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Classroom Weblogs and Wikis How They Affect the Learning Experience with Intermediate Students

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Embedding technology into the education setting is imperative to students' success. In this study, twenty fifth grade students utilized a classroom wiki (website) and responded to literature via Readers' Blogs. The affects of using the wiki and blog were revealed from analysis of the students' blogs and comments made to them, discussion pages, and the student questionnaire responses. Overall, students felt that the ability to communicate via the wiki was enjoyable and beneficial to their understanding of topics. Students reported the need for more feedback on their Readers' Blogs and felt that peer communication was "useless" or "bad." Going forward, lessons on appropriate and useful comments will be taught along with consideration to enlist more adult commentators for the wiki.

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Classroom Weblogs and Wikis

How They Affect the Learning Experience with Intermediate Students

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Abstract

Embedding technology into the education setting is imperative to students' success. In this study, twenty fifth grade students utilized a classroom wiki (website) and responded to literature via Readers' Blogs. The affects of using the wiki and blog were revealed from analysis of the students' blogs and comments made to them, discussion pages, and the student questionnaire responses. Overall, students felt that the ability to communicate via the wiki was enjoyable and beneficial to their understanding of topics. Students reported the need for more feedback on their Readers' Blogs and felt that peer communication was "useless" or "bad." Going forward, lessons on appropriate and useful comments will be taught along with consideration to enlist more adult commentators for the wiki.

Introduction

As a society immersed into the 21st century, teachers need to consider the importance of using new technologies in their classroom instruction. “In today’s information technology age, Internet tools are becoming increasingly popular in educational settings” (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008, p. 9). Web 2.0 tools are technologies that have “allowed for the development of cyber spaces where any computer user can create their own public pages to share knowledge, feelings and thought inviting linguistic interactions with people around the globe” (de Almeida Soares, 2008, p. 517). Teacher’s need to be aware of Web 2.0 tools, embrace them, and prepare their students to use them effectively.

Educators can incorporate Web 2.0 technology into their classroom instruction in many ways. The implementation of a weblog, or more simply, a blog, is one way that educators can take advantage of a Web 2.0 technology that is available to them. Godwin (2007) states that “we [as teachers] have an opportunity to engage the web generation where they are, so that we become relevant and part of the Web 2.0 experience. Web 2.0 can enhance our websites and teaching resources, making them more visual and attractive. We can use them to promote deep and active learning methods and peer-based learning” (p. 104). In agreement, de Almeida Soares (2008) states that, “teachers should...accept the fact that blogging is a new reality in practically all classroom worldwide” (p. 532).

If Web 2.0 tools were ignored and not valued by teachers, going to school will eventually become obsolete and students will no longer be learning things that are valuable to their futures. Students will graduate to become the working people of our country and without exposure and practice with Web 2.0 technology, will be disappointingly insufficient. Mullen and Wedick

(2008) state that, “without reform and the empowerment of teachers and students, schools will widen the digital divide and create an unavoidable abyss” (p. 66).

Theoretical Framework

One theoretical framework of this study is the New Literacies Theory. Lankshear and Knoble state that, “We associate new literacies with an historical conjuncture and a “rising” or “ascending” mind set” (2006, p. 80). That being said, blogs, online communication, webcam, Skype, and all the other “new and hot” instructional tools are currently “rising.” Lankshear and Knoble (2006) continue, “...the kinds of practices we currently regard as new literacies will cease to be new at the point where characteristics and ways have been incorporated into mainstream everyday social practices to the point where they are invisible, taken for granted, and lived out as ‘normal’-as aspects of what will then be conventional literacies” (p.80). Teachers need to implement the usage of these tool or their classrooms will lag behind mainstream social practices.

Communicating in blogs allows for students to be social and use new literacies to develop linguistically and participate in society. “Through these innovations [web pages, electronic presentations, e-mail, computer chat, and instant messaging] the concept of literacy has changed to literacy as a social practice, in which being able to read and search for information in different domains of knowledge as well as communicating ideas and knowledge using a variety of (electronic) media has become important” (Staarman, 2003, p. 73). Mullen and Wedwick (2008) agree in their statement that “being literate no longer involves being able to read and write. The literate of the twenty-first century must to able to download, upload, rip, burn, chat, save, blog, Skype, IM, and share” (p. 66).

Another theory of literacy acquisition applicable to the topic in question is Gee's socio-cultural theory. Gee (2001) wrote that, "meaning in language is tied to people's experiences of situated action in the material and social world" (p. 720). Since much of today's social communication takes place online, the Internet is now considered part of our "social world." Chat rooms, social networking sites, e-mails and blogs are all mediums in which language is distributed and therefore, meaning is gained from. "Blogs provide a place where we can witness and participate in knowledge being socially constructed through collaborative electronic discourse" (Frye et al., 2010, p. 52).

Gee (2001) also writes that, "reading instruction must be rooted in the taking and imagining of diverse perspectives on real and imagined material and social worlds" (p. 721) and Staarman (2003) says "the use of text-based communication medium allows participants to share multiple perspectives or ideas about a particular subject or issue" (p. 73). Therefore, using blogs in educational settings allows students to gain meaning from language and learn about others' perspectives in their social world.

Research Question

Guided by the New Literacies perspective and the social-cultural theory, the purpose of this action research project is to explore the question, how do classroom weblogs/wikis affect the learning experience of intermediate students? This researcher will analyze student engagement and types of interactions in relation to activities on the classroom wiki.

Literature Review

According to Godwin (2007, p. 103), “blogs are expanding on the Web at a phenomenal rate” and Frye (2010) found that, “classroom blogs provide a safe and easy mechanism for public displays of students’ learning. Moreover, publication validates students’ learning since the audience is wider than a single teacher’s grading scheme” (p. 47).

