

THESIS

“WAIT, AM I BLOGGING?”:

AN EXAMINATION OF SCHOOL-SPONSORED ONLINE WRITING SPACES

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## ABSTRACT

“WAIT, AM I BLOGGING?”:

AN EXAMINATION OF SCHOOL-SPONSORED ONLINE WRITING SPACES

In this study, I explore a school district’s blogging engine, one that I helped to develop. Using both qualitative and quantitative methodology, I attempt to better understand how a school-sponsored online space might influence the type of writing occurring therein, while also trying to better understand how new tools like hyperlinks and commenting features on online text are changing student writing.

I conclude that online writing looks a great deal like other classroom discourse, with teachers and students maintaining similar power and voice relationships in both spaces. More research is certainly needed, specifically around the role of these spaces in assessment and how feedback from teachers is incorporated by students into future work, but it seems that online writing spaces, at least in the school district studied, are quite similar to offline classroom composition spaces.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have been a student of Cindy O'Donnell-Allen's in some form or fashion for almost twelve years. While I've not always been in her classroom, she has been my teacher through the Colorado State University Writing Project, my undergraduate work and now, formally, as my thesis advisor. But in the in-between times of our formal partnerships, she has still served as a mentor and friend, helping me to navigate the world of being a better teacher of students and of writing. I am grateful to her for her formal and informal contributions to my work and life.

Likewise, Louann Reid has been my teacher, editor, landlord, and trusted friend. She has modeled what teacher leadership can and should look like, and she took a chance on me as a writer about teaching when I was beginning my entry into the profession. Her faith in me has been a most wonderful gift.

My students have always been my partners in teaching and learning, and it is through the example of both Louann and Cindy that I have attempted to do right by children. I thank my students for their contributions to my learning.

As my teaching and learning have moved increasingly online and in public, I have learned much from my online colleagues, many of whom I would not recognize were we in the same room, but who have, through writing and conversation and critique, taught me much about what is worth knowing, doing and spending time thinking about.

## DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this work to my family:

To my parents, who trusted that I would get to this point eventually, although I sure made them wait an awful long time.

To my sister, always a better student than I, who lately has been showing me what reading looks like to five and six year olds in her work as a Kindergarten teacher.

To my brother, who has always walked a different path, and has always been successful, even though he defines success far differently than I do.

To my grandfather, Willie E. Hunt, who could not read and write, but knew how to love, an essential literacy on its own, and showed me how every chance he could. I write professionally under his nickname, Bud, to remember where I've come from. I'm doing my best to live up to his example.

To my children Ani, Teagan, and Quinn, who don't understand what a thesis is, but who have been kind and understanding every time daddy had to go and work on his "homework."

And, most of all, to Tiffany, who believes in me even when I don't. Especially when I don't.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*I am beginning this blog because I am a teacher and I am in need of an education. . . . It's an exciting place, the blogosphere. . . . I am learning and discovering that podcasting and blogging have incredible potential for teaching.*

- budtheteacher.com, January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2005

I came to blogs and blogging by accident in January of 2005. I was a teacher seeking ways to help students find audience and purpose in their writing in a way that was not about me, their teacher. That accident changed my personal and professional life as I began to discover the work of folks like Will Richardson (<http://weblogg-ed.com>), who was asking his students to reach out to and write with the authors they were reading, and Paul Allison (<http://youthvoices.net>), who was challenging what it meant to write for school in the websites and weblogs he was creating for and with teachers and students around the country involved in the National Writing Project.

Reading and writing as a teacher and a learner in public spaces like blogs and engaging with others in that work was nothing short of transformative. The students I took with me on my blogging adventure became nationally recognized experts about the role of audience and voice in the language arts classroom. The more I worked on projects involving blogging and the use of other technologies to make real the ideas of my language arts background and classroom, I knew that I needed to be working in ways that would help to make these tools and networks easier to use and a more integral part of school.

So I left my high school language arts classroom in the summer of 2007 to take a position in the Information Technology (IT) department of my school district. As a newly minted instructional technologist, it was and still is my role to help mediate between the instructional and the technological elements of our suburban school district. The central goal guiding my work is helping other educators make the connections between thoughtful practice and technology that blogging helped me to make for myself and for my students' writing and learning. One of the parts of this job that is both the most exciting and the most frustrating is the creation of new spaces for the work of teaching and learning. Virtual classrooms, online meeting spaces, and places to read, write and share are all part of my perpetual professional construction zone. And in whatever educational space I'm making or working to sculpt and support, my goal is to ensure that the space I've constructed makes sense for teachers, for students, and for the learning that we value in the district.

Which has led me back to blogs. From the time I've come into the school district as an instructional technologist to the present, blogging continues to be an area of interest for me. From my personal blog, which is more and more my most important professional development tool, to my district blog, which is my primary staff communication tool, I wonder about the role of blogs and blogging in the work of our school district. In the Fall of 2008, our district Wordpress installation, a public blogging engine hosted on district servers for use by students and staff went publicly online. It was available prior to that time for IT use only, but from that point forward, any district employee or student could create a blog for any purpose related to the work of the district. As of this writing, 1,083 blogs and 2,173 user accounts have been created on the site, and 4,924 blog posts have



been written and shared via the blog engine.

Many of these blogs are essential communication tools for district staff and students. Curriculum coordinators use them to share resources and announcements. Teachers and schools use them to share classroom reminders, such as homework assignments and school newsletters. Students are required, in some classes, to keep blogs to report and complete schoolwork. Some of these blogs, like many on the Internet, have one or two posts. The largest blog, the Help Desk Blog, contains 304 posts written since December of 2007 when the blog began.

The rather astonishing degree of writing occurring in these spaces is in line with my initial hopes of creating learning spaces where users could generate and link their ideas across and between texts, but over the years I have become curious about whether or not the blogs were serving the equally important purpose I have experienced in my personal blogging experiences, that is, of connecting users to one another in ways that construct a virtual writing community. Specifically, in this study, I sought to address these questions:

- What does reading and writing for school-related purposes look like in school-sponsored online writing spaces?
- Who are the users in these spaces, and how do their particular roles constrain the texts they create and how they use them?
- Are the new tools and affordances of online digital writing, such as hyperlinks, immediate publication, and world-wide audiences a factor in these spaces? If so, how? If not, why not?

In the chapters that follow, I review what others have said about the potential

benefits of shared online spaces. I then address the above questions through an examination of the texts generated and the interactions that occurred on the district blogging engine during a three-week period.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I trace how writing process theory has intersected with the new tools and affordances of online digital writing to produce new opportunities for writers and students of writing. It seems prudent that, as we move forward into new writing spaces and opportunities, we ground our teaching in the theory and practice that has been shown to be beneficial for students in analog spaces. Certainly, there are countless examples of the power of writing process theory to shape thoughtful teaching and learning opportunities. And many studies of the potential of new online writing tools and affordances are beginning to emerge, particularly in higher education. But are the two working together yet to improve student writing?

### **Writing Process Theory and the Notion of Authentic Audiences**

I was educated, both as a student writer and a writing teacher, within the paradigm of writing process theory (e.g., Elbow, 1968; Murray, 2003). While many, including writing process theorists, make clear that writing is not a linear process and that there is in fact no single model that can account for the idiosyncratic processes of every writer, process theorists nonetheless find it useful to describe the general processes that most writers appear to use: pre-writing, drafting, revision, editing (i.e., proofreading), and publication. As my own teacher educators have argued (Claggett, Brown, Patterson, & Reid, 2005; Smagorinsky, Daigle, O'Donnell-Allen, & Bynum, 2010), effective writing instruction should focus on helping students develop as writers by learning strategies in

each of these stages.

Another key element of process theory is that writers improve through frequent writing. These theories have been so influential that they have fueled the work of entire professional networks, such as the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Writing Project that have directly and indirectly helped to define what it means to learn and to teach writing (Gray, 2000; National Council of Teachers of English, 2004; National Writing Project, 2011) But that writers should write and engage in the process of writing contains a bigger idea—the idea explained by Bakhtin and then expounded upon by so many others, that all writings, all utterances, are in conversation with each other (Bakhtin, 1986; Shields, 2007). As a writer and a teacher of writing, I have always tried to help my students converse with each other and with the audiences to whom they are writing, knowing that this approach was how writers worked—always drafting and fiddling with their drafts, always reconsidering their purpose and audience to ensure that what they wrote made sense in the audiences they were writing to and for, and the contexts they were writing within.

As I advanced in my understanding of how to create the best writing conditions for my student writers, and as I attempted to be a better writer myself since I knew that would help me to be a better teacher of writing (National Writing Project & Nagin, 2006), I was always searching for writing experiences that would ground my students in conversations with other audiences outside of my classroom. Online discussion forums were an early tool that I used to promote conversation and dialogue, working to include students from multiple classrooms in 21<sup>st</sup>-century penpal projects. Through our forums, my students interacted with students on the other side of the mountains or, in some cases,

the other side of town. But in the winter of 2005 when I discovered blogs, my understanding of the possibilities of technology to help me teach writing were blown wide open (Hunt & Hunt, 2007).

