

6TH GRADE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF
THE USE OF BLOGS IN AN ENGLISH CLASS

A MASTER'S THESIS

by

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THE PROGRAM OF CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION
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DEDICATION

*To my inspirations: Sarah Naz, Noah Tan, and Arzu. Together we are the circle of
love, the circle of happiness.*

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of

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by

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GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
THESIS TITLE: 6TH GRADE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE
USE OF BLOGS IN AN ENGLISH CLASS

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ABSTRACT

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This study uses mixed-methods research to investigate how a grade 6 English class in Turkey responds to the use of blogs. It explored students' perceptions of and attitudes towards using a class, community, and student blogs, both overall as well as in relation to their application to learning, writing, and the social aspects of a utilizing blogging. Additionally, key features of blogs and the teacher's insights into the challenges and strengths of blogging as a teaching strategy were examined. The participants were 38 grade six Turkish-national students at a private, English-language-medium school in Ankara, Turkey, who utilized blogging as part of their learning activities during a 10-week period in 2011. Prior to, during, and after the blogging activity, surveys, semi-structured focus groups and semi-structured interviews were conducted. Analysis of the data revealed that students had very favorable attitudes towards and perceptions of blogging as an educational practice.

Students were nearly unanimous in their general favorability towards blogs, though community blogs were less favored.

Key Words: blog, attitudes, perceptions, mixed method

ÖZET

6. SINIF ÖĞRENCİLERİNİN İNGİLİZCE DERSİNDE AĞ GÜNCEİ (BLOG) KULLANIMI İLE İLGİLİ ALGILARI

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Bu çalışma karma yöntemden (mixed-methods) yararlanarak Türkiye'de 6. sınıf öğrencilerinin İngilizce dersinde ağ güncesi (blog) kullanımı ile ilgili algılarını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Bu çalışma öğrencilerin sınıf, topluluk, ve öğrenci bloglarına karşı olan algı ve tutumlarını bir bütün olarak ve aynı zamanda öğrenmeye, yazmaya ve kullanılan bir ağ güncesinin sosyal boyutuna yönelik uygulamalarını araştırmıştır. Buna ek olarak, ağ güncesinin temel özellikleri, ve öğretmenin bir öğretim stratejisi olarak ağ güncesi kullanımının zorlukları ve olumlu yönleri hakkındaki görüşleri incelenmiştir. Bu çalışmanın katılımcılarını Ankara'da eğitim dili İngilizce olan bir özel okulun 6. sınıfında öğrenim gören ve 10 haftalık bir süreç boyunca öğrenme etkinliklerinde ağ güncesi kullanan 38 öğrenci oluşturmaktadır.. Ağ güncesi kullanımı aktiviteleri

öncesinde, kullanım sürecinde ve sonrasında anketler, yarı yapılandırılmış odak grup mülakatları ve yarı yapılandırılmış bireysel mülakatlar uygulanmıştır. İncelenen veriler, öğrencilerin bir eğitim uygulaması olarak ağ güncesi kullanımına karşı çok olumlu tutum ve algılarının olduğunu göstermiştir. Öğrencilerin hemen hemen hepsinin ağ güncesi kullanımına olumlu tepki vermiş olmalarına rağmen, topluluk güncesi kullanımını daha az tercih etmişlerdir.

Anahtar kelimeler: ağ güncesi, tutumlar, algılar, mixed methods

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 15 years of teaching, it has always amazed me how much enthusiasm most of my student have demonstrated at the suggestion that a lesson was going to take place in the computer lab. Even the seemingly tedious act of typing an essay has somehow been perceived in a positive light. The apparent motivational magic of digital technology that I have experienced anecdotally was brought to a new level more recently when a casual discussion with a colleague about teaching methodology turned to blogs. He had been productively using a class blog and student blogs in his high school English classes for two years and extolled their virtues. I took a peek at these blogs and was impressed with the apparent learning, high level of peer interaction, and heightened sense of audience. *What exactly is blogging? What would it look like in the middle school context? Would it help my students?* were some key questions we discussed. This excogitation and subsequent closer investigation into edublogging (and eventual use) led to this thesis.

Background

Blogging is a relatively new phenomenon but is already a very popular feature of the internet. Winn (2009) reported for the blog indexer Technorati.com that, according to Universal McCann, 184 million people world-wide have started a blog. Blogging's popularity is due to several attributes including the ability of bloggers to speak their mind on an area of interest, connect to like-minded people, to share experiences and expertise, and to make money (Sobel, 2010).

Educators have drafted in this new media. As of November 11, 2010, Edublogs.org, a popular blogging site for educators, posted that on its site there were 643,161 bloggers (Edublogs, 2010). The attributes educators find most appealing though are somewhat different than those bloggers in general value. Blogs are useful as a place for publishing (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004), ability to reflect (Ray, Hocutt & Patterson, 2005; Deng & Yuen, 2011), improved interaction (Liang, & Bonk, 2009; Felix, 2008; Kuzu, 2007), increased motivation (Frye, Trathen & Koppenhaver, 2010), support cooperative learning (Wang & Fang, 2005), and foster a sense of community (Halic, Lee, Paulus & Spence, 2010; Zhang, 2010). These attributes may be important to some teachers at all levels of education, though different levels will find some attributes more significant. For example, for university students who may otherwise only see each other occasionally in a large lecture hall, asynchronous possibility of blogging may be both convenient and help students meet each other (Kuzu, 2007). Conversely, in high school, the world-wide audience may enable students' writing to be read and commented on by an expert audience thousands of kilometers away, as evident by a web-based activity by Bos (1997); in elementary school, a blog may be beneficial in finding authentic audiences for students from parents, to friends (Zawilinski, 2009; Frye, Trathen & Koppenhaver, 2010).

Problem

Blogging may serve a unique role in the typical middle school (i.e. grades 6 to 8) context because middle-schoolers themselves and a middle school as an institution are distinct. Middle-schoolers are unique socially, developmentally, cognitively and physically. Walking through the hallways of the elementary, middle and high divisions of Bilkent Laboratory and International School (BLIS), it is evident that the

middle school is distinct from the others in its culture, climate, structure and functions. Contrasting the schedules of 5th graders at BLIS's elementary school and 6th graders at BLIS's middle school demonstrates significant structural differences in the two divisions. The elementary students typically spend eight of 10 daily periods in one particular classroom with their generalist classroom teachers, while the middle school students usually spend at most two of ten daily periods in any particular classroom with any particular subject-specialist teacher. Culturally, it is common to see groups of middle schoolers playing sports or some other kinesthetic activity while the high schoolers typically "hang out".

Wolpert (2009) commented about middle schoolers:

What's so great about them, after all? Well, I've always said that Middle schoolers are ready to talk and ponder about the big issues, yet still yell, 'Crayons!' when the blessed colored wax sticks appear on their desk. Teaching middle schoolers is like working with a herd of wild fillies. You have to rein 'em in and give them slack, rein 'em in and give them slack. It's harder to find a sub in middle schools than in any other grade level. Why? Because they're crazy. And I love 'em.

The above expression of the apparent inner incongruity of middle schoolers can be also be addressed anecdotally at BLIS. The same students will articulately and passionately debate whether dictatorship, communism, or democracy is the ideal political system for their utopia and suddenly request that they be allowed to run around outside during lesson time because the unusual and apparently joyous event of hailing has just began outside.

There is a dearth of literature about blogging in the middle school context. Dozens of studies have been done about the use of blogging in universities (Armstrong & Retterer, 2008; Churchill, 2009; Colombo, Dossena, Balzarotti & Spadola, 2010; Ellison & Wu, 2008; Georgescu, 2010; Goh, Quek & Lee, 2010; Hsu & Wang, 2009; Sim, & Hew, 2010; Liang & Bonk, 2009; Montero-Fleta & Perez-Sabater, 2010; Shahsavar & Tan, 2010; Sun, 2010; Wang & Fang, 2005), some in K-12 grades unspecified (Ray, Hocutt & Patterson, 2005), and elementary (Zawilinski, 2009; Frye, Trathen & Koppenhaver, 2010). From these studies relevant data about blogging have been gathered but cannot be simply transferred to the unique middle school context. The literature on blogging in the middle school context is limited, focusing on practice (Mullen & Wedwick, 2008; Witte, 2007), being part of a larger study (Lansiquot, Rosalia & Howell, 2009) or investigating HyperStudio, a related Web 2.0 media (Garthwait, 2006). Clearly, more needs to be learned about how blogging applies to the middle school learning environment.

