form of whole-class discussion or to teacher questioning. One in particular had a specific aversion to any form of participation, whether in a small- or large-group situation. The conversations that were generated via their blogs enabled them to share their points of view and opinions to an extent that I had not seen before A short questionnaire provided feedback and evidence supporting this fact (Appendix 6). Only seven of the 24 students felt that using the blog made no difference as to how they responded to the questions. The remainder all felt that the availability of the blog affected the way in which they responded.
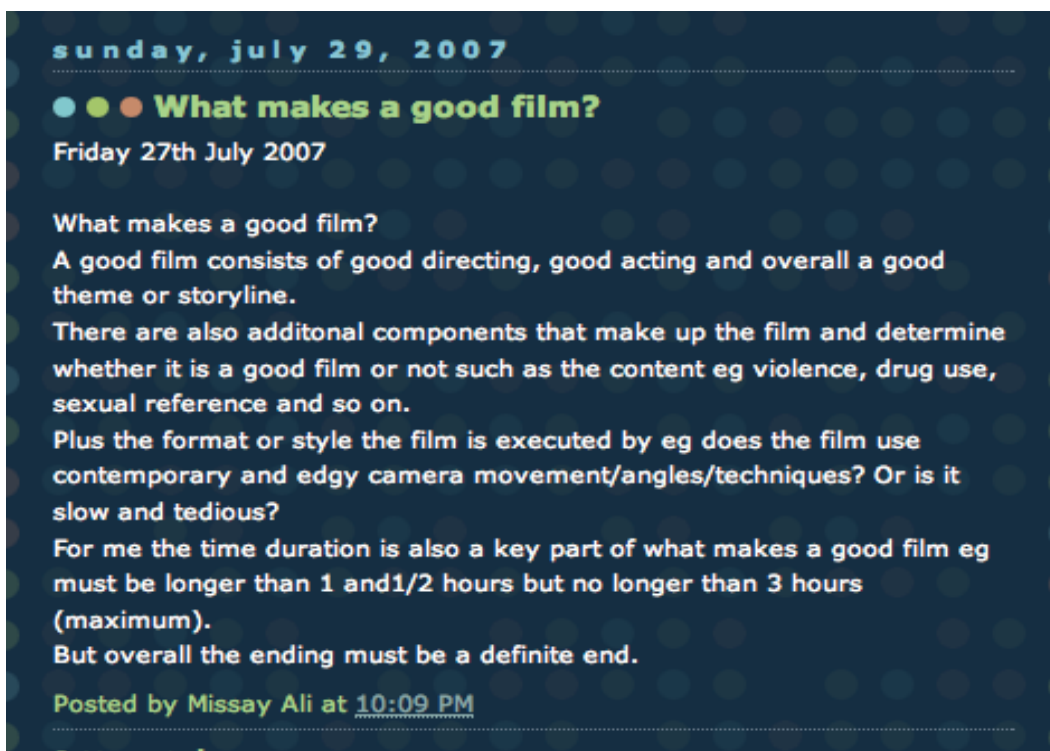
Fig. 3.48 A point of view

Fig. 3.48 provides a good example of this. The student blogger here provides an in depth overview of what they considered made for a good film. It is detailed and

poses thoughtful questions for the readers to consider. This student never willingly spoke to the class in a whole-class situation and rarely involved themselves in small group discussion. In the post-study questionnaire, the student responded to the question – Do you think you responded in the same way that you would have responded in a class discussion – with the answer, 'No I didn't because I would not have felt comfortable saying that in class' (Student 8).

The response blogs gave students the power to say what they thought about the texts studied, the questions asked and, in some cases, their own ability, in a safe and responsive environment. As teachers we are always aware of those students in our classroom who are reluctant, for whatever reason, to participate, respond or ask questions. This is clearly illustrated in Fig. 3.49. Here the student asks me via the blog to borrow the movie to view a section that she had missed in class.

ⓑ me said...
Miss would i be able to borrow a copy of Run Lola Run or watch it during luch at some point please? ive watched all of half an hour of it, and have only been able to do activities as Kalin told me what happened.

August 12, 2007 10:46 PM
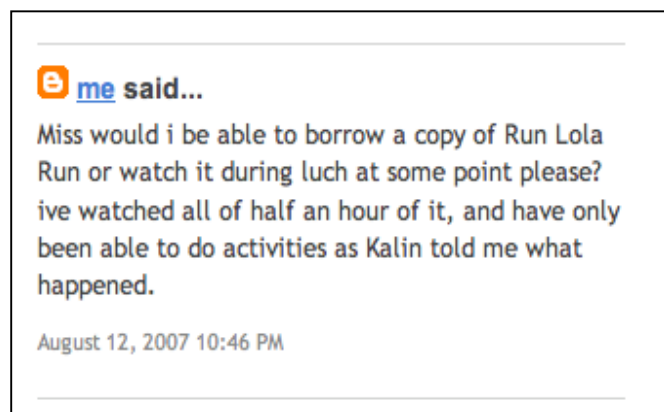
Fig. 3.49 Please Miss..

I initially felt quite 'bad' that the student felt that they couldn't feel that they could ask me in class and had to ask me 'online' to view the DVD. After the next lesson, I asked the student why they hadn't just asked me in class for the film to watch:

> *I forgot to ask ...I thought I'd ask 'cos I remembered. (Student 14,*
>
> *reflective journal, August, 2007)*

I had not noticed the time on the blog entry – 10.46 pm. The ability to work and create in 'their own space', at their own leisure, is a very important part of blogging. I discovered that this was equally important to me as the teacher and I will discuss this point further in Chapter 5.

3.3.3 A safe environment for taking risks

Internet safety and the issues surrounding the online identities of young people are *not* the focus of this section. What I was interested in during the period of the study was whether the students would use the opportunity provided on the blogs to not only take risks when it came to discussing both the texts and the issues we were studying, but also when judging their own abilities as English students**.** As teachers we may expect students to have views that differ from our own, but in reality how many of them feel safe stating views that may be different or apart from the mainstream. The texts that I had selected for the class to study posed fairly complex for the students to deal with – the nature of fate and self-determination and the nature of heaven. Knowing the make-up of my class, I considered both of these topics to be ones that had the potential to lead to both heated and sensitive discussion. In fact, the very first discussion that took place when I introduced the novel *Five people you meet in Heaven* went as follows:

> *Student : ' Are you trying to brain wash us?'*
> *Me: 'What do you mean?'*
> *Student 1: 'You know…a book on heaven. Are you sure you're not trying*
> *to brain wash us?' (Reflective journal, August 13, 2007).*

Not all students have the same level of confidence to pose a question in class as Student 1 did. However, the blog provided other students with an environment where they could express their point of view on sensitive issues. Chapter 4 will discuss how this was not to be the case when the class used the collaborative Web 2.0 application *skrbl*.

MONDAY, AUGUST 27, 2007

Heaven??
my views that i have on heaven from previous readings and movies is that it is a place of happyness and your past is forgotten where as in the novel the five people in heaven, when eddie dies and goes to heaven he meets five people that have effected his life which is not the usual view of heaven.

Posted by Beals at 1:39 PM 1 comments
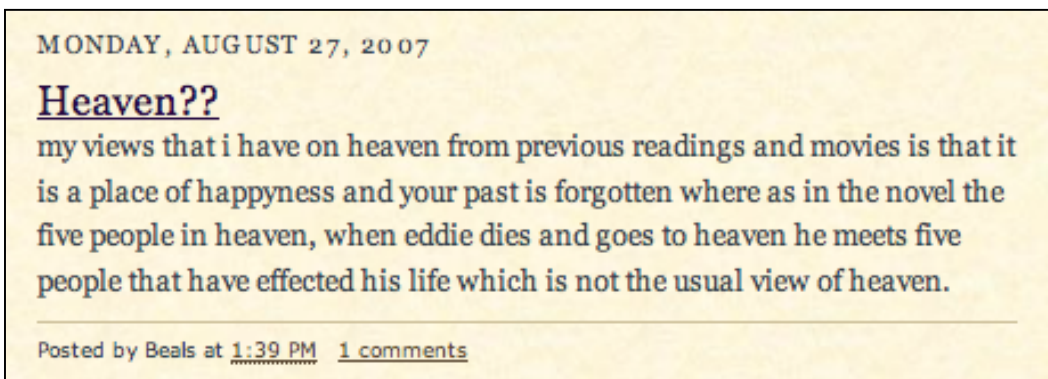
Fig. 3.50 Views of heaven

In Beals' post (Fig. 3.50), the blogger offers a somewhat straightforward take on the traditional Western view of heaven. The differences between their pre-conceived view of heaven and the heaven in the text being studied, are made clear. Missay Ali's post on the notion of heaven is more complex in its approach (Fig. 3.51). This student provides a detailed overview of the iconography attached to a Christian model of heaven – the golden gate, the clouds marking the movement in to the heavens. She makes what I believe is a sophisticated link between traditional Christian iconography and beliefs and her self-reflection. The student herself comments on the fact that she would not have expressed such an idea in general classroom discussion:

> *I don't like to give my point of view in front of others I'm not used*
>
> *to talking to. (Student 8)*

The blog allowed this student to make a very valuable contribution to the class

pool of knowledge.

sunday, august 26, 2007

● ● ● **Ideas of Heaven**
What traditional/fairy tale or mythical idea of heaven do you have?
(You do not have to believe in Heaven to have an image of it)
How does the heaven in the novel relate to this?

i think a lot of traditions, fairy tales and myths have an idea that heaven is
up in the sky above, in the clouds and their is a golden gate that
determines whether you are worthy of entering heaven. if you are, the
gate opens, if you are not the gate remaind shut.
some christian beliefs think that sinners who do not ask for forgiveness go
to hell or are homosexuals go to hell. But people are buried underground,
so maybe heaven is deep underground?

the heaven in the novel does not quite meet the stereotypical elements of
what heaven is, but reflecting on your life is something that is often said
through traditions, fairy tales and myths of what happens when you go to
heaven.

Posted by Missay Ali at 1:18 AM

Fig. 3.51 Views of heaven 2

Others made the same point:

> *I liked the activity we did as I could say what I felt like*
>
> *saying and no one could interrupt or dis agree [student*
>
> *spelling] with me until I had finished writing and it was*
>
> *posted. (Student 15)*

I believed that Student 16 summed up the attitude to blogging anonymously in an interesting, believable and totally honest manner:

> *...we could be as honest as we wanted because it was anonymous [student spelling] because some people aren't exactly nice you can't always express <u>true </u>opinions [student underlining] in a class situation. (Student 16)*

I am sure that I am like all teachers in that I want the students to feel safe and secure in themselves and with their beliefs, whatever they may be. The fact is, however, for some students the classroom may never be a truly safe environment, no matter how hard as teachers we try to make it.

Obviously I was very aware that the personal values and beliefs of students are of great importance to the individual concerned. At the same time I wanted all the students in the class to be aware of the fact the they would each be viewing the text, in particular the novel *Five people you meet in Heaven* (Albom, 2003)*,* in very different ways.

Being able to see and read what others think is, I believe a very valuable part of the blogging activity. 13 of the students commented in their post-study questionnaire on the value of being able to read the views of others, in particular to see if their friends' or peers' opinions were the same as their own. They stated their opinions in the following way:

> *…we could gather each other's points of view (Student 17)*

> *...to get ideas and see people's opinions (Student 7)*

> *...to see how others responded and if they had the same opinion as me (Student 10)*

The idea of creating a safe environment for students to take risks in was also mentioned:

> *I thought it was a good way to get students to participate in the activity that might not participate in class. (Student 18)*

This student viewed the blogs as place where students who, for whatever reason, may not otherwise get involved could do so.

