Learning to Blog and Blogging to Learn: One Teacher's Personal Reflection

Patrica Hewitt, Assistant Principal, Matthew Elementary, Bonavista, NL, patrica.hewitt@gmail.com

Introduction

That students in the 21st century are different learners requiring different approaches to prepare them for futures as yet unknowable has been a position taken by many and reflects, in particular, the role technology now plays in society and in education (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007; Partnership for 21st century skills, 2003). I have come to realize in order to be able to effectively teach, teachers like me need to reflect on their pedagogy around new literacies, become informed about the possibilities, and participate in ways that will promote technology-enabled lifelong learning. Teachers need to engage students and themselves, in purposefully-integrated Web 2.0 technologies that will permit myriad opportunities to communicate, create, connect, collaborate and think critically with "anyone in the world"– all hallmarks of the 21st century literacies (Collier, 2008; Lankshear & Knobel, 2007; NCTE definition of 21st century literacies, 2008).

Blogging is one such technology-mediated activity that I undertook myself and with my students, an activity that I believe has transformed my teaching and learning more than any other. *"*I love the discussions we have with each other in our blogs. I can talk to people online, in school and when I am at home!" It is this observation from a student that hints at the transformation possible for students and teachers when they venture into blogging and the digital world. Just as many deep discussions may begin with a simple and familiar greeting, the conversation, or practice of blogging, may also start with something similar to what is known. If the journey into that world of Web 2.0 and all it has to offer is begun with blogging, then becoming comfortable with the "new technical stuff" while reflecting upon the "new ethos" *can* also be made gradually (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007).

This personal reflection highlights my journey of integrating classroom blogging and describes the impact this integration had on my teaching practice. This journey took various side trips. Along the way, I considered my own role and that of students, thought about the expanded notions of reading and writing, and began to realize the potential of blogging for collaboration and knowledge construction within, and outside, the four walls of my classroom.
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Getting dirty

"Teachers need to get their hands dirty (at least figuratively) by working with the tools, platforms and processes…to fully understand the value and significances of these practices" (Jenkins, 2010, p. 232). This statement about technology integration became increasingly meaningful for me as I began a parallel journey to my students with blogging. My personal adventure began as an assigned project when I was asked to share my learning digitally for a graduate course; I chose to set up my own blog called

"Blogging From The Edge.*"* Earlier that year, I had also begun incorporating blogging within my Grade 5 classroom.

My thoughts about technology-mediated teaching and learning changed over time as I became more familiar with the tools and went from chronicling the establishment of a class blogging experience to writing for myself and my audience and their feedback rather than for the grade my graduate-course instructor was going to assign. I gradually realized that the practice of blogging could [or should] be quite different from simply putting an essay on the screen and hoping for comments, something I truly did not understand until I also engaged with the tools to connect, share my thinking and reflect on my own posts. I also began to abandon the fear of putting myself and my students "out there" as I learned we could all "do it in safe, relevant and effective ways" (Richardson, 2011, p. 44).

Learning to blog: A classroom In transition

In the beginning, I merely wanted to expand my repertoire of current practice with technology. Starting with a move from familiar paper-and-pencil writing activities to the medium of digital screens seemed easily achievable (Huffaker, 2005; Morris, 2012; Poling, 2005; Ripp, 2012). I felt traditional classroom writing activities such as journaling or reading responses could easily be continued as blogging. DeVoss, Eidman-Aadahl and Hicks (2010), authors of "Because Digital Writing Matters" would understand the thoughts I began to have as I considered the integration of blogging in my classroom. In moving to include blogging, I felt I understood how to teach it by continuing to use the writing process, having used the word-processing features on computers for many years with my students. The pleasure and ease of being able to revise and edit quickly, and having a publishable quality product would be continued in the blog-hosting services provided. I did see blogging as an opportunity to enhance the writing in our classrooms; it would promote ongoing peer response and provide easy access to the potential audience of family I hoped to invite to view my students' writings.

"Writing instruction appropriate for the worlds today requires us to reconsider what new skillls and dispositions students might need for the digital age" (Devoss et al., 2010, p. 11). I initially planned to focus on the new technical skills that needed to be introduced as we began to blog. I felt then that all we needed to do was become familiar with the features of the site and what we could do with them to 'write'. I rightly assumed that blogging would complement the activities already underway by increasing authenticity for our writing endeavours. I had not entirely thought through or envisioned what was embedded in the process of becoming bloggers in the 21st century. I had few preconcieved ideas of what we could create, or what different dispositions would be needed, let alone how different we could/would become as teachers and learners in the blogging world. My sense of the journey my students and I were about to undertake was not at all fully imagined.