Learning Beyond School Hours

Ducate and Lomicka (2008) state, “to increase opportunities for interaction outside of the traditional classroom, teachers are beginning to employ different types of social software such as blogs, wikis, chat or instant messaging” (p. 9). “Blogs provide opportunities for authors to share information with others, who, in turn, can further the classroom dialogue and motivate students’ learning by posting responses in the form of ‘comments’ to blog entries” (Frye et al., 2010, p. 50). Conversations that start during school hours can be discussed and further explored at home. Also, discussions can be started through an online discussion before being brought up in class (Frye et al., 2010). This would give students time to think about the topic and form their own opinions before classroom discussion. Also, “the use of a text-based communication medium allows participants to share multiple perspectives or ideas about a particular subject or issue” (Staarman, 2003, p. 73). Unlike in the classroom, time is not limited and using a blog or wiki allows for all students ideas and perspectives to be shared.

Another example is a high school math blog that “provided a place outside of structured class time where students could work together and thus have increased exposure to course content” (MacBride & Luehmann, 2008, p. 179). Besides student discussion and communication benefiting from the implementation of blogs, “blogs present the option for communicating

directly and immediately with both students and parents. Teachers can post class assignments, links, schedules, and messages to parents” (Frye, et al., 2010, p. 52).

Collaborative Learning

The “extended” school day is not the only benefit to a blog; it can promote team work and collaboration too. “The creation of wikis to encourage group work and peer review in IL [information literacy] teaching should be extended from mainstream academic teaching to assisting with IL development” (Godwin, 2007, p. 107).

Similarly, a study of 6th grade students from Queensland, Australia, communicated via blog with U.S. college students on a project and Davey et al. (2009) stated that, “my students also learned the value of taking more care in their writing to better convey their ideas; they learned the value of a cooperative spirit” (p. 24). de Almeida Soares (2008) also found that peer interaction and collaboration were a benefit of using a blog in an educational setting. She writes, “this makes room for peer correction and feedback, which are highly important in the development of critical reading and writing skills” (p. 520).

On the same hand, MacBride and Leuhmann (2008) found that a high school mathematics classroom blog provided “a forum where students learn content from each other...[and an] increase socialization between students, as he [the teacher] encouraged students interact with peers through the available chat box on his blog” (p. 179).

Critical Thinking and Academic Benefits

After studying the use of a weblog focused on history, Woo & Wang (2009) found that “students are seen to display critical thinking traits in the areas of information sourcing, linking information to arguments and viewpoints justification” (p. 431). Also, “students may need to be

taught information literacy in order to widen their use of critical thinking skills” (Woo & Wang, 2009, p. 431).

After evaluating the usage of a blog with German and French language students it was found that, “just over half of the students reported that they enjoyed reading the blog, most reported that it helped them to improve their reading skills and vocabulary in the target language...” (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008, p. 29). Furthermore, Ducate & Lomicka (2008) reported that “students reported that they see blogs as having high academic value and would like to use blogs again in a future FL [foreign language] class” (p. 22).

The students from a Canadian high school math class used their classroom blog to its full advantage. MacBride & Luehmann (2008) noted that, “students in Mr. K’s class regularly read the scribe posts, as they found them a very useful way to review, look up something they did not fully understand in class, or catch up with a lesson they may have missed” (p. 177).

Engaging and Motivating Learning Environments

Teachers who are looking for ways to more actively involve and motivate their students to learn can use Web 2.0 technology. According to Godwin (2007), “Web 2.0 approaches have moved the agenda towards provision of more interactive solutions for engaging our students” (p. 101). Gavran (2009), a first grade teacher from Croatia, compares his former practice to that of using the online journal and says that, “the process of the creation of the ‘Mravici’ [translates to ‘Little Ants’] journal was an improvement because the pupils were more actively involved in the journal editing process, accomplishing most of the editorial activities independently...” (p. 317).

Ducate and Lomicka’s (2008) study of German and French language students found that, “there were learner-perceived benefits of using blogs: an increased interest and motivation towards the target language due to both interaction and feedback from classmates and teachers”

In this same study, a student who rarely spoke out in the classroom wrote a blog that “was truthful, honest, and creative and served as an outlet where she could articulate her feelings and problems. Whereas she was not a frequent participant in class, she seems to feel more comfortable expressing herself in the blog” (by Ducate and Lomikca 2008, p. 18).

A study completed by Oliver et al.(1997) found that, “many students who earlier demonstrated a dislike for completing research, were extremely active in the retrieval of information related to a specific topic being discussed in class” (p. 6). Similarly, in Staarman’s 2003 study it was found that “children who are too inhibited to ‘speak out’ in classroom discussions might benefit from the absence of social presence in CSCL [Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning] environments” (p. 74).

On the other hand, Staarman (2003) does point out that “the possible loss of social relationships in these environments may also have an adverse affect on learning” (p. 74). She says that communicating over a blog, wiki, or instant message leaves out non-verbal cues and can cause communication to be less effective and even cause some to feel left out or insecure. (Staarman, 2003).

Authentic and Meaningful Learning

Blogs provide a way for students to interact with one another and motivate them to engage into a learning activity that is often authentic and meaningful. Thirteen years ago, Oliver et al. (1997) stated, “teachers and their students need to move from planned learning to authentic experiences; Internet technology proves the means by which we can influence that change” (p. 8). Presently, we are fully immersed into a world of digital technology and “when teachers use digital tools to support students in researching, evaluating, organizing, transforming, writing, and publishing what they learn for a wider audience, they are encouraging students to write with a

purpose, an authentic voice, and to create a meaningful representation of their learning” (Frye et al., 2010, p. 53). Frye et al. (2010) continues, “by publishing student work, teachers increase the authenticity of student learning and increase the possibility of wider audience response beyond the classroom community” (p. 50).

“In the classroom blogs are highly effective communication tools that create a verity of authentic writing experiences for students and teachers (Mullen & Wedwick, 2008, p. 69.) An example of online journal being used to create a purposeful and authentic student voice is that of the previously discussed first grade class of Mario Gavran. Gavran (2009) states that “...the process of learning gains a new quality because it is not imposed from the outside, but rather the desire to learn originates from the pupils’ internal motivation because they want to learn something and write something to publish their findings on their journals” (p. 317).

Overall, literature has suggested many benefits to the usage of blogs in the classroom setting. de Almeida Soares (2008) concludes that “attracted by these interactive and public aspects of blogs, teachers worldwide have been exploring the potential of this tool as a learning environment” (p.518). The researcher of this study will compare the claims made in literature to those findings of this study.

