

WRAPPED UP IN THE ONLINE WORLD: TECHNOLOGY, COMMUNICATION, BLOGGING, AND YOUTH TODAY

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In a world that has become rapidly infused with advancements in technology, ways of communicating and constructing meaning have evolved for a generation whose lives revolve around the screen. Being literate in today's society means being able to construct and manipulate words and images through the innovative media of technology. In particular, writing in blogs through social networking sites has become very popular for today's youth, ranging from elementary students to high school students. "Blogs" are identified as "websites that allow individuals to create personal WebPages of text, pictures, graphics, videos, and other multimedia with the same ease as creating a word processing document" (Boling et al. 504). At the same time, writing in blogs transforms the concept of traditional literacy to a type of literacy termed as multimodal literacy.

The purpose of this essay is to reveal how blogging experiences outside of classrooms demonstrate an authentic, constructive, and motivational practice that can and should be integrated into classrooms. The ease of blogging has enabled students to write in an authentic voice and has also enhanced students' motivation to read and write, not only on the screen, but also in the classroom. Similarly, the experiences of writing in blogs have enabled students to exploit their strengths in writing by engaging them in the writing process. In order to demonstrate these assertions, I will give an overview of the influence of technology, communication, and blogging with respect to youths. I will also provide examples from two young bloggers writing for nonacademic purposes to support the assertion that writing in blogs outside of the classroom serves an authentic purpose for students. Next, I will discuss two case studies from third- and eighth-grade classrooms to prove how engagement in blog writing in the classroom reveals that classroom literacy practices can combine writing with online technology to enhance traditional literacy skills. Lastly, I will discuss the expansion of the concept of traditional literacy to a definition of multimodal literacy. My findings of student blogging experiences outside of the classroom will aid in drawing a connection between blogging inside of the classroom and literacy and enhance our overall understanding of literacy.

An Overview of the Online World Today

Technology has undoubtedly influenced the lives of students through the ways in which they are able to engage in online activities that strengthen their literacy skills of reading and writing. Professor Bronwyn T. Williams at the University of Louisville asserts in "'Tomorrow Will Not Be Like Today': Literacy and Identity in a World of Multiliteracies" that technology has changed the way young people communicate today and that these changes are educational: "[O]nline technology has students reading and writing far more than they were 20 years ago or even a decade ago. Words are an integral part of today's online world, along with images and sound, and young people read and write thousands of words online each week" (682). Their lives revolve around the screen, and the online world in which they read and write is fast, multitasking, and multiliterate. Students become profoundly wrapped up in the online world, which becomes a socially interactive

place for communicating and constructing meaning and relationships that may not be possible otherwise. It offers a chance to enhance self-discovery as well as undertake new challenges that are presented to them when they read and write with words and images. Williams clearly asserts the positive results of the influence of online technologies. Therefore, to limit reading and writing to text only would be to overlook and disregard technology as a vital and dynamic learning resource for the ways in which today's youth read and write with words and images.

The writing experiences that students engage in outside of the classroom through online social networking sites allow them to manipulate words and images and play with their identities in the same way novelists, playwrights, and other writers create identities in texts. Williams supports this claim; however, he argues that the difference in writing online is not the ability to create new roles or identities, but rather the ease with which writing can be conveyed or distributed to an audience that may return a response (683). This is revealed through the use of blog writing. Students blog in their personal pages on Facebook or MySpace, which have become such popular forms of composing, and it is through these types of media that they are able to manipulate words and images to construct meaning. Furthermore, students are able to shift roles quickly, spontaneously, and simultaneously (683). For example, they can be involved in blogging on Facebook or MySpace while also participating in online discussions through instant messaging, and thus they are in constant transition between the different roles or identities they choose to convey. Williams claims that "the creation and revision of each personal page is up to the student. He or she must engage in complex rhetorical choices, often many times a day, about how to portray her or his identity to a real audience" (683). As a result, students involved in online activities are engaging in the writing process and gaining intricate literacy experiences in the venues of self-identity and audience. Therefore, performing in such exercises is quite dynamic and similar to the ways that novelists play with characters on the page.