Purpose

The main purpose of this mixed methods study is to find out how a middle school grade 6 English class in a private school in Turkey responds to the use of blogs. To this end, the study aims to

- identify the features of blogs
- explore student perceptions and attitudes (in terms of anxiety, desirability, self-efficacy) of using a class blog, a community blog and a student blog
- look into how students perceive their learning and writing skills as supported by the use of blogging as an instructional strategy

- inquire into how students perceive social aspects of a blogging-enhanced teaching-learning environment
- reflect on challenges and opportunities a teacher may face when employing blogging as an instructional strategy

Research questions

This study will address the following questions:

Main question:

How do students respond to the use of blogs in a middle school grade 6 English class in a private school in Turkey?

Subquestions:

1. How are the features of blogs used and how are they perceived by the researcher in a blended learning environment?
2. What are students' attitudes towards and perceptions of using a class blog, a community blog and student blog?
3. How do students perceive learning as supported by the use of blogging as an instructional strategy?
4. How do students perceive their writing skills as supported by the use of blogging as an instructional strategy?
5. How do students perceive social aspects of a blogging-enhanced teaching-learning environment?
6. What challenges and opportunities does a teacher face when employing blogging as an instructional strategy?

Significance

Middle school teachers and English teachers in particular may benefit from reading about the features of blogs, the features' implications to the learning environment, and perceptions of students and teachers on how blogging has impacted the learning environment. The educators who may have a particular interest in using blogs in their practice are those who may consider new technology because they find something intrinsically important in blogs (Lai & Chen, 2010), believe new media may be beneficial or even their duty to teach students new digital literacies (Brown et al., 2010; Johnson, Smith, Levine, & Haywood, 2010).

In addition to the above, the last group of educators who may be interested in blogging adhere to a controversial view of how today's youth interact with technology and this interaction's consequences. The debate is over whether today's youth are actually different than preceding generations due to their interaction with modern technology. Theorists including Prensky (2001) and Dede (2005) have argued that the current generation's relationship to technology is quite profound. They have contended that those in the present generation (Neomillennials, Cyberkids or Digital Natives) differ from their predecessors not only because they interact differently with modern technologies such as the internet, mobile technologies, and computer games, but that this interaction has actually changed them, made them fundamentally different cognitively and socially. Dede has argued that a Neomillennial possesses "[f]luency in multiple media, [and] values each for the types of communication, activities, experiences, and expressions it empowers. Learning is based on collectively seeking, sieving, and synthesizing experiences rather than individually locating and absorbing information from some single best source; prefers communal learning in

diverse, tacit, situated experiences; values knowledge distributed across a community and a context, as well as within an individual” (2005, p. 15). Others (Facer & Furlong, 2001; Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008; Margaryan, Littlejohn, & Vojt, 2011) have disagreed, arguing among other points, that this generation is not homogeneous and that empirical evidence is needed to support their claims. Nonetheless, the perspective that this generation is different in its interaction with technology appears to have found mainstream appeal, with a recent internet search finding 24 million hits for the phrase 'Digital Native'. For the digital immigrant and digital native teachers who agree that this generation is different, understanding the new educational technology of blogging, its application and teachers’ and students’ perceptions of it in a middle school context is useful.

Definition of key terms

There are several definitions for the term “blog”. Merriam-Webster.com (2010) sees a **blog** as “a web site that contains an online personal journal with reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks provided by the writer; *also*: the contents of such a site”. The site Marketing Terms.com (2010) defines blogs “as a mixture of what is happening in a person's life and what is happening on the Web, a kind of hybrid diary/guide site, although there are as many unique types of blogs as there are people”. Winer (2003) defines a blog (using the term weblog) as “a hierarchy of text, images, media objects and data, arranged chronologically, that can be viewed in an HTML browser. There's a little more to say. The center of the hierarchy, in some sense, is a sequence of weblog ‘posts’... that forms the index of the weblog, that link to all the content in sequence”.

Anderson (2007) observed that the

posting and commenting process contributes to the nature of blogging in what Yale University law professor, Yochai Benkler, calls a ‘weighted conversation’ between a primary author and a group of secondary comment contributors, who communicate to an unlimited number of readers. It also contributes to blogging's sense of immediacy, since ‘blogs enable individuals to write to their Web pages in journalism time –that is hourly, daily, weekly – whereas the Web page culture that preceded it tended to be slower moving: less an equivalent of reportage than of the essay’ (Benkler, 2006, p. 217).

With the above definitions in mind, this study has refined the definition of blog by placing it in an educational context. Thus, a blog in an educational context can be defined as a web application where content is mostly composed of posts by a primary author and secondary comment-contributors who communicate to an audience. The audience is usually composed of participants of a particular course, though potentially they can be anyone with internet access. Posts are a sequence of reverse-chronologically ordered assignments, reflections and comments, often including hyperlinks or media such as photos or video.

A class will usually have either a class blog or a community blog. A **class blog** is one in which the teacher leads by posting questions and determining activities that the students will complete and post, while in a **community blog** students are also involved in leading the blog. Rarely do teachers employ **student blogs** without a class or community blog acting as a hub for the class and as such student blogs are usually found linked to the class or community blog. A **student blog** is the student’s virtual space where he/she can choose the design, themes, widgets and other optional items. Although students often post in their student blogs in response to the teacher’s prompt, their blog usually reflects their individuality and often functions as an e-portfolio.

The definitions of **blended learning** have been examined by White and Geer (2010) and they have found that at its simplest it combines face-to-face and online learning. However, they also recognize other definitions, citing Thorne (2003, cited in Akkoyunlu & Soylu, 2008, p. 184) who “explained it as 'a way of meeting challenges of tailoring learning and development to the needs of individuals by integrating innovative and technological advances'. Further, Dziuban, Hartman & Moskal (2004) recommended that it 'should be viewed as a pedagogical approach that combines the effectiveness and socialization opportunities of the classroom with technologically enhanced active learning opportunities' (p. 3.)” (p. 570).

Blog features include **hyperlink**, text that when clicked on sends the user to another web page, often indicated by underlined, blue-colored text; **blogroll**, a link on a blog's sidebar used to provide easy access to frequently accessed sites; **widget**, image/text on a blog's sidebar which has little, frequently updated operations or links; and **banner**, also called banner image, a photo at the top of a webpage that is meant to catch the interest of the reader.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As a relatively new instructional methodology, blogging's pedagogical potential requires investigation. Though there is a growing number of studies on the use of blogs in higher education, little is known about their usage in the middle-school context in general and in a middle school English class in particular. This study intends to identify the features of blogs, reflect on the challenges and opportunities a teacher may face when employing blogging as an instructional strategy, and explore student perceptions and attitudes of using a class blog, a community blog and students blogs in a grade 6 English class.

This study is organized around a framework that reflects the literature on the use of blogging in education in relation to the variables of this study. The framework thus is structured around the following: understanding the key features of blogs, types of educational blogs (class blog, student blog, community blog), the potential educational benefits of blogging, blogging's perceived role in writing, students' attitudes toward blogging, social aspects related to blogging—especially sense of community—and perceived learning through blogging (Figure 1).