Blogging modelling

One of the blunders I made as I set up blogging was assuming that it was simply a change in how their pieces were going to be presented. I took for granted that students would transfer their understanding of paper-and-pencil formats to the screen. However, teaching how to write quality blogs requires explicit instruction and modelling, teaching students the 'how to' and also the 'whys' of blogging effectively (Ferriter, 2009; McGrail & Davis, 2011; Morris, 2012; Penrod, 2007; Waters, 2009). As with other skills expected of students, they need to see exemplars of quality blogs and connect with the characteristics of these blogging sites. By connecting with other teachers via Twitter, I was able to find these blogging exemplars and have my students pay attention to the bloggers: How old are they? Do they share their personal information? What is noticeable about their writing topics? What kind of links are in the blog? What else have they done that catches your attention? Was it effective?

Beyond the first Step: Learning to comment

Even if teachers only feel comfortable [at first] establishing the give-and-take of students responding to each other within the closed classroom blog, they cannot underestimate the importance of teaching students how to provide feedback. Positive feedback often extends the sense of respectful community already established within the classroom to a "healthy digital ecology" (DeVoss et al., 2010; Lapp et al., 2010-2011). While it is also true for any peer feedback given during a writing workshop, conferencing or other classroom activity, "blogging students need to know how to thank people, how to answer their questions, and most importantly, how to ask questions back" (Ripp, 2011, para. 5).

Teaching these commenting skills can even be done with young children. Kathy Cassidy, an experienced Grade one teacher in Saskatchewan, has been a pioneer in blogging [and other digital literacies] with her classes. She works with her students to develop a sense of what commenting does for them, and how they can move beyond "I like your blog" to connect with their readers. Composing an anchor chart with the children each year to be put on display as a reference, Cassidy works with these students to demonstrate the power of the conversation.

One of the common issues to address in commenting is the difference between social and academic commenting. Students should be asked to consider the purpose of commenting and build an understanding of how to engage in a respectful and constructive commenting discussion. Mrs. Yollis' Grade three class created a video about how to comment effectively that is available to assist anyone wishing to provide a quality model (Yollis, 2011a). It is clear that her students understand that the commenting is driven by the blog post and will connect the writer and the reader in further discussion.

Threads of comments

As a direct result of the feedback feature of blogs, it is possible to follow 'threads' or a picture over time of a conversation resulting from a particular post. This feedback has an essential role to play in the educational intent of classroom blogging as teachers and students use the comments received to shape responses, revisit (and possibly revise) the blog commented upon, possibly impacting future posts (Blackstone et al., 2007; Cassidy, 2012; Lapp et al., 2010-11; Penrod, 2007; Waters, 2009). Being able to provide an audience that allows extended threads of conversation and writing beyond the typical one-draft piece for the teacher (whether it is assigned or not) is a powerful aspect of the blogging platform. The back-and-forth nature of blogging comment threads allows for "familiarity among the conversationalists and a sense of community to build" (McGrail & Davis, 2011, p. 417).

Having an audience of your peers

When I first began blogging with my students, I had yet to grasp the full impact of an audience outside our classroom and so only established a classroom network of readers and responders. I thought that encouraging comments from their peers would at least expand their audience beyond me, and perhaps lessen that sense of writing for the teacher, and the feeling of this is merely 'school work.'

The critical development of audience awareness that can be more acutely constructed with blogging rather than with in-class publishing or writing for the teacher was observed and documented in a case study conducted with second grade bloggers (see Lapp et al., 2010-11). Unlike much work submitted to their teacher, blogging provided almost immediate feedback on their posts. This feedback reinforced for the students that someone had read and thought about their blog; "they heard the voices of their audience in direct response to their writing" (p. 41). This feedback also resulted in an increased willingness to revise and edit the blogs, a disposition many teachers strive to emphasize in mini-conferences and whole class discussions during literacy/language arts blocks of writing instruction. In fact, at the end of the project, 93% of the students surveyed indicated that they would make changes to their writing before sharing it with an audience. Also, the purpose of writing "for others" moved from 21% to 79%, indicating a significant sense of their audience.

Blogging to learn: In the beginning

Taking on the management of such digital projects as blogging can appear to be an add-on until the teacher recognizes the meshing of best practices of traditional literacies with the potential of the new. As I set up blogs with my Grade five students, I recognized some of the "potential for learning, including the built-in opportunity to practice writing in an authentic way, the chance to reflect upon one's thinking and that of others in an online community" (Hewitt, February 13, 2011). My purposes and initial

intentions were not significantly different from those suggested for teachers wishing to integrate blogs into their practice: as a class website, to support my independent reading program, and as an online filing cabinet of student work or a portfolio of showcased student works, and most importantly a personal space to write well in authentic ways for authentic purposes (Boling et al., 2008; Huffaker, 2005; Leu et al., 2011; McGrail & Davis, 2011).

Like Redekopp and Bourbonniere (2009), I was struck by the opportunities that blogging would provide my reluctant students who, for various reasons, do not speak up or contribute voluntarily. This was an opportunity to give them a voice and a chance to show their learning and engage in 'discussion.' The posts allowed all students a forum to consider their argument and interact. Several of my students became more involved in sharing their thoughts about what was happening in school and in their lives as a result of blogging.