### **Blogs as New Writing Spaces**

While most literature defines the portmanteau “blog” as a combination of the words Web and log, the earliest blogs were mostly collections of links to other places on the Web. Before blogs were narratives themselves, they were pointers to other places such as lists of good recipe websites or collections of handy tutorials. As they grew in popularity and presence, blogs emerged as a distinctive form and genre in the late 1990s (Wortham, 2007). Now in their second decade of life, blogs and research about their effectiveness for a variety of tasks, are seemingly everywhere. Among other uses, blogs are used as reflective journals for preservice teachers (Yang, 2009), tools for extending face-to-face discussions outside the classroom (Kajder & G. Bull, 2004; Kajder & Glen Bull, 2003; Witte, 2007), and portfolio spaces for college students (Groom 2011). While their classroom uses are beginning to be well-documented, blogs are often *assigned* to students, rather than written by student spontaneously; that is, they are co-opted by schools rather than brought in from students’ personal worlds (Ito et al., 2010). Students do not choose to blog. It is chosen for them.

Though blogs were originally created as tools to hold texts over a long period of time (Blood, 2000; Winer, 2001), in school, they tend to be created quickly for use in a particular class, only to be abandoned at the end of the semester or project term. In some cases, students will create multiple blogs for multiple classrooms over the course of a single school year, rather than using the same blog for multiple years of writing and

sharing. As account automation continues to accelerate across school districts, it is likely that a student will soon leave school with more spaces to blog than blog posts written.

Often, blogs are explored for their similarities to analog texts. Analog texts are the non-digital texts we are traditionally familiar with. I use the term “analog” to distinguish them from their digital counterparts. Students use blogs for freewriting and for summary response in ways similar to traditional classroom practice (West, Wright, Gabbitas, & Graham, 2006) Teachers have also used blogs with students as homework collection spaces in an attempt to move towards a paperless classroom. The newness of blogs and blogging are seen as possible tools for engaging students to write (Kajder & Glen Bull, 2003; Sawmiller, 2010). While some argue that the novelty of online space, or the excitement of a “more natural” environment for students, can motivate student writers in ways that paper and pen or pencil cannot, this idea of engagement is troubling, as eventually, the newness wears off and students’ continued engagement, according to Cuban (2011), relies on the introduction of more new items. In short, novelty is not, ultimately, sustainable.

Again and again in the histories of teaching and technology, the next “best” thing promises to change the face of education. Typewriters once held this coveted position, as did filmstrips, microfiche (Ginsberg, 1939), and television. By giving voice and opportunity to writers in ways previously unavailable, computers and now the Internet are both considered tools that may well revolutionize teaching and learning, but “electronic technology, unless it is considered carefully and used critically, can and will support any one of a number of negative pedagogical approaches” (Hawisher & Selfe, 1991, p. 56). In short, novelty alone should not dictate classroom practice.

Still, professional journals and texts on writing pedagogy commonly assert that writing for an “authentic audience” (i.e., an audience beyond the classroom teacher) can be a useful way of engaging student writers (Herrington, 1997; Kajder & Glen Bull, 2003; Murray, 1973), and blogs can naturally provide such an opportunity. Blogs live on the Internet and are as accessible as the author of the blog chooses to make them. In fact, many blog projects begun by teachers started as tools motivating students to write (Allison, 2009). Again, this idea is not new; Elbow, Murray, and other theorists concentrating on more traditional print-based texts have consistently argued that students should be writing for external audiences. Likewise, this is one of the reasons why I took my students online to explore the potential of blogs as portfolios when I was a high school language arts teacher. I certainly believed that potential audiences out there were ready and, perhaps even waiting, to interact with my students. Despite my and others’ pedagogical convictions, however, little if any research examines actual interactions between bloggers and these perceived audiences, an omission this study seeks to rectify.

### **Blogs as Digital, Networked Texts**

The “Internetness” of blogs, that is, the ability for them to be tools for networking and linking texts to other texts, is also of interest to researchers as well as teachers seeking to engage students in writing. Drexler (2010) describes how blogs are one component of a students’ networked self, a construction of links and information and connections to others that are, according to Drexler, necessary for learning today. Drexler’s concept of the “networked student” is an extension of Couros’s (2008) notion of the teacher as a connected individual, using blogs and connections to others to improve him- or herself professionally as a teacher and sharer of curricular, personal, and other

types of information.

In fact, some see blogs as essential nodes of one's own "personal learning network" or PLN (Richardson, 2006; Warlick, 2009). Warlick describes a PLN as "a group of people who have something to say that helps [him] do [his] job." The PLN has been suggested as a possible vehicle for professional development (Luehmann, 2008) as well as a vehicle for formal education reform (Leuhmann and Tinelli, 2008), with blogs at the forefront in both cases. Park, Heo, and Lee (2011) also suggest that blogs serve as an informal learning tool that can support teachers' knowledge of, reflection about, and examination of classroom practice. In teacher blogging circles, this notion of the PLN has come to include a teacher's Twitter, Facebook, blog, and any other social network connecting people who share some form of interest in teaching and learning (Downes, 2007). In addition to the presence of the digital texts of blogs in public spaces, the addition of tools such as hyperlinks creates new opportunities for and through blogs.

### **Hyperlinks: Making Connections Visible and Discussable**

Ted Nelson was the first to theorize of the notion of hypertext, an actual system of linking texts to other texts through the use of links. His ideas for Xanadu, a worldwide collection of texts connected to other texts, all a click away from each other, were similar to those proposed by Vannavar Bush in his conception of the Memex, a giant card catalogue and microfilm and largely theoretical information storage and retrieval system he conceptualized in the 1950s. Sir Tim Berners Lee, however, popularized the idea of the actual and working hyperlink when he invented hypertext and, subsequently, the World Wide Web, in 1990. Since that time, the Internet has largely become synonymous with the Web, although the Web is technically still a subset of Internet.



Teachers, largely, have been slow to integrate the hyperlink into their writing instruction, as well as to exploit the capacities of hyperlinks for writing. Yet if a teacher wants to help students understand connections to other texts, teaching student to employ hyperlinks would be a useful way to cement that idea. In my teaching experience, I've noticed that most references to hyperlinks that students will come across in their language arts class are to be found in the style guides that they reference for instruction on proper citation formats. In most, if not all, of the professional development courses, workshops, and presentations that I have delivered over the last five years, someone will ultimately express surprise or confusion when I mention that most every word processing software, including Microsoft Word, includes a button for embedding hyperlinks into WYSIWYG text. "WYSIWYG" is short for "what you see is what you get." Most word processors contain a layer of formatting between what the computer is doing and what you're seeing. Many Web editing tools, in addition to word processors, are able to function in a WYSIWYG mode, blogging software being but one example.

I have written elsewhere about the potential of blogs as spaces where students can explore and use hypertext and links to connect texts (Hunt and Hunt, 2004), but when the subject of hyperlinks comes up in my own teaching, workshops, and presentations, I'm consistently forced to start from the beginning and treat them as entirely new material. The frequency of these occurrences leads me to believe that much of the writing occurring in schools is still analog writing—composing on the page, rather than on the screen. Although results from the Pew Internet and American Life Project suggest that the Internet has "become the 'new normal' in the American way of life," (Rainie & Horrigan, 2005) it does not seem to yet be the "new normal" way of composing in

classrooms.

The reluctant adoption of hyperlinks in digital writing is surprising, given that text-to-text connections are often the stuff of language arts classes, and the hyperlink makes these connections visible and discussable. Davies and Merchant (2007) describe the power of the hyperlink for adding “depth, a richer texture than a printed page.” They also find that the hyperlink increases the ability of a reader to jump back and forth faster than if flipping pages or changing books, and grants writers an easy way to cite external sources. Linking is much quicker than a formal citation, and possibly more informative and useful because less is required of the reader in order to reach the original source. Davies and Merchant describe this text-to-text conversation as a “Bakhtinian buzz” (p. 185) and point out that hyperlinks, at their best, make the work of reading easier for the reader while also creating a lattice of links between the texts that are in discussion with one another.

Hyperlinks, and the writers using them, also make visible and discussable the physical networks of the texts that we carry in our heads. For instance, student writers can link directly to the words of the author they are responding to, while also sharing the essential pieces in the text. Teachers responding to a recent professional development experience can share the agenda for the event by hyperlinking back to it. Even though digital texts allow writers to show their work and their sources in new ways and to connect the dots between their source material and their argument, for the most part, links remain outside of the conversations occurring in language arts classrooms.

Davies and Merchant (2007) further explain the benefits of hyperlinks for readers of blogs:

hypertextual reading confers particular degrees of freedom to the reader who is able to determine not only the reading path taken, but also the level of attention and depth of reading allied to a text. While academics are well accustomed to citing and quoting widely, . . . blogs can also link directly to the other texts so that these other texts can be read at source, in context, and all at one "sitting." The relationship goes two ways; the other texts gain an extra dimension too, in that they are now linked to another text or site. (P. 186)

If, as Davies and Merchant claim, hyperlinks allow writers to extend their own reach *and* readers to make connections beyond the present text, then the fact that we do not capitalize on this potential in schools is disappointing.