The blogging experiences of students outside of classrooms also present challenges for students which, as a result, teach them valuable lessons about reading and writing. This is another assertion that Williams makes about the experiences of online technologies. Students quickly figure out through trial and error "what kinds of comments are appropriate for the context, how best to establish a convincing ethos, how to determine whose comments and ideas they can trust, and many other complex rhetorical literacy practices" (684). These practices gained through the use of online technologies are ones that teachers encourage inside of the classroom. Thus, acquiring literacy skills through online experiences in which students are creating their own identities is an advantage to their learning process as well as their writing process.

Defining Authenticity

Along with these positive influences of blog writing, blogs are also a creative outlet for producing authentic writing. By "authentic," I mean writing that is deep, powerful, and personal. A blog is the student's own personal page, a page that has been uniquely and individually created to convey his or her identity, a place to let loose and free his or her thoughts and opinions about self-related issues or topics he or she feels like writing about. The writing here has more significance to the student/writer, as opposed to the artificiality of the typical classroom assignment in which the student is just writing to get the assignment done, and the only audience is the teacher. There may not be much thought or engagement put into a school writing assignment because the subject

matter might not be of interest to the student. Thus, the words become forced and the writing does not matter to the student.

In the Internet blog space, the intimidation of the blank Word document is eliminated. No deadlines are imposed. At the touch of a key, words and thoughts flow freely and openly. No one is watching; it is the writer and the computer screen. Yet, at the click of a button, thoughts and words are globally distributed to an audience that may return a response. Writers may choose to privatize their personal page or choose to share, but when choosing to share, they allow themselves the ability to connect with an audience that may share the same feelings or attitudes. When an authentic voice is present, the reader responds not just to the words, but also to the person writing them because the reader is able to develop a connection to the person/writer. If students feel that they have a real audience to explore their chosen topics with, then they will craft better writing. Since blogs provide students with an audience and lend themselves to “exploratory topics,” at the same time, they engage students in the writing process and help to enhance writing skills (Beldarrain 140).

Beyond the Classroom

In order to support the assertions that I have made, I have examples of two high school bloggers who are avid blog writers outside of the classroom. I have included full blog posts that include comments submitted by readers of the blog; the commenter is in italics and the comments are in bold print. Both of the bloggers whose writing I have read and analyzed gave me permission to use their blog posts for my research; they have both had an opportunity to read and respond to this essay. The first is Casey, who is a tenth grade student. Casey writes in her Myspace blog on Tuesday, 9 June at 9:26 p.m.:

this time and place.

Current mood: grateful

Fear is not a dominant trait inhabiting my veins. However, it seems to be the only logical description for my overall being lately. As that is completely unlike me, it's derived from another aspect of obscurity. I've gone through tidal waves of misplacement eventually sailing through happiness and certainty. Upon reaching the steady shoreline, I result in being shoved back in. Due to the commotion, my guard has tripled its magnitude. I am content with where I lie now, it's the authenticity of others that I'm constantly questioning. Never will I live for someone else but my conscience yearns for reassurance. For those who possess negativity towards friends or love, do not waste my time. I give full respect to the genuine. This isn't directed towards any one in particular; humanity rather.

“If you love me,
won't you let me know?”

6 Comments:

bro, ashley's here

Ashley Colabaugh:

I love this. Really, so much. :]

TM*jennhanley*

Jennifer:

i love you!

JØR D:

I'm here if you need to talk Stacy. :)

pat:

Wow case you are pretty freaking amazing sometimes, oh and i think smith would be proud of your vocabulary upgrades

Marcus:

Came to your MySpace to ask if you're ignoring me for some reason, then i stumbled upon this.

My old mentality would have congratulated you.

However . . .

Lately, I've been realizing that i don't want to write like this anymore.

I mean, I try, and I certainly can.

