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“Can we blog about this?”: Amplifying Student Voice in Secondary Language Arts

I picture this website: a header image of some lone explorer, venturing into a sunset valley. Over the image float icons inviting visitors to follow him on social media websites, read relevant news, or make purchases on Amazon; the site banner reads “WELCOME TO THE BROTHERHOOD.” Below the first fold of the page follows his commentary: posts with titles such as “President Barack Obama and Atticus Finch,” “America, Too, Is Worth Its Song,” and “Amazon Prime—The Grand Tour.” The content of these posts ranges from reappropriated poetry to television series reviews, incorporating text, video, memes, and comments from readers.

Rico, the author, is 15 years old. He, like my other ninth-grade English students, is a member of the first generation fully immersed in the Internet’s “participatory culture,” a community in which there are low barriers to expression, strong encouragement for content creation, and readily available mentors (Jenkins et al. 3). Those characteristics encourage participant contributions, learning, and teaching within the community. Rico and his peers are active members, whether as gamers, social media consumers, or YouTube video creators. Inside the classroom, participatory culture can engage learners and provide them a space to teach one another. Blogs are one example of this culture in the classroom. Research on classroom blogging suggests digital composition leads to self-directed learning and improved student outcomes by “generating one’s own learning goals, planning how to tackle a problem, evaluating whether learning goals have been met, and re-planning based on this evaluation” (Robertson 1643). Additionally, blogs expand opportunities for class discussion, opening a wider window of time and expression for students learning how to encode their thinking into words (Kahn 17). These findings led me to implement blogging as a regular writing practice in my ninth-grade pre-advanced placement English language arts classes. My goal was to “teach writing as a verb, rather than writings, as a noun” (Heller 12; italics in original); posting traditional assignments electronically or teaching the blog post as another genre of formatted writing would not accomplish this goal. Instead, I focused on building a digital community of authors and improving our craft collectively: goals that had little to do with genre. We wrote frequently, published to a peer audience, and reframed writing as a method for seeking understanding, rather than a recording of already-refined ideas. This practice, feedback, and concept of writing to learn meshed with popular and pedagogical culture: I found deep connections both to participatory culture and writing workshop approaches in our practice. In particular, writing workshop’s elements of student choice, continuing revision, discussion of craft, publication, and process orientation mesh well with digital composition (Hicks 2); these were inextricable from our blogging practice. Blogging in the classroom improved students’ perceptions of themselves as writers, increased peer feedback among students, and provided us with authentic opportunities to write for real audiences: all of this pushed our classes (and me) to become better writers.
Our Classroom

I teach high school in a working-class community of St. Louis, Missouri. Our district is extraordinary in the state for its socioeconomic and racial diversity. Of our student body at the district high school, 79.1 percent qualify for federal free and reduced-price lunch (Missouri Department of Education). We are the rare exception in our state without a clear racial majority, serving a group of 39.9 percent African American, 33.5 percent White, 16.3 percent Hispanic, 2.2 percent Asian American, and 7.7 percent multiracial students (Ritenour School District 3). These demographic data mean we have a rich variety of experiences within our community. Some groups have found themselves voiceless in a traditional curriculum, making me deeply invested in amplifying that voice.

I teach three sections of Pre-Advanced Placement ELA I, a ninth-grade course. These students work on an accelerated language arts curriculum and are highly motivated to succeed academically. My smallest class held 18 students and my largest 24. I began implementing blogging during our district’s first year of 1:1 Chromebook use, so all students had computers to access during class and at home. Navigating the tension between tradition and culturally responsive teaching, our curriculum includes a mixture of literature from the English canon (e.g., To Kill a Mockingbird, Romeo and Juliet) and readings outside of that list (e.g., I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, works by Countee Cullen, blogs, news articles). Both our readings and our writing reflected the tension of building and challenging the literary canon.

Pre-Blogging: Structures

The first step toward blogging was choosing a platform for writing. Ultimately, Edublogs’ paid teacher subscription best suited our needs. Additionally, Edublogs offers a Teacher Blogging Challenge to help educators establish structures for writing online.

Following the challenge, I started a teacher blog. It modeled writing online for students, acclimating us to the website as I posted early (traditional) course assignments there. Along with my model site, I used direct instruction to clarify Internet expectations before students created their own blogs. Edublogs provides multiple models of safety guidelines within the Teacher Blogging Challenge. I adapted Stacy McNally’s guidelines, ultimately selecting eight rules for writing online:

1. Think about your digital footprint.
2. Keep your personal information private.
3. Be kind and constructive.
4. Write about peers only with their permission.
5. Check, double-check, then check again.
6. Cite your sources.
7. Back up what you write with solid evidence.
8. Keep it on task.

