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## Teens Blog the News

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# **Teen Blog the News**

**Renee Hobbs, Paul Folkemer and Katie Donnelly**

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## **Abstract**

This study examined the online writing of a large group of Grade 8 students who participated in a school-sponsored news blog where they read and commented on news and current events. A multi-method design included teacher interviews combined with a content analysis of student writing on the Scarsdale news blog. A group of eight middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers were interviewed about how they use the blog in class. For the content analysis, 216 samples of student writing were randomly selected from the dataset and grounded theory was used to identify patterns in the data. Results show that students found personal value in the articles they read and used online blogging to make connections between the news and their lived experience. Although their writing showed clear evidence of informality, students made important text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections, which are dimensions of emerging critical literacy competencies.

Innovation constantly influences education, and as educators adapt and incorporate technological changes into their classrooms and pedagogy, students must learn new kinds of skills in order to interact with new technologies more effectively. What does it mean to be literate in the age of the Internet? When it comes to adolescents and educational blogging, perhaps the most important concern is how students interact with texts. This study uses the lens of critical literacy in order to better understand how students derive meaning from what they read online in news blogs. Critical literacy “focuses on issues of power and promotes reflection, transformation and action” (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004, p. 54). Critical readers draw upon their own knowledge in order to make connections to texts, which may result in them using the text as a springboard for action. According to McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004), “Students who engage in critical literacy become open-minded, active, strategic readers who are capable of viewing text from a critical perspective” (p. 56). Whether the texts they are interacting with are in print or online, it is important for students to critically connect with them by recognizing links between texts and their own lives and the greater world. The Internet provides an unprecedented way for students to make such connections. For example, a student might read a news story about poverty and with one click, link to the web site of a poverty-relief organization. Internet communication also provides students with a forum in which they can share their own ideas with the world beyond their classroom.

Nevertheless, as electronic media become more prevalent in classroom settings, a natural concern over possible negative effects has arisen. Some literacy educators are torn over the educational potential of electronic texts. On one hand, the Internet offers an engaging, exciting way for students to connect with the larger world. On the other hand, some educators worry that Internet-based writing is encouraging students to become sloppy

writers who use Internet slang in place of standard English. In a time where standardized test performances are increasingly important, such fears among educators are certainly understandable.

However, Crystal (2001) notes that fear over the linguistic changes that accompany new technologies is nothing new: the printing press, telegraph, telephone and broadcasting technologies all caused significant anxiety and controversy over ideas of “proper” language. Debates continue today, with many public figures offering a simplistic view of technology that casts computers as either an educational panacea or the key to educational destruction. In 1994, when computers were becoming common in academic settings, Haas and Neuwirth rejected this “all or nothing” view of computer technology: “In reality, a writer’s particular background, skills, goals and expectations will strongly determine the way the writer uses computers, as will the particular cultural, social and educational settings within which he or she works” (p. 323). Writing, whether in print or online, is different from circumstance to circumstance. As Langer and Applebee noted in 1987: “Different kinds of writing activities lead students to focus on different kinds of information, to think about that information in different ways, and in turn to take quantitatively and qualitatively different kinds of knowledge away from their writing experiences” (p. 135).

Computers, and the Internet in particular, can be used to encourage critical literacy, but they cannot simply replace the traditional textbook or pen and paper. The Internet must be considered in its own right, as it offers new tools to serve the diverse needs of a worldwide population. Among its various facets is the recent phenomenon of user-generated sites such as web logs, more commonly known as blogs. Barry McMullin (2005) argues that the Internet, unlike other more recent lackluster technologies, has a unique palette of tools to offer the educational field. He posits that tools such as blogging

allow for a social constructivist approach to pedagogy, where new dynamics are introduced to the traditional teacher-student interaction. Both McMullin and Huffaker (2005) underscore the utility of blogging in creating a sense of personal ownership and empowerment among learners, since the activity of posting to blogs develops “personal writing skills – in a social, yet still private space” (McMullin, 2005, p. 74). He highlights the three elements that Internet technologies bring to learning spaces: social reflection, collaboration, and construction of knowledge.