3.3.4 Engagement and enjoyment

One of the reasons that I was so interested in involving my students in Web 2.0 social software such as the blog was that my 'gut instinct' and my background readings told me that the interactive nature of Web 2.0 made it an ideal tool for engaging learners in the classroom. The 'digital natives', so used to the 'twitch speed' of their outer school worlds, needed to be engaged (Prensky, 2005). For some students this was certainly the case. The pre-study technology questionnaire (Appendix 5) had provided detailed information about the technology skills of my students. While most of them were very confident users of 'new technologies', as stated earlier, very few had 'blogged'. They approached the blog activities with an

interest and desire to find out more. They viewed the blog activities as a enjoyable and fun way to learn. The post-study questionnaire asked, What did you think of the learning activities in this topic? Student responses noted a level of interest and enjoyment:

> *...it was interesting – so many varried [student's spelling] comments were made. (Student 8)*

> *...it was good and perhaps a fun way of finding the answers to the questions (Student 18).*

> *...it was a different way of expressing your opions[student spelling] about stuff and you could do it comfortably. (Student 20)*

As stated earlier, all students are individuals and not all students were enthusiastic about the blogging activities. Two students stated in their post-study questionnaire that they found the blogging tasks 'boring' (Student 21). Despite being aware of the theories underpinning different learning styles, I had expected that all of the students would engage in and enjoy these tasks. This comment was unexpected, and I have resolved to plan for differentiation and personalised learning when I use this unit and this approach again.

3.4 The journey so far

Blogs and blogging in the classroom have been the focus of this chapter. The journey began with my setting up my own blog at http://blog-mrs-c.blogspot.com/

and having the students commenting on both their own learning and the classroom tasks through student ownership of blogs as response logs. From the start, I found myself working through the intricacies of my school's IT protocols and infiltrating the IT rooms as often as possible to discovering the appropriate hardware for my needs. The blogs themselves provided me with a huge collection of data. The students that chose to 'blog' wrote honestly and engaged in ongoing conversations with me in a way that was far more detailed and structured than the students who chose to keep paper 'logs'. I found that my teaching strategies, methods and activities were openly critiqued in a safe and non-threatening medium. The 'lumping' together of all students under the umbrella of 'digital natives' proved to be wrong and a mistake. I believe I managed to create a safe environment that enabled students to speak honestly and openly about sensitive and controversial issues, even though I found myself 'not approving' a few inappropriate comments. I felt vindicated when I saw students take control of the medium and create their own identities 'on blog' and the saw power of anonymity at work. While I had fun learning the skill of creating and maintaining a blog, I also had to deal with the realisation of the time involved with keeping on top the student posts and comments. As I have suggested throughout this chapter, this journey has raised a number of issues as well as discoveries. These will be discussed in Chapter 5, which concludes this thesis.

Chapter 4 - To *skrbl* or not to *skrbl....*

The previous chapter has dealt with the relatively successful integration of blogging into classroom practice. This chapter deals with a second social software tool, the *skrbl,* a new application. I was introduced to the *skrbl* application during a professional development course run by Waikato University School Support Services in March 2007. The phrase 'Web 2.0' had yet to become part of my daily vocabulary and I was fascinated by collaborative possibilities of the tool that I saw. As a group of teachers we 'played' with the application – brainstorming, drawing, linking words and so on. But underlying the light-hearted banter was the belief that there were tools freely available on the Web that had real potential for English teachers and English classrooms. This was the first time that I actually had time to sit and 'play' and learn about such tools. It was also the first time I had heard the term 'beta[12]' used to describe an application.

4.1.1 What is exactly is a skrbl?

Skrbl is a 'beta' programme, meaning that it is a trial programme developed in 2006. Quite simply, it is an online, interactive, synchronous whiteboard that allows multiple users to write, plan, brainstorm and draw collaboratively. Setting up the *skrbl board* was a simple task, even simpler than setting up a blog. As the user the first thing I had to do was to register or sign up (Fig. 4.1). During the professional development and the 'dummy run' that I went through using my home Internet connection, I experienced no problems while creating multiple

---

[12] The term 'beta' is used to describe a programme or application that is open or free software but in a trial stage.

pages for use. However it was a different story once I attempted to do the same

using the school's server. I will return to this later in the chapter.
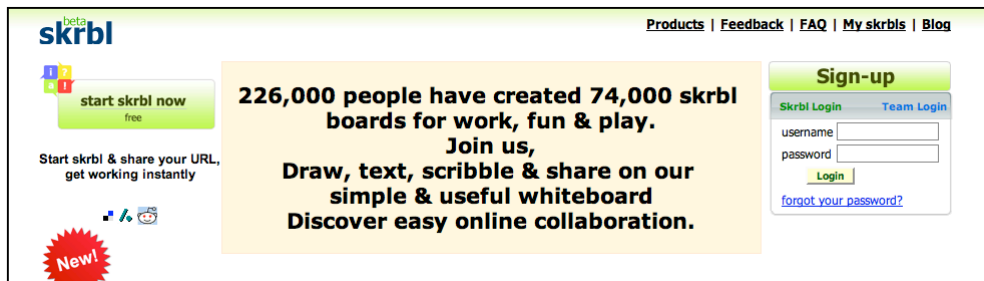
Fig. 4.1 Setting up a *skrbl*

Once a page has been created the user has immediate access to a blank page with

a numbered *url*[13] (Fig. 4.2). This live page can be used straight away.

4.1.1 Setting up the skrbl

From a teaching point of view this instant availability has both benefits and, as I

later discovered, a number of drawbacks. Simply by sharing the *url* with

whomever I wished to, I could enter into online synchronous discussion.
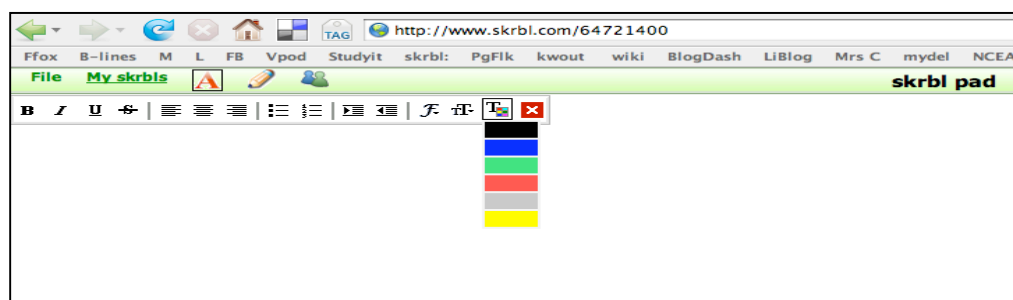
 Fig. 4.2 Accessing the page

Initially I thought that the beauty of the application was the simplicity of the tool.

Any user who was familiar with a word processing programme would find the

---

[13] url – the location or address where documents can be found on the Internet

[14] Te Kotahitanga – a professional development project targeting improving Maori achievement by using effective teaching practices that incorporate cooperative learning activities.

components very straightforward to use. Tabs such as bold, italic, underline are universal. The pencil symbol allowed the writer to add a simple drawing to the page and the colour of the text could be changed from the drop-down bar.

All those who are given the url and who are logged into the page see the same information on that *one* page at the same time, making it what seemed to me to be an ideal tool for a range of collaborative, cooperative and engaging writing tasks. In fact I was excited by the possibilities that the skrbl appeared to afford the user:

> *WOW [writer's capitalisation at the time of writing] spent the day at a workshop on social software in the classroom – introduced to some very interesting sites – browsers and aggregators. Free tools such as skrbl look like really great for writing and response topics. (Reflective journal, March 22, 2007)*

In my mind these tasks could include establishing prior knowledge, brainstorming key ideas about themes and characters and collaborative essay writing.

All of these tasks are clearly linked to the philosophy of cooperative classroom practices. The school's major professional development initiative during the time period of this study was its involvement in the Te Kotahitanga[14]Project I was excited by the fact this tool would allow me to incorporate both cooperative learning activities and the social software that is the key feature of Web 2.0 into my teaching programme.

The first use I envisaged for the *skrbl* was as an immediate record of ideas –

similar to a classroom discussion or brainstorm around a topic. I was working

from the premise that the students were so used to digital discussion via

messaging and texting, that this application would be an instant hit with them. My

initial idea was that instead of me, the teacher, 'collecting' the students' ideas on

the board, the students would process – read and respond to the starter question

and other students' responses and comments – the information. I imagined that

all of the students who were logged in would be able to be able to see each other's

comments and views simultaneously, and that they would be able to see the

development of discussion around those ideas. I also imagined that the students

would then respond to these initial comments, add their thoughts, link ideas

together, add images and symbols and so on. Student users could use a different

colour or font to distinguish themselves if they wanted to add to comments

already posted. Lines could also be added to connect ideas, comments could be

moved around and placed in a different order and simple drawings could be

added. These pages could then be printed as a record for the class – or saved

online to access at a later date. The reality, however, was not as I had imagined.

I decided for ease of use that the students would not have to log on to *skrbl* on the

boards. This meant that any comments they made would be anonymous. This

approach had generally worked well with the initial blog activities. I would again

be relying on them to use the boards sensibly and maturely. However, I soon

found that while anonymity might have encouraged quieter, more reluctant class

members to participate in a class 'discussion', it also enabled students to take

advantage of the fact that I would not know who had made the comments on the

board. I believed at the time that this was a direct response to the fact that the students saw limited value in the *initial skrbl* tasks. This view was supported to a certain extent when the students completed the post-study questionnaire (Appendix 8). I also found that enabling all of the class to work on the same board meant that I did not have immediate knowledge of (or control over) exactly which student was posting which comment. Unlike the blog, there was no tool for moderating comments in this form of collaboration.

4.1.2 Getting students skrbling – software and hardware issues.

While it had been very straightforward for me to set up multiple boards at home, it was a different story when it came to accessing the boards at school. My personal laptop is a MacBook Pro. My browser of choice is Firefox. Using these two tools I had *skrbled* with a colleague to try the application out before launching into classroom use. This trial had been successful in that the *skrbl* had worked and printouts had been generated of the discussion. However my journal reflects a different picture when it came to accessing the programme at school.

> *First issue to arise – went to set up the skrbl boards in the Apple*
>
> *lab – skrbl won't run on the Macs – unless they use firefox as a*
>
> *ISP - will need to look into this further So have had to go to the old*
>
> *PC room where the computers are slower. Two boards eventually*
>
> *set up – what is fate and do we control our own fate/vice versa?*
>
> *(Reflective journal, July 23, 2007)*

This entry highlights one of the issues I found myself facing during the period of this study. The 'best' computer lab – that is, the one with the newer, faster computers – uses PCs, but as I have already mentioned is only free only for one period a week in my English timetable line. The room that was most available was the room of Emacs. This was available every time that I had my Year 12 English class and meant that I could plan activities that were ongoing. However the school chooses to use Safari as its Internet browser and this is automatically loaded onto all of the hardware. Apple, Safari and *skrbl* are for some reason incompatible. Once again I had to rethink my planning and opt for the room of PCs that I could access only one period a week. Once again I was limited in terms of access, but the PC platform meant that there were no issues with the operation of the *skrbl* boards. Yet again I found myself frustrated by the politics and policies of school structures – the timetable did not allow for me to use the very tools I felt I should be using to engage my class with constructive and collaborative Web 2.0 based learning activities. This meant that instead of planning and preparing ongoing activities, I would be restricted to one-off or once-a-week lessons. The activities had to be relatively short and self-contained – a time lapse of seven days between lessons meant continuity was to be limited, if not non-existent.

Despite this the boards had been set up and were ready to go, and access had been allowed. As the 'owner' of the boards, I had the option of making them public or private spaces, password protected or not. I could also 'lock' the board as any time to prevent changes or deletions taking place (Fig. 4.3).

Fig. 4.3 Permissions and security

4.2 Skrbls in action

The first *skrbl* board set up was based on a central theme of the literature the class

was going to study – fate (Fig. 4.4).

Fig. 4.4 First board – part 1

The students were directed to two *skrbl* boards, each with a general discussion

question: What is fate, do we control our own fate? and What cultural attitudes to

fate do you know of? As my reflective journal states, I gave the students very

little instruction on how to use the application or how to answer the questions. The students quickly ascertained, as I had expected, how to operate the application. As digital natives, they learn by doing and so used trial and error to use the simple processing functions of the application.