By making a single blog post into a linked collection of texts, the extensive use of hyperlinks makes bloggers and readers privy to other utterances, lending blogs a polyphonic quality. Yet even when links are used judiciously, blogs still display a Bakhtinian potential for conversation, as they are, by design, collections of utterances. When one considers a blog network, such as the one examined in this study, as a collection of collections of utterances, it is possible to actually see the concept of heteroglossia present in the texts (Shields, 2007).

At their best, hyperlinked texts make all the more visible the connections that texts share. Hyperlinks make sense in written language and are a useful addition to the toolsets of formal and informal language. They should be discussed and explored in our language arts classrooms in thoughtful ways. Unfortunately, due to some of the novelty I mentioned earlier, they are often treated poorly.

### **The “Schoolification” of Digital Spaces**

But attempts to take advantage of new tools to engage students continue.

Universities and school districts have been experimenting with creating online spaces and exploring what these spaces can and should look like to benefit the

organization using and maintaining them. As one example, Jim Groom (2011) describes the creation of “UMW Blogs,” a blog engine at the University of Mary Washington that aspires to “build community” around the school. In this space, students can easily post and share information as they choose to, without a gatekeeper or administrator approving what information can go public and what information cannot. As such, UMW Blogs allow for multiple voices to describe the experience of the university. According to Groom in a video presentation on the space, the “diversity” of UMW is not evidenced by a “photo in a brochure,” but rather by “the thought that happens” at the school, as manifested by the interactions in this digital space (Groom, 2011).

Groom’s description of the UMW Blog maps well onto James Paul Gee’s (2004) definition of an “affinity space.” Gee suggests that the affinity space is a better metaphor than Etienne Wenger’s notion of “community of practice” for describing how people with similar goals and interests might work together. Wenger (2002) has described a community of practice as a group of people who join together around a common interest or expertise. But Gee suggests that the space, rather than the interest, might be the joining factor. He explains:

Even if the people interacting with a space do not constitute a community in any real sense, they still may get a good deal from their interactions with others and share a good deal with them. Indeed, some people interacting within a space may see themselves as sharing a "community" with others in that space, while other people view their interactions in the space differently. In any case, creating spaces wherein diverse sorts of people can interact is a leitmotif of the modern world. (2004, p. 71)

Such spaces are what Groom and others are attempting to create with blogs in their universities and districts. Many practitioners are focusing their efforts on creating the communities. Gee suggests that creating a rich space for interaction, a medium for

conversation and opportunities to interact, might be as valuable as working to create a community.

Ray Oldenburg (1999) refers to public spaces that are on “neutral ground” as “third places.” If spaces such as the ones that Groom is building and Gee describes are able to fill some of the needs of the neutral ground, can schools building blogging engines and other spaces that live beyond the classroom begin to create opportunities within their domains for the type of affinity groups that Gee describes? Or are blogging engines such as those Groom and others have built subject to the limits and rules of the schools that have created them, to the extent that they are not actually inhabiting a third place, but are merely extensions of the classroom?

Along the same lines as Oldenburg, Gutierrez and Stone (as cited in Kirkland, 2009) have identified the notion of “third space,” a space between the official and unofficial work of schools. In third spaces, teachers and students are able to take on new identities, to fiddle with the expectations and traditions of what has come before. These are exciting spaces, spaces where things can be different and new. Productive change can lead to new opportunities for teaching and learning. Might blogs be such third spaces or places?

Although blogs do seem to hold the potential for disrupting classroom boundaries in useful and productive ways, some have argued that the co-opting of a third space or place by institutions or teachers can instead lead to a “creepy treehouse,” a place where the intentions of the organization or instruction overshadow the original nature of the co-opted space (Stein, 2008). In the worst implementations of blogs or other online course supports and/or environments, certainly that is a possibility, but the work of Groom and

others suggest that there is room to extend the classroom in ways that don't create creepy treehouses.

Blogs may indeed lend themselves to a more productive disruption of traditional classroom boundaries. Elbow (1995) and others (James, 1981) have long suggested that writing teachers would do well to spend time responding to work as readers rather than as evaluators. Blogs can provide spaces for teachers to interact with students authentically (i.e., not just for the purposes of critique and evaluation, but for actual communication about mutually interesting issues) and do seem to have the potential to become affinity spaces centered around teaching and learning. It would seem, though, that blogs only make sense as possible affinity spaces if there are practitioners building and maintaining them that are aware of these issues.

In sum, writing in school has never been more important. And the Internet is, at least in many ways, a gigantic canvas for words and stories. Certainly, we should have new opportunities here with which to create better spaces for reading and writing and thinking for students in mind. With these things in mind, let us turn our attention to one particular attempt to create such a space for teaching and learning around writing—the Westchase District blogging engine.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In an attempt to address my research questions within the context of my work in the Westchase School District, I decided to investigate one of the digital tools that I have helped to implement and support in my role as an instructional technologist and teacher. It made sense for me to look specifically at our district blogging engine as an example of the type of digital textual space where there was plenty of opportunity for the types of writing discussed previously. I was curious to examine how teachers, students and staff used the blog for their various purposes. In this section, I provide an overview of how I conducted that investigation as well as providing some more information about the school district and my role within it.

### **Participants and Site**

The Westchase<sup>1</sup> School District, one of Colorado's ten largest, reflects the growing diversity of the region. Numbers for the 2010-2011 school year, provided by the district's Title I Coordinator, show that the district's 51 schools serve 27,379 students across 13 communities and 4 counties. The district is 66.72% White, 27.34% Hispanic, 3.89% Asian/Pacific Islander and .8% Native American. The district has an overall 32.66% free/reduced price lunch population, and 6.91% of the district is receiving special education support. English is the predominant language of the district, but 18% of the district students are English Language Learners. Spanish is the second most frequently-spoken language, with over 90% of limited English students reporting it as their first language. District teacher demographics were not readily available. While these statistics should provide a sense of the district population overall, records were not

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<sup>1</sup> The name of the school district as well as the names of bloggers in this study have been changed or obscured to protect identity.

publicly available to identify the ethnicity or socioeconomic status of the participants in this study, that is, the students and teachers who participated on the blogging engine.

### **Researcher's Role**

As one of the creators of this particular blogging engine, and as one of the individuals responsible for training others on its use and purpose, I approach this research as a participant-observer. Having helped to create and maintain the space and to teach people how to use it, I have firsthand participatory knowledge of its intended purposes, but I also share some stake in the interactions that occur there. I also am an observer to some degree, however, as I do not directly interact with the people writing on the site on an everyday basis.

Formally, I consider myself as a practitioner researcher (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) in this study since the blogging engine represents a kind of virtual classroom space. Furthermore, like a teacher engaged in studying a more traditional, bounded classroom space in order to understand and improve the learning that occurs there, I intend to use the information gained during the course of this investigation to influence future development and training around the use of the blogging engine so that student and educator learning can improve in this space as well. The unique perspective I hold in my current district position should allow me to do so.

As an instructional technology coordinator for the district, I live in both the worlds of school information technology and classroom instruction. My continuing certification as a teacher, as well as my work with teachers to help them understand the role of technology in thoughtful teaching and learning, keeps me grounded in the world of the classroom. My work behind the scenes as a technical advisor, builder, and administrator



of many of the systems that are in play in our district to support teaching and learning gives me unique insight into the limitations and opportunities of technology and infrastructure. Simply put, my role is not to fix broken things, although that happens from time to time. My more precise role is to serve as a mediator between the worlds of IT and education. As an “insider” in both spaces, I work to improve the conditions for teaching and learning by building bridges between the two domains.

It is quite possible that my knowledge of the people and places mentioned in these blog posts has influenced my analysis of the postings in ways that readers less familiar with the context would not see or have been influenced by. My awareness of this potential bias, though, has minimized its intrusion, I hope.

### **Context of the Study: The Blogging Engine**

The blog network, or collection of public blogs, that is the focus of this study is and has been publicly hosted and maintained by the Westchase School District since 2008. The “blogging engine,” as we call it, is powered by open source software, freely available for any users to download and run on their own hardware. Wordpress, the software used, is designed to allow for the creation of either single blogs or of a network of collectively hosted blogs. A blogging network is employed in our district, and the current software powering the blogging engine is Wordpress 3.2.1.

While multiple configurations are possible with this blogging engine, from wide-open to the world to locked down to a single user, the current configuration studied here allows for the creation of blogs by anyone who either has an email address from the school district or who has the express permission and assistance of the district for that creation. Almost all users are staff, students, or administrators, but occasionally we assist

a parent group with blog creation so long as that group is affiliated in some way with a district program or offering. Our information technology department's intention in creating the space in this way was to allow for a relatively open and flexible context that could be shaped by the needs of the teachers, students, or others in the district who needed a place to write in public.