### *Blogging in Academic Settings*

The younger generation was born and has lived with ubiquitous digital media technologies. They multi-task, favor graphics over text, and randomly browse web pages. They like to network and seek prompt gratification and reward. Prensky (2001) describes this generation as “digital natives” who are “native speakers” of the digital language. As opposed to the younger generation, adults are described as “digital immigrants” who do not understand the languages and culture of the natives. The huge gap between digital natives and immigrants is well observed in educational settings. Teachers who belong to the digital immigrant group often have a hard time teaching students whose culture and language are different, and the result is that they do not understand or appreciate students’ unique abilities and skills as digital natives, and use old pedagogies (Prensky, 2001).

However, some efforts to satisfy the needs of digital natives have been made in educational settings. As cyberspace has provided new ways to communicate, online communication tools, such as e-mail, listserves, and course management software, have been widely adopted in educational settings to enrich the learning experience (Bartlett-

Bragg, 2003; Glogoff, 2005; O'Donnel, 2005). Nevertheless, while these online instructional delivery systems still put educators in the center and allow them to control educational environments and experiences of students via these communication tools, blogging makes the learning experiences more learner-centered. Due to its semi-structured format, the blog is seen as a “middle space” between face-to-face learning and other online instructional tools, allowing the development of individuals’ voices which reflect their own characteristics and intellectual approaches (Oravec, 2003).

*Purpose of adopting blogs in education.* The purpose of using blogs in education is to enhance learning by allowing students to experience “computer-supported communication, collaboration, encouragement of reflective practices” (Hernandez-Ramos, 2004, p.1). Blogs are suggested as promoting “deep learning” rather than “surface learning” (Bartlett-Bragg, 2003; Rosie, 2000). Surface learning focuses only on meeting minimum educational requirements at low cognitive levels, without engaging experiences. Surface learning follows safe traditional conventions and avoids alternatives. In this learning environment, concept and object are directly matched without deep reflection (Rosie, 2000). On the other hand, deep learning provides opportunities to stand back, link the concept and reflect on the learning process (Rosie, 2000). Blogging can offer this deep learning experience as students expand the discussion through developing their own ideas (Rosie, 2000).

*Learning experiences through blogging.* Teachers who have integrated blogs into their curricula often expect blogging to offer a collaborative environment where remediation and intertextuality are explored and supported (Sade, 2005). The dialogic characteristics of the blog, allowing users to leave comments and feedback, enable the monological conversation to be broadened and more enriched (Downes, 2004; O'Donnel,

2005). Blogging can be the venue for the “composition of multi-vocal, networked hypertexts,” where individual expression as well as the creation of cohesive community is encouraged and developed (Huffaker, 2005; Kajder & Bull, 2003; Sade, 2005, p.2). Ideally, by participating in blogging, students consider themselves as “meaningful contributors to professional dialogues” rather than passive observers or consumers of information (Hernandez-Ramos, 2004, p. 1). To increase the advantages that can be obtained from educational blogs, Oravec (2003) suggests four different strategies to deepen learning experiences through blogging, summarized below:

1. *Posting student work*: Students can post their writings and get feedback from teachers, their class mates and from outsiders.
2. *Exchange hyperlinks*: Students and educators can exchange new URLs on blogs.
3. *Fostering reflective approaches to educational genres*: Students can share their critical reflections of blogging and other possible educational experiences they imagine. This often leads to online discussions.
4. *Forming and maintaining knowledge communities*: Blogs can be a venue where important information is stored and disseminated (p. 229).

Through these different uses of blogging, where students can freely share any form of writing, from informal notes to more refined, formal essays, new discursive norms emerged in cyberspace. Cyberdiscursive rhetoric is virtual, interactive, continuous and instantaneous, allowing “the concrete rhetoric of orality” and “abstract rhetoric of literacy” to be more dynamic (O’Donnell, 2005, p. 3). Although the aggregative structure of the oral rhetoric and the hierarchical structure of traditional literacy are surrendering to the new language structure of cyberdiscursive rhetoric, it is still often fragmented and not cohesive.

The way students acquire knowledge through blogging can be explained as “directive techniques” which focuses on “frequent responses from learners with immediate feedback from the instructor” (Glogoff, 2005; p.1). Due to the public nature of blogs, important information can be equally accessed by all. Not only can students can broaden their knowledge of certain topics, but they can also easily explore additional information through blogs. Since users can easily add a new entry and comment on others’ entries, directive learning is well supported and encouraged (Glogoff, 2005; Prensky, 2001).