Before blogging, students read the guidelines, discussed them as a class, and clarified understandings of the rules we would follow. Setting these norms provided responsive boundaries within which students could innovate to reach our broad writing goals. Following our discussion, all students “signed” the guidelines by commenting they had read and would follow guidelines in blog postings. Clarifying expectations upfront meant fewer instances of inappropriate postings later, though student writers still found favorite rules to break. Bloggers periodically posted their last names or off-task content early in the semester. Following our agreement, I returned posts to draft form and gave points for the assignment after the errors were repaired. This gave authors both opportunity and responsibility for their corrections.

To become better writers, we needed to become consistent writers. Every Friday became protected class time for blogging, with final postings due Sunday evening.

During Blogging: Habits

My classes needed regular writing practice; blogging filled that need. Beyond practicing a specific product, I wanted students practicing habits they could use in developing any product, which meant writing frequently, receiving feedback regularly, and discussing ourselves as writers daily (Heller 12). Essentially, to become better writers, we needed to become consistent writers. Every Friday became protected class time for blogging, with final postings due Sunday evening. We talked regularly about being “classroom writers” and “sit on the couch with a cat writers” as identities
students could try on to establish their own preferences about writing. I shared my writer’s tricks, including voice-to-text, using task timers, creating a physical writing space, and co-writing with others. Blogging every week meant these discussions happened every week.

Practitioners at the university and high school levels note that blogs have transformative potential when used to generate purposeful dialogue and create community among students, but this potential requires cultivation by the instructor (Hungerford-Kresser et al. 332). Cultivating that potential meant keeping writing focused and keeping writers involved with each other. Two primary structures supported this: content-reliant blog prompts and regular peer commenting. Each week, students might post reflections on our reading, co-write poems, or analyze and create multimedia responses. This worked best when our prompts were both specific and linked to our literary content for the week. When I included broad prompts, posts were typically short and unfocused. For example, our first prompt asked students to share what readers should know about them. Writers’ responses varied wildly from background information to self-protective depreciation. (Student writers are identified by first names only and their writing is only edited here for length.)

Abby shares herself beyond her blog as “just a genuinely nerdy person. In my free time I play D&D, board games, and video games, with my friends. I am treasurer of the school’s GSA” (Abbyneedsanap). Alternately, Jada introduces herself by noting, “What is in my head? That’s a hard question. I’m Jada and I usually think about how horrible high school is and how stressful life is and how I’m apathetic to the world” (jadawantstogohome). Other students’ posts were similarly scattered: “tell us about yourself” was too general a prompt to produce strong writing without other supports.

These other supports developed as I learned more about our blogging practice, coming into maturity during our January study of Romeo and Juliet. This unit focused on literary analysis and wrestling with a difficult text, making it well-suited to our writing. For our final post of the unit, I asked students to “Generate a list of topics this play might
be about. Choose one. What does the author believe about that topic? Use evidence from throughout the play to support your ideas.” We spent time discussing potential topics as a class, then shared strategies to change our topics into themes. I modeled hunting for evidence in my notes, annotations, and other materials for the play, then began writing my own post alongside students. The quality of thinking in these final posts skyrocketed. By purposefully prompting student writing, I pushed students to focus on the specific skills of making and defending claims using evidence. Abby writes:

I think the author believes that arrogance is the most deadly poison. There are multiple times in the play, where characters acted arrogant and then wound up dead because of it. Between Mercutio, Tybalt, and Paris. They were all full of themselves and they all faced their untimely death. (Abbyneedsanap)

She later includes multiple pieces of evidence from each character’s death, ultimately concluding, “Three men showed hubris in this play, and every single one of them died . . . the arrogant people were the real tragedy. Arrogance is the most deadly poison.” She expresses her ideas more clearly here, guided directly by our prompt and prewriting work of text marking, brainstorming, and informal conferencing. Though some conventional errors remain (for example, the fragment “Between Mercutio, Tybalt, and Paris”), the analytical power Abby wields is much stronger than in her earlier writings. As her analysis improved, so too did her classmates’ responses: their feedback developed her thought process.