But anymore, the act of overcomplicating things just pisses me off.

Maybe it takes skill, and i should flaunt my ability, but I just feel like a stuck up prick whenever I do it.

I wonder if you could explain why I feel this way?

It might actually just be because you don't talk to me anymore, and I'm serious, this isn't some cheap trick to get us to talk like we used to.

I'd talk about it more, but quite frankly, I doubt you'll even read this, not let alone reply, and I don't really want to put time into an explanation if I'm just wasting my time.

Boschi:

Read it. And I love it. But now all I can think about is that I have to wait two long weeks before I can talk to you in person again.

Back to the Blog thing . . . Fear isn't a bad thing. Just another way of being afraid of change. Some things you can't completely understand until you know how it feels to be afraid and unaware of what's going to happen. But at the same time, completely stuck in the feeling of loneliness. As if you're the only one going through that specific fear. Although, when that fear subsides, things seem to fall in place. Not in the order they were before, but in an order completely new. An order that you cannot only live with, but feel comfortable with. :) I'll miss ya!

First skimming through this blog, one can gain a sense of Casey's maturity, not only through the feelings she expresses but also in her writing. This is only one example of Casey's blogs, but it

clearly represents authentic writing. It is deep, personal, and powerful. As a tenth grade student, she already exhibits correct usage of grammar and good organization of thought—and her word choice is just impressive. Yet, this is written for a non-school-related purpose. Here, she is portraying her identity to a real audience. With her level of maturity, it seems as if she is already aware of how to best establish a convincing ethos and determine appropriateness of context as well as whose comments and ideas she can trust, and many other complex literacy practices that are involved here. In this piece, Casey writes about her current feelings, perhaps a self-reflection, but she writes on a topic that matters to her: her fear and where this fear lies in her life at that current moment. She receives six comments from her audience, but of course that's not an accurate reflection of the number of people who read her blog that day. By publishing her blog on a public space, she is sharing information globally to those who choose to respond. These six comments represent those who read her blog and wanted Casey to know that they felt some connection to what she was saying. If this is done outside of the classroom, imagine what can be done inside of the classroom if the same motivation and engagement can be achieved.

My next example comes from a young woman named Tanya. Tanya writes in her Myspace blog on Tuesday, 7 February, at 10:45 a.m.:

something i realized
pain gives and takes, but the result is you feel more pain.
love gives and takes, and the result is you feel more love.
respect gives and takes, and you feel respected . . .
and the list of the intangible goes on.
if you take food out of your kitchen and eat it, but pass a hungry
person begging for food, does the hunger ever really go away?
probably not. negative emotions such as guilt or worry cause a lot of
people to over eat.
if you get a few bucks to grab smokes from the corner store, but deny
a person outside trying to bum a cigarette, does your nicotine craving
really get satisfied?
doubt it. you are so irritated that a stranger asked you for a smoke that
it makes you smoke even more.
. . . i was just noticing that people tend to give and take with things
that are portrayed through words and emotion, and the result is we get
more of it, regardless of what it may be.
yet these same things are what we should consider priceless because
nobody can convey them exactly as you. we all express ourselves
uniquely, and react in our own unique way.
but things such as food, money, cigarettes . . . i mean . . . anyone can
have these things. buy these things . . . whatever. they are readily
available to anyone for the buying (or taking, in some cases) and we
hold onto them like they are the Holy Grail . . . like it is some
precious thing nobody has except you, the Chosen One.
it's ridiculous how badly we all tend to put things in perspective.
reach vertically for once, and not horizontally.

1 comment:

Dale:

I think what it really is isn't so much that as it is that people look at that person begging for a smoke outside the store and think "What? Go get a job instead of being lazy and living off the work of everyone else."

They figure why should I give away the stuff I worked for to someone that has done nothing to earn it?

I don't necessarily agree with that viewpoint. Sometimes it is true and sometimes it is not.

Like everything else in life you have those that are truly in that spot and those that are there because they are too lazy and are just taking advantage.