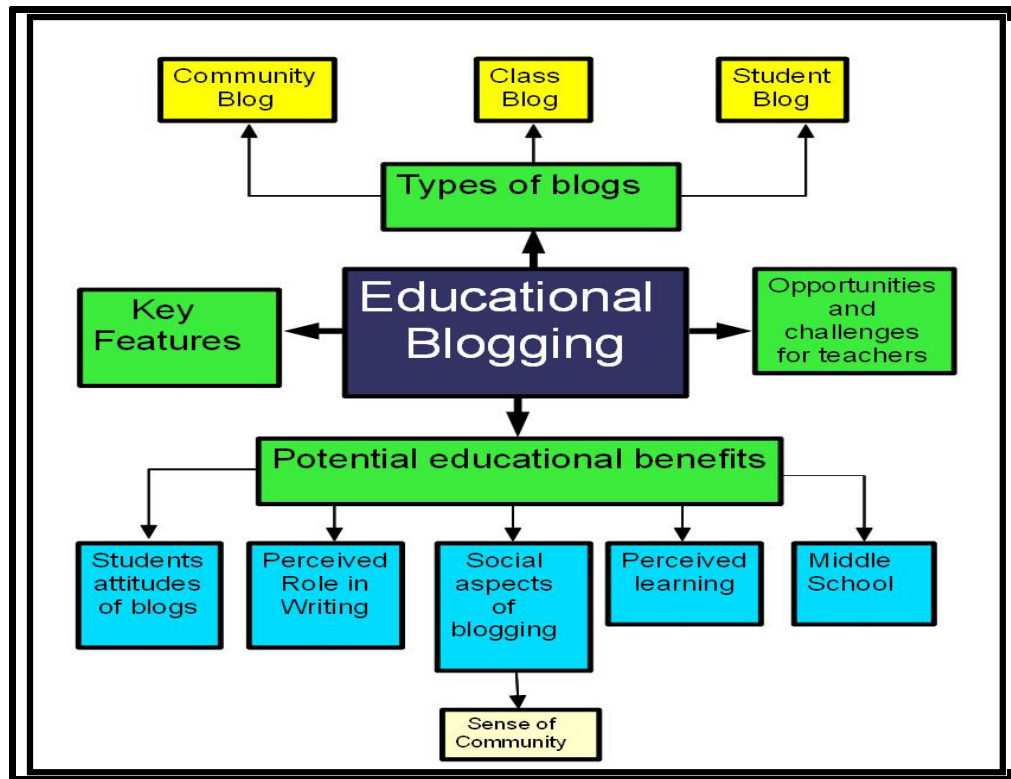


Figure 1. Study's framework

Key features of blogs

A blog in an educational context can be defined as a web application where content is mostly composed of posts by a primary author and secondary comment-contributors who communicate to an audience. The audience is usually composed of participants of a particular course, though potentially they can be anyone with internet access. Posts are a sequence of reverse-chronologically ordered assignments, reflections and comments, often including hyperlinks or media such as photos or video. In their article, Deng and Yuen (2011) showed what a blog typically looks like (Figure 2).

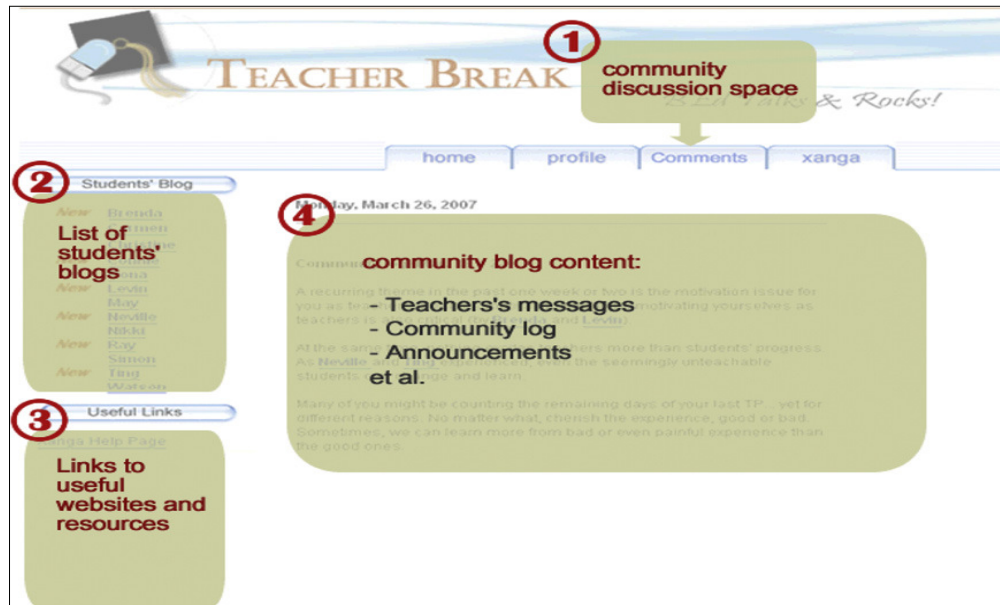


Figure 2. Visually identified key features of a community blog (Deng & Yuen, 2011, p. 445)

As in many media adopted by educators, blogs began outside the realm of education. According to Blood (2000), in 1997 there were just a handful of what were then unnamed types of web sites which we now call blogs. In 1999, these were coined “weblogs” by John Barger and subsequently renamed as “blog” by Peter Merholtz in a post with little fanfare at the time. In a little sidebar entitled “For what it’s Worth,” the now oft-used term “blog” was born: “I’ve decided to pronounce the word ‘weblog’ as wee'- blog. Or ‘blog’ for short” (Merholtz, 2000).

The popularity of blogs as an educational application has grown for a myriad of reasons but chief among them could be that “the flexible, hybrid nature of the blog format means that it can express a wide range of genres, in accordance with the communicative needs of its users” (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus & Wright, 2004, p. 38). On the other hand, Goh, Quek and Lee (2010) focus on key features to explain the

rising popularity of blogs: “Weblogs (or blogs) are perhaps the most popular of the Web 2.0 applications, mainly because their collaboration supporting features where users (or bloggers) are allowed to share their opinions, experiences and even media-rich files with others in the virtual world” (p.91).

According to “The use of weblogs in higher education settings: A review of empirical research” by Sim and Hew (2010), blogs have usually been adopted in the university setting for having the following features:

(a) individual ownership, (b) hyperlinked post structure, (c) updates displayed in reverse chronological order, and (d) archival of postings.

Individual ownership. Bartlett-Bragg (2003) suggested that individual ownership is one of the most important features of blogs. In essence, the individual owns the blog. The individual is responsible for the blog, both in terms of publishing the blog content, moderating the contents in the comments provided by readers, deciding the rights of the readers (for example, the rights to read his blog as well as to post comments), and customizing the look and feel of the blog (Baggetun & Wasson, 2006; Downes, 2004).

Hyperlinked post structure. Blog technology allows an individual to create hypertext links to reference materials outside the individual’s site. Given the highly individualized nature of blogs, the selection of links would therefore be at the discretion of the blogger, who may link to reference materials anywhere on the web; or for that matter, choose not to link (Herring et al., 2005). Pacquet (2002) proposed that the presence of links may be taken as one of the distinguishing feature of blogs as opposed to online diaries.

Updates displayed in reverse chronological order. A typical blog captures the latest posting at the top of the page. Older posts (hence older contents) appear further down the latest post. Such a reverse chronological order of displays in the updates is another feature of blogs. This systematic reverse chronological display of the postings allows the individuals to access his latest posting immediately when he logs on to his blog.

Archival of postings. Blogs provide for the auto-archiving of older posts. Newer posts are reflected on the top of the blog. This also means that theoretically over time, the blog will grow indeterminately. In practice, this is not so as the system only captures a certain fixed number of recent posts on the site and that older posts are no longer shown. Older posts are archived and may be accessed elsewhere on the site by default via a permanent hyperlink or permalink (Pacquet, 2002). (p. 152)

Herring, Scheidt, Bonus and Wright (2004) pointed out that “technological changes, even incremental ones, can have wider consequences. One of those consequences, in the case of weblogs, is the potential to reshape the genre ecology of the Internet” (p. 38). Kim (2008) held that blogs have the potential to overcome some deficiencies in traditional computer-mediated communication (CMC) applications in the areas of management of communication, lurking, ownership, anxiety, instructor-centered system, archiving. Lai and Chen, (2010) found eight significant influences on teachers' blog adoption: perceived enjoyment, codification effort, compatibility, perceived ease of use, personal innovativeness, enjoyment in helping others, school support and perceived usefulness, ranked by relative importance.