I gave no instructions re type of language eg txt, abbreviations etc but all of them seemed fine with the actual workings of the programme. Some of them chose a colour to write in, some added drawings – but then erased them when they had worked out the 'eraser' tool. I didn't get screenshots as often as I should have because I was continually wandering trying to check where the 'Chuck Norris[15]' comments were coming from. (Reflective journal, 26 July, 2007)

Figs. 4.4 and 4.5 show the first *skrbl* board that the students worked on. Another issue that arose is clearly shown in these two extracts from the board – the boards themselves are too big to take screenshots of in one single shot, reducing the size of the font made them too small to read. As I had initially wanted to use the boards as a brainstorming tool, to print off and give to the students, this was obviously going to need re-thinking. The initial questions in red were aimed at accessing prior knowledge and promoting discussion. The students posted

---

[15] I still chuckle when I read over this comment now! I had no idea that they knew who Chuck Norris was, let alone realised that they idolised him as a 'God'!

[16] Interestingly, the *only* Excellence grade in the group of 24 students for this standard came from a member of this group. While there is no direct link between that grade and this activity, I felt that the point should be made.

comments in response to the general discussion questions – 'What is fate?, and

'Do we control our own fate'?
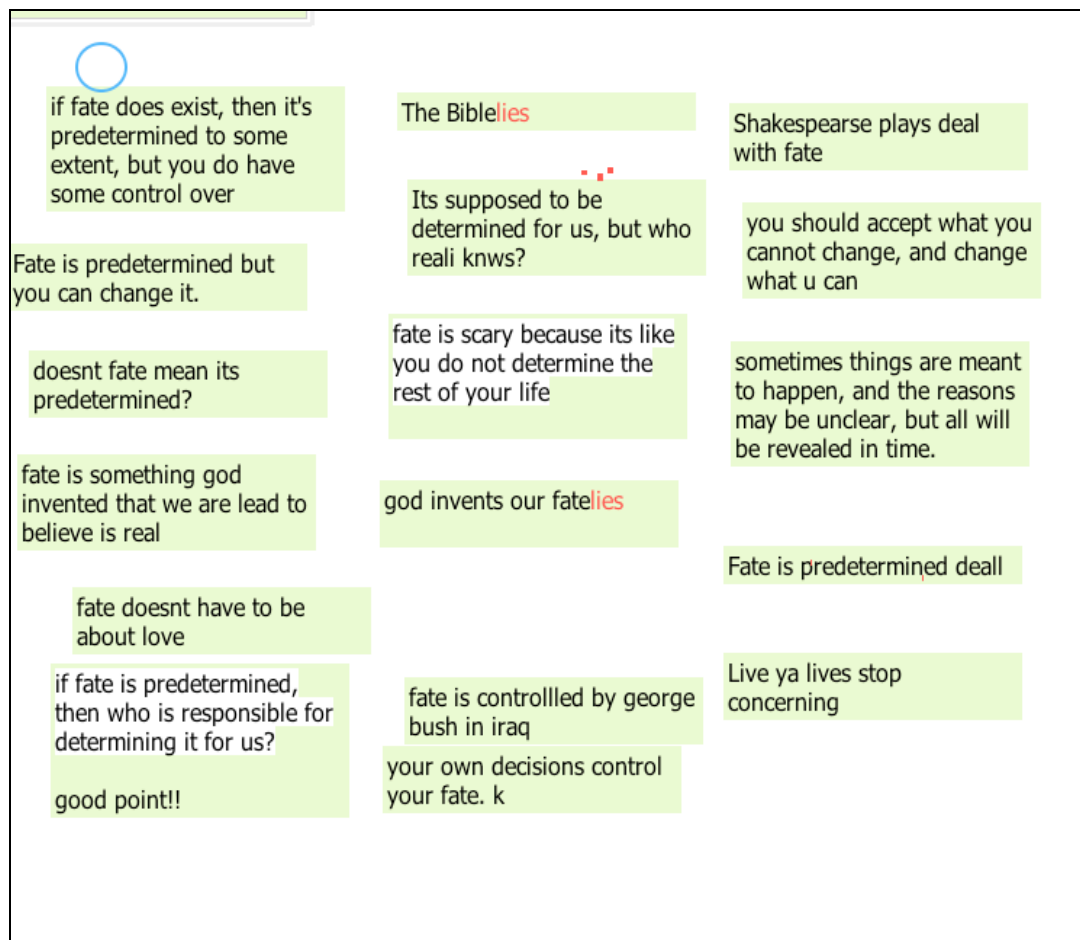
Fig. 4.5 First board - part 2

The student responses showed a range of attitudes existed in the class regarding

the notion of fate and what it was. Three responses made clear links to literature:

the Shakespeare that we had studied earlier; *Lost* (a popular television

programme) and the *Bible.* Another makes reference to George Bush being in

control of fate and Iraq. These showed the ability of some of the students to think

critically and to make connections to real world activities. The two red responses

'lies', while being clearly contrary to the notion of respectful observation of the

ideas of others, did represent one student's point of view. However, I also quickly

realised that some of the students were taking advantage of the 'anonymous' aspect of the task. This in turn led to further discussion in the classroom regarding the appropriate ways in which to present an alternative point of view.

From the board 'Fate', it was apparent that while the students could make links to the comments posted by other students, this did not in turn lead to further discussion. However, the positive reinforcement 'good point' highlighted the possibilities of collaborative social software with its ability in allowing people to make connections about texts. The students had quickly worked out how to use the application and had experimented with the drawing and colouring aspects of the programme. The positive aspects of the activity are reflected in the comments that refer to the idea of predetermination and the conflicting, contrasting views and thought-provoking points of view that are presented. In particular, I noted the following conversation for further discussion when we moved onto the novel later in the term:

> *If fate is predetermined then who is responsible for determining*
> *for us?*
> *good point!!*
> *(skrbl board 39392373, 26 July, 2007)*

The reference to the current popular television drama *Lost* displayed the ability to make connections between texts and across genres. Unfortunately, before I could take a 'snapshot' of the screen, the reference had been removed and 'lost' by the '*skrbler*'.

This highlighted a further aspect of the application that meant that it was going to less user-friendly for the classroom teacher.

The activity was as much a learning one for me, their teacher, as it was for the students. I quickly realised that I needed to refresh the page regularly so that I could keep up with their comments. In fact, some comments 'disappeared' as some students deleted their responses before I could save the page. This is an aspect of synchronous discussion that I had not taken into account and would need to refine before I used the activity again. I wanted to regularly refresh the page so that the students could respond to the comments that had been posted. This was time-consuming and meant that I could not monitor what all of the students were engaged in. After I realised that the *Lost* comment had been 'lost', I attempted to do frequent screenshots. This was not totally successful and I was unable to grab screen shots of all the posts before they were moved, changed or deleted. This in turn meant that instead of doing the usual 'prowl around the room' that characterises my teaching style (I rarely sit at a teacher's desk for any great length of time!) I was 'chair bound'! The dilemma being – do I wander around the class and maintain a 'hands on' approach to the teaching and learning that was taking place? Or do I remain static at the computer, refreshing pages and 'saving' valuable information. In hindsight, the simple solution would have been to make use of a student to refresh and save pages, as this would have freed me up to deal with other issues. My reflective journal highlights my concern:

> *..how do I preserve all of the discussion?*
> *(Reflective journal, 26 July, 2007)*

Discussion with the English teacher who acted as a critical friend threw up an interesting idea. She suggested making the class as a whole collectively responsible for preserving the discussions. Unfortunately, time did not allow for a trial or for me to investigate this further.

While there had been some comments that I would categorise as being deep and thoughtful, ongoing conversation had not been engaged in to the same extent as on the blog. It appeared to me that the negative aspects of the activity outweighed the positives. I will return to this in Chapter 5.

4.2.1 The issue of language

As I have already noted in Chapter 3, the issue of appropriate language use had not been a particularly big issue when the students were commenting on my blog, or setting up their own. Unlike the blog, where the students had commented using appropriate language, more inappropriate comments appeared on the *skrbl*. Despite giving very few instructions regarding the structure and style of the language to be used on the *skrbl,* most of the students posted in standard English. Only two of the posts included abbreviations or 'text-style' language – 'ya' and 'knws'. The issue of comment moderation seemed to be more problematic with the *skrbl* than when the students had blogged. The student responses in the post-study questionnaire showed that a number of the students initially did not see the *skrbl* as a serious or valuable activity. It was not until they participated in the collaborative essay-writing tasks that saw any purpose to the *skrbl boards.*

4.3 Refining the process

The second *skrbl* activity was a more specific question regarding their views and beliefs on the notion of heaven. The text we had been studying as a class, *Five people you meet in Heaven* (Albom, 2003) suggests a view of heaven based on five important incidents from the main character's life. This was the first time that I had studied this text and I had anticipated a certain reluctance on the part of the students to discuss ideas such as heaven, faith and the afterlife. The starting questions – What images or views of heaven have you seen or read about before? Does the heaven in the book match this view? – provided a range of interesting responses (Fig. 4.6). Once again, fairly strong views were stated on a sensitive and personal topic. Most of the students responded with a view of heaven that was firmly grounded in what I would call 'stereotypical Christian iconography'.

The two images of Christ that were selected reflect a traditional image that has been embedded in Western art for centuries. The image of the devil and the repeated references to clouds, harps and angels reinforced this point of view. This time, interestingly, the students who had fairly strong views opposing the existence of a heaven, on the whole did so in a more appropriate manner than before. Although the word 'lies' is used as a response once, the comment 'i don't believe in heaven or hell sorry for Christianity' suggests a more sensitive approach towards those who did support or believe in heaven Also of interest was the fact that the students themselves had started to group the ideas according to some form of commonality. Those who did not believe in the Christian view of heaven are grouped together in the top right hand corner, while those who
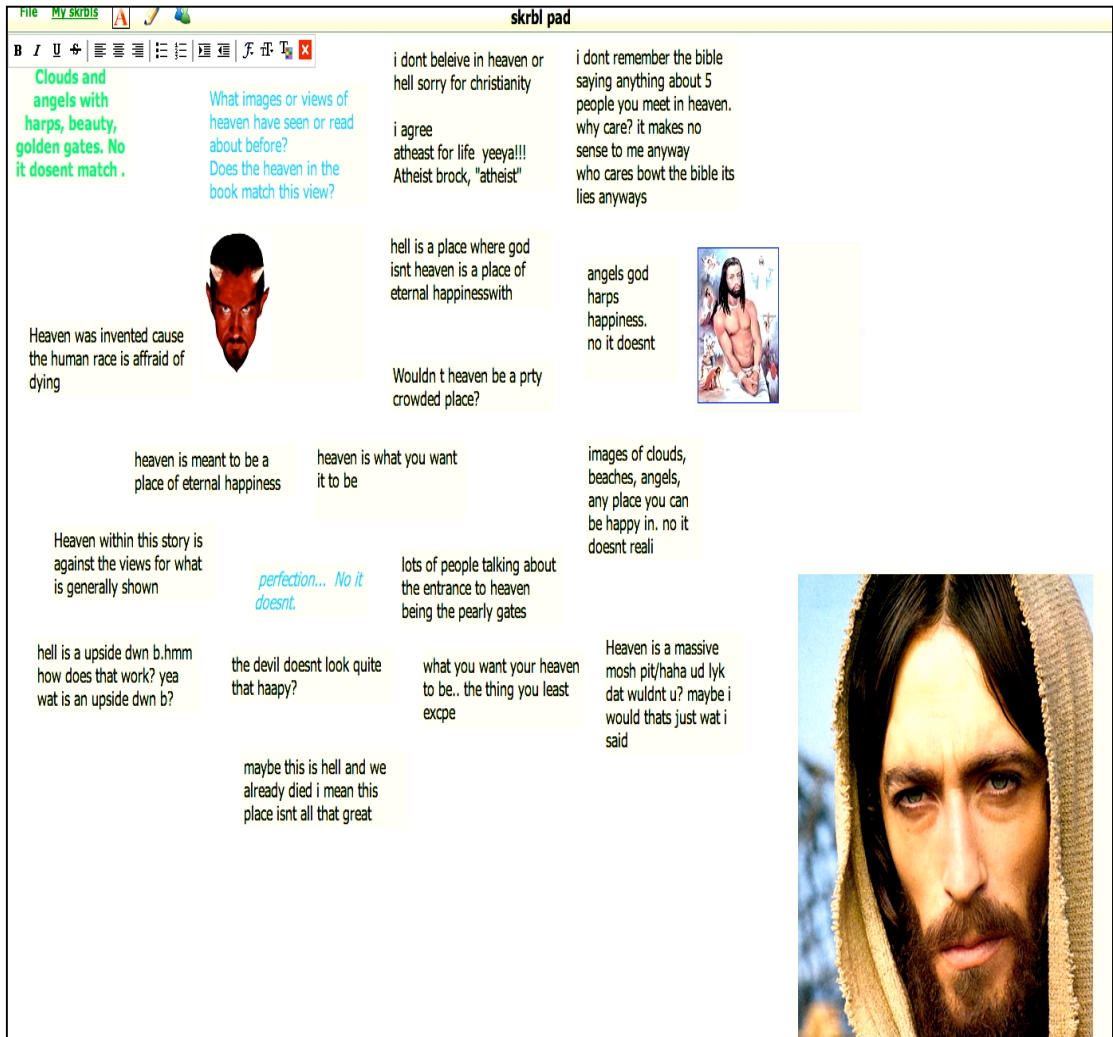
Fig. 4.6 Images of heaven

do support or believe in heaven are spread across the page. Three comments in particular stood out for me as they presented views that I considered to represent quite an individual point of view:

> *maybe this is hell and we already died...i mean this place isn't all that great*

> *heaven is where you want it to b*
>
> *heaven was invented cause the human race was affraid of dying*
>
> *(skrbl board 51656985, 2007)*

The students who wrote these comments obviously felt safe enough to respond to the questions openly despite the earlier inappropriate responses.