As blogging gains in popularity, innovative educators seek to incorporate it into school curricula. One of the co-authors of this study is the pioneering educator Paul Folkemer, assistant superintendent for instruction of Scarsdale Public Schools, who has crafted a current events blog for Scarsdale public school students, available at <http://pfolkemer.googlepages.com/scarsdalecurrentevents>. Each blog post includes a short news brief written by Folkemer concerning world news, national news, local news, health news, or science and technology news. Students’ reactions to the post appear in the form of short comments. In using the current events blog, students are encouraged to engage in dialogue, connect news with the school curriculum, and express their personal opinions. This study combines interviews with Scarsdale teachers with analysis of students’ blog postings in order to understand how students and teachers are using the blog. A method of grounded theory was employed for the content analysis, and two major themes were uncovered in students’ blog postings: informal writing and textual connections.



## Method

This research used a multi-method design that includes teacher interviews and a content analysis of student writing on the Scarsdale news blog. A group of eight middle school (sixth through eighth grade) teachers were interviewed about how they use the blog in class. Their subjects range from history, social studies, English, and humanities. Six female and two male teachers were interviewed, ranging from one and one half years to 36 years of teaching experience at Scarsdale. Teacher responses regarding the blog were drawn from semi-structured phone and email interviews (see Appendix A: Interview Questions).

For the content analysis portion of the analysis, 216 samples of student writing were randomly selected for analysis. Grounded theory was used to identify patterns in the data. Random number sampling was used in order to derive a representative sample of student blog responses from among ten months worth of blogging available in the archives of the Scarsdale current events blog. The time frame for the news blog ranged from its inception in February 2006 to the present time of analysis, February 2007. A specific date from each month was selected through using a double set of numbers sequentially gathered from a randomly generated number chart, which was obtained through a Google search. In this fashion, a random selection of eight dates was gathered. When a zero appeared as the first digit, the second digit determined the day of the month. Numbers that were too high were disregarded and the next random number was selected.

To analyze student writing, a method of grounded theory was employed. We included posts explicitly marked as written by Grade 8 students. By limiting the research to one grade, it ensured that students were on a similar developmental level. Working in two teams of two, graduate student researchers analyzed four blogs per team (eight blogs total).

One team analyzed 213 blog entries while the other team analyzed 216 entries. Each person in each team worked independently of the other team member to ensure independent review and findings. The two teams then shared their data with each other in order to identify the most promising themes for further exploration. Once the themes were identified, one member of each research team worked together to place the comments in appropriate categories and extrapolate examples for this paper.

### Teachers' Perceptions of Blog Writing as an Educational Tool

Teachers were free to use the blog in whatever way they found appropriate. Of the Grade 8 teachers we interviewed, five used the blog often in class (at least once a week), two used it moderately (once a month or less), and one teacher has never used the blog. Two of the teachers who used it often, however, just started using it this year. Most teachers required that students post to the blog a certain number of times per quarter. This provided students a choice as to which story they will respond to, so long as they complete a certain number of responses per quarter (the average amount required averages out to approximately two postings per week). All of the teachers who used the blog did so for two reasons: 1) to keep up on current events; and 2) to connect to their curriculum. The moderate-use teachers used the blog more if the stories connected better to the material they are teaching. One teacher noted she only discusses the blog in class if it is relevant to what she is teaching. Assessment on the blog varies: whereas some teachers graded students simply on whether they posted or not, other teachers required students to use proper grammar and spelling, or make “an earnest effort to participate,” or require at least a paragraph long response. No teachers graded on the opinion of students, but one graded on “logical errors” in their statements.

Teachers fell into two camps: those who are concerned with writing quality on the blog, and those who are not as concerned. This concern has to do with whether a teacher is required to teach English. One teacher who covers social studies and English asked students to edit their writing for form (grammar, punctuation, spelling) before posting to the blog, and prefers that students write in a formal tone. On the other hand, teachers who do not teach English were more concerned with self-expression on the blog rather than form. This camp of teachers believed that students are using “this generation’s way of communicating” where they write to get out their thoughts rather than for perfect form. One teacher called this type of writing “right from the gut.” In fact, one teacher worried that grading on form may limit a student’s openness in expression: “If a kid is going to agonize over writing and grammar, it will slow them down.” These teachers were most concerned with the thought and expression of a response. Blog writing was connected to the way students think through thoughts and gave them “an opportunity to think about it on their own time.” Even Folkemer, who browses over the student responses before he posts them “live” on the website, was comfortable posting those which used an informal writing style.

