LITERACY EDUCATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE:
USING BLOGGING TO TEACH WRITING

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Abstract

Through an in-depth and detailed analysis of one specific case, this study demonstrated that digital technologies, for example, blogging, wikis and social networking, have a role to play in the development of literacy skills in the primary classroom. The findings from this study suggest, that in this instance blogging was successfully integrated into teaching and learning sequences to achieve numerous English syllabus writing outcomes.

This study also demonstrated that, in addition to the development of traditional literacy skills, concerned mainly with the ability to construct "well structured and well presented" (BOS, 2007, p37) texts, the collaborative use of the classroom blog provided students with the means to develop critical literacy skills in relation to interacting with an audience and each other (BOS, 2007).

Keywords: blogging, writing instruction, literacy

1. Introduction

It is well documented and a generally accepted notion that the rapid advancements in technology have had a dramatic affect on society, in particular influencing the way in which we communicate with each other in various aspects of our lives (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear & Leu, 2008; Healy, 2008; Walsh, 2009). Developments in technology and its applications have made it possible to access and transport information instantly while on the move (Walsh, 2009). Furthermore the introduction of new technologies such as "blogs, wikis, online games, social networking technologies, such as *Twitter* and *Facebook*, and video and music dissemination technologies such as *YouTube*" (Coiro et al., 2008, p. 5) allow us to communicate globally with online audiences at the push of a button. The integration of such technologies into everyday life has seen the introduction of "new social systems that view technology as the medium for establishing and maintaining relationships and exchanging information" (Merchant, 2005, p. 51) influencing what it means to be an active member of society in the 21st century.

As schools have a responsibility to equip students with the skills to become active members of society, technology and its place within the classroom has become an area of immense interest for educational researchers (Bloch, 2007; Glogoff, 2007; Sun & Chang, 2012; Sun, 2009). Furthermore, students' ability to effectively communicate with individuals "from all walks of life" (Board of Studies, BOS, 2007, p. 8) identifies that the connection between technology and literacy is an area that requires exploration (Sun & Chang, 2012; Walsh, 2009).

Due to this uncertainty, the concept of literacy is continually evolving, with current educational researchers endorsing a multimodal approach to literacy education (Healy, 2008; Walsh, 2009). Although it has not yet been confirmed what impact these advances in technology have on literacy education, it has been recognised that each new wave of technology "changes the forms and functions of earlier literacies since they carry within them new potentials for literacy" (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear & Leu, 2008, p. 5). Therefore, without doubt, the "definition of literacy remains a contested topic among researchers, educators and society in general" (Raison, 2007, p. 3).

Irrespective of this, researchers (Coiro et al., 2008; Healy, 2008; Raison, 2007; Sun & Chang, 2012) agree that the development of appropriate literacy skills in the 21st century will require these skills to be developed to suit specific sites and contexts. When using technology, this will entail the use of various skills and strategies, for example "language, image, sound and movement" (Unsworth, 2008) to gain a true understanding of the entire text. This supports the current push by educational researchers (Healy, 2008; Walsh, 2009) for a literacy education model that is truly inclusive of multimodal literacy, a term that has been defined as "meaning-making that occurs through the reading, viewing, understanding, responding to, producing and interacting with multimedia and digital communication" (Walsh, 2009, p.3).

Several studies have reported on the advantages of integrating digital technologies, namely blogs, in the classroom to develop writing skills, foster a sense of collaboration and community, develop a sense of voice and foster critical and analytical skills (Bloch, 2007; Lee, 2010, Noytim, 2010; Sun, 2009). Therefore, for English teachers, blogging would appear to be a potentially useful tool for creating a space to foster a diverse range of multimodal literacy skills that the traditional classroom may not be able to develop.

The focus of this research will be on the blogging experience of one Australian class blog. This paper will examine the publicly available blog created and maintained by one Sydney, Year 3 class. Focusing in particular on the opportunities that this blog provides for

literacy development in relation to the specific syllabus strategies, in particular how it can be used for helping students develop literary recount strategies.