Methods

The study will closely examine the researcher’s classroom wiki, which contains information for student and parent communication along with each student’s Reader’s Blog where they posted their reading reflections. This is the second year the classroom wiki has been implemented in the teacher’s fifth grade classroom. Implementing the online Reader’s Blog has allowed the researcher to monitor students’ reading choices, comprehension of text, and analyze

their writing expression and feelings about the book. Each student's Reader's Blog and all comments made to each were printed and examined.

Lastly, each student in the class completed a questionnaire that allowed him/her to express his/her feelings about the classroom wiki, Reader's Blogs, and the discussion pages.

Context

The students who participated in this research attend one of the five elementary schools in an upper to middle class dominated suburban school district in Western New York. According to the 2009 New York State School Report Card (2009), the school's Young Kindergarten through Grade 5 enrollment was 508 students during the 2008-2009 school year. The common class size during this year was twenty one students. Three percent of the students were eligible for free lunch and there are no students that were eligible to receive reduced lunch. During the 2008-2009 school year eighty-four percent of the students were Caucasian; ten percent were Asian, Native Hawaiian, or other Pacific Islander; four percent were African American; and one percent was multiracial. The annual attendance rate was 97% and no children were suspended from school during the 2008-2009 school year (New York State, 2009).

Participants

The participants of the study were 20 fifth grade students, ten boys and ten girls, ranging from age ten to twelve. The majority of the students in this class came from middle to upper income families and all had computer and internet access available at their homes. The majority of the students in this class read at a fifth grade reading level or above. Based on observations, most of the students enjoyed reading and chose to read if they finished an assignment early. Four of the students in the class had Individualized Education Programs that required the services of a Speech Language Pathologist, Learning Specialist, and/or Autism Specialist. Of these four

students, two read at a second grade level, one at a third grade level, and one at a fourth grade level.

Researcher Stance

As the researcher, I worked with the students who participated in this study since September 2009 as their teacher. Therefore, I was an active participant/observer throughout this study because I was the one who implemented and observed the outcomes of different aspects on the classroom wiki. In conjunction with conducting the research needed for this study, I am working to obtain a Masters Degree in Literacy Education at St. John Fisher College and currently hold a current Bachelor's Degree in Childhood Educations and Students with Disabilities Education. I am a twenty-six year old female with an initial certification in Elementary Education and Instruction of Students with Disabilities. I have been teaching for three years in the suburban district in which the study is taking place. Prior to working as a full-time teacher, I worked as a long term substitute for half of a year in an urban district.

Method

During this study, I observed my students entries to their Reader's Response Blogs and the comments they post on each other's readers' blogs over the duration of the entire school year. I explored a few students' Readers' Blogs for evidence of engagement and interaction between peers. Then, I added discussion pages where students can post comments or questions about specific content areas. I observed the activity on those discussion pages and compare it to that of the selected Readers' Blogs; I compared the engagement level by the amount of conversational comments posted, authenticity of the assignment, and interaction between the students.

Finally, I administered a student questionnaire. This helped me determine the students' enjoyment and the amount of value they feel the classroom wiki and Readers' Blogs had on their learning experience.

credibility.

Mills (2011) defines creditability as, "the researcher's ability to take into account the complexities that present themselves in a study and to deal with patterns that are easily explained" (p.104). The fact that my participants were actively involved in the Readers' Blogs over the entire year and that I was their teacher, rather than a passive observer, helps to overcome distortions that can occur with the presence of a "temporary researcher" (Mills, 2011). Also, Guba (1981) states that having peer debriefing and practicing triangulation help to ensure credible research. I practiced peer debriefing by consistently communicating with my critical colleague. I was able to discuss my thoughts and questions about my findings with this person.

Additionally, I collected multiple sources of data, which include my student work samples, comments to their Readers' Blogs, and the questionnaires in order "to compare a variety of data sources and different methods with one another in order to cross-check data" as Guba (1981) suggests (p.79-81). Using all of these data sources has allowed me to ensure my information is credible and it was help me to understand explainable patterns I may find

transferability.

I also ensured transferability during my research. Transferability is explained by Mills (2011) as the researcher knowing that his/her study is "context bound" and that the goal of a study is not to find a "truth" and that a generalization should not be made to larger groups of people. This action research study took place in a fifth grade classroom where all students have computers with internet access available to them in their home. Therefore, the findings may not

be transferable to all students because not all students have access to computers and the Internet outside of the school setting. Also, this study's population is relatively small, twenty students, and consideration should be taken when transferring the findings to substantially larger population.

dependability.

According to Mills (2011) dependability essentially means the stability of one's research. I can ensure my research project is dependable by referring to the questionnaires after reviewing the student's Reader's Blogs to compare findings and to assist in my understanding of the students' viewpoints. Also, the Readers' Blogs that I chose to examine are recorded on my PBworks site and can be accessed by an external "auditor" if further examination is required (Mills, 2011).

confirmability.

Lastly, my study will be confirmable because I practiced triangulation, explained by Mills (2011) as "the neutrality or objectivity of the data..." (p. 105). Also, as stated in my researcher stance, I have revealed that I am the students' teacher and questionnaire developer so that all background information is clear when considering the formulation of questions and response.

Informed Consent and Protection of Rights of Participants

To ensure the study's participants' privacy and protection, all names are anonymous and any identifying marks will be removed from student's work in order to keep the participants in the study private. An assent and consent form that explained my research and its purpose was sent home with each student in their folders (Appendices A and B). Each student brought back

his/her signed assent form and his/her parents' signed consent form stating that the son/daughter would be able to participate in the survey.

Data Collection

I used three forms of data collection in this study. One form of data collection is the student questionnaire (Appendix C). The purpose of the questionnaire was to understand the students' thoughts about the benefits of the different aspects of the classroom wiki and reader's blogs. The questions were written so that students could express their opinions freely. The questionnaire was created in Microsoft Word with form fields so that the students can type their answers into the document. Students accessed and individually completed the questionnaire within fifteen to thirty minutes via the school's network on net book laptops.