A blog usually contains the following:

- Post Date — date and time the post was published
- Category —category the post is labeled with (can be one or more)
- Title — main title of the post
- Body — main content of the post
- Trackback — links back from other sites
- Comments — comments added by readers
- Permalink — the URL of the full, individual article
- Footer — usually at the bottom of the post, often showing post date/time, author, category, and stats such as number of reads, comments or trackbacks. (Duffy & Bruns, 2006, p. 33)

Johnson, Smith, Levine, and Haywood (2010) articulated an emerging view of the modern class(room). “The way we think of learning environments is changing. Traditionally, a learning environment has been a physical space, but the idea of what constitutes a learning environment is changing. The “spaces” where students learn are becoming more community-driven, interdisciplinary, and supported by technologies

that engage virtual communication and collaboration. This changing concept of the learning environment has clear implications for schools” (p. 4). The new concept of a learning environment includes a fair number of internet-based applications that have already been adopted by educators, including blogs, wikis, social networking sites such as Facebook, video-sharing sites such as Youtube, Podcasts, RSS feeds, e-portfolios and course management systems such as Blackboard and Moodle. Duffy and Bruns (2006) address a frequent misunderstanding of those who have experience with discussion forums but not blogs:

A commonly asked question relates to the difference between blogs and discussion fora. While similar in some respects, however, there remain substantial differences in user experience in both spaces. Discussion fora are predominantly shared community spaces in which individual voices may make themselves heard but are afforded no specific space of their own. First and foremost, blogs provide a platform for individual expression and also support reader commentary, critique, and interlinkage as subsequent steps. In other words, blogs foreground the individual, while discussion fora foreground the group. The suggestion here is that this makes blogs the more useful tool, especially in cases where there is no strong sense of group belonging or loyalty, or there is a lack of group turn-taking and communication skills. An example of this could be large classes or at early stages of students’ semesters and/or degrees. (p. 34)

Types of educational blogs

There are different approaches to blogging in the educational context, including tutor blog, teacher blogs, student blogs, community blogs, class blogs, and blogfolios.

Class blog

A class blog is one in which the teacher has overall responsibility for the blog and leads through authoring a post to which students respond. Georgescu (2010) stated that the “[c]lass [b]log is the result of the collaborative work of all the students in a class” (p. 188), although the teacher’s leading role may make this comment more

appropriate for a community blog. Hall (2004) gave some suggestions about class blog usage that would apply to an English class:

- post class-related information such as calendars, events, homework assignments and other pertinent class information.
- post assignments based on literature readings and have students respond on their own weblogs, creating a kind of portfolio of their work.
- communicate with parents if you are teaching elementary school students.
- post prompts for writing.
- provide examples of classwork, vocabulary activities, or grammar games.
- provide online readings for your students to read and react to.
- gather and organize Internet resources for a specific course, providing links to appropriate sites and annotating the links as to what is relevant about them.
- post photos and comment on class activities.
- invite student comments or postings on issues in order to give them a writing voice.
- publish examples of good student writing done in class.
- showcase student art, poetry, and creative stories.
- create a dynamic teaching site, posting not only class-related information, but also activities, discussion topics, links to additional information about topics they are studying in class, and readings to inspire learning.
- create a literature circle.
- create an online book club.
- make use of the commenting feature to have students publish messages on topics being used to develop language skills.
- ask students to create their own individual course blogs, where they can post their own ideas, reactions and written work.
- post tasks to carry out project-based learning tasks with students.
- build a class newsletter, using student-written articles and photos they take.
- link your class with another class somewhere else in the world.

Student blog

In a student blog the student controls most design features such as the blog's themes thereby giving him/her a sense of ownership and empowerment. Also, the student authors mostly initiate posts to which the teacher and other students respond. The

journalistic nature of blogs makes some student blogs quite diary-like where they share what comes to their heart or mind. Conversely, student blogs often reflect the reality that they are driven by being required coursework, resulting in student blog owners' posts consisting of assignments prompted by the teacher. Additionally, student blogs sometimes form blogfolios or e-portfolios. Hall (2004) gave some suggestions about student-blog usage that would be relevant for an English class:

- learn how to blog
- complete class writing assignments.
- create an ongoing portfolio of samples of their writing.
- express their opinions on topics you are studying in class.
- write comments, opinions, or questions on daily news items or issues of interest.
- discuss activities they did in class and tell what they think about them
- write about class topics, using newly-learned vocabulary words and idioms.
- showcase their best writing pieces.

Churchill (2009, p.180) listed the blog-related activities that were taking place in a course that used a class blog and student blogs (Table 1).

Table 1

Blog-related Activities That Were taking Place in the Class

<i>Relation-ship</i>	<i>Activity</i>
Facilitator and his/her blog	Provide course home page <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Link student blogs in the home page • Post ‘after class’ reflections and summaries of major issues for students to read and comment on • Post announcements to the class • Address any emerging issues and learning needs • Invite and encourage students to provide comments • Monitor comments and provide responses • Distribute notes, slides and other material used in the class • Provide any additional resources • Negotiate issues such as what students want to learn and assessment criteria for their assignments • Set datelines and describe tasks for students
Facilitator and student blogs	Regularly monitor student blogs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide feedback on student work • Encourage students to contribute • Provide individual students with resources
Students and their blogs	Present completed tasks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect on learning • Share ideas • Provide information and resources that they find interesting • Monitor comments and respond to them
Students and blogs of others	Visit blogs of other students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide comments and recommend resources
Students and blog of the facilitator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read and reflect on posts provided by the facilitator • Access resources • Provide and monitor comments on the facilitator’s posts

Community blog

A community blog is similar to a class blog except that students as well as the teacher take the lead in authoring posts for others to comment on. Giving students this role has important implications according to Maor (2008) in her analysis of discussion groups rather than community blogs:

[Studies] suggest that students from online communities tend to learn more from information added by their peers than from the teacher.... According to Ikpeze, (2007), involving group members in rotational leadership style helps them to become a more cohesive team and each person’s individual contribution is accounted for. Heckman & Annabi

(2006) see the role of the teacher as “developing thoughtful and stimulating questions and raising issues that generate active participation” (p. 143). (p. 2959)

A community blog relinquishes some of the teacher’s power over to students which may disturb some teachers, however, Maor’s study found great potential in doing so:

Her results

found that the discussion leader’s role enabled and promoted interactions [which] created a greater commitment among the community members.... The role of discussion leader prompted empowerment and active learning, which were two goals intended in creating this unit. This also changed the role of the teacher of this unit to a cofacilitator and co-learner.... the discussion leaders fulfilled most of the facilitation roles and the leadership experience provided them with the opportunity to be highly interactive, reflective and understand the new relationship between the online teacher as a facilitator and the learners in the changing learning landscape....the lecturer scaffolded the learners into reflection and interaction and guided them to immerse themselves in the online experience. (p. 2962)

On the other hand, another study (Deng &Yuen, 2011) found mixed success from the use of community blogs:

Although the social facilities of blogs were highly valued, the scope and the depth of interaction remained limited. It seemed that blogs enabled ample opportunities for social connectivity, but only a limited degree of social interactivity in a many-to-many fashion. This study has indicated that blogs are primarily a tool for personal broadcasting and reaching, but the potential of blogs for supporting extensive and dynamic dialogues within a learning community remains questionable. Blogs seem to be better suited for enhancing social presence and the socio-emotional dimension of a learning community. They can fit in a niche between formal assignments and casual communications or private journals, thereby offering the student teachers another avenue for expressing themselves and sharing with their fellow classmates. (p. 442)

Armstrong and Retterer (2008) addressed some of the issues involved in choosing between blog types:

In creating the blog for this class we were cognizant of the fact that blogging as a class assignment was quite different than maintaining personal blogs; it would be an imposed communication environment. We weighed the merits of using a class blog in its most familiar manifestation: as an online class journal. Journal writing is a familiar tool in the classroom and can be very effective. However, we rejected this format because journal entries can simply be laundry lists that lack any type of reflection on the part of the students. In addition, students might be hesitant to provide reflective and revealing commentaries so early in the semester before getting to know (and trust) their peers and instructor. Ultimately, we decided that it would be most beneficial to have students participate in two different blogs: a community blog and a [student] blog, with each serving very different functions. Students posted their more formal writing assignments in their [student] blogs. This would serve as an e-portfolio during the semester, and students could look back on earlier postings/essays. The community blog would be a discussion board at the start of the semester and the students would post commentaries about a variety of topics and to which the other students would respond. (p. 235)

The potential educational benefits of blogging

There are many potential educational benefits of blogging. However, for the purposes of this thesis, five areas have been identified as most relevant. The first relevant area is middle school, as the study will take place in this type of school. The second area is perceptions of writing, as the study will take place in an English class. Writing has been chosen because it was seen as most closely linked to blogging. The other English skills (reading, speaking, listening) may be worthy of investigation, however during this study their class instruction will mostly be addressed in non-blogging activities while the majority of writing activities will be blog-related. The third area, attitude, the fourth area, perceptions of learning, and the fifth area, perceptions of social aspects, are addressed because the literature recognizes them as key elements in the use of blogging in an educational context.