As of the first day of school for the 2011-2012 school year, the blog engine was home to 1,097 unique blogs and 2,296 user accounts. That number is growing at a rate of approximately five to ten new blogs per week. Anyone who posts to these blogs has the ability to restrict access to a posting and prevent it from being publicly seen, but most users never do so. Those posts made public are aggregated into one publicly available specific blog, called "Everything," that serves as a chronological record of every post publicly made. It is this meta-blog, and the texts that exist within, that is the focus of my study.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data in this study is an analysis of every public blog post published to the blogging engine from August 11<sup>th</sup> to September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011. I reviewed those posts with a particular eye to the coding categories described below. I chose this particular time period for a few reasons. To begin with, this was a period that contained the time in which teachers from the district returned to school after summer. The same period extends into the school year to a point where regular routines and habits for the year were established. It seemed reasonable to me that the regular use of the blogging engine would take off during this time.

In December of 2010, prior to this analysis, I piloted the coding procedures described below. At that time, I developed much of the coding structure that I'm employing in this study, attempting to focus my analysis around the questions of this study about types of text and authorship as well as the presence of conversation and/or hyperlinks. I noticed then that blogging practice in the district during the school year seems to be consistent with the time period I've collected from for this study, but it would be of interest to compare, in a future study, blog postings over multiple time periods to see if my observation was an accurate one.

Informed by a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I developed the codes and categories described below by identifying themes that emerged from the texts on the blog. I selected this methodology because other researchers doing similar studies of blogs and bloggers and similar short texts have found it to be a useful way to approach such a collection of material (Bishop, 2010; Dickey, 2004; Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2005; Kerawalla, Minocha, Kirkup, & Conole, 2009; Luehmann, 2008; Park, Heo, & Lee, 2011; Purcell-Gates, Perry, & Briseño, 2011). I accessed each blog post via its corresponding link reference on the meta-blog mentioned above. Coding for each post was logged into a Google Form so that all information could be collected into a spreadsheet for further analysis and review.

Guided by my research questions, I was interested in the nature of reading and writing occurring in these spaces, and thus developed a coding scheme that would reflect who authored the posts and who their intended audiences were. I was also curious about the affordances of digital writing spaces, hence my interest in the nature of the comments on a post, particularly in regard to whether or not they led to conversation between the

author and the responder. Finally, I also wanted to focus in on the presence of hyperlinks and other media and the functions these appeared to serve. I was especially interested in whether or not these spaces appeared to fulfill the potential that blogs hold for connecting texts and readers and writers, as I described earlier in my literature review. Furthermore, if these spaces could include tools for meaning making other than words, then what might that look like in practice?

### **Coding Scheme**

The coding scheme I developed included the following tags: author, audience, text type, comments, links, and additional media. Below, I describe each tag in more detail and provide examples where appropriate.

#### *Author*

This tag refers to the general role of the author of the post. This was either determined from the context of the post or the biographical information included in the blog. Subcodes included are as follows:

Administrator

Anonymous

Counselor

IT Department

Staff

Student

Teacher

Undetermined

The sub-code “Anonymous” differs from “Undetermined” in that when the identity of the blogger was intentionally masked by the author, he or she was said to be anonymous. The sub-code “Undetermined” indicates both that the individual’s role was unclear, and it was also unclear whether or not the information included on the blog was deliberately obscured. “IT Department” denotes staff of the school district’s IT department.

### *Audience*

The audience was coded if it was clear from the text whom the authors intended as the audience of the post. I used the following sub-codes to label the audience type:

K-2

3-5

6-8

9-12

Parent

Staff

All

Unknown

“All” was coded if both students and parents were the intended audiences, and “Unknown” was used if the audience was unclear.

### *Text*

This tag refers to the text type of the blog post. Several sub-codes exist here. The examples provided below are actual excerpts from the data set.

**Table 1: Text Type Codes**

<b>Type</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Example</b>
Announcement - Resource	An announcement pertaining to the availability of a new item, object, website, or other tangible object of use to the school community.	<b>“YOUR BOOK IS ONLINE:</b> Follow these steps to get signed up:”
Announcement - Program	An announcement pertaining to the availability of, or the opportunity to participate in an event of some kind.	“This is a new program which the Math Department is beginning to help kids who are having trouble with their Math.”
Assignment	A task required of a student by a teacher. Both the task and the students’ response to that task, if part of the blog, are coded this way.	“Read the passage below and answer the question that follows in the “reply” field below.”
Communication	A generic post from the blogging software rather than a human author. All blogs come with this stock post as a first post.	“Hello world! This is an example of a blog post.”
Curriculum	A reference to, or passage of, district curriculum or curricular resources.	“ <i>Spelling for Writers</i> is designed to help your child develop the spelling and literacy skills needed to become a successful, independent speller, reader, and writer.”
Meeting Notes	A meeting agenda with embedded notes.	“Our question as we leave the meeting: What are three things you’re looking for in classrooms when you visit with teachers in the next month?”
Newsletter	A text that did, or could, appear in a school newsletter.	“All requests must be submitted to the counseling office by 4:00 PM Tuesday, August 30 <sup>th</sup> .”
Reflection	A text in which the author reacts to some other thing. Reflections may contain summary, but the summary is less than half of the post.	“It is far too soon to call this model a success and a better alternative to Dewey, but I am happy with the way this library is progressing towards making that determination.”

Report	A statement about the progress of district work.	“IT has installed the new wireless network solution for the Main Street School building and there is 100% wireless coverage.”
Student Work	A post made of a response to an assignment or work shared by the teacher in response to an assignment. Different from assignment as it was either a teacher’s or student’s choice to share beyond the assignment itself.	“On our very first day of school, I asked children to write their name to ‘sign in’ and to draw a picture of their favorite things. Here’s a gallery of their writing and drawing!”
Summary	A post which is a summary of some event (including class time) or other text.	“Today we: *Had music and we played the drums. *Read some more of “There Is a Boy in the Girls’ Bathroom”. *Did our strengths in writing.”
Syllabus/Course Description	A post which is a course description or syllabus.	“Please review our course syllabus [link in post] and email me with any questions. Gracias!”

*Comments*

The number of comments left on a post were noted. In addition, the presence of responsive comments from the author of the post were noted separately as

“Conversation.”

No Comments

One Comment

Some Comments (2-4)

Many Comments (5 or more)

Conversation – Author responds to comments

### *Links*

Every hyperlink in a post was noted, and the number of links was counted. Links went to two types of places—either to another Web page or to a file attachment included in the post.

No Links

One Link

Some Links (2-4)

Many Links (5 or more)

### *Additional Media*

If a post contained media other than text (e.g. as a file attachment or a displayed element of the post), the type of item was noted as follows:

Audio

Video

Photo

None

Other

### **Coding Process**

After coding all posts using the tags described above, I totaled the numbers for each category in order to determine patterns. I then reread the posts I had earmarked as noteworthy in my first pass through the data because they seemed representative of a particular text type, contained especially interesting content, or because they did not fit neatly into the coding scheme. This method of analysis proved especially appropriate for



determining the type and nature of interactions that occurred in a digital space intended to support opportunities for learning.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

In this section, I will present the numerical data generated from the coding and the coding process, as well as analysis of representative postings from the blogging engine. The coding system provides an organizational structure through which I will explore the different elements of the blogging engine under examination as well as a useful tool for approaching my research questions. In addition to providing statistical information about location, authorship, audience, text type, comments, and hyperlinks, I also share excerpts of blog posts drawn from the larger data set in order to further develop and inform the quantitative data presented. Except when noted, these excerpts are representative of the categories below as well as being characteristic of the activity on the blogging engine in general.

### **Location & Authorship**

One third of the blog posts in this study came from two schools—Vocation School and Flynn High—that required students’ use of blogs in their courses. When I address the nature of blogging as student assignment later in this chapter, I am largely referencing these two schools and, specifically, these two classes within the schools—a multimedia course for students at the Vocation School and a “Wired” course at Flynn High, which is intended to prepare students for the school’s forthcoming 1:1 computing environment. In each school, these classes were responsible for all of the blog posts in that particular school. In fact, in most of the schools represented here, one classroom is responsible for all of the posts from that building, suggesting that blogging appears to be an isolated task

in some classrooms rather than a common practice across a school. The third largest category is “Unknown,” which is a category for posts where I am unsure of the location of the blog author. Most of the posts and blogs falling into this category are there because adding location information is an intentional act by the author. I cannot determine, though, if this data was omitted on purpose to protect the identity of the blog author, for example, or because it simply was not shared.

**Table 2: Blog Posts by Location**

<i>Location</i>	<i>Posts</i>	<i>Percent of Total</i>
Bayberry Middle	3	1.29%
STEM Camp	2	0.86%
Vocation School	41	17.60%
IT Department	17	7.30%
Etiwan Elem.	15	6.44%
Pimlico High	12	5.15%
Fuquay Elem.	9	3.86%
Majestic Elem.	22	9.44%
Longview Elem.	2	0.86%
Creekside High	16	6.87%
District Admin	8	3.43%
Tiger Elem.	3	1.29%
Cliffside Elem.	1	0.43%
Willow River High	18	7.73%
Flynn High	37	15.88%
Unknown	27	11.59%
Total	233	100.00%

Clearly, in the vast majority of the schools, there was no blogging presence during the period of review. Even within schools, individual teachers were responsible for all or most of the posts. For instance, a single teacher at Longview Elementary who moved to Majestic Elementary is responsible for all of the postings from Longview Elementary.