2. Literature review

2.1. Educational blogging

It has been reported that digital technology is commonly included within the contemporary English studies classroom. Furthermore, it is regularly used to extend literacy education (Walsh, 2008, 2009). For example: *The Multimodal Literacy Project*, (Walsh, 2009) reported the inclusion of numerous forms of digital technologies such as "Digi-cams, Pod Casts, Smart Board software, internet, blogs, Movie Maker and PowerPoint" (pp. 40-41) in classroom teaching and learning activities. Likewise, Vardy, Kervin and Reid (2007) describe the use of "iPods and podcasting" (p. 2) within the primary classroom. The challenge now is for teachers to incorporate up to date and emerging technologies into teaching and learning experiences in an authentic manner, whilst also addressing curriculum content (Vardy et al., 2007). For this to happen, exploration into the classroom practicalities of the use of different up to date digital applications must occur, to establish the relationship between technology and the diverse contexts for literacy that they provide (Merchant, 2005; Walsh, 2009). Given that blogs are cost-effective and relatively intuitive and present a range of pedagogical potentials, for example, the opportunity for students to construct knowledge at their own pace and are known to increase participation and motivation due to the nature of the broad audience, they are increasingly being implemented into classrooms.

Furthermore, studies of blogging suggest that contemporary blogs emerge through reading, writing and linking (Bloch, 2007; Burgess, 2006; Sun, 2009; Sun & Chang, 2012) and that they resemble journal entries. Each entry or reflection is presented in reverse-chronological ordering in what is called a 'post' or 'blog post', each with a social purpose to create partnerships or links with likeminded people (Halavais, 2006). Blogging has become a culturally familiar practice across the globe (Bloch, 2007; Burgess, 2006; Sun & Chang, 2012). Hence, understanding the potential that blogging provides is an area of great interest.

The technological and social affordances of blogs make them an appealing technology for a broad range of educational purposes. For example, blogs have been examined as a means to increase student outcomes in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom (Hourigan & Murray, 2010; Nadzrah Abu Bakar, 2009; Pinkman, 2005). Nadzrah Abu Bakar (2009) suggests blog use has been credited with improving student communication and interaction with their peers and the wider community, raised language awareness and

development and also encouraged the use of different language patterns. As the study also indicated, because blogs are individual and had been used to provide students with a personal writing space, blogging was able to increase student motivation and engagement, which in turn, expanded their critical thinking ability.

2.2. Studies on literacy

In relation to literacy learning the *Multimodal Literacy Project* (Walsh, 2008) indicated that the use of blogging in the classroom context has been shown to "address outcomes across all three literacy areas including talking and listening, reading and writing" (p. 40). Furthermore the subsequent *Multimodal Literacy Project* (Walsh, 2009) identified a number of literacy skills that have been expanded due to the use of blogging, such as

> social protocols of students introducing themselves, developing an understanding of formal and informal registers, knowledge of the difference between posts and comments, summarizing, the ability to read and interpret other students' texts and to select effective descriptive language appropriate to a particular audience. (p. 28)

Similarly, in another study conducted by Jones (2004) blogging was shown to improve the literacy skills of year 8 males in the areas of reading and writing. In particular students' engagement in lesson content was stimulated, as well as their confidence when interacting with the blogging software (Jones, 2004). Students had the "opportunity to develop their basic skills" (Jones, 2004, p. 55) and their ability to draft, proofread and edit texts. Likewise Kelly and Safford (2009) found blogging to be extremely beneficial in assisting students to "articulate their ideas in a range of complicated linguistic modes" (p. 121), thus developing students' ability to construct complex sentences.

Furthermore, blogs provide students with the opportunity to apply and extend their writing skills and publish their work (Bloch, 2007; Burgess, 2006; Godwin-Jones, 2003; Knobel & Lankshear, 2006). By being aware of their audience, students become encouraged to focus on their language choices, editing their work with the possibility of advancing their "storytelling and creative writing" abilities (McNamarra, 2008), whilst also responding to and making comments on blog posts.

In addition to the development of conventional writing skills and strategies, when publishing students' work on a blog Merchant (2009) identifies that they become part of an online community where their work is the topic of conversation, highlighting the "participatory culture" (p. 112) and interactive nature of blogging (Godwin-Jones, 2003). Overall, it could be concluded that blogging is generally accepted as a useful tool for fostering

the development of literacy skills; by providing students with the opportunity to display and extend their writing ability whilst interacting with an extended audience (Jones, 2004; Kelly & Safford, 2009; Merchant, 2009).

Though past literature has shed light on the ways that blogs can be used to encourage language learning and learners' participating in writing practices, little, if any, empirical research has been done to examine individual student contributions in terms of the documentation and development of grammatical features in a literary recount and the application of blogging as a medium for social interactivity.