Blogging in the middle school

Unfortunately, there is little literature about blogging in the middle school context. Witte (2007) utilized blogs in the middle school context and the experience was showing promise. Unfortunately, when a student posted the location of his/her neighborhood, an administrator abruptly halted the project over security issues, leaving students dismayed at what they perceived as a gross over-reaction, and the teacher-researcher without adequate data.

The only other study with data from the middle school blogging context is regrettably marked by a lack of reliable quantitative data or detailed qualitative data. Lansiquot, Rosalia and Howell (2009) investigated different approaches and perspectives of educational users of blogging, though only one approach was done in a middle school. In this case a middle school computer teacher used blogs to post students' animations created during class and intended for them to comment on classmates' work, although "the instructor has yet to have the students comment on each others' work because only one technology coach is available for the whole school, but having students interact in their blogging is a future goal" (p. 2855). Even without students commenting, the instructor believed students enjoyed blogging and were excited about viewing each others' work.

Blogging's perceived role in writing

As this thesis takes place in the context of an English class, the impact of the usage of blogs on students' writing is highly relevant, though comparing learning outcomes between different media is extremely difficult. Sim and Hew (2010) posit, "We are hesitant to advocate media comparison studies *per se*. Historically, researchers in

instructional technology have voiced concerns about comparing learning outcomes between different media (e.g., blogs versus no blogs). This is due to the presence of many potential confounding variables which makes the task of pinpointing specific factor or factors that may account for the learning difference difficult, if not impossible” (p. 157). While Sim and Hew (2010) do not specify what the “confounding variables” may be, it would be reasonable to speculate that these could include learning that takes place extramedia, either in non-blogging activities in the class or even in nonclass time. For example, a researcher who attempted to attribute blogging’s influence on sentence length would find it difficult to validate her findings because perhaps the students’ writings’ sentence length had increased (or decreased) due to students’ nonblogging activities. Confounding variable can be found in the following scenarios: Johnny is an aspiring novelist who models his writing on William Faulkner, Julie writes dozens of SMS messages on a daily basis, and Robert broke his hand and finds it hard to type. If the above students were participants in a study measuring blogging's influence on writing, Johnny, Julie, and Robert's nonblogging writing activities would probably be a greater, confounding influence than blogging, the supposed factor being measured. However, even if blogging's influence on writing may not be pinpointed quantitatively, some understanding of its perceived role on writing may be gained. Qualitatively, students' and teachers' perceptions of writing can be explored and analysis of the writing products can be examined.

Armstrong and Retterer (2008) presumed that blogging is a useful technology but wanted to know how useful it was. They examined the use of a blog in an intermediate level Spanish undergraduate class of 16 students and its effect upon

students. The only difference between this class and that of past semesters was that students were writing with blogs. Instructors' reflections on format of blog were included and rationale given for choosing both a community blog and a personal blog. Instructors told students that form was not important for the essay but linguistic competency and risk taking would be. Instructors led the community blog for three weeks, and by the fourth week students led it. Blogs were measured by word length and students completed an anonymous online survey. Results found ungraded assignments on the community blog longer than graded assignments on the personal blog. By the end of the semester, students had written 375 postings, 81% of the class reported posting at least twice a week, 100% responded that they felt more comfortable writing in Spanish and 100% indicated more comfortable manipulating verbs than they had prior to the blogging-assisted Spanish course. Authors point out the limitation that there was no control group and therefore they cannot attribute improvements to blogging.

Like the previous study by Armstrong and Retterer, a study by Sun (2010) also had some serious limitations, but suggested that blogging improved writing. Writing performance was compared on the first three and last three blog entries and a survey of students' process and perception of blogging was conducted. Participants were 23 undergraduates taking an academic writing course. A total of 30 blog posts and 10 comments were required for 20% of the grade. The grade was only for quantity of posts, although the study measured writing skills. To avoid rater bias, bloggers' names and time of writing were unknown to raters. Analysis of writing was six writing criteria with rating value and syntactic complexity using number of clauses and T-units. Also a survey was given.

The author pointed out that 92% of teacher comments were about error correction, 8% compliments on writing. Results showed that students perceived content organization, vocabulary, idea development, grammar, and reading comprehension were higher from blogging. Analysis of syntactic complexity showed that students tended to use simpler syntactic structure in the last three blog entries than in the first three. Raters' mean scores of last three entries were slightly higher than first three. Results of writing process in blogging showed that the most frequent behavior was going through blogs again before uploading to the blog, paying attention to the number of clicks on one's own blog, reading others' blog entries. Students' perceptions of blogging showed that the most popular activity was proofreading with error annotation, study ranks feature, analyses of students' error types. Also, students' language complexity decreased through blog usage: "This result could be explained by the fact that a blog's informal, casual environment represents a shift away from a highly structured, teacher-fronted, formal environment to an informal genre of communication (Salaberry, 1996). These results are consistent with those of Chun's (1994) and Kern's (1995) studies which showed that CMC learner output exhibited a higher proportion of simple sentences over complex ones" (p. 337). Sun recognized that small sample size reduces the study's validity; however, Sun failed to note that any gains could be due to other factors such as learning that could have (presumably) taken place during nonblogging lesson times.

Garthwait (2006) wanted to know how students used technology in the writing process. She narrowed the focus to the software program HyperStudio being used in a 7th grade ICT class. The main area investigated was how students demonstrate an awareness of audience as they write in a hypermedia environment.

Most of the studies reported in *Children's Writing: Perspectives From Research*, (Dahl 1998) found support for the Piagetian concept that young children generally direct writing towards self rather than show awareness of an eventual audience. As children move out of these early stages, they begin to put themselves into the place of others, adopting the perspectives of a presumed audience.... At the most basic level, a writer demonstrates a 'sense of audience' by acknowledging a point of view other than his or her own. This can be accomplished either in content or in tone, and increases along a continuum as the author negotiates and coordinates the inferred perspectives of readers with the writer's perspectives. Language arts teachers focus on this awareness because it 'can help young writers figure out what to include, what to leave out, and how to present their ideas' (Dahl 1998, p. 51). (p. 1483)

Results were that using HyperStudio showed "a rich array of textual audience considerations" (p. 1486).

Also in a nonblogging context, Crowhurst (1978) examined the effect of intended audience and mode of discourse on the syntactic complexity of compositions written by sixth- and tenth-graders and to determine whether there were increases in syntactic complexity from Grade 6 to Grade 10 of each audience and in each mode of discourse. Grade 6 was a grade selected because it precedes a "growth spurt" in syntactic development that occurs during middle school. Randomly assigned 120 sixth graders and 120 tenth graders wrote for a friend or a teacher using narrative, description, or argument. Results showed that compositions for teachers were more syntactically complex than for best friend in grade 10 but not grade 6; for both grades, argument ranked highest on syntactic complexity and narrative lowest.

Frye, Trathen and Koppenhaver (2010) disagreed with the above notion that audience would not effect writing in a study of blog publishing for elementary social studies. "Elementary students' motivation to produce quality, written work, their engagement in writing, and the time they invest in the writing process increase when they know

their work will be published on the Internet (Karchmer 2001b). The effect of publishing student work online increases accessibility as viewers from around the world can potentially learn from the work, further increasing student motivation to produce quality work (Karchmer 2001a)” (p. 50). However, the authors did not support these statements with evidence.

Craig (1986) also argues that audience affected writing, though unlike Frye et al. (2010) he supports his claim with evidence from his dissertation that examined the effect of audience on the writing of sixth graders and eleventh graders. Results showed that writing to a friend versus to a teacher made a difference in terms of their writing.