#### Informal Writing and Textual Connections in Student Blog Entries

We looked at both the form and the content of student writing. Here we review the use of informal language in blog posts and students’ ability to make *text-to-self connections*, *text-to-text connections* and *text-to-world connections*. These connections demonstrate students’ emerging critical literacy in responding to news and information.

### *Informal Language*

Despite the fact that this study examined teen blogging, there were no obvious examples of Netspeak or textspeak, the new form of language that is unique to the internet (Crystal, 2001). Some examples of Netspeak include emoticons, abbreviations such as "LOL" (laugh out loud), and numbers mixed with letters to create a word, such as "4ever" and "2day" (Crystal, 2004a). Although these types of examples were not evident in this sample, many students used an informal style of writing in their posts. This informal writing style is in stark contrast to traditional academic writing, in which students follow grammatical rules and a formal essay structure. The most common informal characteristic found was mixed use of capitalization. For example in response to the blog post "Anti-Smoking Ads May Increase Teen Smoking," one student wrote:

the reason kids, teens and adults smoke is becuae of peerpressure, insucurity and "stress". smoking causes lots of diseases and is very disgusting and is not COOL. I think tabacco companies sponser anti compaigns for children so they can teach kids at an early age that smokingis bad and is bad for your lungs. Im not sure if they should getride ofthere anit smoking compaign (*chelsea*, January 06, 2007 12:08 a.m.)

This post illustrates the use of capital and lower case letters that is distinctive to the Internet. This mixed use of capitalization is frequently used online to express feeling. For example, all capital letters are often used to make a strong point, the equivalent of "shouting" in speech (Crystal, 2004b, p. 83). In addition to the use of capital letters, Internet dialogue frequently makes use of combinations of punctuation marks. The ellipsis (...) is often used online to express a pause (Crystal, 2004b). For example, take *Karan's* response

to the blog post “Laptops for Every Child in Libya”:

I STRONGLY think that scarsdale school's education will DEFINATLY change with the usage of laptops for every child. I actually think that it would be absurd. America will soon be a country connected to the internet if we keep going on and on about having school computers. i think that having a computer is a good way to get research but if we have laptops for scarsdale students then people, i think, will start getting out of hand. We already have computer labs that have computers and people are already getting out of hand because there is always some person that is always playing with widgets. This is not what we are supposed to be doing. What we are supposed be doing is doing our schoolwork to get an education. Computers in the schools are one thing but laptops?! thats a little too far. I think that having laptops in Lybia is also a bad idea becuase then soon people in africa will start logging in which will go on to asia and pretty soon...very soon...everyone will be on the internet. Our world is not a world of ".com". Our world is about education, culture, society, everything tht gets someone somewhere in life. Chatting with friends and playing with widgets, in my opinion, isnt going to get any kid into harvard university i can tell you that right now. (*Karan*, October 18, 2006 10:49 p.m.)

In this example, the student makes use of ellipsis to express a pause, all caps for emphasis on certain words, and mixed capitals elsewhere. Clearly, the student’s blogging style is distinctive to Internet language, which differs from traditional writing in its grammatical fluidity.

Netspeak is different from traditional writing in other ways as well. According to Crystal, "Emails and chat group interactions, where the pressure is strong to communicate rapidly,

lack the carefully planned, elaborate construction that is characteristic of so much writing" (Crystal, 2004b, p. 79). While some educators are concerned about the potential decline of language skills, others argue that computer mediated communication is not identical to speech or writing. Instead, like the telegraph and telephone that came before it, the Internet uses new conventions of discourse (Crystal, 2004b).

One of these new conventions is a non-linear, stream of consciousness style of writing. This may be due to the fact that students are typing as fast as they are thinking (Crystal, 2004b). For example *ScottJ* had the following reply to the blog post "Anti-Smoking Ads May Increase Teen Smoking":

I completely agree with Alex Isby... these ads are "big tobacco's" way of trying to make themselves look good, when really they are trying to "encourage" kids to smoke (through reverse psychology). Here's my reasoning: the perfect kid who does everything his parents tell him/her to do is NOT going to smoke anyway. However, the rebellious kid, the one who doesn't listen to their parents, may take these ads in a different way. As Mark Twain (the writer of **Tom Sawyer**) said about Tom's ability to get his friends to whitewash the fence, "[Tom] had discovered a great law of human action, without knowing it -- namely, that in order to make a man or a boy covet a thing, it is only necessary to make the thing difficult [or in our case, 'wrong'] to attain." The kids who do not listen to 'authority' may see it as just another thing (like listening to their parents) that they can disobey. Perhaps this is why, when you think of a teen smoking, you think of a rebellious kid. "Big Tobacco" could have thought up this idea because they have virtually unlimited resources... who knows if (and i'm getting a little crazy here) the companies have child psychologists working for them who came up with the idea of making the kids