The issue of anonymity gave the students the confidence to respond without fear of ridicule in an open forum. This was confirmed in the post-study questionnaire (Appendix 8), where the students were asked they thought the benefits of the *skrbl* were:

> *..you remain anonymous (Student 7)*
>
> *Students can anonymously share their ideas, traditional class*
>
> *Discussions can be tedious and unenjoyable. (Student 8)*
>
> *..confidential, nobody to laugh at your ideas as they don't know*
>
> *who wrote it. (Student 3)*

The anonymity, as with the blog, once again gave the students freedom to express their views safely. In total 14 of the 24 students commented positively in regard to this aspect of the tool.

4.4 Students' views – the value of the skrbl

As well as the issue of anonymity in the post-study questionnaire (Appendix 8), the students commented on a number of other benefits they believed the *skrbl* offered them as students, as well as a number of drawbacks they felt the tool had.

The students clearly identified the same concerns that I had reflected on after the first *skrbl* session, the fact that the anonymous nature of the tool meant that some students took the opportunity to make inappropriate comments (though the students put it a little more colourfully than that!):

> *...some people write the dumbest things (Student 3)*

> *...some people are immature with what they do on it (Student 9)*

> *...people being dicks (Student 1)*

Being able to keep a better picture of exactly who was doing what doing the next *skrbl* session was going to be a key concern.

Four students commented on the visual aspect of the task. One saw this as a positive aspect of the tool:

> *..makes it interesting with the use of colours, photos and pictures also. (Student 10)*

The two other students commented on the actual layout of the information. One saw the 'overlapping of comments' (Student 14) as annoying, while the other stated that the information was 'too spread out all over the screen' (Student 4).

As in the case of blogging, the 'fun' aspect of the task was seen as a benefit and was mentioned by six of the students:

> *...it was fun to look at everyone's ideas (Student 23)*

It was noted that all students could get involved and that the class was not totally dominated by 'a few loud students' (Student 13). The collaborative nature of the tool was noted by six of the students:

> *...you can use other people's comments for ideas (Student 22)*

> *...more input. Sharing ideas. Adding to ideas etc (Student 4)*

> *It gave you ideas not just your own ideas everyone elses to (Student 23)*

This group of students had identified one of the reasons I been so excited when I was first introduced to this tool – the possibilities of shared activities and collaborative tasks. This was to be my next activity – collaborative essay-planning and writing.

4.5 Small group sharing – essay-planning and writing

It was apparent that monitoring large groups on the one *skrbl* in a one-hour class session was always going to be difficult. It was hard to keep up with posts and comments and also hard to keep track of who was posting and when. The last activity I had planned with the class was an attempt at collaborative brainstorming, planning and writing a practice Level 2 literature essay. The initial task was revised to enable me to manage more easily the comments and the discussions that I hoped were going to take place. My modified plan involved setting up no more that five boards, each with a different essay question. I would then allocate the students a number so that no more than five students would be loaded onto any one board and essay question.

This proved to be a far more workable system. The task was to read the question, jot down the ideas and then sort them on the page. Once this was done, the students were asked to write the opening paragraph of an essay on the topic they had worked on collaboratively. As far as I was concerned this was the most successful *skrbl* activity.

The essay tasks were: 'To what extent do the decisions that Eddie makes control his life?' and 'How relevant is the quote "events in life do not happen by chance"?' One of the most interesting aspects of this task was the way in which the students approached both the brainstorming and essay-writing task.

Much has been made in recent years of the concern over students using 'text language' in the NCEA examinations (McCarthy, 2008).

 As a teacher and a long time marker of both NCEA and Bursary, I have rarely come across a student who writes as if they are texting. I have always had a firm belief that most students know when it is or is not appropriate to use 'txt talk'. This task supported my views. The students did use 'txt talk' when they were

heres anda box

all the ppls hu eddie meets up wif have quite an important meaning to eddies life and the choices from their lives have an effect on how eddies life was to turn out......yeyah
*
*
*
*
*
*

do da brainstorm in dis box

(wat r the ideas??)

*the blue man tells eddie that there are no random events in life, and that everything in life is connected somehow.
*
*
*
*
*

and anda one

*Maybe things do happen by chance because they are affected by peoples decisions and these decisions are made by chance
*
*
*
*
*
*

In the novel, The Five People You Meet In Heaven, by Mitch Albom, the quote "Events in life do not happen by chance" is a very relevant quote in many ways.

Throughout the novel, there are several references and links to the quote, such as when Eddie meets the Blue Man in heaven. The Blue Man tells Eddie "that there are no random acts. That we are all connected. That you can no more separate one life from another than you can separate a breeze from the wind" This is an important idea as Eddie believes his life has no purpose, this quote tells him that he had a purpose and that his decisions affected other people for the better and for the worse - such as in the Blue mans case (death).

This quote also ties in with the idea of interconnectivity and how Eddies decisions affected those around him such as his father, Marguerite, the Blue man and Tala and others decisions affected him such as the captain's decision to shoot eddie in the knee to save his life.

Fig. 4.7 Collaborative essay - 1

brainstorming, but when they were writing the draft introductions and then the essay, there is not one example of 'non-standard English' used (Fig. 4.7 and 4.8).

The use of 'txt talk' is particularly evident in the planning boxes of Fig. 4.7. Abbreviations such as 'ppl', 'hu', 'do da' and 'wat r the ideas' are clearly conventional and accepted abbreviations that are used while texting. The students in this group attempted to bullet point their ideas (not that successfully) and

In the novel, The Five People You Meet In Heaven, by Mitch Albom, the quote "Events in life do not happen by chance" is a very relevant quote in many ways.

Throughout the novel, there are several references and links to the quote, such as when Eddie meets the Blue Man in heaven. The Blue Man tells Eddie "that there are no random acts. That we are all connected. That you can no more separate one life from another than you can separate a breeze from the wind" This is an important idea as Eddie believes his life has no purpose, this quote tells him that he had a purpose and that his decisions affected other people for the better and for the worse - such as in the Blue mans case (death).

This quote also ties in with the idea of interconnectivity and how Eddies decisions affected those around him such as his father, Marguerite, the Blue man and Tala and others decisions affected him such as the captain's decision to shoot eddie in the knee to save his life.

Fig. 4.8 The essay attempt

appeared to work as a team. They have used different colours to identify

themselves as writers and have crossed out ideas as they have used them, using the edit tab on the toolbar.
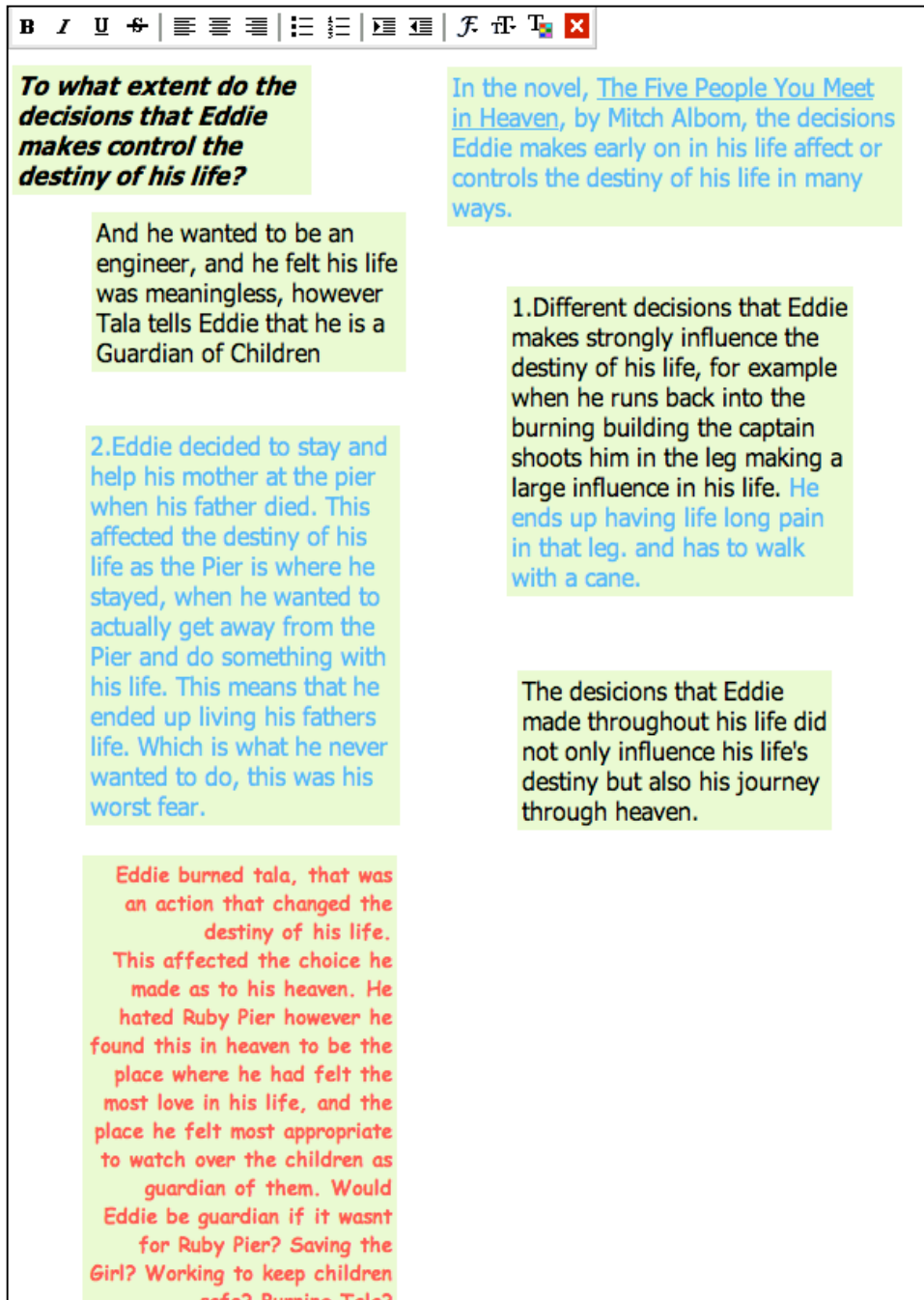
The group went far beyond simply writing the introduction and worked together to create the second and third paragraphs of the essay as well. The paragraphs are 'fleshed out' from the abbreviated notes on the left-hand side of the board. Although this group completed the task and produced the first half of a collaborative essay, the group did not necessarily see that as a positive outcome. In the post-study questionnaire the students stated that they found the task 'time-consuming' (Student 23) and it was 'sometimes hard to organise different ideas on the page' (Student 7). The group that completed Fig. 4.9 had a different view of the activity and the tool.