3. The study

3.1. The aim of the study

In order to further investigate the opportunities that blogs can provide for literacy development, this study investigated one specific classroom blog and analysed syllabus strategies, using the online application of blogging. An analysis of the individual student and teacher contributions, that is, blog posts, was made and the pedagogical purpose, grammatical features of each literary recount and social interactivity assessed.

3.2. Participants

The contributions of fifteen Year 3 students and one teacher from the same class, in a school situated in Sydney, Australia, were the focus of this study. Six students were males and nine students female, aged between eight to ten years of age. The teacher was an experienced blogger and had been blogging with a variety of her classes for approximately five years. For the students, however, this was their very first introduction into blogging, collaborating in this way and publishing work online.

3.3 Design and procedure

Qualitative research methods were employed to study the students' writing strategies and the skills that blogging provides for literacy development in classrooms (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2009). More specifically, case study methodology was selected to allow an in-depth and detailed study of one specific situation to occur within context (Gay et al., 2009). Sun and Chang (2012) imply that case study research is an efficient study research method best utilised when the researcher has limited time, a small sample size and will utilize thematic analysis for qualitative evidence.

The research encompassed the study of a publicly available Year 3 classroom blog, *2011 AllStars Blog, http://allstars.edublogs.org*, during Term 2, March to May. The school was located in Sydney, Australia, with no other specific information provided on its exact location. According to the 'About' section of the blog site, the school had been blogging with students since 2007, and each student had produced individual blogs with posts relating to special events that had occurred at school, or reference to curriculum content covered in class.

A number of contextual factors affected the study. The study did not employ classroom observation or interviews with the teacher or students, and reflects only what is happening within a specified context; capturing a moment in time, therefore the findings are not generalizable (Gay et al., 2009). Three assumptions have been made to construct a complete picture of the research site reflecting the "interpretive nature of qualitative research" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004, p. 73). These are:

1. The posts with names at their conclusion have been written by students.
2. The remaining posts, without names at their conclusion have been written by the teacher.
3. The students that authored the post selected the images to accompany their text

As a result of the contextual factors, the research focused on the students' contributions as recorded over a period of two consecutive months. 15 blog entries produced by the Year three students and a further two entries that had been written as a joint construction between the teacher and several students were examined. Each post was assessed in terms of their level of productivity as a medium for social interactivity, and the grammatical features of the presented text type, focusing on the processes that are highlighted as stage appropriate by the NSW Board of Studies syllabus outcomes and indicators. The analysis of Year three students' blogs was more exploratory because of the quantity and diversity of the data. An emergent thematic analysis was conducted in addition to coding for dominant themes and identifying patterns.

In addition to the thematic analysis, each post was analysed using the "key grammatical features" (Droga & Humphrey, 2003, p. 151) of the text type, a literary recount. Specifically, Droga and Humphrey (2003) suggest that a literary recount should be written in past tense, and include "a range of adjectivals, verbs and nouns, sentences that contain adverbials and dependent clauses, lexical cohesion, affect vocabulary, figurative language" (p. 151) and modality. In order to provide an in-depth, detailed insight into the potential for the development of literacy skills, in particular writing skills and strategies, the grammatical features identified were matched to the syllabus writing outcomes and indicators. Findings

were tabulated and discussed reflecting extensive reading within the field and findings of other researchers, leading to conclusions to be made regarding the research purpose and in relation to the direction for future research.

3.4. Results and findings

3.4.1. The teacher's contribution

The teacher served as the facilitator to guide students as they embarked on this blogging journey, helping students set up each individual blog. The teacher also set up a website and entered each individual student's blog URL, to create a central place for all to access the individual blogs with ease.

The 'About Me' page in the website provides an introduction and background into the purpose of the site and the blogs. This information was provided by the teacher and drew comments from ten educators around the world sharing their own experiences and reasons for visiting the site. The guest comments were made between April 30, 2010 and March 15, 2012 and were all acknowledged and responded to individually by the teacher.

3.4.2. The students' contribution

Each student in the class created and maintained their individual blog, with posts ranging from ten to 200 word contributions. Each post received responses in the form of comments, however, they did not come from external visitors, instead, comments were provided by peers and the class teacher.

