The Classroom Blog: Enhancing Critical Thinking, Substantive Discussion, and Appropriate Online Interaction

In August 2012, I entered my eighth-grade language arts classroom and was immediately bombarded with questions and comments: “Miss Baldino, did you like my post?” “Miss Baldino, who is ‘Peanutbutterontoast’?” “Miss Baldino, I don’t think I wrote enough—I’ll add another post tonight!” My classroom was abuzz with discussion about the students’ previous night’s homework assignment.

Surely, I thought, I am either still at home and dreaming, or I’ve died and gone to teacher heaven. Of course, neither was true, but it was true that my students were showing clear engagement with the assignment I had given: write a blog post in our newly published classroom blog, The Falcon Files.

Just as Rome was not built in a day, this transformation did not happen miraculously overnight. Flash back two months to June 2012: I had just finished my first year of teaching and was reflecting on the rookie mistakes I’d made. What was my biggest rookie mistake? Handing out homework assignments that lacked a clear purpose, which naturally resulted in a lack of completion (Marzano & Pickering, 2007). I made it my personal and professional goal to come up with homework that was not only purposeful for my students academically but that could also teach them to interact appropriately with both social and professional digital media.

I knew that I did not want to overwhelm my students or myself by incorporating several new technological advancements into our classroom at once, so I decided that a class blog would be the perfect beginning vehicle for purposeful homework and teaching appropriate digital interactions. This would serve my purpose more efficiently than wikis, Twitter, etc. because it allowed the most user-friendly way to continue conversations and learning after my students had physically left my classroom.

Working through the Process

Preparing the Classroom Blog

Several questions had to be addressed before I could implement this new digital venture, starting with: Which blog platform should I use? I didn’t feel comfortable with my students having their own blogs at the eighth-grade level because of stranger danger on the Web and the unfortunate possibility of cyberbullying. After perusing various blogging platforms, I decided to create one class blog, The Falcon Files, on EduBlogs.org. It seemed like the best option because I could be the moderator; nothing could be posted without my approval.

When ready to post, students would type a minimum of four sentences as a response to a prompt I created, drawing from conversations during our weekly classroom lessons. In support of text-dependent responses based on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), students were required to use evidence from either previous posts or research to support their responses.
Another question loomed: *What would be posted and how would students be expected to respond?* By reading Marzano and Pickering’s (2007) suggestions and cautions regarding meaningful homework, I knew that requiring a daily blog could prove unsuccessful because not all the students had a computer or Internet access at home. However, by creating a once-a-week prompt, my students had one week to write two responses: one to my initial prompt and one to a post written by a peer. Once-a-week prompts made it possible for students who didn’t have a computer or Internet access at home to use school computers during study halls.

I struggled with one last question: *How do I get my students to respond as honestly and thoroughly as possible?* I decided that each student would use a pseudonym that he or she had created. The pseudonyms were crucial because I wanted students to feel open in sharing their opinions without fear of backlash. By not using their real names, students could create fresh, new digital identities. When I asked students later about their experience with using pseudonyms, one explained that doing so “eliminated any of the biases [I] may have when looking at [my] peers’ responses.” This lack of bias afforded students the opportunity to share their opinions freely and made it possible for me to teach them how to share their opinions respectfully.

**The Ground Rules**

My middle level students were already learning how to write in an appropriate and academic tone through classroom papers and writing exercises, so I knew I needed to spend time teaching them the importance of using a similar academic tone and appropriate manner when writing their blogs. Lemov (2010) writes how the meaning of a written response can easily change depending on the diction or tone of the author, which ultimately impacts the perspective of the reader toward the author’s character. The Internet and social media can make identifying the tone of a message even more difficult, and both can ultimately affect the perceptions people have toward each other. I knew immediately that it was important for me to teach my students how to interact with others professionally via the blog in the hope that doing so would motivate them to engage in respectful, professional interactions in all aspects of their lives.

Because I wanted to teach them how to post in a respectful manner that would promote critical thinking and peer interactions, we spent time reviewing the following ground rules for a successful experience posting in the blog:

1. **Difference of opinion is OKAY, and even encouraged!**
2. **Do not criticize people for their opinions.** That is, never say that someone’s ideas or thoughts are stupid. This is meant to promote discussion, not to hurt feelings.
3. **If you disagree with someone, try saying** “(Name), I do not know if I agree with your statement __________ because . . . .” And be sure to use solid textual evidence to support your response.
4. **If you write anything inappropriate, disciplinary actions will be taken.**

As a class, we discussed each of the guidelines and practiced scenarios that could occur (Gardner, n.d.). I’d ask one student what an appropriate response would be if someone had written that his or her post was “garbage.” I’d ask another student how she or he would respond upon seeing an error in another student’s argument. We practiced and discussed the value of not only positive criticism, but also the importance of using evidence to back up their claims. If a student disagreed with someone—that was completely okay! That said, there was also a clear expectation for the student to use evidence to support a different point of view.

Once I was confident that my students fully understood how to interact with each other in a professional manner, I opened up the blog and
created our first post. It was the next day that, upon entering the classroom, I heard the excited chatter about their responses to my prompt. Students were dying to crack the code of various pseudonyms based on the entries that had been posted.

**Weekly Posts**

Once I felt my students were ready to blog, I put up—on August 29, 2012—the first post that would support our unit on American Revolution texts. I planned to focus on the CCSS skill of inference as well as on analysis of authorial choice and reliability:

The American Colonists did not have the technological capabilities to tweet “the British are coming!” The only way news traveled was by horseback, arguably the fastest means of transportation at that time. On April 19, 1775, the battle of Lexington and Concord raged between the British forces and the American Colonists. It took three days for a newspaper in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, to report it. The editor of the Portsmouth newspaper included the following statement along with the article: “The publisher of this paper has been in such perpetual confusion by the different and contrary accounts of the late bloody scene, that all mistakes must be overlook’d.” Why would the editor ask this? What can you infer about the newspapers of Colonial America? Would you believe news articles published in the late 1700s to be reliable? In today’s world, news can be released within seconds. Does that make the news that is published today any more reliable?