want to smoke using reverse psychology through anti-smoking ads. I don't know what really went through the tobacco companies' minds when they put the ads on the air, and I don't think anyone ever will. Nonetheless, if studies prove that they have a negative effect on teens, and there is at least an arguable cause that may question the companies' motives (like the one I mentioned above), we should pull the ads off the air. (*ScottJ*, November 30, 2006, 5:20 p.m.)

Although the writer used a stream of consciousness style of writing, it should not be assumed that this is a reflection of his reading comprehension. Even though he did not follow traditional essay structure, he interacted with the text on multiple levels. Although he made use of mixed capitalization, stream of consciousness writing, and personal interjections, he made an insightful comparison to a work of classic literature. This example demonstrates that informal language does not necessarily impede upon students' ability to interact with texts. This is just one of many examples of students who made important textual connections, which we examine more carefully in the following section.

### *Textual Connections*

Educational scholars have identified three types of links students use to relate to texts: *text-to-self connections*, *text-to-text connections* and *text-to-world connections*. These connections help students better understand texts by incorporating them into existing schema (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997, p. 55-56). Students make use of text-to-self connections by relating new texts to prior personal experiences. Additionally, students use text-to-text connections to relate new texts to other texts they have read, seen or heard. Lastly, students make text-to-world connections by relating new texts to their prior

knowledge of the world. The Scarsdale blog includes examples of all three types of connections, indicating that although students often utilized an informal writing style, they still made important links between the new information presented on the blog and prior knowledge from their own lived experiences.

*Text-to-self Connections.* There were many instances in which students linked the blog articles to their own personal experiences. For example, in response to the blog question, “If you were a member of a blended family, what would you do about HR Bill 4437?” *ScottJ* wrote:

I think its great that the kids protesting are expressing their first ammendment rights. During vacation i was in White Plains and there was a big demonstartion against illegal immigration and i didnt realize how many illegal immigrants there were until last week. i dont think that the bill should have been passed because there are so many "blended" families and i couldnt imagine what it would be like to be the child with "criminal" parents. (*ScottJ*, November 30, 2006, 5:20 p.m.)

Several students used their personal experiences (as well as their opinions) in their posts responding to the blog question, “What’s the best way to teach math?” For example:

Ok-- I among many other students can honestly say that math is the toughest subject for me to understand. I mean, I like math, but its just so hard to understand sometimes. I think that teaching math should be about the skills that we pick up while we do them, in other words- how much actually sinks in and stays with us, rather than always worrying about whether or not the right answer was obtained. The answer is important, but how someone got to that answer is the most important process of all to me. I hate it when I do a problem, and at the end of it



I'm like, "Hey, what does this all mean? How did I get this answer? WHY did I get this answer?" Personally, I prefer to understand the process rather than get the right answer all the time. Thats nice, but it doesn't mean you actually understand what you are doing. (MG, May 15, 2006, 10:14 p.m.)

Another example comes from *rachel*, who wrote:

I think that the best way to teach math is with understanding. Grading only answers doesn't encourage a student to actually understand the information and if a state test is given months after a lesson is over, if all the math that was used was memorization, then students won't remember/ understand the questions being asked. Personally, I like when my work is graded and not just an answer because a lot of the time I get all of the tough math right but end up making a small error that throws my answer off. Using understanding as a basis for grading and not just looking for answer is, in my opinion, the best way to teach and learn math. (*rachel*, May 15, 2006, 11:13 p.m.)

*ZachA* used his experience as a goalie to understand the reaction to a new soccer ball design for the World Cup:

As a goalie I understand why they do not like it. Its much easier to use the same ball that they have been using for years because that way every one is used to the ball instead of having to adapt to a new ball for most players its better just to stick with the old one (*ZachA*, September 19, 2006, 8:09 p.m.)