Many educators use blogs in the classroom to gather, archive and showcase the learning that students are producing, and to which they are contributing (Cassidy, 2012; Huffaker, 2005). During 2011-12, my students blogged about a variety of topics across the curriculum in the class blog called "Our Learning Scrapbook." Using an iPod touch, they documented the process of learning how to needlefelt, a dry technique of working sheep's wool. They uploaded photos of the works in progress and the final display and wrote corresponding text to share what occured in our classroom. Their research into the life of the Beothuk, an extinct people native to our part of the world, was also the focus of some blogging and the resulting posts demonstrated students teaching and learning together. Having posts such as these available outside school hours was also a bonus for working parent families who could not easily visit their child's classroom.

Next Step: The collaborative potential of blogging

Rosenthal Tolisano (2010b), a blogger of the website "Langwitches," describes the different levels of collaboration made possible with blogging and outlines the movement from the least to the most connected classroom. She characterizes the latter as having:

> Two-way communication between the class and the world, with the teacher and students actively looking to connect with peers, mentors or experts around the world. Additionally these classrooms connect learning to authentic opportunities and audiences and make contributions to the learning of others.

To be of assistance, many educators have shared their experiences with collaborative blogging on their own blogs (e.g., Cassidy, 2012b; Hewitt, 2011b; Morris, 2012; Ripp, 2012b), or through journal articles and other published texts (e.g., Penrod, 2007; Peters, 2009; Richardson, 2006).

Online blogging projects as the Global Read Aloud, where students around the world listen to the same book, support working together on a wide variety of follow-up activities. Founder Pernille Ripp's hope is then realized; "Global collaboration is

necessary to show students they are part of something bigger than themselves" (Ripp, 2012). For my students of 2011-12 the contacts and conversations made through blogging with Grade five students in the United States, Argentina, and Switzerland opened up their eyes to the purposeful possibilities afforded via the Internet and deepened their sense of being like other children yet with different life experiences. Blogs such as these provide an extended audience for students and illustrate the potential of Web 2.0 pedagogy in action.

Changed role

There is little doubt that engaging in 21st century literacies impacts many aspects of the classroom dynamic, not the least of which is the role of the teacher. Taking a close look at what can be accomplished with blogging and other new literacies has to be integral to the reflective pedagogy of teaching, particularly in today's society. As Lindsay and Davis (2012) indicated by participating in the fullness of blogging's global collaboration, we provide opportunities for "building bridges, forging new pedagogies, and questioning current education systems that place value on content above process and individual output and gain rather than on collaboration and community learning for understanding"(p.16). We change our role in the classroom significantly as we move from the being captain, always at the front of the ship, to allowing students to become valued crew members who can teach their peers, and indeed guide others to familiar and exotic places anywhere in the world.

Richardson (2011) suggested that teachers must reflect deeply about the ethos that underpins their choice of what and how to integrate technologies. He is concerned that teachers have yet to embrace the notion that students should be prepared to create new learning networks and that self-direction, the 'learning to learn' that is integral to teaching 21st century skills is not sufficiently at the forefront of teacher pedagogy. Most importantly, he argues that teachers must model what students are being asked to take on. He points out that students need to see teachers not just as "engaged teachers but as engaged learners…that as educators we have to shepherd our students into a much more complex, much messier, and much more profound world of learning" (p. 108).

My journey: A blogging classroom still in transition

It is one thing to read about the integration of technology, the importance of 21st century literacies and even the impact of blogging, yet another thing to put it into practice. It can be daunting to think of global connections in a rural community where many students have yet to travel one hundred kilometres in any direction and where not all own home computers. But I jumped aboard and started small, building in some of the 'new technical stuff' as I thought more about the 'new ethos' that I was becoming aware of through my own readings and reflection. I certainly understood the pedagogical rationale for moving beyond having students writing only for their classmates. I gradually realized that, when blog posts are shared with other readers and contributions to a body of knowledge about a particular subject are distributed, the impact of

belonging to a community of bloggers becomes evident. It is through that network and community of practice that bloggers gain what is afforded by engaging with the technology.

"Can we blog next year?" That was one of the most repeated questions from my outgoing students these past three years. I certainly hope they do. I hope my bloggers, and their teachers build on what we started together and that they continue discussing topics in their blogs that excite their passion for further learning and move them deeply, from home and school. If my students continue to blog, tweet, create and share various digital text forms, read other bloggers and respond to what they have read on line, then they will have demonstrated the skills and the dispositions that are indicative of the paradigm shift in my teaching, indeed that being discussed by many educators (Penrod, 2007; Yancy, 2009; Zawilinski, 2011). This generation of students will know what it is to use the new media available collectively as well as individually within, and in spite of, the four physical walls of a classroom.

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