Writing workshop prizes consistent feedback, but teaching students to give quality feedback is difficult. In the past, I have rushed or scripted peer feedback; blogging’s participatory nature eased this process by prioritizing dialogue between author and reader. Since “students often learn to write by speaking, listening to academic discourse, and reading others’ works” (Heller 13), I assigned peer commenting to encourage that discourse. Students followed at least two peer blogs. Many students exceeded the minimum in order to follow friends: of 60 bloggers, 41 followed between three and nine blogs. Nine students followed ten or more of their peers’ blogs. The social importance of following and being followed was incredibly clear; their audiences encouraged them to create content and mentor one another in this participatory space. Some commentary was surface level: “Nice, I really enjoyed reading this” (mickey914). Others moved into more substantial, analytical feedback: “I really like that you chose the Nurse as your topic, nobody ever talks about her” (jadawanststogohome). While building analytical depth, these comments motivated writers and enabled sharing throughout the composition process. The first extended writing piece was a Poe-themed Gothic writing exercise. Tyrell shared his beginning piece on bees, writing:

I told you I was bad scary things but I hope you enjoy it tho. I need help. . . . Here we go:

As I walk to soccer practice, it was a bright spring day in April. I’m just chilling minding my own business then Mr. Bee came in and ruin my day. I ran so fast, I got to practice 20 minutes earlier then anyone else, even the coaches . . . I can deal with spider, ant, beetles, and etc. but the flying ones are the worst. Bees are the earthy devils. Touching flowers in weird way, not sharing any of the honey, and buzzing all the day. ☺️(TyrellG)

Tyrell’s piece is an early draft, and as a writer, he admits he needs help. Other students offered that help, commenting: “Lol I like your Start, You should tell us about why you don’t like bees” (mickey914) and “I like your story. It’s really descriptive about the bees being one of your fears. I feel that you could add more of like a gloomy setting and suspense to make it gothic” (sjamerimex761). This casual, friendly commentary offered content-based feedback an instructor might give, but it came from peers whose work he also read. Tyrell mentored others in website design, teaching them to include custom images, links, and layouts in their blogs. Being both learner and mentor strengthened his role in our community of writers and deepened the impact of blogs on our learning.

Practicing writing with peer commentary deemphasized grading and pushed our focus to the writing itself. However, even in our collaborative classroom, blogs eventually needed a grade.
Balancing grading with practice, I adopted a loose numerical system for scoring blog posts. For example, Salvador’s post during our literary analysis of *Romeo and Juliet* received full points:

The author believes that too much love with obsession can lead to your death or to another person’s death. Tybalt and Mercutio’s death made Romeo & Juliet’s relationship difficult to keep smooth. The Capulets forced Juliet to marry Paris when her love with Romeo was to the extreme level. Then, Friar Lawrence gave Juliet a potion to avoid marrying Paris without letting know Romeo.

. . . It comes to the part where the Capulets try to cheer up Juliet by telling her that Paris is willing to marry her, but she doesn’t seem satisfied about it. “Is there no pity sitting in the clouds. That sees into the bottom of my grief? — O sweet my mother, cast me not away! Delay this marriage for a month, a week. Or, if you do not, make the bridal bed. In that dim monument where Tybalt lies.” (Shakespeare.III.v. 197–202) (sjamerimex761)

During *Romeo and Juliet*, we focused on supporting claims with textual evidence, which Salvador does to show the danger of obsession. Holistically, his writing demonstrates willingness to engage with the text, incorporates an arguable claim, and reasonably analyzes our week’s reading. Even though he is still practicing the finer points of citation and analysis, his writing accomplished our goals for the week and received full points. Posts falling short of our goals—those summarizing rather than analyzing, or partially answering a prompt—received three points. No post for a week resulted in zero points. This loose scoring satisfied students’ need to be compensated for their work and liberated me to give quality feedback.

Instead of exhaustively grading every post, I offered constructive feedback on student writing. In response to Bobby’s post on themes in *Romeo and Juliet*, I wrote, “‘Anger drives your actions’ is a really fascinating theme to explore here. You do a great job including examples from the play—are there any lines from your journal or annotation you could cite to support your point?” (mellyteaches). Commenting gave me opportunities to workshop with each student, as individualized conversations about writing could happen at any time. This consistent feedback was more valuable than a numerical grade, specifically pointing students toward ways to improve writing while avoiding the catharsis of the “good enough” grade. The final grade on a piece was not established until the writing had been read, revised, selected, and explained in student portfolios: this extended process pushed writers to think critically about their work long after the first draft.

**After Blogging: Portfolios**

While I only offered feedback on “practice” pieces, I evaluated student writing more closely through portfolios. We assembled portfolios once per quarter, incorporating second- and fourth-quarter portfolios in students’ final exam grades. These portfolios included three student-selected writing pieces, a table of contents identifying and briefly introducing each piece, and a cover letter explaining students’ reasons for including each piece and analyzing their growth as writers. Students selected writing that showed growth, not effortless mastery; I encouraged them to choose assignments they struggled with. The cover letter and table of contents shared insight into students’ understanding of themselves as writers. Portfolios both incentivized keeping up with every blog assignment and reduced the punishment for missing occasional assignments: students completing the majority of posts had many options for their assessment, but even students missing multiple posts could analyze enough writing samples to consider the entire quarter’s work. Portfolios also pushed students to establish and revisit their goals as writers. In including a particular posting in her *Romeo and Juliet* portfolio, Mehak wrote: “I chose this piece because I kept my promise from the last portfolio and voiced my opinions” (simplymehak). These final reflections emphasized blogging’s ability to empower student choice, revision, craft, and process in our writing classroom.