Another form of data collection was the samples of students' reader responses printed from the classroom wiki. Each student was responsible for posting a reader's response on their reader's blog by nine o'clock pm on a certain day of the week. Students were assessed only based on their inclusion of seven topics in their response. The seven topics were: date of entry, title of book, author of book, genre of book, a short yet descriptive summary of what they read; the last two of the seven components were choice topics. Some choice topic ideas were given to students in the beginning of the year when the expectations were explained to them and include predictions, character description, and description of a favorite part. Readers' Blogs samples that were collected for this study dated from September 2009 through, the end of the school year, June 2010.

The third form of data collection was the classroom discussion pages (see Appendix E). These were added toward the end of the school year to compare engagement and interaction to

that of the Readers' Blogs. The classroom conversation pages were on various content areas such as Incan culture and mathematics assignments.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, I read through each of the students' Reader's Blog and the comments that went with them, the conversations from the discussion pages, and the questionnaires. For the student questionnaires, I created a word document table to align each question with all of the students' answers to better analyze the results. Then I looked at each question individually and coded the answers. For example, for the first question of the questionnaire was, *What did you like best about our classroom wiki?* I coded the answers into the following categories; S= study tool, H= Homework/informational reminders, R= Reader's Blogs, D=Discussions, interaction, or communication, O= outside of school, T= using technology or computers. I created codes for each of the questionnaire questions and this allowed me to recognize patterns and present themes in my findings.

I counted all of the comments made to each student's Reader's Blog. I coded comments made by a teacher or parent commenter with a T and comments made by fellow students with an S. I also counted the amount of time the student replied to the commentator and coded those with an O, for own. Also, I noted whether or not the student's Reader's Blogs included pictures. I created an excel document that tabulated each students' comments classified into one of four sources of comment; teacher, fellow student, or own comment (Appendix D). This table helped me to look for correlations between amount of comments or patterns that may exist.

Findings and Discussion

Wiki Interaction

The average amount of adult comments on the students' Reader's Blogs was 15 posts over the duration of the entire year that they blogs were used. The Reader's Blog with the most adult comments had 18 comments and two Reader's Blogs had the least amount of adult comments had 10. The average amount of fellow student comments on the Reader's Blogs was eight. The Reader's Blog with the most student comments had 18 and the Reader's Blog with the least amount had two student comments. The average amount of times that the creator of the Reader's Blog commented on his/her own blog, in response to an adult or fellow student comment, was eight times. The Reader's Blog with the highest amount of comments made by its creator had 15 and one of the Reader's Blogs creators never commented on their own blog at all.

Table 1Reader's Blog Comments

Type of Comment	Average Amount	Greatest Amount	Least Amount
Adult Comments	15	18	10
Fellow Student Comments	8	18	2
Blog Creator comment	8	15	0

Overall, the majority of the comments that made up the students' Reader's Blogs were from an adult. The possible adult commentators were the teacher, the teacher's aide, and a parent volunteer. It should be noted that the students were instructed to comment on a fellow student's Reader's Blog about five times over the duration of the year. This instruction was given as a homework assignment and without it the average amount of fellow student comments could possibly have been lower.

The student questionnaire showed that the most popular reason for liking the classroom wiki was because of the ability to interact and communicate through it. Half of the students who completed the questionnaire commented that they liked the ability to communicate, discuss, and/or interact with their fellow classmates on the wiki. For example, one student wrote, "I liked that we could all communicate through the wiki." Another stated, "I liked how our class can interact with each other whenever we go on the web." Lastly, another student commented, "I liked how it made the students interact a little more than usual."

producers of information.

Question number two in the student questionnaire was, "What did you like best about the Reader's Blogs?" and the majority of the students, 12 out of 20 responded that they liked to provide information in some way. For example, these 12 students liked to express their thoughts and reflections about the books they were reading, comment on other student's books, or edit other student's blogs. One student's expressed the following about a book on her blog:

"This book is a non-stop reader! Two sisters named Stephanie and Eleanor Steiner, also known as Stephie and Nellie, are being sent off on a train and away from their parents. This story takes place a long time ago which means the Nazis were hunting all Jews and grownups would send their children to somewhere where the Nazis wouldn't find them. Off the Steiner girls are sent...to Switzerland!! Stephie is 14 years old and has to take care of little Nellie who is about 8 years old. When the girls arrive after 2 days of boat riding, they finally reach their destination. Their first thought is that the women taking care of them will be speaking a totally different language. Their guess was correct! As they got off [the boat] a quite elegant lady addressed them to their homes?.For the first time in the Steiner girls life's they were split apart! Nellie grabbed her belongings and

was sent to another house with a strict looking woman. The adventure starts!! When Nellie find outs that there is a beach, the first thing she wants to do is go there! Do you think Nellie will have problems in the pool? I predict that the Steiner's will get an unexpected visit from their parents!"

Another student gave the following feedback on another student's Reader's Blog:

"How far are you in the book? Also, you spelled Parnell different two times. The correct spelling is P-A-R-N-E-L-L. Please fix!! Otherwise, nice work! And love how you said that how the author described Caroline's smell made you feel warm and comfortable! It seems like your enjoying the book. :)"

receivers of information.

Less popular than giving information, but still a prevalent reason of enjoyment of the blog, was receiving information from others. Nine out of the 20 students reported that they enjoyed receiving information in some way. The different types of information the students liked to receive were; comments on their blogs, book recommendations, what other students are reading and why, other's point of view and opinions, and examples of how to complete something correctly. One student commented on another student's blog: "Wow! This sounds like a good book. It doesn't surprise me why it's called RUNAWAY retriever."

One student received a great book recommendation and asked if he/she can read it next; "Cool book! When your [you're] done, can I borrow it so that I can read it?"

lack of interaction.

Although half of the students in this study liked the classroom wiki because of the ability to interact on it; 15 of the students commented on the lack of or poor quality of interaction and feedback given. There were twenty two comments about the lack of

feedback on the wiki. For example, seven students reported that they would have liked more comments made on their reader's blogs and two students commented that conversations were either dropped or the subject would change. Seven students also disliked the nature of the feedback, calling the comments, "embarrassing, redundant, pointless, or bad." One student did not like interacting with others about what they read because, "No one would listen to my advice. Ever."