Table 1: Number of posts and comments in each individual student blog

Student	Number of posts	Average number of words	Number of comments	Inclusion of images
S1	2	50	17	No
S2	0	0	22	No
S3	3	90	12	Yes
S4	2	70	12	No
S5	2	10	3	No
S6	3	50	21	Yes
S7	4	100	35	No
S8	6	30	43	Yes
S9	4	20	21	Yes
S10	5	50	46	No
S11	7	47	35	Yes
S12	4	70	21	No
S13	5	15	6	Yes
S14	1	25	21	No
S15	5	20	21	No
Total	**53**			

3.5. Discussion

The analysis has two components. For each there is a description of the analytical approach and findings. Drawing on the results of our qualitative textual analysis of the archived Year 3 blogs, first teacher's contributions are analyzed and then the students' blogs are examined. Findings relating to the teacher's contributions include the pedagogical functions of the posts and the importance of teacher presence. The textual analysis of the 15 blog entries yielded evidence of how they met curriculum expectations, indicators of productivity.

3.5.1 The teacher's posts and comments: pedagogical function

The analysis of the teacher's posts and comments, by descriptively coding each comment, including images, formatting and text, revealed that the contributions served a number of functions. In particular the function of the teacher's contribution was to model appropriate content and language, along with a variety of technological skills and procedures.

When we viewed the teacher's contributions made during 2010 it was evident that the teacher was modeling best practice. Whilst there was little evidence of a learning continuum, the nature of the frequency of the contributions played a vital role in ensuring students were encouraged and motivated to continue to create and upload their posts. Consistent comments provided by the teacher ensured that students were made aware of the teacher's presence and that their blog posts were not going unnoticed or unread.

3.5.2. The students' blogs

To examine the extent to which the students' blog posts matched the curriculum and syllabus expectations, in addition to the thematic analysis, each post was analysed using Droga and Humphrey's (2003) key grammatical features of the literary recount text type. The posts were coded to determine the range of adjectivals, verbs and nouns, sentences that contain adverbials and dependent clauses, lexical cohesion, affect vocabulary, figurative language and modality.
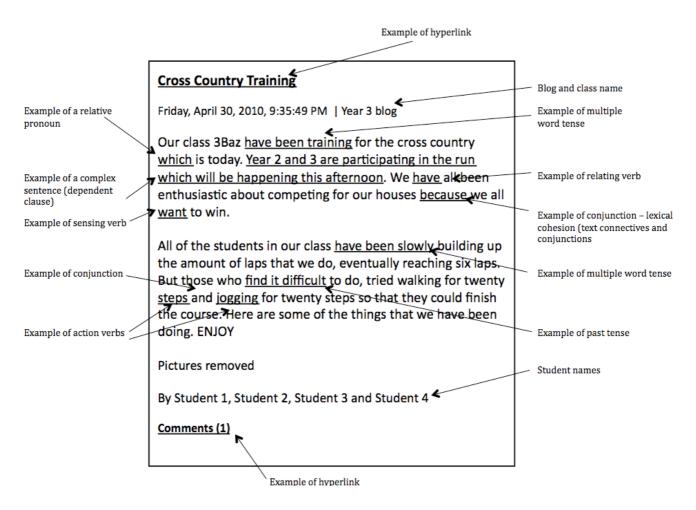

Figure 1: Screenshot of an entry posted on the Year 3 AllStars Class Blog, with an example of analysis procedure conducted.

The blog posts provided classroom evidence that blogs can effectively support students in developing the "skills and strategies that are involved in learning to write" (BOS, 2007, p. 9). The key processes demonstrated were in the areas of "drafting, editing, proofreading and publishing" (BOS, 2007, p. 9). Students also demonstrated the development of "well structured sentences, accurate spelling and punctuation" (BOS, 2007, p. 9). In addition, due to the medium of the text, students also demonstrated the "development of

computer skills used in the production of the text, graphics and multimedia" (BOS, 2007, p. 9) associated with the posts.

The text type presented in the blog posts reinforces the social purpose of the blog. Literary recount was the predominant text type presented within the blog posts. All entries analysed retold events that have occurred within the classroom, emphasising that the intention of the blog is to communicate with the world outside the classroom, "establishing a relationship" (BOS, 2007 p. 68) between the publisher and the audience. This recognises that the increased use of information technology within the classroom influences the way in which students communicate, reflecting new social practices and therefore also identifying additional contexts for literacy (Coiro et al., 2008; Merchant, 2005). In this context students were constructing and publishing texts that can be viewed and commented on by an online audience.