Four students worked on this essay topic. Three of them are clearly identified by the colour they have chosen. This group used no abbreviations in their planning; in fact, they chose not to plan a great deal at all. Instead they decided independently to discuss the topic and then have turns at writing the introduction and following essay. Though this was not exactly what the task asked of them, I accepted and respected their decision, as it still involved the idea of collaborative writing and a very valuable discussion came out of the task as they interpreted it.

The section in red (Fig. 4.10) serves as a brainstorm and is the work of one student in the group, who recorded the ideas after they had discussed them. This group was confident in their ability to write an essay and they wanted to get on

with the task. Two of the students implied that they hated planning and never did

it before they wrote class essays, so why would they start now!

B *I* U ℱ | ≡ ≡ ≡ | ≔ ≔ | ⊟ ⊟ | ℱ ℱℱ Tₐ ☒

To what extent do the decisions that Eddie makes control the destiny of his life?

In the novel, The Five People You Meet in Heaven, by Mitch Albom, the decisions Eddie makes early on in his life affect or controls the destiny of his life in many ways.

And he wanted to be an engineer, and he felt his life was meaningless, however Tala tells Eddie that he is a Guardian of Children

1.Different decisions that Eddie makes strongly influence the destiny of his life, for example when he runs back into the burning building the captain shoots him in the leg making a large influence in his life. He ends up having life long pain in that leg. and has to walk with a cane.

2.Eddie decided to stay and help his mother at the pier when his father died. This affected the destiny of his life as the Pier is where he stayed, when he wanted to actually get away from the Pier and do something with his life. This means that he ended up living his fathers life. Which is what he never wanted to do, this was his worst fear.

The desicions that Eddie made throughout his life did not only influence his life's destiny but also his journey through heaven.

Eddie burned tala, that was an action that changed the destiny of his life. This affected the choice he made as to his heaven. He hated Ruby Pier however he found this in heaven to be the place where he had felt the most love in his life, and the place he felt most appropriate to watch over the children as guardian of them. Would Eddie be guardian if it wasnt for Ruby Pier? Saving the Girl? Working to keep children safe? Burning Tala?

Fig. 4.9 A second essay task

Eddie burned tala, that was an action that changed the destiny of his life.
This affected the choice he made as to his heaven. He hated Ruby Pier however he found this in heaven to be the place where he had felt the most love in his life, and the place he felt most appropriate to watch over the children as guardian of them. Would Eddie be guardian if it wasnt for Ruby Pier? Saving the Girl? Working to keep children safe? Burning Tala?

Fig. 4.10 Collaborative planning

Each student then made a start at writing different parts of the essay:

1.Different decisions that Eddie makes strongly influence the destiny of his life, for example when he runs back into the burning building the captain shoots him in the leg making a large influence in his life. He ends up having life long pain in that leg. and has to walk with a cane.

Fig. 4.11 First attempt

Student 4 was allocated the introduction and they wrote (Fig. 4.11) what they saw as a 'reasonable attempt' (Student 4). However, the conversation that ensued saw them rethink their introduction and reword their attempt:

> *Student 22: That's not an introduction...it's like...you've got the main stuff all in there... you need to...you know ...introduce it...yeah...introduce it*
>
> *Student 4: Like how?*
>
> *Student 22: You kno...like Mrs Cleary explained...you can't just start off with the main point...whatever*
>
> *Student 4: do you wanna do one?*
>
> *(Reflective journal, September 19, 2007)*
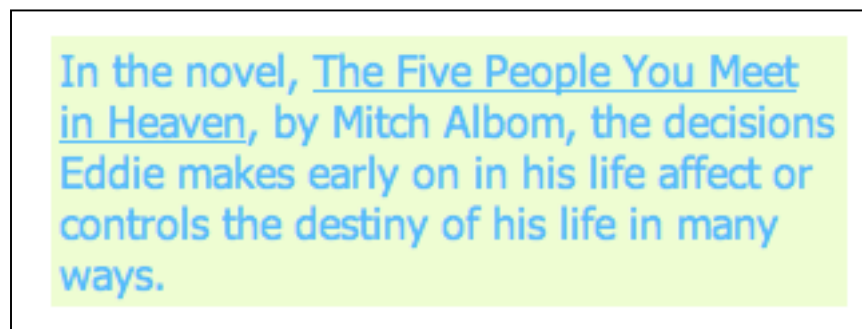
The resulting paragraph, though shorter than intended, fulfils the function of an introduction:
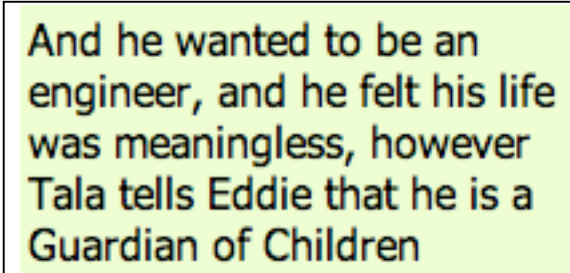
Fig. 4.12 An introduction is born!

It introduces the question, the author and the text and it makes a statement or sets up a thesis for the essay. This group of students continued to discuss the essay and

play around with the way in which each of them had contributed to its

composition in such a way that the entire group had ownership of the learning.

The group continued to work together, numbering paragraphs after each one had

been edited and deciding whether or not they had anything that could serve as a

conclusion.

As already noted, Student 22 took the lead in the discussions that revolved around

the writing task. However what emerged was a collaborative piece of writing. The

conversations that took place around the writing were valuable learning

conversations. The group discussed which point should be the first to come after

the introduction and Fig. 4.11 was selected as 'it seems to follow on OK' (Student

7). They decided that the opening statement needed further evidence and so

added the sentence in blue to clarify the point. Student 14 added Fig. 4.13

because she 'thought it was important but didn't know where to add it in'. By

adding to the board she thought the others would see it and incorporate it

somewhere in the essay.

And he wanted to be an engineer, and he felt his life was meaningless, however Tala tells Eddie that he is a Guardian of Children

Fig 4.13 An important idea

Student 14 was right – this is a very important idea of the novel and it definitely

related to the question that had been set for the topic. Although time did not allow

the group to complete the task to the level they had expected, that is a completely

finished essay, they did take away a printout of the board with the vital idea

included. The group were determined to get as much done as possible and

Student 4 was given the task of writing the conclusion (Fig. 4.14).

The desicions that Eddie made throughout his life did not only influence his life's destiny but also his journey through heaven.
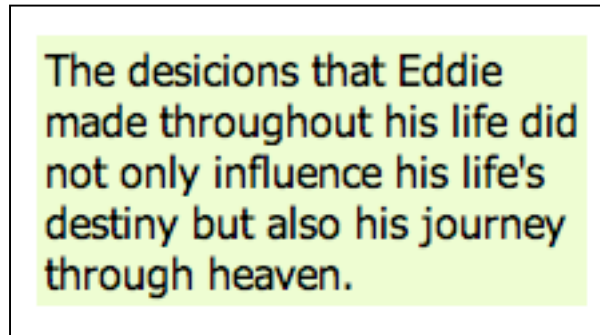
Fig. 4.14 A conclusion

This met with the immediate approval of the group:

…yep…short but sweet… (Student 14)

That's it…(Student 22)

Profound [says Student 4's name] (Student 7)

While this may not have been the 'perfect' essay in terms of its language and

structure[16], I believe the activity was perhaps one of the most powerful learning

activities that this group had experienced with regard to essay writing. They had

discussed what did and did not make a good introduction. They discussed what

evidence was needed to back up the point they were going to make. They realised

they needed to tie it all together with a neat and tidy conclusion. They each

worked in a group with students that they would not necessarily have selected to

work with themselves. The students in this group commented on the value of

sharing ideas in this format when asked in the post-study questionnaire (Appendix

8) to describe any benefits they saw from this activity:

We could combine ideas, write fuller, more detailed essays

(Student 7)

There was a shared/large input into the essay. More than

one person showing ideas + writing. Easy to bring ideas.

(Student 4)

We could use other peoples opinions. (Student 14)

The group noted also a number of drawbacks:

it was time consuming (Student 22)

there were a lot of ideas to read and keep up with

(Student 4)

Not everyone contributed much (Student 14)

I found it interesting that the students had found the task time-consuming. There

were four students in this group. During a one-hour lesson between them they had

worked out the key ideas, written an introduction, two paragraphs and a

conclusion and had further information to include had they wanted to. When I asked them how long it might have taken them to do the task for homework, they all thought it would be 'way longer than that'. Time *is* relative. Collectively, they had produced in one hour what it would have taken them at least an hour each to do at home. They had also experienced the benefit of collaboratively discussing the task as they worked through it. They had successfully '*skrbled'*.

I found the issue of time to be more of a factor or issue for me than it was for the students. Having the students on four different boards meant that while I did not have the ability to moderate comments, there were fewer students to target if an inappropriate comment appeared on any of the *skrbls*. However, this meant that I had to switch between multiple pages on my screen. I found that it was easier, and more in keeping with my style of teaching, to monitor the groups by actually moving among them in the physical space of the computer room. This proved to be especially beneficial for this study, as I listened and recorded the conversations that the group who produced Fig. 4.11 conducted as they took place. This meant, however, that I may have missed out on equally valuable discussions that the other groups were having. But as the teacher-researcher in the class, I made the decision to focus on this one group for a part of the lesson. The issue of time will be one that I return to in Chapter 5.

4.6 The journey continued

This chapter has dealt with my attempts to use the new trial application *skrbl* as a collaborative brainstorming, planning and writing tool within my Year 12 English programme. Specifically, I have focussed on two tasks; brainstorming sensitive

ideas and issues such as on *skrblboard* http://www.skrbl.com/51656985; and the collaborative essay-writing that forms *skrblboard*

http://www.skrbl.com/54145531. Once again, I found that I had to work inside the parameters of my school's IT network and the availability of usable spaces.

Initially, I was disappointed with the somewhat immature approach that some of the students adopted when it came to the initial tasks in the early *skrbling* sessions. The anonymity afforded by the application and the belief that the tasks were not 'real work' meant that some students initially made inappropriate comments. However, redefining the tasks and creating small groups to work on individual boards gave me a better picture of what individual students were doing during the *skrbl* lessons. Time and my time management in the classroom once again became an issue. I had to discover and utilise strategies to ensure that a) valuable electronic data was not lost; and b) that the students were being engaged in valuable learning activities and conversations.

The essays that were produced in the final collaborative writing session supported and restored my belief that students *do* know when it is and *isn't* appropriate to use non-standard English such as texting. It also restored and supported my belief that Web 2.0 technology does have a place in the English classroom. This part of the journey continued to raise questions, some of which duplicate those raised in Chapter 3. The discussion in Chapter 5 will attempt to address them.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and future directions

> Literacy runs through all human activity regardless of
> historical time or space, technology has always been at the
> center of literacy. Blogs are merely the latest technological
> iteration. By themselves blogs are neither good nor bad, and
> neither are they ingenious nor trivial (Penrod, 2007, p. 61).

When I embarked on this self-study 18 months ago I was working from a fairly
strong premise that English teachers needed to change the ways in which they
viewed response to text and textual composition in the classroom. A great deal of
the professional reading that I had done during 2006 and 2007 had led me to
believe, as many educators and commentators did, that English teachers needed to
realise that today's (and more than likely tomorrow's) generation, the 'Nintendo
generation', learned best by *doing* (Gee, 2003; Prensky, 1998 & 2005). They
needed to realise that the notion of what it means to be literate has evolved. They
needed to place value on the cultural worlds that students exist in (Beavis, 1997;
Marsh & Millard, 2000; Pelletier, 2005; Snyder, 1998). They needed to recognise
that many of their students, whose brains are operating at 'twitch speed' (Prensky,
1998), think that 'deeper and better forms of learning are taking place in the
online communities that they belong to rather than the schools they attend' (Gee,
2004, p. 60). They needed to accept that if they do not 'engage' them by
providing them with learning opportunities that challenge them in some way, they
will ultimately 'enrage' them (Prensky, 2005). My journey through this self-study
has meant that I have had to reflect on this premise and accept that in the real

world of the classroom, things are never so 'black and white' or so 'cut and dried'!