Students' attitudes toward blogging

Like any medium, blogging can inspire various attitudes. Shamsavar, Tan, and Aryadoust (2010) developed a Blog Attitude Scale (BAS) that proved to be effective in predicting blog anxiety, blog desirability and blog self-efficacy.

Churchill (2009) found that students were encouraged to blog by teachers' blogging activities, enjoyed seeing others' perspectives, and others' progress, and receiving comments. Ellison and Wu (2008) found blogs uniquely engaging because students could use their own voice and the interactive nature of blogs gave different perspectives. However, they found some students felt feedback was often nonsubstantive and some felt the public sense of commenting made them uncomfortable as the commenter or receiver.

A noteworthy perspective of blogging is offered by Goh, Quek and Lee (2010) who contended that most studies of blogging originate from the West and overlook cultural differences and most studies lack reliable and valid instruments for measuring the learning benefits of weblogs. Their study investigated students' perceptions of the learning benefits of blogging in an East Asian context. The variable measured was students' perceptions of the learning benefits of blogging. They found that factor I dealt with the efficiency of using blogs and was negatively loaded; factor II dealt with deliberation/reflection and was positively loaded; factor III, depersonalization, dealt with fear of offending others and expressing views were positively loaded, but changing blogs to suit one's needs, adding new features, keeping up with current trend were negatively loaded; factor IV, collaboration discussion, sharing information and enhancing learning through interaction were positively loaded. Students generally concurred that: 1) Blogging is an efficient approach to learning as it saves them time. 2) They become more careful about what they wrote on blogs. 3) They would approach blogging in a practical way (i.e., there is no need to personalize course blogs). 4) They learn collaboratively. The study concluded that the findings were different than other studies because students were not Western. The study does not identify what Western students are, though they are implicit through study's analysis of difference. Authors believed that Asian values could explain differences.

Confucianism still remains at the heart of basic moral standards amongst Singaporeans. It is thus not surprising to note that, in order to maintain harmony and protect one's face, the students deliberated before posting blogs entries or comments. These values foster preferences to be more conservative, reserved, restrained, shy, cautious, and introverted. As such Singaporean students may refrain from expressing their thoughts and views in such a way that leads to arrogance, and may even sidestep making honest comments on the blogs of other students. Another 'cultural' explanation could be a result of Singapore's emphasis on pragmatism which has been infused in the Singapore educational system (Sanderson, 2002). Perhaps this is why the students preferred not to

personalize their blogs and valued efficiency and pragmatism instead. (p. 99)

While the above study argued that cultural differences account for some attitudinal variance, Kalanda and Oliphant (2009) investigated the way classroom environment and teacher and students “themselves” influence students’ attitudes towards Information Technology at the Lesotho College of Education. Correlation analysis led to the results that in situations where teacher characteristics, student characteristics and the classroom environment were perceived to be good, students had positive attitudes toward technology. Also, attitudes towards technology were positively correlated with student characteristics defined by satisfaction, friendship and support, although the relationship was weak. Lastly, students following good learning styles, have self confidence and who enjoy technology lectures, are likely to have good attitudes toward the subject compared with those who lack these defining factors. Regression analysis led to results that “explanatory variables of classroom environment (X1), Student Characteristics (X2), Teachers Characteristics (X3), have some power to a reasonable extent to influence the dependent variable--student attitude toward technology (Y), albeit moderately” (p. 2739).

Other factors that contribute to attitude towards blogs were measured by Colombo, Dossena, Balzarotti and Spadola (2010) in a study that used eye-tracking technology to explore the relationship between the reading of blogs and multimedia processing with emotions, in relation to gender, cognitive style, and emotional content.

Conclusions showed that females have longer fixations which can be interpreted that they look more carefully at text and titles, indicating “more analytical and sequential

style of visual exploration of multimedia contents” (p. 1664). Also, emotional posts are paid more attention to than neutral ones by male and female participants. The authors report that results are still preliminary and will be further elaborated on in the future.

Shahsavari and Tan (2010) focused on bloggers’ field dependency and their attitudes toward using blogs in a learning environment. Results indicated that no significant difference was found between Field Dependents’ and Field Independents’ attitudes toward blogs.

In terms of attitude, blogging appears to fulfill many of the criteria six experts (Brown, Auslander, Gredone, Green, Hull, & Jacobs, 2010) viewed essential to create engagement with education via technology [emphasis not added]:

Students are more engaged when they are knowledge creators, in addition to being knowledge receivers...Students are more engaged when there is a feeling of producing work for a wider audience...Students are more engaged when there is selective use of the formal and the informal...Students are more engaged when there is a variety of alternative venues for expression...Students are more engaged when it is clear that what they learn will serve them elsewhere and is transferable to other contexts...Students are more engaged when there is a sense of a learning community...Students are more engaged when they help to steer the ship...Students are more engaged when story and narrative are used effectively. (p. 40)

Social aspects related to blogging

Leslie and Murphy (2008) summed up the purposes of blogging and social software in the literature. They identified two major themes:

The first relates to social interaction and social presence, and suggests that one general purpose for blogging may be to support, facilitate, model, and increase opportunities for social, peer and group interaction,

communication, presence, feedback, networking learning experiences, and getting to know each other.

The second theme relates to the social and collaborative construction of knowledge and suggests that an additional purpose for blogging may be to support, contribute to, and provide opportunities or means for collaborative, cooperative and community-centered sharing, building, contributing, outlining and asserting knowledge, ideas, opinions, different viewpoints, interpretations, perspectives and common goals. From this framework, we derived two purposes for blogging one being social and the other for knowledge construction. (p. 4)

Blogs appear to increase social interaction. Blogs helped students feel that their instructor was more involved their learning (Churchill, 2009), supported peer communication (Ray, Hocutt, & Patterson, 2005), helped interactions between reader and audience, though this depended on students' attitude towards blogging (Liang & Bonk, 2009). In using a blogfolio rather than blogs, Yuen and Yang (2008) found that students had favorable feelings towards student-teacher and student-student interactions. Gagne and Fels (2007, as cited in Liu, Kalk, Kinney, Orr, & Reid, 2009), found that students desired greater involvement from instructors in the blogging process and would have found collaboration activity more meaningful.

Communication patterns are important for understanding social interaction. Felix (2008) discerned four communication patterns teachers perceived as a result of blogging: (a) increased peer interaction among students, (b) increased teacher interaction with the students, (c) students exhibiting more positive emotions about learning, and (d) an increased sharing of ideas among students and with the teacher.

Communication includes the occasional disagreement. Chen and Chiu (2008), using online discussion groups rather than blogs, found that disagreements did not really

disrupt dialogue compared to face-to-face interaction, suggesting controversial subjects are better done online.

Social interaction can be student-teacher, student-student, or student-undefined audience. Maor (2008) compared what occurred when discussion groups (not blogs) were led by teachers versus students and discovered that teachers tended to facilitate more in the areas of direct-instruction content-related postings and encouragement and giving than student leaders. However, students' postings were higher in four types of facilitation: summing up and confirming, focusing discussion, moving the discussion, and debriefing of the teacher's postings.

An important feature of the social aspect of blogging is the concept of audience, which Bos (1997) defines it in terms of four constructs:

1. *Role* of the audience with respect to the information given;
2. *relationship*, both present and future, between the authors and the audience;
3. *knowledge* of the audience with regard to the subject matter of the writing;
- and
4. *feedback* (both nature and quantity) between audience and authors examined the relationship between writer and audience in testing. (p.86)

Tentative relationship refers to a brief relationship without much incentive for either party to develop relationship building; *non-evaluative relationship* refers to feedback that does not affect grades; *ambassador relationship* where readers represent their countries [or, for blogging, a particular constituency].

Feedback is an important aspect of social interaction. The above study by Bos (1997) also provides a framework for feedback: *Evaluative feedback* is "neither helpful in revision nor in motivation; *elaborative feedback* (ways to improve story), which

authors believe most directly aid revision; *responsive feedback* (your story reminds me of...) which are difficult to apply to revision but can be most valuable because they function on a deeper, thematic level” (p. 96).