She is also the blogger writing on behalf of STEM Camp, a summer program she facilitated the previous summer focused on STEM curriculum and early elementary school students. To clarify, that teacher is not only responsible for two of the sites represented in the data, she is also one of only two teachers writing at the third (Majestic Elementary). Without this point of clarification, the data seems to suggest more use at additional schools than is actually the case. Further, it appears that once this teacher left a site, so, too, did the practice of blogging at that school. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that blogging is not only an isolated practice across schools in the district overall, but is also uncommon within an individual school.

On the other hand, when blogging did occur, authorship was well distributed across teacher and student roles, as you'll see in Table 3. I was able to determine authorship in blog posts by either the title of the blog or the author line given by the blogging software, as users are required to have a username when they post. For example, teacher usernames were often names such as "Mrs. Smith," while student usernames frequently reflected the login credentials they use for other school services. A third category, though not broken out in the data, could be "other staff," comprised of the other staff categories I coded and referenced in Table 2. If broken out, this category would make up roughly one third of all authors. If students, teachers, and other staff were roughly equal sized groups, this statistic would illustrate that blogging as a practice is at least evenly distributed across different groups in the district, but as the table below indicates, that is not the case.

**Table 3: Blog Posts by Author Type**

<i>Author</i>	<i>Posts</i>	<i>Percent of Total</i>
Student	89	38.20%
Teacher	84	36.05%
Staff	33	14.16%
Administrator	2	0.86%
Counselor	6	2.58%
IT Department	17	7.30%
Undetermined	2	0.86%
Total	233	100.00%

What is also remarkable about these statistics is that, although students outnumber staff and faculty in the Westchase School District by a factor of five to one, the blog post authorship in this study is largely staff. This phenomenon suggests that students are either unaware that they can use this online space, are significantly restricted from doing so, or are uninterested or unwilling to do so. Of the 233 posts in the study, only one was posted by a student beginning his own blog independent of a school requirement to do so. I analyze the content of his posts in a section below.

These findings suggest that the speaking or writing in our blogging engine is similar to traditional notions of physical classrooms. That is, students do less talking, or in this case writing, than do staff members. This seems to challenge the idea that Richardson (2006) and others suggest when they say that blogs are tools for increasing student agency. The blogs of more students certainly *could* exist—there are no technical reasons why they could not—but they do not.

## **Audience**

Identifying the intended audience for each blog post was somewhat tricky in that at no point did an author explicitly state, “I am writing this for my fifth graders.” When a tenth grade teacher, for example, wrote a question clearly intended for students on a blog labeled with the course name, her audience was clear. But when a staff member shared an announcement or a newsletter item, the intended audience was less possible to discern. As a result, more than a third of the posts received the code “unknown.”

Table 4 shows the results for my coding of audiences. I broke codes for audience into grade level, so “K-2” means that the audience addressed was kindergarten through second-grade students. All numbers refer to grade levels, but sometimes, posts seemed to be written to both students and parents or to multiple groupings of grade level students. When multiple audiences appeared to be present, I coded for both. You can see those intersections as codes separated by a comma in Table 4.

The code “All” is also a tricky case. When it was clear that the author wanted to speak to every possible audience—anyone in the district, for example, or in one case “Attention, everyone!,” the code “All” was used.

**Table 4: Intended Audience for Blog Posts**

<i>Audience</i>	<i>Posts</i>	<i>Percent of Total</i>
K-2	0	0.00%
3-5	1	0.43%
3-5, Parent	3	1.29%
6-8	0	0.00%
6-8, Parent	1	0.43%
9-12	35	15.02%
9-12, Parent	3	1.29%
Parent	65	27.90%

IT Department	0	0.00%
Staff	32	13.73%
Unknown	80	34.33%
All	10	4.29%
Staff, All	1	0.43%
K-2, 3-5	1	0.43%
K-2, 3-5, 6-8, 9-12	1	0.43%
Total	233	100.00%

Even though intended audience was sometimes difficult to discern, it was usually clear enough whether a blogger was writing to a teacher or a student. If audience is important as a motivator for writing, then the presence of so many posts with an unclear sense of audience is troubling. Certainly, blogs are and can be written for general audiences, but from a writing instruction point of view, the uncertainty of who is reading a post can make it that much more difficult to writers to shape their message appropriately according to audience and context.

If the potential of new audiences in blogging spaces is that students will be writing for purposes beyond the traditional teacher and engaging in student-to-student conversation (Kajder & Glen Bull, 2003; Richardson, 2006), then that potential seems unrealized when students are unsure of their audience. Students in most cases seem, as I address in the comments section, to be writing for their teacher, who, at least in this data, is not typically responding. Potential audiences may well only be useful if they are ultimately realized and actual.

Parents, too, seem to be an intentional audience of many blog authors. However, as a parent never responds in the comments to any postings directed at them, I cannot say that they saw these texts. I address the idea of commenting as signaling in a later section.

## Text

In this section, I provide examples of the types of texts that emerged in the blogging engine and comment on the significance of their content in relation to my research questions and related issues identified in the literature review. As my analysis of the text types will make clear, the postings on the blog generally represent the types of texts normally seen in offline writing. The excerpts are quoted as they appeared on the blog, errors and alternative spellings preserved and uncorrected.

**Table 5: Blog Posts by Text Type**

<i>Text Type</i>	<i>Posts</i>	<i>Percent of Total</i>
Announcement - Program	13	5.58%
Announcement - Resource	22	9.44%
Assignment	71	30.47%
Communication	2	0.86%
Curriculum	6	2.58%
Meeting Notes	1	0.43%
Newsletter	39	16.74%
Reflection	29	12.45%
Report	1	0.43%
Student Work	5	2.15%
Summary	40	17.17%
Syllabus/Course Description	4	1.72%
Total	233	100.00%

Two text types will not be further addressed below. Reports appeared only once in the data, and the post in its entirety appears in the example table in Chapter 3. The other type that will not be addressed here is Communication. Two such posts appear in the data; both were the same automated message from the blogging software welcoming the user to their blog, and both had been deleted from the blogs at the time of this writing.



### *Announcements*

About 15% of the posts during the time period I studied were announcements of one sort or another. This makes sense, as it was the beginning of the academic year, and lots of announcements are made as folks adjust to new routines and begin new programs, announcements such as where to park, how to drop off children, and how to sign children up for various programs such as insurance or getting eyeglasses. These announcements were made most often by school and district “official” blogs, rather than individual teacher blogs. Many of these announcements were repurposing of other texts; that is, authors appear simply to be passing other messages along from other sources.

For example, one announcement, coded “Program,” described professional development opportunities for teachers and was a repost of an email sent earlier by a professional organization to the curriculum department staffer who keeps the blog for math curriculum in the district. Another announcement from Pimlico High, coded Resources, provided information about a program for eyeglasses that was a repost of a district flyer produced for the program. Generally, such posts appear to duplicate or replace announcements from school newsletters and other communication frequently mailed to parents or tucked into student folders for the weekly trip home.

I understand these duplications to some extent as I myself have sometimes struggled as a “district person” with where exactly I should post an announcement in order to reach the intended audience. Because there doesn’t seem to be “one place” where a teacher or staffer or student or parent can access everything that they need to know about their school, classroom, or computer, my solution is often to repost announcements

to various blogs. These repostings, in some sense, are an attempt to meet that need, but it seems that such repostings create as many problems as they solve for people who are paying attention to different district communications spaces. In light of my first research question, it seems that school-sponsored announcements in blogging spaces are simply the same messages sent again and again.

### *Assignments*

Nearly one third of the posts made during the data collection period were student assignments. Further, the majority of those posts came in the third week of the data collection period—the second week of school—and the writers were mostly high school students.

Within the Assignments category, I noticed multiple structures. The first of these is a structure I refer to as the call and response. In these posts, the teacher would pose an initial question to which the student would respond using the comments feature of the blog. In the following example, the teacher posted this “call”:

Read the passage below and answer the question that follows in the “reply” field below.

*Millie sat in the window, longingly staring at a small bird outside. The bird was busily chirping and hopping around in the bushes. This hopping and chirping made the tip of Millie’s tail twist and turn. The rest of her kept still. If the window had not been in the way, Millie would have pounced right out with the bird.*

**What can we infer about Millie? What two pieces of evidence can you find in the text to support your inference?**

In the comments section of the blog, short responses followed. Each bullet below represents a different student comment:

- Millie is a cat first kept still and when it says that if the window had not been in the way he/she would have pounced on the bird
- well i think that millie is a cat observing the bird. Because its tail twists and turns.

- (((: uhhmmmm ...!! LooL  
 \*Millie's TaaiL Twiiszt aandd TuurN Thiszz Meannsz thaath hes aaH piiG  
 \*MiLLiiesz szaaT iin thee windoow-Hee wasz CaaLm ..!

Calls and responses written entirely in Spanish were also posted in the blog engine by a high school Spanish teacher.

Call-and-response posts, in English or in Spanish, at least the ones in this time period, include no conversational elements; that is, once the teacher posted the question, the students responded to the teacher directly. They did not comment on each other's comments, nor did the teacher report back or respond to the students' comments on the blog. While such feedback may have occurred in the physical classroom, this is impossible to determine through these posts.