The study set out to answer the following questions:

6. What online, collaborative Web 2.0 applications are students familiar with?

7. What literacy practices can online, collaborative applications such as 'blogs' and 'skrbl' boards support?

8. How can these applications promote effective learning in the classroom?

9. How can these applications be integrated into classroom practice?

10. What are some problems associated with the use of Web 2.0 applications in the secondary, English classroom and how can these be overcome?

The study that I carried in my classroom over two terms in 2007 provided answers to these questions in varying degrees. As important however, as already stated in Chapters 3 and 4, the study raised a number of issues for me as a classroom teacher. Issues that need to be reflected on and that will in turn inform my future practice as an English teacher in the 21st Century.

5.1 That old trap – don't make generalisations!

One of my earliest memories of being in a Social Studies class is one when the class was being taught about stereotypes and the danger of making generalisations. When I embarked on this study I thought that I had a reasonably strong base to start from, that is, that learners of today are 'digital natives' and that therefore they are totally immersed in the digital technology that has become

a part of our lives in the 21st century. They 'txt' without looking at the keys; they have two cellphones and two cellphone providers – one provider for 'txting' another provider for talking. They download music and movies and upload images and text to various social networking sites, such as *bebo, Myspace* and *Facebook.* They SMS because it's there, it's cheap, and they can. They compose music using sophisticated programs like *Garageband* and they are using the same editing tools that the professionals are using to create images *(Adobe Photoshop)* and texts *(Pages08)*. It made sense to me then to expect that the students who were in my class would all be enthusiastic about using Web 2.0 technology as a medium for learning activities. However, I found out that this was not always the case.

5.1.1 The class – a group of individuals

I would describe the student participants in the study as typical New Zealand teenagers. The class was made up of a fairly even mix of male and female students. The cultural make-up of the class reflected the cultural make-up of the school. Each of the students had achieved at least 15 credits in English at level 1 NCEA, which meant that they had all achieved Level 1 Literacy. Of the twenty-four that took part in the study, only two had no access to the Internet at home; one of these students chose to blog, one did not. The one that did blog made use of class time to blog, and also accessed the Internet out of school hours (though there was no requirement to do so) at a friend's place. The majority of them had downloaded music, played computer games, and used digital cameras. 90% of them either had a *bebo or Myspace* social network page or had accessed one on a

regular basis. To me they were the definitely the 'digital natives' that Prensky (2001) talks of.

However, the mistake I initially made was one that I would not expect the first-year that teachers I supervise to make, that it, to expect that all students learn in the same way. In the same way that we acknowledge that there are kinaesthetic, visual and auditory learners, I believe that we now have to acknowledge the digital learner as one who has a preferred learning style. While it was obvious that many of the students thrived on the opportunity to discuss texts with me via the blogs that both they and I had created, just as many of them preferred to use the traditional paper and pen. In fact, it was a 50-50 split, with 12 choosing to blog and 12 choosing to keep paper logs. For some, this choice was governed by their attitude towards the school's computer hardware and network system, which they viewed as substandard. For a number of others, this was simply because they preferred to write on paper. Some of the students felt that they lacked word processing skills and this in turn made the task of thinking and 'typing' seem daunting. Though they can 'txt' and think simultaneously, this skill did not seem to transfer to the larger keyboard. This reminded of the danger and simplicity of using universal descriptors. While all students may be exposed to and immersed in digital technology, that does not necessarily mean that they all want their learning to be digitally mediated.

This study has confirmed my belief that as a teacher I have to allow for individual differences in the classroom – it is a simple fact of life. We all learn differently too. When *I* write a paper or an essay, I do so straight onto the screen. I do not

plan as such, but usually have the opening or introduction in my head and often where I want the piece to go. I fill in the rest as I think of it. We all work in different ways.

The new national curriculum focuses on the student as an individual, places the emphasis on creating schools where learning will be personalised and student's individual needs are to be met. By giving the students the choice of whether to 'blog' or not was a move I believe in the right direction. Although at the time I was frustrated by the fact that only half of the students had chosen to keep blogs, on reflection, the fact that they were given the choice was an important step in individualising their learning. Just because students are familiar and comfortable with Web 2.0 technologies does not mean that they will all want to use them as a learning medium.

5.2 To 'blog' or not to 'blog'? The benefits of blogging

> **...**it is recognised that incorporating new media into curriculum work should not be done simply for its own sake but must be justifiable in terms of enhancing learning (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007).

As I have previously stated, I believe that student blogging was the most successful aspect of the study. Their initial responses to *MrsC's* blog served as a form of appraisal of not just my teaching activities and style but of the students own attitudes to the learning that was taking place in the classroom. The 12 blogs provided me with a wealth of information. The daily responses and conversations

that emerged from them I found to be enlightening at times and prompted me to reflect on the learning experiences that had taken place in the classroom.

5.2.1 Giving students voice

While blogging purists such as Will Richardson and Stephen Downes would question whether blogs as response journals really constitute a blog, for me this was the most manageable way to start integrating Web 2.0 activities into my classroom practice. I believe that response blogs have a definite place in the English classroom. They allow students to develop a personal and critical voice in response to the texts that they are studying. They allow them to do so in a safe and non-threatening environment. They allow the student blogger to work when and where they want, from late at night at home to before school in the school library. They allow for individuality and expression – the student can personalise the blog however they choose.

Some chose to use pseudonyms, some chose names and descriptors that reflected an aspect of their personality or their place in the world. Others chose to simply post their blog using their name and details just as they did on other social networking sites they belonged to. They tended to write more and to write more thoughtfully than their classmates who chose to keep paper response logs. They used the blog to give me advice on texts to view and to ask questions of me that they might not have felt comfortable raising in the classroom. While initially I was disappointed that one student did not want to ask for extra material in front of the class, I later accepted this as another benefit of the blog. They responded openly and honestly to the questions that I asked of them regarding the learning

activities that were taking place in the classroom. The result of one of these discussions has been my review of the performance-based assessment of the Shakespeare unit of work. They communicated with an audience outside the walls of our classroom and engaged in conversations around texts with readers with whom they would never have had the opportunity to engage in discussion otherwise. They even saw their views being read and responded to by teachers from across the globe. The most exciting aspect of the blogging was that the students participated in ongoing conversations with me, their teacher, and responded willingly to the questions that I posed for them on an almost daily basis. This, however, was to prompt one of the major issues that arose during the course of the study. I will return to this later in this chapter.

As a teacher I want my students to be able to read any text with a critical eye; to be able to engage in discussions based around texts that may involve taking risks, and to feel safe in this undertaking. I also want them to understand the process involved in the production of texts. I believe that for these reasons, blogging falls naturally into the parameters of the English curriculum and course of study. It is equally at home in both the making meaning (reading and viewing) and creating meaning (writing and presenting) sections of the new curriculum. To create a blog is to create a multi-modal text. To able to do so, is to be literate in the newer, broader meaning of the word.

From the 'small steps' that I took with classroom blogging during this study, giant leaps are waiting to be made. The original blogs were a way of keeping track of information; the blogger could search back through the live links that they had

created on their blog. Today blogs offer a lot more. I envisage using blogs as research logs with students embedding their searches and links to content within them instead of keeping a 'research log' of 'what book I used' and 'what information I got from it'. I imagine my students setting up global book chats on the texts that we study in class and using their blogs to keep track of their thoughts and responses as they read. I imagine them continuing the conversations that I began with my students last year around the texts we were studying, as for me these were refreshing, enjoyable and wonderful learning experiences.

5.3 Collaboration and engagement in the learning activities

I was really excited when I was first introduced to the *skrbl* application early in 2007. I saw great potential for the use of such a collaborative and multi-modal tool in English classes. My initial forays into *skrbling* were, however, fraught with a number of tensions. These will be discussed in the next section of this chapter. The first learning activities that used the *skrbl* involved the whole class working on the same board. The students saw these boards as a safe place to express ideas that they might not have felt comfortable expressing in the classroom. The comments were anonymous and students with opposing points of view eventually learnt to temper their comments a little more appropriately. While some collaboration and interaction was apparent amongst the students, it was not until the students worked in small groups on individual boards and tasks that the true value of the *skrbl* became apparent.

Collaborative essay writing was the final *skrbl* activity that I engaged the class in. The conversations that took place, both on the boards and around the screen, I

believe, provided strong evidence to support the use of such Web 2.0 applications in an English classroom. The students used the *skrbl* boards as effective brainstorming tools. They bullet-pointed notes using their own 'txt talk' abbreviations. This was an accepted form of note-making, comparable, I believe, to the shorthand of old! They moved information around the boards and organised their ideas into a logical sequence. The discussion that I witnessed regarding essay structure and the importance of an introduction, I take to be an incredibly valuable learning conversation. Here were a group of students critiquing each other's work, re-organising their ideas and collaboratively producing an acceptable essay that it would have taken them a lot longer to produce as individuals. This is something that as teachers, often trapped in the 'treadmill' of assessment, we may tend to overlook.

It became clear in my study that the students themselves enjoy reading and seeing their peer's ideas and work. This is a point that many of them raised during the period of the research. They want to know what others think about texts and text production. They want to have open and honest discussion. They want to be able to challenge points of view in a safe environment. Collaborative brainstorming, planning and writing tasks on the *skrbls* allowed them to do so.

5.4 Problems associated with the use of Web 2.0 applications in the secondary, English classroom

In Chapters 3 and 4 I identified a number of issues that were to be discussed further here. These issues can be organised into three main themes – issues that arose from the school and school IT protocols, its systems and programmes;

issues that arose from the students' engagement with and use (or misuse) of the Web 2.0 tools; and issues that arose from my own beliefs and actions as the teacher-researcher engaged in the study.

5.4.1 The school and its systems

Whatever innovations or modifications I had wanted to make as a teacher to my teaching programme relating to the use of ICTs and Web 2.0 technology had to 'fit' inside the parameters of what I could effectively manage in my own school environment. From the outset, ongoing access to efficient and up-to-date hardware that enabled the tools that I wanted to use with my class to function properly was an issue. This was (and continues to be) increasingly frustrating. I had to make the decision to sacrifice regular and consecutive lessons in order to use the least available room which housed the only computers that would allow the Web 2.0 tools I wanted to use efficiently. While the Head of Computing at the school was totally supportive of what I was attempting to do and was regularly finding answers for me regarding software and hardware 'anomalies' that occured due to the double platform of Mac and PC that we operate, the crux of the matter is, if I cannot get access, I cannot use the tools.

Similarly the school's watchdog site was particularly efficient at blocking any live feeds that appeared to be 'inappropriate'. Unfortunately this meant that I had to think carefully about the links and feeds that I planned to utilise with my classes. I mentioned early in Chapter 3 that *blogger.com* was about to become a blocked site, just as I started using it. Links to other social software sites such as *Youtube, Vodpod and Rockyou* were broken. *Youtube, Vodpod* and *Rockyou* are all sites

where music, photographs and video footage can be collected, aggregated and then fed directly to an external site such as my blog. Music and film are part of popular culture and they form an important part of what I teach in the classroom. While I may set up wonderful pages and provide links for the students to follow, at school they were unable to do so. It became a case of technology controlling what I could teach and use and not the other way around.

Another issue that arose from school policy was one of supervision. Half of the class wanted to blog, half did not. School policy dictates that no students are to be unsupervised in a computer lab. While I can understand that there are issues of security when a great deal of money has been invested in hardware, I believe there is a need to be flexible. This imperative becomes greater when we look at the 'front end' of the new curriculum, which requires teachers to be inclusive and to focus on what the students can do, the abilities that they have already. If acted on, the 'personalising' of students' learning will mean that there may *not ever* be a time when all students are all at the same point of understanding and learning. As a school I believe we will need to find other ways of dealing with issues such as this and adopt a more flexible approach to delivering the curriculum.

This study has shown that a teacher like myself can work within the parameters of a school's system in order to integrate valuable new social software applications such as blogging and *skrbling* into classroom practice. What the study has also shown, though, is that while it can be done, it could also be done more effectively and without the compromises I felt I had to make to both my teaching programme and the learning activities I wanted my classes to engage in.

5.4.2 Student issues – am I out of touch?

A number of issues arose directly from the attitudes or actions of the students themselves. These were primarily to do with how they represented themselves in the online environment and their understanding of what was and was not appropriate to say in that online environment. The issue of appropriate language use will be addressed in the section that deals with a 'Blogging Code of Ethics'.