It can be argued that the news that we receive today (via the Internet, TV, social media sites, etc.) can be very unreliable. Would you argue this to be true or false? (8/29/12)

Reading through the first week of posts reinforced why I decided to become a teacher. My students were writing thoughtful reactions to my prompt and were discussing their personal beliefs (while using evidence) among one another. They were commenting on their peers’ posts using positive, evidence-based contributions. And no one called anyone stupid. Or a jerk. Or any of the other names I had feared might emerge. No, my students were polite and respectful while still maintaining their own independent thoughts and beliefs. And it was only September.

Week after week, my students looked forward to the next post and to finding out who had won “blogger of the week.” I felt it was crucial to recognize a handful of students each week for the depth of their writing, the respectfulness of their interactions, and the overall quality of their work. By the end of the venture, every student

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**CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITE THINK**

**Teaching with Blogs**

Getting started with a classroom blog can be a bit daunting. The ReadWriteThink.org strategy guide “Teaching with Blogs” (http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/teaching-with-blogs-30108.html) describes the processes involved in composing blogs in the classroom, and the process of writing regular posts, or entries, that are published online.

Put that knowledge into action with the lesson plan “Creating Character Blogs” (http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/creating-character-blogs-1169.html). Students view examples of blogs, learn the basic elements of blog creation, and then create a blog from the perspective of a fictional character.

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had been blogger of the week at least once. It was my goal to find something positive in every single student’s writing so as to reinforce the importance of each individual’s digital interactions.

I recently interviewed some of my students to gauge what their perspectives were toward this activity. One student wrote:

I feel more aware of how I interact with others while using social media. I feel that I’ve somehow matured and no longer need to use name-calling or other childish tactics to get my point across. I try to be as respectful as I can to others because I know that I would not like it if someone else was disrespectful to me. (11/27/13)

Another student shared:

I do feel that blogging helped me to be more aware of how I act and respond to things online. If I disagree with something, I would be more respectful instead of keeping a closed mind before hearing the other person’s point of view. On the blog, we had to respectfully disagree, which taught us to be professional. This not only helped me on the blog website but on other social networking websites. Blogging made me more conscious and aware of other people’s feelings online, where it is especially hard to understand others. (11/27/13)

The Challenges

As successful as our classroom blog was, it was not always rainbows and sunshine; I did have some struggles along the way. One challenge was that some students would simply restate what other people had posted previously in the week. I wanted to nip that in the bud before it became widespread, so I spent class time going over why restating what other people wrote was not a way to complete the assignment. The discussion turned into a lesson about plagiarism and the importance of writing your own thoughts and opinions, and how to cite those of others. As the students came to understand the gravity of stealing other people’s work, the issue quickly disappeared.

Another issue involved a handful of parents who did not like any homework assigned in a digital format. One parent even threatened to report me to the board of education. With the support of my administrators, I explained to those parents that writing digitally is a necessity, plain and simple. Twenty-first century learners must be prepared with the skill of writing in a digital world because that is what will be expected of them in the rest of their education and into their careers.

The biggest challenge the blog created was the extra work it required of me every week. Because I was the moderator, I had to read every post before it could be live on the blog. With 80 students, this became an extremely demanding task. However, I quickly saw the benefits of the blog in my classroom, and within weeks, I noticed that my students were progressively interacting with each other more appropriately and respectfully in class, as well as in their traditional pen-to-paper writing. The extra work benefited me in other ways, too, because over time, I witnessed the progression of my students’ writing abilities in the blog and was able to give specific individualized feedback based on each student’s growth.

Blogging to Learn 21st-Century Skills

Our middle level students are completely immersed in a tech world that is dictated by various forms of social media: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc. It is time to accept that students today write more through various social media than by using pen and paper (Downes, 2004, pp. 14–26). Accepting this, I realized (as I’m sure many teachers have) that I could get my students to not only write more, but also to “like” to write if the digital realm was the forum. The classroom blog became a way for me to teach students the 21st-century survival skills as outlined by Tony Wagner on his website titled Change Leadership: Transforming Education for the 21st Century (2014). He identifies the seven skills as Critical Thinking and Problem Solving, Collaboration across Networks and Leading by Influence, Agility and Adaptability, Initiative and Entrepreneurship, Effective Oral and Written Communication, Accessing and Analyzing Information, Curiosity and Imagination.

As the weeks went on, my posted prompts...
included higher-order thinking questions that focused on various Common Core skills and encouraged my students to think critically while devising solutions to difficult questions and issues. They learned the importance of meeting deadlines. They also learned to take initiative in continuously reading the blog so they could see how peers were responding to their posts. The students adapted to having their peers disagree with their thoughts and opinions; they did not get angry about differing perspectives but instead focused on responding (respectfully) to argue their own point. My eighth graders were learning to communicate their responses effectively and to collaborate with each other to make our blog prosper and to build an atmosphere of camaraderie. Ultimately, they were able to create respected digital identities and make profound written statements in a digital environment.

It is crucial for middle school teachers to teach their students not only how to be 21st-century literate, but also how to interact appropriately with others via social media. If students can learn to be respectful and considerate of the opinions of others through blogging, perhaps they will apply those traits to other forms of social media. Our young adults have opinions and voices of their own, and it is our job to help them express themselves appropriately in our tech-driven society.

References

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