**Beyond Blogging: Reflections**

Though our blogs leveraged the collaborative power of participatory culture, what made them successful writing practice were the same characteristics present in all strong writing workshop instruction: we wrote frequently, read other writers’ work regularly, received timely feedback, and reflected on our growth as authors. Blogging
provided the engine we needed to power these processes in our classroom, functioning as the core activity our thinking revolved around and grounding our classroom in strong writing practice and participatory culture.

Blogging’s power in our classroom did not come from substituting a keyboard for a notebook. Instead, it functioned as a tool to accomplish goals that were process- and community-based: exploring ideas about course content, practicing formal writing skills in a low-stakes setting, and responding to each other’s writing. Every blogging-related decision supported one or more of these goals (and ideally, all three). This kept our blogs focused on meaningful practice, not busywork. That practice bolstered writing workshop approaches, offering

- student choice about genre;
- continuous feedback and revision;
- ongoing conversations about craft in writing;
- publication beyond the teacher; and
- flexible assessment of writing processes as well as products.

Blogging enabled writing workshop in our classroom, offering solutions for many of the struggles in a pen-and-paper workshop setting. Time and space constraints eased when I could comment on student work through my smartphone; the struggle to express ideas lessened when students could access examples and support with a click. Beyond being publication platforms, blogs supplemented strong writing practices with a digital community.

This digital community was the leverage point in our writing practice, as students’ desire to participate in a peer community pushed them beyond my expectations throughout the year. This extended to me, too: blogging alongside students generated new musings on core texts and my own writing habits. “This part is where it gets interesting,” one pointed out in the final paragraph of my Gothic story. “How can you cut out the boring part at the beginning?” (“The boring part” included the first two pages of my three-page story.) Receiving feedback from each other emphasized that all of us were learning writers, all of us benefited from sharing, and all of us contributed to our classroom workshop.

Our collaborative classroom culture gave rise to student-directed learning, often leading us to incredible discussions. “Can I blog about this?” was a question I heard all year. Some took the next step of inviting classmates along on their thinking, as Makilya did after we finished reading To Kill a Mockingbird. After seeing a news story about Barack Obama quoting Atticus Finch, she brought the story into context with our discussions on race. “Is it okay to quote Atticus Finch?” she asked her classmates in a guest blog prompt. They answered: Abby felt “‘TKAM’ is the true representation of Atticus’ attitude and mind, [so] it is still okay to quote him” (Abbyneshap). Rico disagreed, believing “that Finch was once noble and tolerant but now he has changed and I don’t think it is good to tell children quotes from a man that has become something sinister” (swineyr). Alissa argued for considering the Atticus of Go Set a Watchman and the Atticus in Mockingbird separately: “Each piece of literature has it’s own meaning, agenda and reasons behind it” (alissadahomie). These complex arguments developed online in response to a peer’s question: any literature teacher’s dream and the direct result of a writing community empowered by technology.

That empowerment led Makilya, Abby, Alissa, Salvador, Mehak, Jada, Tyrell, Bobby, Rico, and their peers to writing even outside our course content. Several posted personal musings; on his “Brotherhood,” Rico blogged about the 2016 presidential election. He wrote about watching results until midnight, weighing the pros and cons of both candidates, and exhorting his classmates that “As American citizens you need to vote the next time when you turn 18” (swineyr). This 15-year-old author is already working to influence his peers far beyond their opinions on Romeo and Juliet in ways that would not be possible without a digital forum. Blogging supported best practices in writing instruction—frequent practice, timely feedback, authentic audience, extended reflection—by bringing writing into a participatory, digital setting. The communal space of our digital writing workshop reinforced our community of

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learners and writers, and empowered us to expand learning far beyond the four walls of our classroom.

Works Cited

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NCTE Student Writing Awards for 2018

Teachers, here is your opportunity to let your students shine.
The 2018 Promising Young Writers (for eighth-grade students) and Achievement Awards in Writing (for high school juniors) are now open for submissions. Both programs are accepting applications online in a secure site. The prompt for Promising Young Writers is “Truth and Reconciliation” and for the Achievement Awards, “Changing the Narrative.”

Students from the United States, Canada, Virgin Islands, and American Schools Abroad are eligible to submit both a Best Writing and a Themed Writing. Teams of teachers across the nation will judge entries using a secure judging site. Entries with top scores will be deemed superior.
February 15, 2018 is the deadline for both awards. Results will be announced in May.