Homework and Reminders

Following its ability to allow for interaction, the second most popular reason for liking the classroom wiki was that homework and other important information could be found on it. Nine of the twenty students who participated in the student questionnaire listed that their favorite part of the classroom wiki was that they could go on to look up the homework assignment, their spelling words, or other information they made need.

Engagement Influences

Eight students reported that the reason they wanted to read and comment on another student's blog was because the book they were blogging about or the blog itself was "long," "good," "interesting," or "stood out." Two students reported the reason they commented on other's blogs was so that they could increase the chances that they would comment on theirs in return. Three students reported that the reason they commented on other's blogs was to gain more information about the book that was being blogged about so they could decided if they would want to read the book.

Another suspected reason for engagement into other's Reader's Blogs was the presence of pictures. Seven students included pictures of the books they were reading or related images on their Reader's Blog. There appeared to be no correlation between students who included pictures

on their blog and the number of fellow student comments on their blogs. For example, the students who had the most comments from fellow classmates, eighteen, fourteen, and twelve, had no pictures. Also, the seven students who did include pictures on their blogs received an average of six fellow student comments, with the highest amount being eleven and the least being three comments.

Technology in our Digital Era

Two of the questions on the questionnaire asked what the students disliked about the classroom wiki and Reader's Blogs; there were ten different comments about the dislike of some aspect of technology, making it the most popular reason to dislike the wiki and/or blog. A few students commented on having computer troubles at home. Some reported that the PBworks page would freeze or not allow them to save.

The majority of the students, 15 out of 20, had never blogged before this experience in their fifth grade classroom. One student stated, "No, I have not, so this was a learning experience." Five of the students had prior experiences with blogs before using the classroom Reader's Blog in fifth grade. For example, two students blogged on YouTube, one helped with their mother's yoga blog and has a cooking blog, and one student had blogged on Wikianswers and various video game blogs. Also, one student reported that he was currently working on a blog with his mom and friend where they are writing a story collaboratively.

After the experience with the classroom wiki, Readers' Blogs, and classroom discussion pages, 14 of the 20 students reported that they would consider starting their own blog. When asked about what topics they would consider blogging the different answers given included; personal writing, fictional stories, specific topics, pets, reader's blog, famous people, school, animals, environmental issues and way to help, hockey stats, music, baseball tips, and a gamers

blog. One student reported that he would blog about, “Amazing things that I can do which would blow your mind.”

Freedom of expression

Four students reported that they liked blogging about the books they read because of their ability to choose the book they wanted to read and what they wanted to write about. One student commented that he liked that everyone’s blog was different. When asked for ideas and suggestions for next year’s classroom wiki, eight comments dealt with increasing the amount of choice students have in the construction and make-up of the wiki. For example, four students suggested that every student should have his/her own personal page for an auto-biography or to post/blog about anything he/she would like. One student suggested, “You could put a page for each person and everyone can ask questions and comment on the pictures and topics you write about.” Another suggested, “to open a whole new page for news from the KIDS. That way the kids could tell each other news that they have to the whole class without calling everyone or talking about it during class.” Yet another student comment dealt with student freedom of expression in the following suggestion, “We should be allowed to talk about other things on our personal blogs like homework and things so it is funner[more fun] to go to the website instead of “having to” go to the annoying website which some people may think.”

Responding to the question, “What did you not like about interacting with other people about your reading?” one student expressed that she did not like to be forced to comment on a specific person’s blog and that, “it would be better if we commented on someone’s and then told you who we did.”

The classroom discussion pages allowed for a little more flexibility and freedom of expression than the Reader’s Blogs, which had some required aspects. Also, the classroom

discussion pages were completely voluntary with no assessment grades being given for participation. On the Writing Discussion page, eight of the 20 students added a comment. On the Social Studies Discussion page, half of the students, 10 out of 20 in the class, contributed to the conversation. The Math Discussion page, which was added due to a suggestion from a student, had five of the 20 students adding comments. Lastly, the Reading Discussion page had two student commentators participating in the discussion. The Writing and Social Studies Discussion pages had the same or more interaction than the average eight of the Reader's Blogs. The Math and Reading Discussion pages had less interaction than the Reader's Blogs.

Outliers

Some of the comments received from the student questionnaire qualified as "outliers" because they did not fit in any of the identified themes. One of the outlying pieces of data was that the classroom discussion pages actually enhanced a student's comprehension/understanding of a topic. The student stated, "I liked how we added the discussion on math, social studies, and writing because I didn't understand a lot and how that I discussed it with my classmates on the wiki, I understand it!" Another piece of data that did not easily fit into the determined themes was a student's report of feeling independent as a result of using the classroom wiki. Also, when asked what they liked the best about the Reader's Blogs, two of the student's reported that they liked the typing practice and that it was easier to type the assignment rather than handwriting it.

Implications

Weblogs can have many benefits to a classroom's vitality and creating my very own class weblog has been one of my favorite accomplishments as a teacher so far. To maintain this online community, which can sometimes be called a wiki, one needs technological knowledge and dedication to management it properly. The reason the Readers' Blogs were implemented two

years ago is because blogging, or posting thoughts and information online, is popular amongst all ages and is a strong method of expression in today's society. Due its ability to be informal, creative, and conversational, the blog was thought to be a non threatening way for students to reflect on their reading. While using the Readers' Blog to express their thoughts and connections to the books they read, students concurrently would be increasing their new literacy skills in order to be successful in our digital and technological world. "Our growing digital world has created an abundance of virtual spaces and tools for communication, expression, and information creation and acquisition" (Mullen & Wedwick, 2008, p. 66).

Based on this study, students liked the ability to express their opinions about books and academic topics along with being able to see other students' opinions and book favorites. As a teacher, I value conversation about literature and find the class day does not provide enough time for students to converse about what they are reading. I found that the classroom wiki and Readers' Blogs provided a communication link that allowed students to make book recommendations to other students and further literary conversations that would not typically have occurred. Based on my findings, students read blogs of students who read a book that he/she were interested in or had read. This could contribute to students who have different genre interests than the majority of the class to feel left out. I would encourage teachers to think about their opinion or expectations on student to student blog commenting. I too need to think further about how I will approach peer commenting on the Reader's Blogs next year. I want to be sure that all students feel included and that his/her blog is being read by others, without requiring a certain number of comments and sacrificing the natural environment of the blog.