The students who created their own blogs presented an image of themselves for a worldwide audience to read and view. I was initially uncomfortable with the amount of information that some students were prepared to place out there in 'cyberspace'. Some gave real names, other webpages they had, and posted identification pictures of themselves on their blog. Unlike me, the students had no issue with this. If they had *bebo* or *Myspace* accounts, the information was already there and they merely provided links to these other socially mediated sites.

Am I out of touch with what are acceptable or safe Internet practices? I think not, but in future I will provide more guidance before the students embark on their own blogging journeys. The model blog that I provide has no photograph but rather an animated avatar, or cartoon figure that bears a passing (ever so slight) resemblance to me. I give no specific detailed information about myself, only that I am a teacher, that I work in South Auckland and that I am a film and music fan. For the purposes of the tasks that I involved the students in, that was enough. Education is the key to safe Internet practices. Students need to be educated on to how keep themselves safe, just what and how much information they should give

out about themselves and how to react when inappropriate material comes up before the. Imposing a 'blanket ban' on all socially networked sites, a path that many schools have chosen too take does not lead to an improved understanding of the issues concerned.

5.4.3 Issues concerning the teacher – what will I do differently next time?

From the outset of the study, my initial assumptions were challenged. I began with the following beliefs: that all students would blog; that by Year 12 I would not need to lay down incredibly stringent guidelines as to acceptable use (they had by now had at least four years of the school's Internet protocols presented to them); that they would blog out of class time; and that there would be no problem using the Web 2.0 tools I had selected for classroom use. This latter assumption has been addressed in the previous section.

As I have already stated, the belief that all students were 'digital natives' and so would prefer to learn using digital media was not correct. The need to accept that all students do not learn the same way has also been addressed. All students sign an Internet User contract (Appendix 2) when they enrol at the College. Whenever they take ICT or Computer courses at school, these expectations are reinforced. I had expected that the students, as Year 12s, would have had a firm understanding of user protocols, appropriate language and behaviour when online. My initial disappointment, when I found that this was not the case during our first *skrbl* sessions, was tempered by the fact that, once again, I should have known better.

Further reading and online conversations with other teachers using blogs and the like in their classrooms have reinforced for me the need to introduce a specific blogging or social software set of protocols. Both Penrod (2007) and Richardson (2006) advocate the need for a 'Blogging Code of Ethics' to be established before teachers embark with their students into the world of the blog. Adhering to a code that acknowledges the values, sensitivities and judgements of the group involved is best practice (Penrod, 2007). They have provided models for me to make use of in future practice.

Time management during and after blogging and *skrbling* sessions was a consideration I had not taken into account before starting the study. Not only was it hectic keeping up with the students' posts during class blogging sessions, it was nigh impossible. I wanted the posts to be approved immediately (otherwise what is the point in being digital?), so this meant that I was 'trapped' at a screen moderating and approving posts. While this 'entrapment' provided me with incredibly insightful comments and therefore data, responding to the students' individual blogs was considerably more time consuming. This was mainly because of the interactions that occurred between the students and myself. Besides, I wanted to regularly check and respond to their blogs. That is, after all, the power of blogging – it hooks a reading public into regular checks or feeds of the updated site. One way to cope with this is to encourage the students to add an RSS or feedburner[17] tool to their blog. Any marking for an English teacher is time-

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[17] RSS or any other feedburner is a way to aggregate new information By activating a feed burner on a site you follow on a regular basis, new posts are automatically 'sent' to your link. This would have saved me valuable time; each time a student made a post I would have been automatically notified of it.

consuming – the upside was, of course, that I could mark the students' individual blog posts any time anywhere.

Despite these issues, blogging and *skrbling* provided valuable learning experiences for the students in my English classroom. A number of the issues that arose did so because of what I would consider to be 'external factors'; that is, outside the realm of my control. However, a number of them were issues of my making – and I will need to work carefully through these before I use Web 2.0 technology in my classroom in the future

5. 5 Future directions

> As technology offers new ways of communicating it is clear that schools must incorporate these ways into their social, communicative practices
>
> (Mercer, Dawes, Wegerif, Sams & Fernandez, 2007, p. 2).

5.5.1 Me – a 'digital immigrant'?

My foray into the world of blogging last year had immediate impact on the English Department that I belong to. My Assistant Head of Department started a blog for both her Year 10 English classes as part of their homework routine when they were studying film as text. This year she plans to utilise a blog as a response journal for her Year 12 Media Studies class. For the latter part of 2007, the pair of us could be often found last period on Friday in the English office huddled over our laptops investigating what new tools had entered 'cyberspace' that week. Together we maintain an English Department blogsite (Fig. 5.1) at www.tuakauenglishdept.blogspot.com, where we update the English Department

(and anyone else that cares to take a look) with events that are happening,

resources that are available, fun and useful sites to look at and so on. The

Department blog has live links to sites such as *TKI* and *English Online* where the

new curriculum is both being 'unpacked' and resourced. We both hold the firm

belief that Web 2.0 applications and tools hold vast possibilities for English

teachers who are prepared to 'take the leap' and use them.
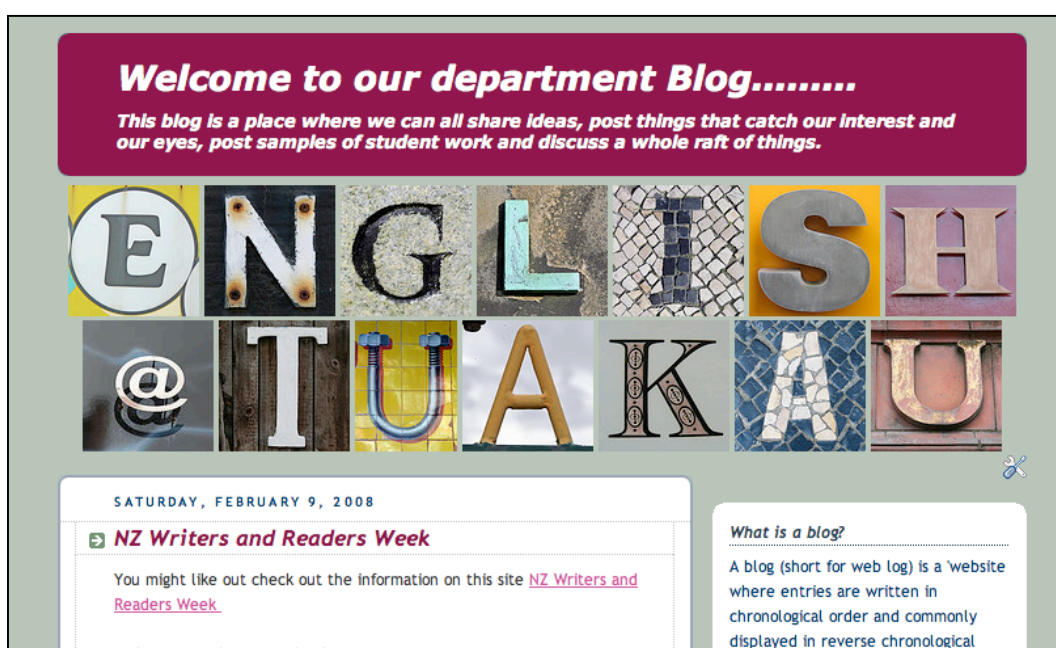
Fig. 5.1 Tuakau English Department blog

Just as the students personalised their blog, so the English Department blog

reflects my personal choice and makes a statement about me as a producer of text.

I also initiated a library blogsite http://tuakaucollegelibrary.blogspot.com/

(Fig. 5.2) where I regularly post reviews of new books that have been processed

into the library. Initially, the blog address was blog-mrsc-library.blogspot.com but

the feedback from the students was that this was too difficult to remember and

hence the change of name. As well as book reviews, the blog contains links to

other sites that are aimed at teenagers and a link to my online bookshelf at

Shelfari[18]. The library blog has been particularly popular with the College's junior

students and we are hoping that this will continue.

Fig. 5.2 Tuakau College Library blog

During 2007, I ran competitions on the blog (Fig. 5.3) and, though it was early

days, it was encouraging to see junior students, in particular, having fun with the

site. Thirty-six students entered the initial competition and the winning entry is

published below (Fig. 5.3). The first competition for 2008 will run during New

Zealand Readers and Writers Week when we will run an 'Ernest Hemingway'

task of writing a story in six words. The junior students who accessed the library

blog last year did so in both school and out of school time and, just as my Year 12

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[18] Shelfari – another Web 2.0 application where users can 'build' a bookshelf of books they have read, rate and comment on them and if they wish discuss them with other readers.

English class had done with their blogs, engaged in interesting and informative

discussions around the texts that they had been reading.

Fig. 5.3 Favourite book competition

I have never seen myself as fitting Prensky's (2001) category of 'digital

immigrant'. I see myself continuing the journey of discovery that I began last

year, investigating the possibilities that the unbelievable multitude of Web 2.0

tools offers me as an English teacher. I have discovered RSS and receive daily

feeds from educationalists who review the best of the new Web 2.0 tools,

especially for teachers. I have discovered *Pageflakes* (Fig. 5.4), a tool that enables

me to build an interactive page of feeds and direct links to all my favourite places

on the Web, and I have developed a separate page for the new Year 13 English

Popular Culture course that I have developed for 2008.
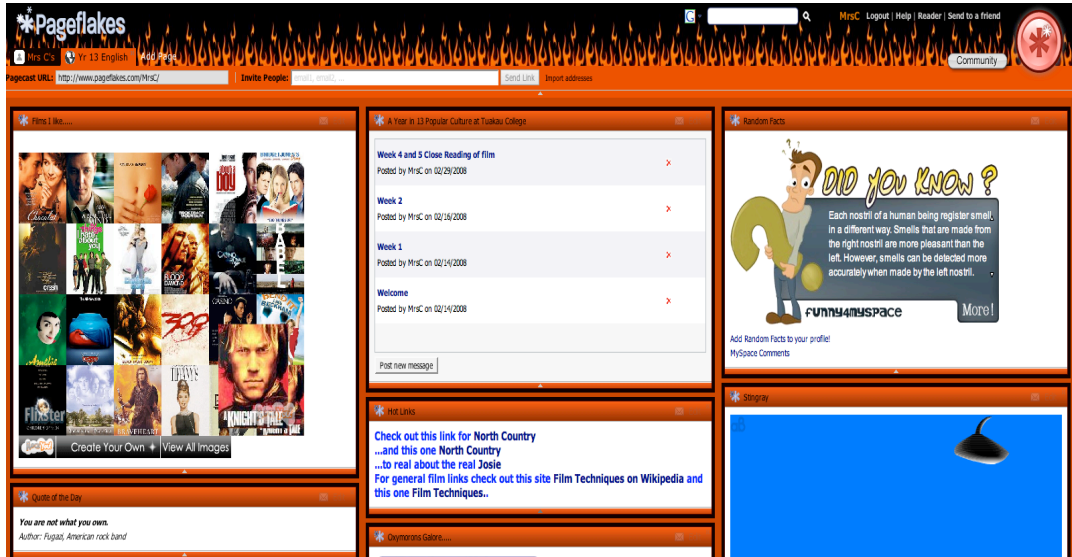
Fig. 5.4 Year 13 English Popular Culture *pageflake*

Viewers and readers who know me would perhaps suggest that the images and

colours chosen that dominate the page reflect not only myself but the nature of the

students who have selected the course year. The beauty of all this is, of course,

that the format of the page can be changed with the click of a tab and can reflect

whatever I choose it to.

5.5.2 *Teachers as researchers*

> Educators are at their best when they take the lead and show
> their communities how learning takes place (Richardson,
> 2006, p. 149)

As I stated in Chapter 1, I believe that teachers characteristically *do* continually

reflect and evaluate their actions in the classroom. From these reflections they

inform and adapt their classroom practice. This self-study has reinforced for me the value of this self-reflection. It has shown me how to embed the action research cycle more formally into my 'being'. It has also reaffirmed for me that as a classroom teacher I need to know and understand the world or 'space' that the students in my classrooms exist in. If I don't, I will be in danger of making the same mistake that I made at the beginning of this study, that is, that all students are made in the same mould.