Another type of assignment post that I saw frequently was the recording of an assignment description for the students. Again, this usually occurred at the high school level. The best example is the high school history teacher who posted a short outline of each day of her courses, links to files from the day, as well as any homework assignments:

- HW:** Choose one parent to interview and ask them the following questions:
1. What do the terms liberal and conservative mean to you?
  2. Do you consider yourself a liberal or conservative?
  3. What factors most influence your political socialization? (you may need to explain what political socialization means and show them some of the things that may shape their beliefs)

Not once did anyone comment to one of these assignment-listing posts, although the commenting feature was activated for all of them and there were in some instances three posts per day from this particular teacher. It seems clear that students knew that

blog posts made in this vein were intended as “pushes” of information, or that they did not look at them, or some combination of the two.

Another assignment type is the group or class blog. I can trace the majority of those assignments to the Wired course, described earlier, for high school freshmen at Flynn High. In the course, all the students and the teacher share one blog for the course, and they all have authorship privileges on that blog. These postings are varied, following the topic or topics assigned by the teacher. One assignment for students in the Wired course appeared to be to ask students to explore a blog or blogs and then describe what they saw and how they might choose to write a blog of their own:

A blog that I found interesting is called Waffles from a can. The blog is about a guy named Joe Vanhoose who tried waffles from a can. He said that he has spent years perfecting his waffle recipe and did not expect Batter Blaster (the name of the product) to taste very good because its batter in a frozen can. He said that they actually tasted really good and that Batter Blaster is a great deal.  
Here is the blog: <http://athenscms.com/blogs/3176/>

The authority that this author has is experience and informal because he actually experienced waffles from a can. He also provided information on good the product was.

The idea of authority in this blog isn't really important because its not about anything too important.

The blog does have comments. People with accounts on the website are commenting on this blog. There is only three comments, one is a question from a staff member, one is a positive comment and one is a bad comment. The author has not responded to any comments.

Yes, the blog is very easy to read.

There is one link, the hyperlink leads to the product's website.

I quote this post at length because it raises several issues inherent in these types of assignments and about the blogging engine itself. The hyperlink in the post is “naked,” which means that it is independent of the text structure and not embedded within the text. The standard hyperlink that one usually sees in online writing frequently an underlined

word that is “clickable,” is an embedded hyperlink. Many bloggers find naked links similar to grammatical errors– they suggest imprecision. In addition, a well-embedded hyperlink can function like an adjective or an adverb or another modifier to further sculpt and shape text.

Many of the other student assignments in this category as well as others include naked rather than embedded hyperlinks. Although I will discuss hyperlinks separately in a section below, it’s important to note here that the patterned use of naked hyperlinks that I found across posts suggest that students have not been taught the convention used by most bloggers outside of school. This would be the digital equivalent of not teaching students the value of capitalizing sentences or using end punctuation. Actually, it is more significant than that since naked hyperlinks do not enter into a writer’s writing as much as they take up space between ideas. Digital writers need the functional use of embedded hyperlinks.

In comments on other students’ posts on this particular topic, one teacher mentions that a tool in the blog editor will help students embed their links, but the student did not do so here. As was frequently the case in blog comments from a teacher, no corrective action seemed to be taken by the student receiving the feedback. It is possible that the student just overlooked the hyperlink, but as it was a common occurrence, I am wondering if it was overlooked because it was not taught.

The paragraph structure of the rest of this student example felt stiff and formulaic. Once I saw this next student’s response, I understood why:

1. <http://crafthub.net/>
2. ?
3. they look like they have the authority because they have professional minecraft creation

4. most of the comments are all complements like wow and that good
5. yes this blog is very big fount to read
6. yes it does
7. minecraft players
8. informal
9. this blogs have more facts
10. it has pictures of peoples creations
11. yes they give credit to the craters of the builds
12. i want to teach my brother how to blog because he want to right his fantasy storys

If we compare the two posts, we can see that the students were working from a list of questions that they both chose to address directly rather than responding to the gist of the prompt in extended prose. Neither post had any comments from the teacher regarding format and/or form. Most of the posts from the Wired class on this particular topic stuck to a similar structure, with the most extreme the numbered example above.

These texts do not seem any different from texts that would have been handed directly to the teacher in the classroom were they not online. In fact, they seem to replicate the initiate-respond-evaluate (IRE) model of school conversation (Cazden, 1988), with the notable exception that the evaluation, at least as it is accessible on the blog, appears minimal or absent altogether. Of course, evaluation may be a component of face-to-face conversation in the physical classroom. Regardless, this school-sponsored class blog seems to be an online version of too many unsatisfying classroom discussions.

Other high school students wrote to similar assignments in another vocational education course on multimedia, but it was clear that their blogs were created for the particular course, as the course and school name appeared in the blogs' mastheads. During the data collection period, the writing assignment at hand involved a definition of copyright and related terms. Students wrote examples to go with their definitions, many

of which were incomplete, and in some cases, incorrect. Again, none of the definition posts had any comments from other students or the teacher, leaving one to hope that these misconceptions were cleared up in class. In one case, a student even put a heading in the top right corner of the post including her name, date and class period, much as she might have if she had typed and printed paper to hand in in class. The reproduction of these old habits in new spaces suggests that blogs hold no special power for transforming learning unless the purposes of the tasks students and teachers perform in these spaces are themselves transformed.

### *Newsletters*

Another prominent text type on the blogging engine was the newsletter post. Although these posts weren't always complete newsletters, they included individual items that might be found in a newsletter, each contained in a separate post. One post, for example, explained parking and student drop-off procedures.

There were two exceptions to this pattern. Willow River High publishes a weekly online version of their school newsletter with hyperlinks added in. Sometimes, these links were embedded. Other times, they appeared naked. Because there was at least one comment, left by a teacher seeking clarification on the dates of an upcoming parent night, it seems that someone is checking in there. The other exception is the Vocation School. One staff secretary at the school has published a daily staff email for years about what's going on in the building (e.g., staff absences, birthdays, adjustments to the bus schedule, etc.). This year, at the request of an administrator, she has converted that daily email into a blog post on a dedicated blog instead, though the reason for this change has not been made publicly clear to my knowledge. Although she made daily posts to the staff during

the observation period for this study, no comments were made in return. From a staff member's perspective, I found her daily emails to be quite helpful when I worked in the building several years ago, but I would have been less likely to seek out a blog to find the same information. Since I suspect that I as an instructional technologist would have an easier time than most of the school's current staff in locating and making the blog posts a daily routine, it seems that the move from email to blog would not increase functionality, but would instead limit access to valuable information.

In this case, I suspect that the blog is seen as "new and better," and therefore, as frequently happens in discussions of technology and new tools, it has a value that a more traditional technology, like email, does not. So "getting with the times," then, is moving the email newsletter to a blog. I usually recommend against this type of move, particularly if the previous method of information delivery seemed to be meeting the needs of those using it. In this case, the "newness" of blogs and blogging has probably resulted in fewer people getting the information that was being delivered to them on a daily basis previously. Now, they have to go and find it on the Web instead.

### *Reflections*

Although reflections by students are, in many cases, technically assigned by teachers, and are therefore assignments, I was interested in breaking out reflective writing because it seems to be common in the genre of blogging. Reflections differ, too, from the assignment posts above in that they contain more self-directed analysis than posts examining the habits and efficacy of others. The majority of the posts – all but seven – in the reflection category were written by students in response to teachers' prompts. But not



all of them were. I will return to the seven staff posts after I look at student use of reflection.

The same vocational multimedia course mentioned in the assignment section figures as the largest subgroup in the reflection section. Students considered what they liked and did not like about various elements of their multimedia projects and tried to apply their thinking to future work. One student from this course, reflecting on what his hope for his own blog would be, wrote:

When I create a blog I plan to have a playful voice, lots of pictures, not many words. I'm more of a visual person and I hate reading so that will probably show as much as possible. Though in class, "as much as possible" will probably be paragraphs upon paragraphs. My blog would/will contain humor and serious comments.

This reflection borders on prediction. While the student's speculations in this entry are promising and forward-looking in considering where his interests lie and how he will apply them to a new situation, this blog or others like it did not emerge in the evaluation period. Yet again, instead of student-driven texts, we see teacher-driven texts.

Staff also posted reflections during the three-week period. As several of my colleagues in the technology department are among the reflective posters, I know that their posts were not assigned by others. The content of other posts in this category also suggests that their reflections were not prompted by others. This self-initiated type of writing I was hoping to foster when we developed the blogging engine—writing not assigned by a teacher, but written to be read. Unfortunately, it occurred only seven times in the data collection period. Three of those occurrences were by my colleagues in the IT department, who share my enthusiasm for this type of process writing.

Reflection posts show a variety of staff concerns and issues. In one post, a district staffer reports on some research results from a new district program. In another, a teacher explains some of her concerns about student playground behavior. The posts are exploratory, but also move beyond exploration and into advocacy—reminding students that being left out of games on the playground is hurtful and should be avoided—or general sharing.