I was pleased to find that many students enjoyed being able to edit one another's posts, as peer editing is a skill we teach and practice in fifth grade. A recommendation for teachers

deciding to implement a classroom wiki with Readers' Blogs would be find an appropriate balance between student conversations and peer editing. Grammar and conventions are important, but students should feel comfortable enough to express their ideas as well.

An important thing I learned through my research was that students put value on their voices being heard. They appreciate the opportunity to express their opinions and thoughts on various topics. Also, many students felt that the classroom wiki, more specifically the Reader's Blogs, lacked feedback from the teacher/adult commentator. The number of students who made this comment has caused me to re-think my process of commenting on student's blogs. Perhaps I will need to enlist additional parent/adult commentators in order to fulfill the student's need/want for comments and feedback on their blogs.

Although, in relation to the activity on the Readers' Blogs the number of students participating on the classroom discussions was less, they received good feedback from the students. I plan to continue the implementation of those pages, along with starting them in the beginning of the year and allowing students to decide. They provide a great place for students to gain more information about specific content topics, discuss ideas, and get questions answered by peers.

An unexpected result of my research was finding that a few students found that participating with the classroom wiki actually helped them with his/her typing skills. I never thought about this effect, but now see how it is directly related and a benefit from participating in a classroom website. Teachers who are looking to increase students' typing skills can consider implementing Readers' Blogs or other classroom website ideas.

The literature that I classified under "Authentic and Meaningful Learning" indicates that when student work published for a wider audience, purposeful and meaningful work is produced.

After analyzing the data taken during my research, it is inconclusive if the students' work was considered more purposeful or meaningful than other types of work. None of the students reported being motivated to produce work due to having a wider audience.

Conclusion

According to Ducate and Lomicka (2008), MacBride & Luehmann (2008), Staarman (2003), and Frey et al. (2010), classroom wikis allow for learning that typically only occurs during the school day to be extended. My research attests to this literature because many of the students reported through their questionnaire and their blog comments proved that they enjoyed the ability to communicate at times other than the school day. This reason is a major one for starting a classroom wiki because student communication is imperative to a successful learning environment.

Staarman's (2003) research touches upon communicating via wikis or other technology can cause communication to be ineffective or even cause students to feel "left out." These comments can be connected to my research through the student's that reported comments made on their blog were "pointless" or "bad" or they were afraid someone might type something that was "embarrassing." As a teacher, I find it to be worthwhile to have a discussion about what makes comments appropriate before launching the Reader's Blogs.

As Ducate & Lomicka (2008) reported, my research concurred that a classroom wiki can provide academic benefits. Ducate & Lomicka (2008) reported that students found their blog had "academic value" (p. 22). My students similarly reported enjoying the ability to improve their academics through the use of the classroom wiki, blogs, and discussion pages. Teachers of all grade levels can count on a classroom webpage to be a convenient and academically beneficial

addition to their classroom. Homework and other information can be posted and students can discuss assignments or confusions via blogs.

Above all, this experience has opened my eyes to other questions worth thinking about such as; do I need more parental/adult involvement to meet the feedback needs of my students? How should I approach peer to peer comment expectations? Like the literature suggests, is critical thinking evident in my student's comments and blog posts? Lastly, I would like to further investigate the impact a wider audience has on student's work.

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Appendix A Child Assent

St. John Fisher College
CHILD'S WRITTEN ASSENT



Study Title: **Classroom Weblogs and Wikis and How they Generate Conversations about Literature with Fifth Grade Students**

Researcher/Investigator: **Amy Fitzsimmons**

The purpose of this study is to investigate effects of a classroom wiki with reader's blogs on students' opinions of blogs and their relation to peer interaction/discussions around literature.

This study has been approved by St. John Fisher College.

Place of study: **Suburban School in Upstate NY**

Length of participation: **two days (Student Questionnaire and Classroom Discussion Groups)**

Risks and benefits: This study presents no risks to you and it will help me become a better teacher.

Your name and the name of the school will be changed to keep your identity secret. Only my professor and I will be able to see the data I collect. The findings from this study will be shared with other professionals at the St. John Fisher College Capstone Presentation conference.

Your rights: As a research participant, you have the right to;

1. Know what the study is, what the risks are and what the benefits are.
2. Decide not to participate. It will not affect your grade or anything else in school.
3. Decide not to answer any question I ask.
4. Ask to hear about what I learned.

I, _____, agree to participate in this study. I have received a copy of this form.

Print name (Participant Parent)

Signature

Date

Print name (Investigator)

Signature

Date

If you have any questions, please let me know. If anything about this study makes you feel uncomfortable, let your parents know so they can contact people who can help you.

Appendix B Parent Consent Form

St. John Fisher College
PARENTAL PERMISSION FORM



Study Title: **Classroom Weblogs and Wikis and How they Generate Conversations about Literature with Fifth Grade Students**

Faculty Supervisor: **Martha Murray**

Researcher/Investigator: **Amy Fitzsimmons**
Phone for further information: **585-313-8707**

The purpose of this study is to investigate effects of a classroom wiki with reader's blogs on students' opinions of blogs and their relation to peer interaction/discussions around literature.

This study has been approved by St. John Fisher College.

Place of study: **Suburban School in Upstate NY**

Length of participation: **two days (Student Questionnaire and Classroom Discussion Groups)**

Risks and benefits: This study presents no risks to your child. The benefits are opportunity for improved teaching.

Your child's name and the location of the research will be changed in order to protect your child's anonymity. All data will be kept in a locked location and accessible only to the researcher. The findings from this study will be shared with other professionals at the St. John Fisher College Capstone Presentation conference.

Your rights: As the parent/guardian of a research participant, you have the right to;

5. Have the purpose of the study, and the expected risks and benefits fully explained to you before you choose to allow your minor child to participate.
6. Withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.
7. Refuse to answer a particular question with penalty.
8. Be informed of the results of the study.

I, the parent of guardian of _____, minor _____ years of age, consent of his/her participation in the above-named study. I have received a copy of this form.