The question is how do you do the truly worthy from the ones that are just taking advantage of the generosity of others?

Here is another representation of authentic writing; Tanya also displays a high level of maturity, but the kind of maturity that comes with a keen eye and a sensitive perception of the outside world. This particular blog represents the assertion of blogs lending themselves to exploratory topics. Her blog is based on an observation that led to one thought or realization after the next. She questions ideas and wants answers. These answers may be found within her, through further research, or from the audience that she has shared these thoughts with. The point is that her thoughts are real and deep and about something personal to her. Tanya receives only one comment, but it is full of content and shows someone who was really able to connect with her—perhaps not fully, but he at least met her halfway and provided her with more insight than what she expressed in her blog post. What is left for her now is the challenge of determining whether to trust this comment and how to deal with it. There are many rhetorical literary practices involved here, but it is through Tanya's rhetorical practices as a blogger that she helps or invites others to make meaning of what she has presented to them.

I have exhibited one piece of blog writing from each student; they are only a glimpse into the kind of blogging that students engage in outside of the classroom. They are only the words and comments from their Internet pages and do not portray the multimodal effects that went into producing Casey and Tanya's blogs, which would help fully understand the influence that blog writing has on students outside of the classroom today. Further understanding the authenticity involved in blog writing requires more reading and analysis, but my purpose was to convey that real writing exists beyond the classroom where students are motivated to write.

Achieving Modernization Inside of the Classroom

Writing in blogs has an impact on new models of teaching and new ways of learning. In "'That's Online Writing, not Boring School Writing': Writing with Blogs and the Talkback Project," Shelby Witte discusses how she and a colleague combined writing with online technology by forming a "Talkback Project" for students and future educators. The purpose was to develop digital fluency while also strengthening traditional literacy skills. Witte mentions how taken aback

she felt when one of her students was unwilling to write in her journal each day in the classroom but was writing pages of unassigned poetry and prose in her blog each night. Although it demonstrated that the student was passionate about writing in the online world, Witte was perplexed by how posting personal writing in an online blog was any better or different than writing in the classroom (92). What inspired Witte and her colleague to form the Talkback Project of writing with blogs was a particular project involving pre-service teachers at Indiana University who were writing two-way journals collaboratively with middle school students. “Both sets of students were strengthening their literacy skills on different levels: The pre-service teachers were learning intricacies of interpreting and responding to student work while the middle schools students were developing their comprehension and written responses with a clearly defined audience” (92–93). With the success of this project, Witte and her colleague worked to integrate the journal collaboration into the world of technology, and after researching and reading about the successes with blogs in the classroom, they formed the Talkback Project in order to integrate technology into the curriculum (93).

The Talkback Project involved “blog conversations on the novels middle school students were reading in literature circles” (93). Students were to post their journal entries on the Talkback Project blog during class time, and the pre-service teachers responded on the blog weekly. After initial setbacks, Witte decided to revamp and reconstruct the criteria to focus more on blog collaboration and conversations. “The pre-service teachers worked hard to develop questions that allowed middle school students to make text-to-text, text-to-world, and text-to-self connections” (94). In addition, more collaborative technology and face-to-face visits between the students and the pre-service teachers were scheduled so that both groups could be more involved in the project, with the understanding that “real people” were depending on them and not the computer. Witte asserts that “many insightful discussions and text connections grew from the blog.” The Talkback Project was a great success and created enthusiasm not only in the students involved but also in one student’s parent, a soldier in Iraq, who asked if he could participate in the book discussion with his son’s literature circle group. At the termination of the project, one student went as far as to state: “[B]y taking away our access to the Talkback Project blog, you have taken away my voice” (95). Therefore, the Talkback Project proved to be an effective method of incorporating traditional literacy practices with the online world because students were able to communicate and convey meaning more effectively. The success of this project also proved how teachers are able to motivate their students to write if they provide them authentic purposes to do so.