Students effectively used the key grammatical features of the text type and editing techniques to create well structured texts. The students' used the appropriate grammatical features required by a literary recount in an accurate manner, such as past tense, different types of verbs, as well as more complex examples of noun groups paired with conjunctions and text connectives assisting their posts to be coherent. Additionally, the refined nature of all of the posts identifies that the students "recognise the importance of correct punctuation in the presentation of a published text" (BOS, 2007, p. 47). The use of technical nouns such as "blog" and "post" demonstrated that students developed a vocabulary for discussing blogging, in this instance using "language associated with the specialised domain of learning" (Droga & Humphrey, 2008, p. 116).

Several grammatical features presented within the posts demonstrated that students were deliberate in their language choices to achieve an interpersonal function (Droga & Humphrey, 2003). By using affect vocabulary, such as "we work together and encourage each other" as well as an abundance of personal pronouns such as "we" and "us" demonstrates that students consciously structure their writing to interact with the audience (Droga & Humphrey, 2003). This recognises the students' awareness of their audience and illustrates that in this context digital writing is both interactive and participatory (Grabill & Hicks, 2005; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Merchant, 2009). Once again, this affirms the idea that the use of blog technology in the classroom changes the discourse of writing, by "allowing writers to become publishers and distributors of writing" (Grabill & Hicks, 2005, p. 305) extending their learning to reach beyond the classroom.

Students' contributions to the blog continued outside the classroom, allowing them to reflect and respond to classroom learning and develop their critical literacy skills. Students involved in the blog regularly ask the audience for feedback at the conclusion of their posts with statements such as, "we tried to make our writing put pictures in your head – did we succeed? Let us know what you think".

The number of comments made on each post varied. Majority of the comments made were unproductive as they were from other students and teachers congratulating the students on their achievements rather than critically reviewing the students work as requested. Conversely there was evidence that classroom learning continued outside the classroom for the blog participants as they made numerous comments on each other's posts. One comment made by a student from the classroom in response to the above request gave specific justification as to why he liked the post "I really liked it how you described your figure, it made me get an image of it. You used some interesting descriptive words. For example: Bulging, Enormous and Devious". Therefore, in this case although there was participation from audiences outside the classroom the comments that carried the most significance came from the participants themselves. This demonstrates that the participatory nature of the blog allowed students to develop their critical literacy skills (BOS, 2007).

Although this study focused on the development of writing skills and strategies, it becomes evident the rereading and editing of texts as well as navigating their way around the blog software and choosing appropriate images to accompany texts allowed students to extend their reading skills and strategies whilst creating multimodal posts to be published on the classroom blog.

3.5.3. Productivity

The technological medium of the blog altered the processes of reading, writing and learning, and these skills looked different to the traditional print-based medium. For example, the open-ended and flexible nature of each blog post offered the teacher and students with the opportunity to present content utilising a range of mediums, e.g. written, audio and visual mediums, it offered the opportunity for collaboration and co-construction of content and ideas, personal time management, production techniques and interpersonal communication. The use of blogging in this manner provided the opportunity for students to acquire these additional skills and empower them to pursue greater depth of creativity and innovation.

Overall, the findings from this study demonstrated that blogging is an effective tool in accomplishing English Syllabus writing outcomes, using a medium that students are

accustomed with. The interactive nature of blogging recognises it as a "communicative tool" (Merchant, 2005, p. 59) between the classroom and the outside world, challenging the typical ways in which students have performed in-class writing tasks in the past and introducing new contexts for the exploration of literacy (Grabill & Hicks, 2005).

4. Conclusion

The analysis conducted in this research study has demonstrated that literacy skills can be fostered through the meaningful integration of digital technologies, namely blogging, in the primary classroom. It can be concluded, in this case, that the art and skills required of students when blogging resulted in a marked improvement that was reflected through greater proficiency and demonstration of the syllabus outcomes and indicators. These findings are reflective of results from similar studies conducted by Jones (2004), Kelly and Safford (2009) and Walsh (2009), whose research also concurred that blogs do develop the "skills and strategies that are involved in learning to write" (BOS, 2007, p. 9).

Furthermore, the collaborative nature of blogging, which involves interaction with peers and also the wider community through the co-construction of each blog post and providing timely and appropriate responses to audience comments aided in the development of essential 21st century critical literacy skills. In addition to the development of traditional literacy skills concerned mainly with the ability to construct "well structured and well presented" (BOS, 2007, p37) texts, students demonstrated the ability to produce multimodal texts, including discourses of language that are pertaining to their medium. Therefore, the findings from this study support the movement towards a literacy education model that is reflective of a multimodal environment (Walsh, 2008, 2009).

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