Print name (Participant Parent)

Signature

Date

Print name (Investigator)

Signature

Date

If you have any further questions regarding this study please contact the researcher listed above. If you experience emotional or physical discomfort due to participation in this study, please contact the Office of Academic Affairs at 385-8034 or the Wellness Center at 385-8280 for appropriate referrals.

Appendix C Student Questionnaire

Writing and Technology

What did you like best about our classroom wiki?

A large rectangular area that has been completely redacted with a solid black fill, obscuring the student's response to the question about what they liked best about the classroom wiki.

What did you like best about the reader's blogs?

A large rectangular area that has been completely redacted with a solid black fill, obscuring the student's response to the question about what they liked best about the reader's blogs.

What did you NOT like about our classroom wiki?

A large rectangular area that has been completely redacted with a solid black fill, obscuring the student's response to the question about what they did not like about the classroom wiki.

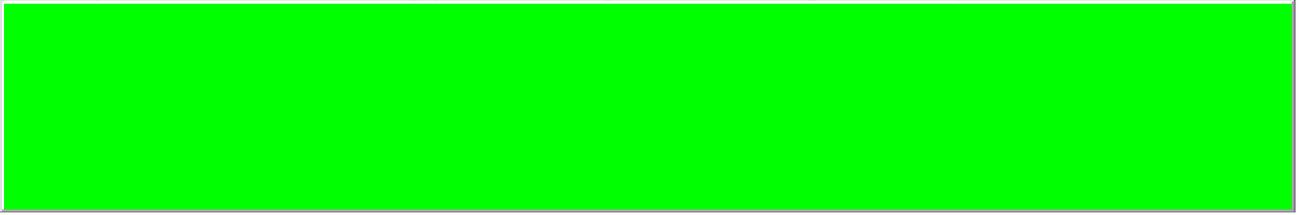
What did you NOT like about the reader's blogs?

A large rectangular area that has been completely redacted with a solid black fill, obscuring the student's response to the question about what they did not like about the reader's blogs.

Have you ever blogged for personal reasons from home or outside of school? If so, please explain.

A large rectangular area that has been completely redacted with a solid black fill, obscuring the student's response to the question about whether they have ever blogged for personal reasons from home or outside of school.

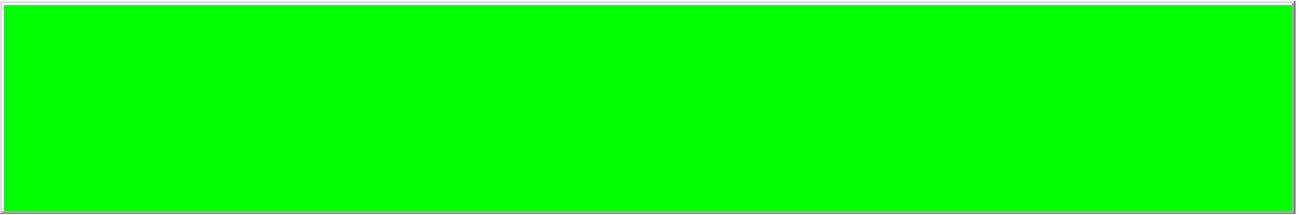
Would you ever consider starting your own blog? If so, what topics would you write about?

A large rectangular area that has been redacted with a solid black fill, obscuring any text that might have been present.

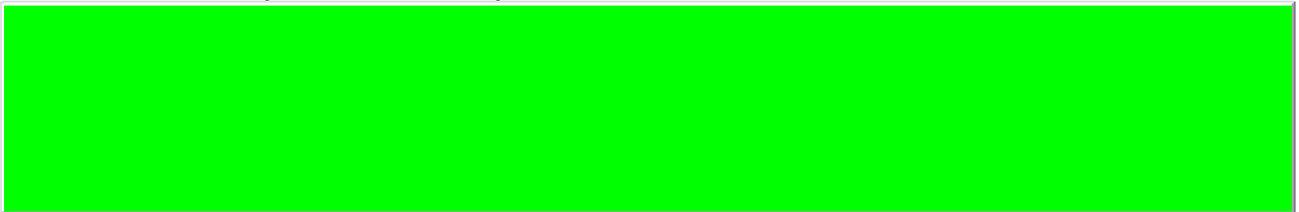
What advice do you have for next year's students relating to the classroom wiki?

A large rectangular area that has been redacted with a solid black fill, obscuring any text that might have been present.

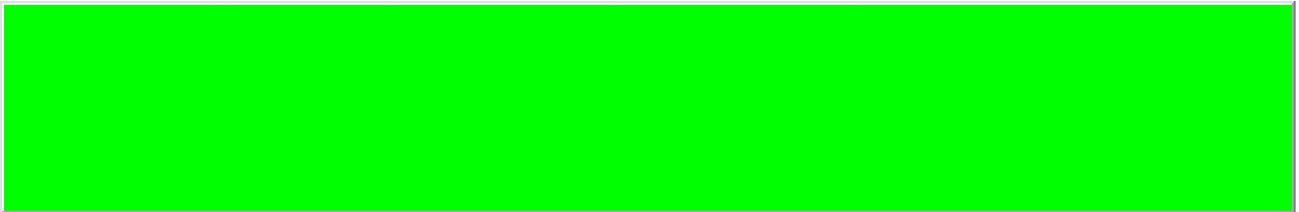
What advice do you have for next year's students regarding the reader's blogs?

A large rectangular area that has been redacted with a solid black fill, obscuring any text that might have been present.

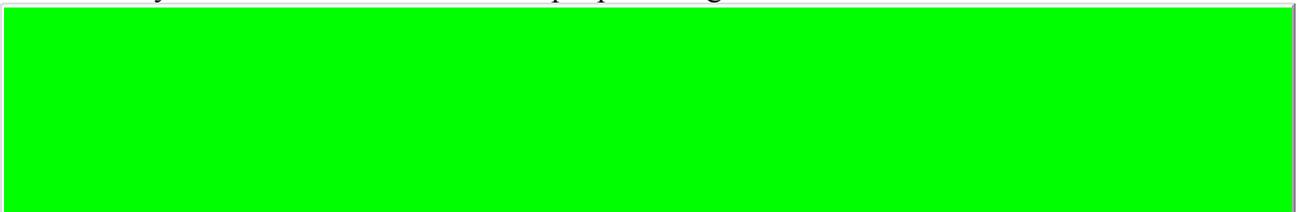
What other ideas do you have for next year's classroom wiki?