One preschool teacher shared a Wordle, a visualization of words, she had constructed as a way of following up with parents who had attended a recent parent night in her classroom:

Remember how you wrote down those three descriptors that best describe your child? Here's what our classes as a whole look like (so far). If you weren't here, or you didn't write down the words, just email them to me and I'll update the Wordle.

The teacher's post ends with a question to parents about the information she shared regarding the characteristics of the students. She wonders if the parents have noticed that the classes, based on their Wordles, are so different. While this was an interesting use of Wordle—and a new twist on a standard preschool assignment of students bringing something about themselves to school – the teacher's question prompts no responses, at least in this online venue.

Agency, choosing to write when one is not required to and the resultant feelings of ownership or control it inspires, is barely blossoming here in this blogging engine. While the data does not tell me why, it does suggest that this question is worthy of further study.

### *Student Work*

While the assignment posts discussed previously as well as other posts written by students might be considered “student work,” posts receiving this code refer to instances when a student or teacher shared a piece or pieces of student work that were not required to be shown by a teacher. They were basically posts where someone said, of a student artifact, “Hey, check this out. This is great!”

Only five posts of student work were made during the data collection period. In two of these posts, a teacher shared the work of other students. The first was a story written by a student and shared via the teacher’s account, and the second was a collection of photographs of preschool students’ attempting to write their names for the first time. The remaining posts were made by one student in the Wired class. Inspired by the blogging reflections students were writing about other people’s blogs, this student decided begin a blog about aviation and fitness. The student promised to explain in future posts why those two topics belonged together in one blog. As of this writing, he has not yet done so.

In reviewing these posts, it seems that, while we have certainly created a space where sharing and showcasing could happen, we have not articulated a philosophy or approach that explains why and how such sharing should occur. It is happening by accident, in isolated pockets, rather than systemically. Another possibility is that the work being done in most of our classrooms is simply not worth sharing, but I have been in many of the district’s classrooms, and that is not the case. Children are doing interesting work, but it is either not easy enough to share, or district staff and students do not understand why and how to share it, or they are sharing it elsewhere.

## Summary

The second most frequent text type in the data set was the summary. Daily summaries are short lists of what classes did or accomplished or learned during that particular day of school. This practice in the school district certainly predates the blogging engine, with many Westchase School District teachers, particularly in the elementary school, creating a short paper flipchart summary with their students at the end of the school day as a routine for helping students remember the highlights of the day as well as have something to speak with their parents about when the inevitable “What did you do at school today?” conversation occurs at home.

The summaries posted to the blog take two forms. The first is a teacher-written and teacher-posted summary. One example:

Don't be fooled by our lovely students who come home and tell you nothing happened in school today. Good conversation starters for this evening will include.....

What do you know about the word splintered? What does it mean to you?

How is an array different from area? What are some of the features you can find on a multiplication chart? What is a quotient?

In the second type, a student or group of students compose and post to the blog, often signing their names to the posting. The following post is representative of this type:

\*Today we had music and we did a dance about the 7 habits.

\*We also had snack and read aloud and we read some more of *There Is a Boy In The Girls' Bathroom*.

\*We did writing workshop and worked on a list of our top ten.

\*We started our new math program! (It was great!)

\*And near the end of the day we read a book that was called *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge*.

\*\*\*Made by Jaya

These summaries appear to serve an informational function, perhaps to spark conversation between readers of the blog and children about the activities taking place

during the school day. But again, as there are no comments to any of these posts, it is unclear from the text itself what reaction families have to them. Does this suggest that parents and other caregivers are not paying attention to the posts, or that they are having conversation about the summaries outside of the blogs? Although the answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this study since answering them would require follow-up interviews, the frequency of the posts suggest that these are important classroom routines or texts for the participating classes.

Overall, among all text types, the dominant form in the blogging engine is certainly teacher-driven. This resembles traditional physical classrooms in more ways than I anticipated. In some ways, the blogging engine is a giant hand-in folder for students in the district. At the same time, the texts being produced here are largely ignored, at least as comments and responses from others are concerned. Let us examine that element now.

### **Comments**

One would expect that one benefit of using blogs as district communication would be that students and staff would take advantage of the commenting features of the blogging software. Comments in the larger world of online texts serve to connect readers and writers around their topics. In the comments to a blog post, anyone can potentially respond. At their best, a blog's comments are rich discussion spaces, with popular bloggers seeing dozens of comments to their posts. In the Westchase School District, this was largely not the case, as the table below illustrates.

**Table 6: Comments on Posts**

<i>Number of Comments</i>	<i>Posts</i>	<i>Percent of Total</i>
No Comments	183	78.54%
One Comment	21	9.01%
Some Comments (2-4)	11	4.72%
Some Comments (2-4), Conversation	7	3.00%
Many Comments (5 or more)	7	3.00%
Many Comments (5 or more), Conversation	4	1.72%
Total	233	100.00%

In three weeks of postings on the blogging engine, less than one quarter of the posts in the spaces received any sort of comment. In the rare cases that a comment was posted, the vast majority of blog posts with comments had but one comment. Most of the posts with “some to many” comments were in response to the class assignment postings mentioned previously, so they, too, were most likely a kind of assignment in themselves.

If the purpose of the blogging engine was and is to provide students and staff access to each other for the purposes of being in conversation about teaching and learning, then the blog engine is a gross failure. Less than 5% of the posts on the blog exhibited any sort of conversation. And in all but three of those cases, the conversation was teacher-driven, a teacher responding to a student post with some sort of gentle push to make a change to the writing or to dig deeper. Some examples of those teacher-driven comments are as follows (Note: Each bullet is a separate comment from a different comment thread):

- Yes, but what can you INFER about Millie from the text? Who or what do you think she is?

- Dear Samara, Thank you for being the only person to really follow the instructions. Well done!
- A little short on content.

Both times in the data where a student and another student engaged in blog comment conversation occurred in the Wired course. Likely this is because, as they shared a single course blog, students were able to discover each others' posts a little easier than in other courses where each student maintained a separate blog. Here is the first exchange, following a post about a student's interest in video games (Note: Each bullet is separate comment.):

- First commenter: what kind of video games do you play?
- Post author: All of them
- First commenter: computer games?
- Second commenter: Funny:)
- Teacher (posted one week later): A little short on content.

The delay in response as well as the content of the teacher's comment suggests that it was a comment motivated by the need to grade the student's work. This comment is literally the last word in this conversation and seems disjointed from the conversation itself. Unlike the student comments, the teacher's short statement dismissed the topic at hand (video games) and passed a quick judgment.

The second exchange containing comments is uncomfortably odd for a public blog space. The post that it follows is a freewrite from a student who seems to be off the assignment:

One time in wired, I was sitting there when to my right was this creepy looking guy and behind me was this girl that was laughing enough to be way past the point of sanity. To my left was this guy who I knew but forgot his name. I asked him and told me his name was Smurf. At that moment, I had known at that moment that I was going to lose my hair by the end of the period. The girl who was all giggly was joking about I can't write about her, so I kept typing. Now the people behind me are debating about thigh fat. I am disturbed. I just realized how quiet Lois always is. She was sitting in front of me. Oh well. Now the guy to my right froze his computer. That amuses me. The people behind me are talking about stalkers, but in my opinion, they are all equally disturbing. Now they are all talking about how now instead of saying yes, they will now say "yesh".

Although this is only the first third of the post, the remainder continues in the same vein.

Later on in the post, having realized that he's far exceeded the number of words typed by the other students in his vicinity, the student asks:

"Wait, am I blogging? How low I have fallen."

Clearly, the student has taken his freewriting and published it straight on. The comments responding to the post are troubling as well, especially since they, like the post, have been online now for more than two weeks. (Again, each bullet is a separate comment.):

- First commenter: what?
- Second commenter: It's not very nice to write offensive things about people, especially without their permission
- Third commenter: no nice person
- Post author: I find nothing offensive with it
- Teacher (again, one week later): Ahh, but a responsible blogger will not write gossipy insults and cut downs about classmates. I wonder if you should find a different place to sit. Please keep your comments appropriate.



As a teacher, I wonder why this post remained available and in public online, and what the conversation in class was about it. It seems that one possible answer to what school-based writing looks like is something akin to “messy.” While I don’t wonder how this post made it to the blog, I do wonder if posts like this one help to make the case that students are too often under-supervised in school computer labs. Although I could suggest that this particular student was engaged in Elbow-ian freewriting, I cannot argue that it was the best use of the student’s time.

The other type of conversation post in the data was a simple question of clarification. When a teacher commented “What’s the date of Parent Night?” on a newsletter post, the author of the post edited it to include the information and then responded in the comments section she had done so. Unlike students, who did not respond online to requests for improvement, change, or clarification in their posts, this particular staff member did, resulting in an exchange not unlike a typical office conversation.

Commenting is a feature of online texts that is new. Readers could not easily post their thoughts about a book in the margins or could attach comments to the book itself in a way that any other reader might discover. Blogs have such potential as heteroglossia, as places where multiple voices can exist together (Bakhtin, 1986). Schools are certainly places of multiple voices and perspectives, even if those student and teacher voices are not given equal weight and time in the classroom, which seems to be happening here. Again, traditional physical spaces in school the most common forms of interaction found there are being replicated in the blogging engine.