In addition to the Talkback Project that Witte and her colleague initiated in the classroom, other teachers have realized the profound influence that online technologies like blogging have had on their students. Another teacher describes the ways in which intertwining writing with the online world has made students eager to write in the classroom, even at a young age. This project involved third-grade students writing blog responses to “Jefferson Bear,” a teddy bear that is the “host” of the class’ blog (Boling et al. 504). Jefferson Bear writes to the students and “asks them to share their thoughts and opinions about various class topics” and “their experiences and suggestions for how individuals might respond when being teased.” In addition, the class blogs also involved literature discussions so that students could engage in writing while sharing their ideas with each other. The success of this project proves that providing real writing purposes enhances students learning processes as well as their writing skills. By implementing writing with blogs in the classroom, teachers are creating resourceful methods of writing for their students by engaging them in the writ-

ing process while they connect safely with a real audience and acquire strengths in reading and writing for authentic purposes.

A Convergence

As these examples of online blogging inside and outside of the classroom show, the concept of traditional literacy is expanding to a definition of multimodal literacy. Multimodal literacy means “the meaning-making that occurs at different levels through the reading, viewing, understanding, responding to, producing and interacting with multimodal texts and multimodal communication” (Walsh 106). Multimodal texts are identified as “texts that incorporate words, images, video, and sound” (Takayoshi and Selfe 3). A blog is “designed, produced and written for a screen on a web page and may include written text, pictures, graphics, video and sound. It can be read, listened to by others, and responded to with text, pictures, video or sound with the manipulation of digital technology” (Walsh 102). So in essence, blogs are a form of multimodal literacy since the definition of “blogs” is almost identical to that of multimodal literacy/texts. Multimodal literacy integrates the traditional practices of reading and writing but it also combines these two components of literacy with the use of different modalities and semiotic systems. When students combine these different modalities, they are learning them more in depth and capitalizing on their reading and writing skills from their strengths in online technologies (106).

The examples of student blog writing outside of the classroom show that authentic writing is present, existing aside from the pressures of deadlines and writing about subjects that are not of interest to the student. The examples from the two in-class projects presented clearly show that combining traditional literacy with writing in blogs has encouraged learning in the classroom and demonstrated the convergence of the modes that occurs within multimodal literacy. For example, in the Talkback Project, students read the novel assigned to them, posted journals on the page and had blog conversations with the pre-service teachers while combining the different modes of communicating and conveying meaning. With the third-grade students writing blog responses to “Jefferson Bear,” different modes of communication were also involved, where the written text, image, and sound were dominant and combined in the way the children constructed and processed meaning. Consequently, the children were very engaged and motivated to learn. It is important to understand how these different modes of communication may be implemented in the classroom as quickly as they are learned outside of the classroom because they have proved to be effective and have enabled simultaneity, interdependence, and the convergence of traditional literacy and multimodal literacy. Writing in blogs has enabled an effective meaning-making potential for students outside and inside of the classroom and thus, proficiency in literacy certainly requires multimodal literacy (Walsh 107). This includes combining the practices of talking, listening, reading, and writing with the different modes of media such as text, image, sound, and movement. Much more research and analysis are needed to understand such a process; however, the classroom learning experiences illustrated here provide evidence that students are able to make transitions from traditional literacy to multimodal literacy.

Continuing the Motivation

The influence of technology in the lives of youths outside of the classroom will continue to dominate as advancements in technology thrive. It has been made evident that student blogging outside of the classroom is an effective learning resource that involves many complex rhetorical lit-

erary practices essential to student learning inside of the classroom. The most important thing educators, scholars, and literary researchers must understand is that if what is achieved outside of the classroom has been shown to be an effective and constructive practice, then it can and should be implemented inside of the twenty-first century classroom. Student blogging experiences outside of the classroom are enhancing their literacy skills and creating levels of maturity that may not be achieved otherwise, inside the classroom. If teachers are motivated to want their students to really learn how to write, then they have to provide authentic purposes of writing, such as implementing writing in blogs into their classroom.

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