A large rectangular area that has been redacted with a solid black fill, obscuring any text that might have been present.

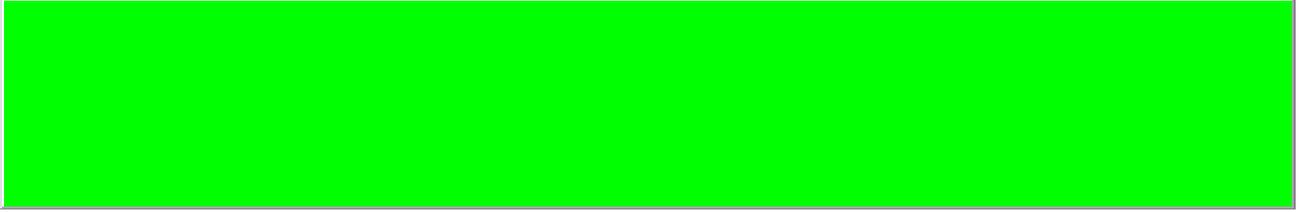
What ideas or suggestions do you have for next year's reader's blogs?

A large rectangular area that has been redacted with a solid black fill, obscuring any text that might have been present.

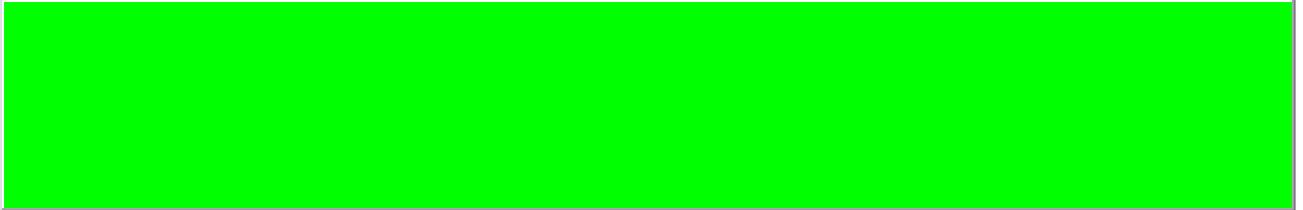
What made you want to comment on other people's blogs?

A large rectangular area that has been redacted with a solid black fill, obscuring any text that might have been present.

What did you like about interacting with other about your reading?

A large rectangular area that has been redacted with a solid black fill, obscuring any text or images that were originally present.

What did you NOT like about interacting with other people about your reading?

A large rectangular area that has been redacted with a solid black fill, obscuring any text or images that were originally present.

Appendix D Sample from Student Reader's Blog

Dear Miss
Fitzsimmons,

Title	The Cay
Author	Theodore Taylor
Genre	Historical Fiction/Survival/Adventure

Summary- (I will continue where I left off from my last reader's blog of what's going on) The class is done read book. I think everyone can learn a "hidden message" from this book. That would be that you can find true friend even in a hardship. Anyway, since my last blog, a frightening storm struck the little island they are currently (I'm) surviving on. Timothy did everything in his power to protect his young companion, Philip. That resulted in a sad Timothy finally couldn't take it and went asleep for good. After all that Timothy had done for Philip, it had to end that? You never know with these stories! Philip learned to survive with only a cat, and the little resources they had food, shelter, and water. One day, Philip hears (Not see's, remember, he's blind now) a plane just above the island sends up a fire then the smoke goes up so they can see it. They fly away. All hope is lost for Philip. Then, a few days later, he sees a schooner in the distance. Could it be, or is he just going mad like poor old Tim? No, he hears it must be! He calls out. Then, he gets rescued! He reunites with his mother and all is well. His sight returns after operations! Now, let's get to the rest of my blog!

My favorite character is Philip! (Not a big selection, right?!) He is brave and not afraid to let his emotions loose. I think that shows that he is brave even more. He is also brave because he climbs up a palm tree to retrieve coconuts and he goes into a natural watering hole!

Questions I Still Think Needed to be Explained in this book:

1. Why did the author choose those certain names? Did they have a certain significance to them?
2. Was Stew Cat ever given back to the cook aboard *The Hato*.
3. Did Philip ever see the island again? If so, when?

Signed, Hayley

Appendix E Sample from Discussion Pages



Michael Ramirez said

at 9:25 pm on May 27, 2010

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)

I think it's suprising how Incas were amazing architects and they only had rough tools.



Mariah Bender said

at 4:13 pm on May 28, 2010

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)

About the guinea pigs, it's that they're accustomed to it like the Korean, and dogs: or us with pigs, and cows.



Rose Gilbert said

at 4:39 pm on May 31, 2010

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)

That's really cool Mariah!



Eli Hess said

at 7:31 pm on May 31, 2010

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)

yeah, i also learned that in some of those eastern countries that they eat dogs that they rais as pets ewwwwwwwww! All I know is that I am not bringing my dog to asia.



Miss Fitzsimmons said

at 8:32 pm on May 31, 2010

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)

If guinea pigs are "helpless," aren't the cows, pigs, chickens, goats, lambs, turkey that people in society eat "helpless" too?



Adam Greenstein said

at 3:30 pm on Jun 1, 2010

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)

Yeah, I think so, because we eat them. At my house, we have some kind of steak, chicken, sausage, or hot dogs like 3-4 days a week!



Lindsay Rockoff said

at 4:00 pm on Jun 1, 2010

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)

I do think that all animals are helpless if we eat them. Because maybe in a few hundred years, people will think eating cows pigs, chicken, goats lambs, and turkeys is extremely weird. the we should re-think that!! Also, I don't get why they burn every clothing the Emperor wears. That gives more work to the people that work for him! DOes anyone feel the same way?!



Lindsay Rockoff said

at 4:04 pm on Jun 1, 2010

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)

i feel this website will answer lots of ur questions!!!



Kiana Lougie said

at 4:30 pm on Jun 1, 2010

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)

do you know a name of one of the Mayan tribes? I do