5.5.3 Final thoughts

I know that for many of my students, collaborative Web 2.0 applications are already an important part of the popular culture of their lives outside the classroom and, as such, they have the potential to be a powerful resource for teachers like myself to use (Beavis, 2000; Green & Hannon, 2007). More importantly, perhaps, using these applications to change the ways in which conversations can be had around texts, to change the media through which texts can be responded to, and the ways in which texts can be composed in the English classroom demonstrate an acceptance of and place value on the cultural worlds of today's students (Beavis, 2000; Green & Hannon, 2007; Pelletier 2005). However, I am now also aware of the dangers of categorising all of today's learners under a totally 'digital umbrella'. Students are individuals and as such have individual preferred styles of learning. By knowing our students, we become interested in their 'space', whatever that space might be, digital or otherwise. By doing so, by *being* interested, we will lessen the divide between ourselves and our students' out-of-school world (Beavis, 2000; Green & Hannon, 2007) and thereby re-engage many of today's students in our classrooms.

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Appendix 1 – Board of Trustees permission/approval for research

100A Axtens Road
RD 1 Bombay
South Auckland
2675

Board of Trustees
Tuakau College
Elizabeth Street
TUAKAU

Attention: The Chairperson

20 July 2007

Dear Andrew

You will already be aware that I am taking part in a TLRI project looking at ways of improving the teaching of literature in multi cultural classrooms. Last year the Board approved this partnership between the myself and the University of Waikato research team. As part of this study I intend to carry out research investigating how to integrate new technologies into classroom practice and the impact of these new technologies on student motivation and outcomes. This will be the basis for my Masters Thesis 'Keeping in touch with the 'Digital Natives' - Incorporating New Technologies into Classroom Practice'.

The students of today are growing up in a world where new technologies, such as 'blogs', 'podcasts' and 'wikis' are changing the ways in which they 'read' and 'write'. As a teacher I am looking for ways in which to successfully incorporate new technologies such as these into classroom practice. They are the 'popular culture' of the learners of today. As such they provide strong vehicles for classroom learning and interactions.

Students will be selected by the fact that they are in the classes that I am teaching in 2007 –Year 12 (26 students). These students have already received information and informed consent forms for the TLRI - Teaching Literature in Multicultural Classrooms. My intended research will take place as part of this project. Informed consent will be obtained by a letter to parents and students outlining the nature of the research and the implications. Any students who do not wish to be involved, or parents who do not wish their child to be involved have the right do withhold

their consent. Such students will not be disadvantaged, as the course of study will remain unchanged.

I would like to do is collect "data" or information from the students as they take part in classroom work around literature and while using new technologies. These data may include:

- responses to questionnaires
- classroom observations (including videotaped observations)
- occasional group interviews
- occasional one-on-one discussions during a lesson
- work samples with the pupil's consent

I would like to make it clear that in the course of this project no child will be identified by name. The data collected and subsequent findings, will be used by myself in the writing up my thesis for completion of the Master of Education degree I began while on study leave in 2006.

If you have any questions regarding the nature of the research, the content involved or the assessment process, please do not hesitate to contact me at the college.

Yours faithfully

Alison Cleary
HOD English

✂---

Board Of Trustees Consent Form

We, the Board of Trustees have read the attached information sheet and we have had the purpose of data collection explained to us.

We give our consent for Alison Cleary to carry out the stated research in 2007.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 2: School's Internet agreement

STUDENT NAME: …………………………………

| ID #: _____ |
| Office use only |

As a student at Tuakau College you may have access to the school's computers <u>only</u> if you comply with the following conditions. Please put a ✓ in the box when you have read, understood and agreed with each condition.

☐ 1. **ACCESS**

Use computers that are designated for student use. Use them for your educational benefit.

☐ 2. **SET UP**

Do not change the way the computers have been set up.
(e.g. desktop, monitor, screen saver, software, network settings.)

☐ 3. **CARE & RESPECT**

Treat all equipment with care. Respect the school's user requirements.

☐ 4. **FILES**

Access only your own files. Save them with appropriate names and in your own folders. Ensure your network password is kept to yourself.

☐ 5. **PRINTING**

Print with permission to the printer set up for your room. Print once only. Report difficultes to staff.

☐ 6. **INTERNET**

Internet access is for school-based research on approved sites. Messaging, personal emails, downloading files, online games, are not included.

☐ 7. **SOUNDS**

Multi media sounds will be necessary in some classes. Use headphones and speakers with teacher's permission only.

☐ 8. **LOG OFF**

At the end of a session, always ensure you follow correct log off procedures.

9. **ASK FOR HELP**

If there is anything you are uncertain about, ask for help.

10. **SUMMARY**

Only students who respect the school's requirements will have continued access to the computer network.

I have read, understood and accept these conditions.

Student signature: ……………………………………………… Date _____/_____/_____

Parent/Caregiver signature: …………………………………….. Date _____/_____/_____

Parent/Caregiver name (please print) …………………………………………..

Office Use:

Appendix 3a: Pupil's informed consent form
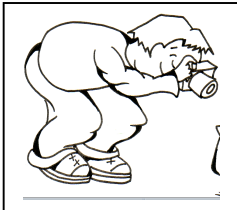
I _____ am willing to be involved in the study on integrating new technologies into classroom practice.

It is possible that I may be filmed or photographed during class time.

I understand that sometimes there will be observers in class and notes may be taken and occasionally discussions taped. You may " quote me" without saying who I am.

I understand that you may want to make copies of my classroom work to share with other researchers and teachers.

All information will be looked after carefully. I understand that some may be used for presentations, with my agreement, and this will be checked with me before it is used.

Signed_____ Date_____ (A Cleary,2007)

Appendix 3b – Notification to Parents

Tuakau College
Elizabeth Street
TUAKAU

<address>
<address>
<address>
<address>

<date>

Dear < parent/guardian names>

You will already be aware that I am taking part in a TLRI project looking at ways of improving the teaching of literature in multi cultural classrooms. You and your child < name > have given permission to be involved in this research project.

As part of this study I will also be carrying out research investigating how to integrate new technologies into classroom practice and the impact of these new technologies on student motivation and outcomes. . This will be the basis for my Masters Thesis 'Keeping in touch with the 'Digital Natives' - Incorporating New Technologies into Classroom Practice'.

The students of today are growing up in a world where new technologies, such as 'blogs', 'podcasts' and 'wikis' are changing the ways in which they 'read' and 'write'. As a teacher I am looking for ways in which to successfully incorporate new technologies such as these into classroom practice. They are the 'popular culture' of the learners of today. As such they provide strong vehicles for classroom learning and interactions.

The principal and board of trustees have been consulted and have given their consent for this project. My research will take place within the existing classroom programme so it does not mean disruption to your child's programme.

I would like to do is collect "data" or information from your child as they take part in classroom work around literature and while using new technologies. These data may include:

- responses to questionnaires
- classroom observations (including videotaped observations)
- occasional group interviews
- occasional one-on-one discussions during a lesson
- work samples with the pupil's consent

I would like to make it clear that in the course of this project no child will be identified by name. The data collected and subsequent findings, will be used by myself in the writing up my thesis for completion of the Master of Education degree I began while on study leave in 2006.

If you have any questions regarding the nature of the research, the content involved or the assessment process, please do not hesitate to contact me at the college.

Yours faithfully

Alison Cleary
HOD English

✂--

I have read the attached information sheet and

I/We (name of parent(s)/caregiver(s))_____
                                                                (PLEASE PRINT)

consent   /   do not consent (circle one)

to the involvement of my child,

(name of child)_____
                                                                (PLEASE PRINT)

in the "Integrating new technologies into classroom practice" study. I realise that this study is part of the classroom programme but will require some data collection such as discussions and work samples. Some of these samples may include taped interviews and I am aware that my child will not be identified by name.

PLEASE SIGN:

Appendix 4 – Pre-Study Shakespeare Questionnaire

Extended Text - Shakespeare Study
Name:

Pre- Study Questionnaire

1 Had you heard of Shakespeare before our initial introduction?   Y/N

2 Have you studied or read any texts by Shakespeare before? Y/N
  If yes, which texts have you read or studied before?

3 Do you have some anxieties about being asked to study Shakespeare? What are these?

4 What kind of activities are you expecting to do as part of this unit of work?

5 How do you feel about a number of assessment tasks being linked to this unit?

6 How confident do you feel about this study? (Circle ONE).

Very				*Unconfident*
5	4	3	2	1

Thanks   *Mrs C*

Appendix 5 - New Technology – Preliminary Questionnaire

	Never	Hardly Ever				Often
	0	1	2	3	4	5
I use the word processor for writing	0	1	2	3	4	5
I use the Internet to find information..	0	1	2	3	4	5
I download music..	0	1	2	3	4	5
I play computer games..	0	1	2	3	4	5
I participate in on-line forums..	0	1	2	3	4	5
I create my own web page	0	1	2	3	4	5
I use my cell phone to access the internet..	0	1	2	3	4	5
I use a digital camera .	0	1	2	3	4	5
I have written in a 'blog'	0	1	2	3	4	5

How confident do you feel using the following new technologies?

	No Confidence					Very Confident
	0	1	2	3	4	5
Word Processing	0	1	2	3	4	5
Internet Search Engines	0	1	2	3	4	5
Downloading music	0	1	2	3	4	5
Playing computer games	0	1	2	3	4	5
On line forums	0	1	2	3	4	5
Creating Web Pages	0	1	2	3	4	5
Using a cell phone	0	1	2	3	4	5
Using a digital camera	0	1	2	3	4	5
'Blogging'	0	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix 6: First blog lesson questionnaire

How's the Blog?   **Name _____**

1 Did you find the questions easy to answer? Y/N . Explain why you thought this?

2 Did you respond to anyone else's postings? Can you explain why or why not?

3 Do you think you responded in the same way that you would have responded in a class discussion? Explain your answer.

4 Did you find the blog straightforward to use or not? Explain your answer.

5 What did you think of this activity? Please expand your answer with an explanation.

Thanks

Mrs C

Appendix 7   Ethnicity questionnaire

Name:
Yr 12 English AC - Baseline data questionnaire

Please tick the ethnic backgrounds you identify with. You can pick more than one.

Maori   Fijian
European   Indian
Chinese   Samoan
Tongan
Other (*please write what other)*

Now rank these (1 being the ethnicity that you most identify with)
1.
2.
3.

Write down what languages are spoken at home by your **family** members.

Write down what languages **you** can speak fluently.

Write down the languages **you** also feel confident in reading and writing.

Write down what languages **you** can understand but not speak.

Write down what languages **you** can understand a few words of.

Thank you for your time

Appendix 8: Post–study questionnaire

ICT in the English Classroom – Final Questionnaire

Name: Please respond honestly and in detail.

Mrs Cleary's Blog

1 How would describe your familiarity with 'blogs' before this year?

2 How straightforward was the blog to access and use?

3 Did you access the blog outside of normal school hours? ? Why/Why not?

4 Did you feel you could say what you wanted on the 'blog'? Explain.

5 Did you read other students' comments? Why/Why not?

6 What benefits do you think there are in using a blog for writing tasks?

7 What drawbacks do you think they are in using a blog for writing tasks?

Individual Student Blogs (only answer if you used a response blog)

1 Why did you choose to set up a blog as a response journal?

2 Did you access your blog outside of normal school hours? Was there a reason for this?

3 How did you personalise your blog?

4 How often would you say you responded to my comments on your postings? Explain – use over the page.

5 Did you post any practice essays on your blog? Why or why not?

6 What were the benefits to you of writing responses on your blog?

Skrbl Boards (online collaborative whiteboards).

1 What do you think was the purpose of using the skrbl boards for brainstorming?

2 Did you respond to other students' comments on any of the skrbl boards? Why/Why not?

3 What benefits do you think there are in using a 'skrbl' for writing tasks?

4 What problems, if any do you think they are in using a 'skrbl' for writing tasks?

Collaborative Essay Writing on Skrbls (only answer of you did this activity)

1 What if any benefits were there to this activity? Explain?

2 Were there any drawbacks with this activity? Explain.

Thanks, Mrs Cleary