## Links

Like comments, hyperlinks in the blogging engine are largely absent. These features of blog spaces are not a significant piece of the Westchase School District blogging experiences.

**Table 7: Links in Blog Posts**

<i>Number of Links</i>	<i>Posts</i>	<i>Percent of Total</i>
No Links	173	74.25%
One Link	39	16.74%
Some Links (2-4)	16	6.87%
Many Links (5 or more)	5	2.15%
Total	233	100.00%

Linking is not happening in three quarters of the posts in this study. And, when links are included in a blog post, they are often included outside of the text structure rather than embedded within the text. One caveat to the use of links is that many of the single link posts reflected in the data above were posts where a teacher uploaded a file usually a Word document or a PDF—and the blogging software generated a link in order to deliver the file. So in those cases, teachers might have been using hyperlinks, but not intentionally. Many of the instances of links' existence at all were due to the assignment, noted above, that required students to note the use of hyperlinks in others' blog posts. The use of links in writing is certainly not yet a foundational or essential skill in the classrooms studied herein. But this assignment does at least suggest a beginning awareness that hyperlinks might be important.

We have seen a great deal of information about the use of the blogging engine. In the next section, I will attempt to make some recommendations based on this data.

## Summary

In reviewing the features above, I found that the so-called “interactions” occurring in the blogging engine bear little resemblance to the hoped-for transformation communication possibilities suggested in the literature review. While school-sponsored blogs may hold potential for engaging writers (Kajder & Glen Bull, 2003; Richardson, 2006) and creating new spaces for learning and discourse (Gee 2004, Kirkland, 2009), the instances of communication analyzed here contained little, if any, evidence that the mere presence of a blogging engine liberates or connects stakeholders in an educational institution in any substantial way that is not available in face-to-face settings.

In fact, most of the text present in the blogging engine is very similar to content that would have been produced whether the blog was available or not. To use the language of my research questions, if this blogging engine is even somewhat parallel to similar online spaces available in other school districts, it is clear that most of the writing produced in school-sponsored spaces online is almost indistinguishable from writing produced in school-sponsored writing spaces off-line. The usual cast of characters—teachers and students—predominate these spaces in the usual ways. That is, teachers make assignments, which students complete primarily for the audience of the teacher; the traditional closed loop remains intact. Other common posts present in the blogging engine, such as announcements, also replicate the traditional print-based announcement texts that populate school communications and newsletters.

What I did not find, with some minor exceptions, were new forms of writing generated by students for their own goals or purposes and containing the affordances featured by online composition. Multimedia, despite the presence of a multimedia class,

was almost non-existent. I had hoped to see student writers creating their own publications, perhaps, places to share their ideas and work, or speaking up and back to voices of authority in the district, either through their own blog posts or even anonymous comments. Students' primary reason for writing in this blogging engine still seems to be "because the teacher said I had to." Students, then, appear constrained in these spaces by the types of texts teachers ask them to produce. While I do not know what requirements other than an assigned prompt were imposed on the students, it seems clear that, at least in the posts coded as assignments, teachers fulfilled their end of the traditional contractual agreement in schools by rewarding students who completed the assignment with a grade, an evaluative comment or a point value.

Lastly, the new tools available in these spaces, specifically hyperlinks and comments, were largely absent from student writing, either because they were not required, or writers did not understand how or why to use them. In the following chapter, I speculate why this may be the case and examine the implications of these overall findings.

## CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study focused on three questions:

- What does reading and writing for school-related purposes look like in school-sponsored online writing spaces?
- Who are the users in these spaces, and how do their particular roles constrain their use and the texts they create?
- Are the new tools and affordances of online digital writing, such as hyperlinks, immediate publication, and world-wide audiences a factor in these spaces? If so, how? If not, why not?

To answer the first question, the data suggests that reading and writing for school-based purposes online strongly resembles reading and writing offline. The work may occur in a new space, but it is not new work. To bridge the first and second questions, students and teachers, operate in the same manner that they have in the physical classroom. Teachers ask students to write. Students write for the teacher, and oddly, students seem to have very little voice or agency in the blogging space, despite the fact that they are able to access the space independently of the teacher.

As for the new affordances and tools of the blogging engine, it would seem that they have little to no use, much less impact on the writing that students and staff are doing in the blogging engine space. Perhaps this is because knowledge of the tools is low, with hyperlinks being one example. But it might also be that this space, which has

the potential for a worldwide audience, simply does not. If students infer that they are writing for their teacher alone, I would not say that we have built a “creepy treehouse” in our blogging engine, as discussed in Chapter 2, but I would suggest that we are approaching creepy territory.

When I began this study, I presumed that the answers to my research questions regarding writing and activity lay within the texts contained on the blogging engine itself. At the conclusion of my analysis, however, I realized that in order to determine the true function and impact of the texts, one needs to know more about the face-to-face context in which they are nested. For instance, I wonder what other writing these students and teachers are doing that is not present in the blogging engine? What conversations are happening in between the writing and publishing of each blog post? Are hyperlinks and other valuable feature of online writing topics of conversation in classrooms? If so, why aren't students implementing them? If not, why not?

While an examination of the actual texts occurring in institutional schooling places like the Westchase blogging engine is an important first step, future studies examining such questions should begin with the writers: teachers, staff and students. Longitudinal case studies of what kinds of writing they are producing (both online and offline), where they get feedback, what they do with that feedback, and how that shapes the writing that they do both for school and for themselves would all be useful.

Additional important questions include:

- What conversations are happening in classrooms around the texts being published on the blog engine? How do those conversations influence future work?

- Beyond the teacher, whom do students believe is the audience for their work? Are they writing for that particular audience, or because the teacher says to? Likewise, whom do staff believe they are writing for? To what effect?
- What instruction about writing online is happening in our classrooms?
- What kinds of texts are most appropriate for online spaces? How do other online tools that are available to users, such as Google Docs, complement and conflict one another? How do users choose the right tool for the right purpose in the right place?
- What are the best ways to support stakeholders who are allowed to write in a public space associated with schooling so that the interactions that occur there can be more robust?

Despite these as yet unanswered questions, I feel comfortable making some recommendations based on the results of this study. First of all, schools and districts would be wise to create a single blog for each student user to prevent blog redundancy. That is, if every class a student takes requires the creation of a new blog, then a student will create space after space after space, preventing students from experiencing the benefits of a perpetual blog, such as a longitudinal space that they could come to use over years in the district. This single blog could serve as a portfolio, and would allow the student to develop a following of readers over that time, which should increase the likelihood of both discovery and conversation.

I would also recommend that teachers model using blogs in a more conversational way in order to exploit their potential for exploratory conversation. Evaluative comments

seemed to end conversation, what little there was, whereas a more inviting approach might be to facilitate student-to-student conversation. Finally, as we in the Westchase School District are beginning the implementation of new curricular state standards that are tied to the Common Core State Standards, it makes sense for us to pause and consider carefully how we teach writing overall and how online writing fits into that picture. In the discussions that teachers, staff, and administrators have had so far around creating shared writing spaces and places to share exemplar texts, I continue to argue for the use of tools like blogs for these purposes. I also continue to believe that, much as I have experienced in my own practice, blogs have the potential to be transformative writing spaces. But they are not yet that in my school district. There is still plenty of work to do.

When I began blogging with students in 2005, Will Richardson (2006) became a valued online colleague. While we have gone on to work formally together on projects and presentations and now know each other in face-to-face situations, at the time he was known to me online only. In one of our early blogging conversations, he explained that it was not the tool of the blog that was important to him per se, but the habits he had developed as a blogger. As he wrote:

But it is the essential piece of Weblogs to me: blogs allow me to create content in ways I could not before, not just post what I could create otherwise in a different form. And in the essence of that creation I use and learn all of those skills that will serve me in my lifelong learning that were (I think) much more difficult for me to learn before: close reading, critical thinking about information, clear and concise writing for a real audience, editing, and reflection, all of it understanding that whatever truth I may put forth will continue to be negotiated by readers and more reading. This, by the very nature of the process, develops reading, writing, information, collaboration and computing literacies, literacies which I think most of us would agree are going to be crucial in navigating what's ahead. (Richardson in Hunt, 2005)



In my school district, we have come a long way in creating the space for the type of work that Richardson discusses above. Blogs are easy to make. But we have not yet made the bloggers that he describes. We are not yet producing students and teachers who are writing in blogs as bloggers. Rather they are using blogs to post things they would otherwise write offline.

In my response to Will, which I still return to regularly, six years after I published it on my blog, I wrote that I was seeking to create students who used blogs, the noun, to become students blogging, the verb, writing openly and honestly in the ways that we would want from all writers, teacher, student or otherwise. That is a place, as a school district, worth trying to get to. And I will continue to explore blogs as spaces for that work. However, it seems clear to me now that my focus should be not just on creating the spaces, but also on helping to shape what happens within them.

We need bloggers blogging. Through this study and future work, I hope to help make the practices of bloggers blogging commonplace in our schools.

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