To examine the role of audience on writing, Bos (1997) developed a model of publishing students’ work with “authentic” readers by utilizing the World Wide Web and email at a time prior to the usage of blogs. In the study, American students studied Africa and wrote stories set in Africa. Bos (1997) found readers with African roots to read the students’ stories and give feedback to the students via email. Results include that none of the student authors considered African readers to be their primary audience, as they wrote to please themselves, their parents or teacher, though the study does not explore this issue further.

In the discussion section, Bos (1997) argued that the model provided “extensive and varied feedback which could provide students with rich material for revising their work and motivate deep engagement with the writing task. It also seems evident that the outside readers were able to provide types of comments that are qualitatively different than what a classroom teacher could or would provide” (p. 96). However, if the students did not perceive the African readers as their primary audience, the relevance of this “authentic” audience becomes questionable. In terms of edublogging, the role of audience needs clarification in terms of the four constructs identified by Bos and their relation to the students blogging. *Will students consider the potential world wide audience as their primary audience? What kind of relationship will they develop?* and other questions should be answered.

In a study that demonstrates the significance of feedback to social interaction, Lin and Chien (2009) presented a model for peer revision in second language learning for Taiwanese students. Students wrote assignments, peers gave feedback, and their teacher graded and provided feedback. No details were given about nature of student or teacher feedback. Upon completion of the course seven students volunteered and answered a questionnaire. Results showed that all of the students preferred peer feedback over teacher feedback, although they felt they learned more through the teacher's feedback. Additionally, all students felt that by correcting peers, they learned about their peers' writing skills. In critique, there are serious validity issues: there is a small population and sample size which is perhaps why a validated statistical analysis such as t-tests was not used. More so, volunteers for sampling methodology undermines any sense of objectivity.

An important feature of social interaction is a sense of community. Valdes-Corbeil and Corbeil (2008) showed that blogs were superior to discussion boards in social presence because the latter were inflexible, text-bound, and isolate discussions by threads (as cited in Liu, Kalk, Kinney, Orr, & Reid, 2009).

Halic, Lee, Paulus and Spence (2010) also viewed a sense of community at the core of understanding social factors' role in blogging in an educational setting. They address the construct Sense of Community through a review of its understanding in the literature (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995; Willms, 2000; Yasuda, 2009, McMillan and Chavis, 1986; Sarason, 1974; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Nichols, 2008; Solomon, Watson, Battistich, Schaps, & Delucchi, 1996; Solomon, Watson, Battistich, Schaps, & Delucchi, 1992, as cited by Halic et. al). They identify

and explain what they view as the two key concepts of a sense of community: interdependence and supportive interpersonal relationships.

Perceived learning through blogging

It appears as though learning in a blogging context is greatly influenced by blogging's inherently interactive, social nature. The connection between the social aspect of blogs and its use in knowledge construction is implicitly drawn by Xie, Ke, & Sharma (2010) who connected interaction and learning in blogs. They used team blogs in an undergraduate class and assessed the effects of different starter styles (questioning versus monologuing) on students' blog participation and thinking. Each section was divided into four groups of randomly assigned students. Each blog had a rotating leader, each section had blog leaders with a different starter style. Results indicate that monologuing blog starters consistently wrote more and their writing in the blog posts showed higher cognitive thinking than the questioning starters. However, the students who replied to questioning starters' blog posts demonstrated a higher level of cognitive thinking than those who were in groups with monologue starters.

The social element of blogging may help in perceived learning. Blogging was helpful by reading others' comments (Ellison & Wu, 2008), by reading others' blogs, receiving comments (Churchill, 2009), and sharing of ideas (Ray, Hocutt, & Patterson, 2005).

The notion of a social knowledge construct with blogging was developed further through cooperative learning. In a study aimed at discovering how cooperative learning may be integrated with computer for instruction and to "ascertain the

benefits” of computer format in learning, Wang and Fang (2005) assigned students to blog as groups and required them to post about content and comment on group mates. At the end of the semester a group essay was posted. The researchers found learner autonomy (self confidence, empowerment), cooperative learning (positive interdependence, individual accountability, group processing, social skills, face to face interaction), and time management all increased due to blogging.

Social knowledge construction via blogging was used in a project-based EFL digital literacy study. Zhang (2010) found that this kind of activity had “the potential to engage learners in active identity construction using verbal and visual resources and to provide the social, affective, and metacognitive support essential to the development of digital literacy skills. Despite these potential strengths, findings from this study also indicated that the value of blogging seems to lie more in self-reflection than in active peer interaction and collaborative knowledge construction” (p.14).

In a study that explored social factors and perceived learning in blogging, Top, Yukselturk & Inan (2010) examined actual activities as well as perceptions of pre-service teachers required to blog as a course requirement. When they examined students’ actual activities, they observed that they used blogs mainly for information sharing rather than for interaction, collaboration, and/or peer feedback. Conversely, the survey data indicated that students most valued the interactivity feature of blogging (comments, questions, and peer feedback). Additionally, participants’ course satisfaction had statistically significant correlations with learning community and social community. On the other hand, learning community and course satisfaction were found to have a positive and statistically significant correlation with pre-service

teachers' perceived learning. The authors did not speculate about why there was apparent incongruity between the data collected observationally and through the survey.

In a survey research design, Halic, Lee, Paulus and Spence (2010) identified some relationships between a sense of community and perceived learning in a university course using blogging in a blended-learning environment. They explained that students' perceived learning has been found in the literature to be an “adequate” alternative to standardized tests and course grades at the university level. They cite Caspi and Blau (2008), So and Brush (2008), Goldman et al. (2008) to demonstrate the positive impact of social factors on perceived learning in a blogging context. They resolved: “Although the use of perceived learning as a measure of cognitive learning has its detractors (King & Witt, 2009), we chose to use perceived learning in this study as a viable construct with reliable survey instruments” (p. 207). In their study, 67 undergraduates taking a class in nutrition were assigned to groups of 7-14 students in which they were required to submit one post and one comment per week on concepts covered in class. The results of a survey administered at the end of the course showed that the majority of students reported that blogging enhanced their learning, had a positive attitude of the potential of blogging to enhance their learning, stimulated thinking about course-related concepts outside of class, facilitated understanding of other points of view and sharing of knowledge with peers, although the value of peer comments were roughly evenly divided. Also, age, gender, computer expertise, or previous blogging experience produced no difference in students' perceived learning. Additionally, there was a significant difference in perceived learning between the students with a low sense of community and those with a high

sense of community ($t=-5.90$, $p<0.001$). Lastly, sense of community ($b=0.73$, $p<0.001$) and computer expertise ($b=0.22$, $p<0.01$) were identified as independent predictors of perceived learning while the other factors did not. Authors recognized that some limitations to their study include a 43% response rate to the survey and the lack of comparison between students who used blogs and those who did not.

In summary, the many features of blogs and the flexibility of these features create great potential in their use in an educational setting. Unfortunately, as shown above, there is a dearth of data of blogging in the middle school context. The use of blogs in various educational settings including universities has shown some positive impact on students' writing, especially in relation to audience, although the studies that used blogging were hampered by serious limitations. Most blog features and usage are viewed positively by students, as are the social factors associated with blogging. Lastly, a sense of community and computer expertise appear to be predictors of perceived learning in a blogging context.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study is conceptualized as a mixed-methods approach using an embedded design. According to Cresswell & Plano-Clark (2007), “[t]he Embedded Design is a mixed methods design in which one data set provides a supportive, secondary role in a study based primarily on the other data type” (p. 67). This study's data is primarily qualitative, with quantitative data in the form of surveys used for support, hence the study can be designated QUAL(quantitative).