*Text-to-text Connections.* Students also made text-to-text connections, in which they related the blog posts to other texts they have encountered. Students used a variety of different texts, including books, films, and the U.S. Constitution. Below, *becky* describes

how the movie *Walkout* helped her better understand the idea of peaceful protests:

If I were a member of a blended family, i would definitely protest the bill. I would never be able to accept the idea that my parents or siblings were criminals. How are they criminals for seeking a better life for themselves and me? I am a U.S. citizen because they immigrated illegally, and if the bill passes they will be considered criminals for it. I cannot stand by and allow that to happen. And after seeing the movie *Walkout*, which is about Mexican-American students in LA in the late 1960s walking out of school for better rights, i saw that peaceful protest is the best way to protest, and that walking out of school will let your voice be heard.

(*becky*, April 17, 2006, 5:39 p.m.)

*Soozy* made use of a different text-to-text connection and related the same protests to a quotation from Edward Everett Hale:

I think it is a great idea that the children in Oregon are protesting because if they are able to stop this bill from becoming a law, then it really proves a quote that was said by Edward Everett Hale, "I am only one; but still I am one. I cannot do everthing, but still I can do something; I will not refuse to do someting I can do." If I had a blended family of illegal immigrant parents or relatives, I would most certainly protest because family always comes first and I would not want my family taken away. I completely understand what these kids are doing and I hope they win!

(*Soozy*, April 25, 2006, 8:54 p.m.)

*EthanG* incorporated the preamble to the Constitution in his argument against trans fats in restaurants:

Finally, a government has come up with a smart way to help stop the obesity epidemic. One of the nation's top killers, American's are addicted to fatty foods, especially fast foods that are high in trans-fatty acids. By banning trans fats, we are one step closer to achieving health within our nation. Many people are for banning smoking. Isn't trans fats practically the same thing? It is a common consumer product that has many health risks and is not healthy to eat. Trans fats, however, cannot be banned in just one city. If our nation made the move to stop the obesity epidemic by outlawing trans fat, a horrible killer, we would be much more healthy. By not making this illegal is avoiding the Constitution and our rights. The document states, "...to promote the general welfare..." Isn't stopping a major killer promoting the general welfare? I am pretty sure it is. Hopefully, one day, other towns, states, and eventually the country will get trans fats eliminated. Sure, food is better with trans fats. But would you really take a risk of your life just to eat good food? (*EthanG*, September 27, 2006, 9:49 p.m.)

In response to the same blog post, *peter* applied information from *The New York Times*:

The restraunt Sylvia's in Harlem (which serves fried chicken) was one of the first restraunts in New York to stop using trans fats in their cooking, and accoring to the New York Times the food tastes the same. So if banning trans fats is healthier and the food tastes the same whats the problem? (*peter*, October 02, 2006, 6:02 p.m.)

These examples show that students are actively involved in deep learning rather than surface learning. Through blogging, we see evidence that students are engaged in deep learning, where they can stand back, link new ideas to what they already know, and reflect

on the learning process.

*Text-to-world Connections.* Students also made connections between the blog posts and their prior knowledge about the world. In this example, *Robbie* made use of his prior knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement as well as the current situation in Darfur in his response to “*Students Walk Out of School In Protest*”:

If I were a member of a blended family I would join the protest knowing that the only way to change a law is to get the government to act. For example, the Civil Rights Movement was a success because they pressured government to finally act. Other ways to get the government involved are phone calls and letters. People are currently using these ways to make the government do something about the genocide in Darfur. I would use all of these methods to try to save my family members from becoming criminals. (*Robbie*, April 20, 2006, 5:20 p.m.)

*Nancy* used her prior knowledge of Asian educational systems in her reply to the blog post, “What’s the Best Way to Teach Math?”

I don't think that there is one specific way to teach math because every teacher is different. That would be like saying there is only one way to interpret a book. I do think, however, that every student should take a foundation math course, whether it be in 6th grade or 9th grade. After that, I think the student should learn how to apply the skills, formulas and concepts that they have learned to what they are learning. If teachers really want to know, maybe they should conduct an experiment to see. However, just because children in Singapore are doing better in math, doesn't make their teachers better or the students smarter. Many children in Asia go to school 6 days a week. And just because they excel in math does not mean that they are great in history or literature. Overall, there is not one way to

teach math or and subject in that case. (*Nancy*, May 15, 2006, 11:59 p.m.)

Another example of students' use of outside knowledge in interpreting blog content comes from *zach*, who incorporated his knowledge of lawsuits filed against tobacco companies:

It is hard to believe that tobacco companies sponsor anti-smoking campaigns to educate parents and protect children. Even though the tobacco companies argue that they genially want to discourage children and teenagers from smoking, teenagers still represent the largest percentage of cigarette consumers. It seems unlikely that tobacco companies would want to lose customers and, consequently, lose great amounts of money. It is important to remember that tobacco companies have already lost millions of dollars in lawsuits filled by families of tobacco victims. Furthermore, according to recent studies, teenagers who see anti-smoking ads are more likely to smoke in the future and more likely to have smoked in the past 30 days. It makes sense that tobacco companies would want to clean up their acts and change their public image. So, they don't get sued anymore. It can't be pleasant to be seen as the devil. However no matter what they do they are still responsible for the countless deaths of smokers and the victims of second-hand smoke. (*zach*, November 30, 2006, 6:23 p.m.)

What is remarkable about this post is the ability of the student to situate the argument from multiple points of view, reflecting ideas from both the tobacco companies and public perspectives. Responding to news and current events may stimulate some pre-teens to think in more complex ways about one's personal relationship to social and political events and the multiple points of view that exist on topics of public concern.

## Discussion

This study examined the online writing of a large group of Grade 8 students who participated in a school-sponsored news blog where they read and commented on news and current events. The evidence presented in this study shows that students found value in the articles they read and used online blogging to make connections between the news and their personal and social lives. Although their writing and typing is not perfect, students made important text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections, which are dimensions of emerging critical literacy competencies.

There were a number of limitations to this study. Since researchers did not have access to students' academic writing samples, it was not possible to discern differences between students' blog writing and their writing for traditional assignments. However, the sampling approach used in this study enables us to generalize about the presence of critical literacy themes across the Scarsdale news blog as a whole, which has thousands of student responses. Future researchers may wish to compare students' written assignments to their blog postings to learn more about children's ability to code-switch between formal and informal styles. In addition, the role of the teacher in assigning and encouraging blog participation should be examined in more detail. A longitudinal study documenting teacher's attitudes toward students' use of blogs might provide insight into the evolving nature of Internet language and teachers' understanding of how informal writing can support student learning. Finally, more information is needed on how students in other grades respond to the blog.

Teachers put a lot of effort into trying to get middle-school students to develop their reading and writing skills. Blogging about the news creates an authentic task that gives students the opportunity to learn about news and current events and share their thoughts and ideas with a small learning community. Ultimately, it is up to educators themselves to

decide whether to focus on spelling and typing errors or to focus on students' ability to respond to reading by making meaningful connections to news and information about contemporary social issues. It's important to recognize that informal writing is not unique to the online environment. Langer and Applebee (1987) found that students' responses to short answer questions and note-taking exercises were more likely to be fragmented than their answers to essay questions. Since writing on a blog cannot be easily classified, the evidence we report in this study may simply reflect students' confusion about the expected level of formality for this particular new media form.

This study has shown that, when students respond to questions about news and current events, they demonstrate substantial interest in making text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections. As we have shown in this study, participation in blog writing reflects students' emerging ability to situate themselves, as active, thoughtful readers in relation to new ideas and information. Blogging should not be dismissed because of its informal use of language, but embraced for its educational potential in simultaneously strengthening critical literacy and learning about news and current events.

## Scarsdale Teacher interview Questions

Our graduate level *Media and Children* class is doing a mini-research project on the Scarsdale Current Events Blog.

There is no judgment as to whether you use the blog in your class or not—I'm interested in examining conditions that surround the blog use, and exploring administrative, student, and teacher response to it. Please do not feel as if you have to answer all of these questions—they are just jumping points for your response.

These responses are anonymous—your name and any identifying information (other than “teacher” and grade level “elementary” or “middle”) will not be connected to your comments, nor shared with administrators, other teachers, parents, students, etc.

\* \* \*

1. Please provide brief information on what subject and grade level you teach, and how many years teaching (overall and at Scarsdale).
2. Tell me about how you use the blog\* in class.

\*If you use it, I'm interested to how you incorporate it into class. Some questions to consider: How long you've been using it? Is it for credit or an assignment? How often do students blog? Do they do it outside/inside of class? Do you tie it to curriculum? What have student reactions been like? How has the blog added to (or taken away from) your class? What do you want students to learn, or what do you think they're learning from the blog? Are you surprised by anything?

\* If you don't use it, tell me about your reaction to the blog. Do you feel it doesn't fit into your class, or your teaching style, just not really interested, or something else? Any comments welcome here.

4. Would you like to see any additions or changes to the blog, or its use?
5. Please share any other feedback/comments.



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