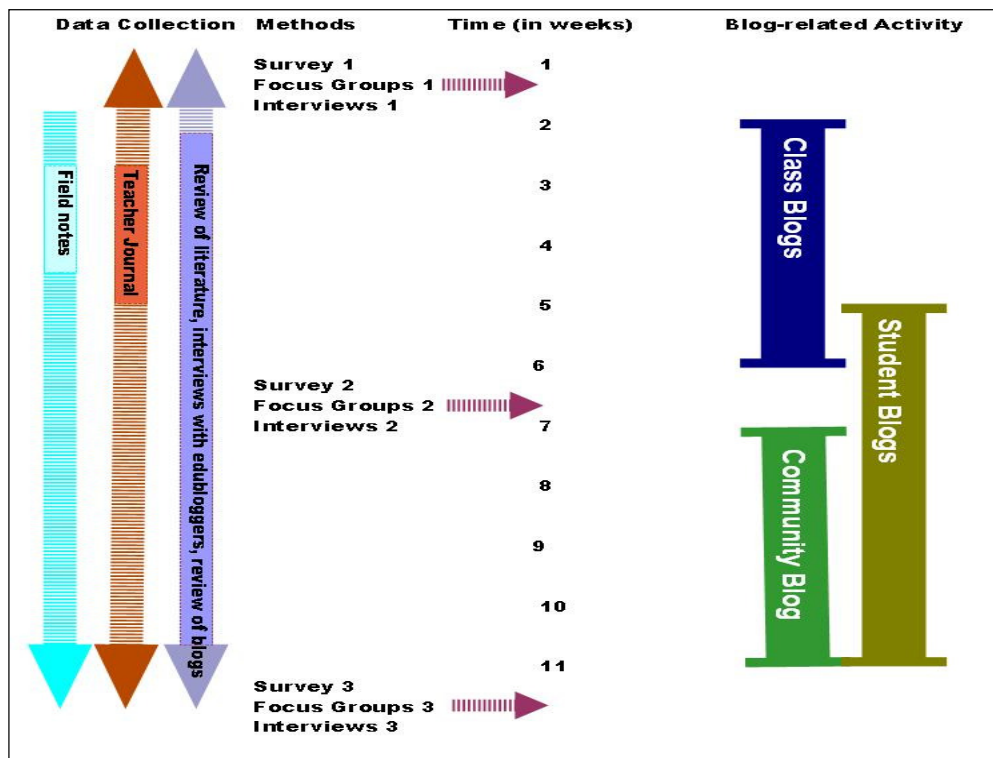


Figure 3. Timeline for data collection.

The overall approach was to consider blogging as an integral element of instruction (as opposed to a concurrent or consequent activity). Though blogging was used

throughout the study, different forms of blogs were utilized. Initially, a class blog was used, followed by a community blog (Figure 2). Additionally, student blogs commenced once students were perceived to be ready, three weeks into the class blog and were concurrent with the class blog and community blog.

Over ten weeks, students followed the curriculum pursuing a course similar to what they would have normally done in class except that some assignments were done as blogs, and blogging features such as comments were used. As blogs were integrated into most activities, the study's research questions were answered during the students' learning activities. The units covered and the content of those units were The Whodunnit Mystery, short story, and poetry.

A three-week unit on Whodunnit (or Murder) Mystery was done cross-curricularly with science and drama. In English class, students studied the features of the genre, contrasted it to another genre using videos posted on the blog, and created their own Whodunnit in a media of their choice.

A three-week short story unit was based on *Best Shorts: Favorite Stories for Sharing* (Avi, Shute, & Paterson, 2006), a collection of short stories, and covered reading strategies (predicting, interacting with the text, etc.), and the elements of fiction (plot, theme, characters, setting). Using process writing, students wrote their own short story subsequently published on their student blog which ultimately received feedback from and was assessed by their teacher and peers on their writing skills and ability to demonstrate an understanding of the elements of fiction.

The three-week poetry unit was based on the book *Love that Dog* (Creech, 2001), which is a story told through a collection of poetry. It covered some types of poetry and figurative language. Students also wrote their own poems which were published on the blog and received feedback from and were assessed by their teacher and peers on their ability to use poetry types and figurative language correctly.

Context

The study took place at Bilkent Laboratory and International School (BLIS). BLIS is considered a unique private pre-K-12 school in Turkey, and although the majority of students are Turkish nationals, the Turkish Ministry of Education-approved school attempts to create the culture of an international school through various means including making the medium of instruction English in the majority of subjects. The school is recognized nationally and internationally for its high academic achievement.

The middle school is comprised of grades six, seven and eight (students aged 11-14) and is seen as a bridge between the elementary school where the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program (IB PYP) is taught and high school where in grades 9 and 10 all students study the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) and all grades 11 and 12 students pursue the International Baccalaureate Diploma. Students have 50 forty-minute periods of lessons per week with 12-14 different subject specialists, including seven periods of English. The Middle School English curriculum has been created in-house and incorporates the textbook *Voyages in English: Writing and grammar* (Chantal Brookes, Kervick, & Masino, 2006). Grade six English units include: writing (the personal narrative,

expository writing, and how-to articles); literature (*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, Holes, and The Cay*); additional literature units (whodunnit mysteries, short stories and poetry). Grammar and vocabulary are taught throughout the year.

Participants

Thirty eight of the 41 students in BLIS grade 6 English participated in the blogging portion of the course taught by the teacher-researcher. Three students were excluded from the study because they were foreign nationals and it was seen that their identity would confound the study. There were 19 boys (50%) and 19 girls (50%) whose mean age at the commencement of the study was 11.8 years old. In comparison, BLIS's pre-K through grade 12 student profile is 55% male, 45% female. Of the study's participants, according to The Mac II Test of English Language Proficiency (Questar Assessment, 2011), 67% are advance in writing, 64% are advance in reading, 69% are advance in speaking, 67% are advance in listening. Participants have been at BLIS, on average, 5.5 years.

All students (n=38) participated in the surveys; students were purposefully selected for interviews to be representative of high-, medium, and low-achievement based on the first semester's GPA, and gender and because they were seen as information rich. Focus groups were composed of 6-8 randomly selected students in each of three section that they take their lessons in.

Method of data collection and analysis

To address the first sub-question, *How are the features of blogging used and how are they perceived by the researcher in a blended learning environment?*, the researcher developed a framework showing various uses of blogging and their implications in a blended learning environment. To this end, the researcher clustered data collected through: reviewing the literature; using unstructured interviews with colleagues who have used a blog for their insights into blogging and requesting their feedback on blogging activities pursued in this study; examining class blogs, community blogs, student blogs and analyzing them using content analysis of students' and teachers' comments and design; email-interviewing edubloggers; reviewing websites and discussion groups dedicated to the educational use of blogging. The results was a narration of personal accounts.

As for sub-questions 2-5, the second subquestion, *What are students' attitudes towards and perceptions of using a class blog, a community blog and students' blogs?*, the third subquestion, *How do students perceive learning as supported by the use of blogging as an instructional strategy?*, the fourth subquestion, *How do students perceive their writing skills as supported by the use of blogging as an instructional strategy?*, and the fifth subquestion, *How do students perceive social aspects of blogging- enhanced teaching-learning environment?* The researcher collected data using surveys, focus groups and interviews.

The survey instrument consisted of the Blogging Attitude Scale (BAS) by Shahsavar, Tan & Ryad (2010), an instrument developed by Halic, Lee, Paulus, and Spence

(2010), and five questions about students' perceptions of writing using blogs developed by the researcher.

The researcher's questions were developed by reviewing other questionnaires in the literature (Sun, 2010; Goh, Quek, & Lee, 2010; Churchill, 2009; Lin, & Chieh, 2009). The BAS uses a four-point Likert-type scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree). Data analysis for the latter used exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. "Findings indicate that attitudes toward blogs can be reliably based around and measured by the three distinct dimensions identified in this scale (anxiety, desirability, and self- efficacy). As such, this assessment tool is useful for researchers who attempt to measure blog attitudes specially learners' anxiety which may have effect on other variables such as students academic achievements in programs where blogs are used as mediums of instruction. It is also useful for teachers who use blogs in their classrooms as an educational instrument". The survey by Halic, et al. uses a five-point Likert-type scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree) on some items and fill-in on others. Researchers computed the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy and the Bartlett's test of Sphericity, preliminary principal axis factoring extraction with varimax rotation. Confirmatory factor analysis was then performed and Cronbach's alpha was used to confirm reliability.

Administering surveys

A pre-blogging-activity survey composed of a 48-item questionnaire (see Appendix A), was administered prior to the first unit. Section A was composed of 15 items that measure blog anxiety, blog desirability, and blog self-efficacy using the Blogging

Attitude Scale (BAS); Section B was a modified version of the instrument developed by Halic et al. that contains a total of 28 items. Seven of the items measure perceived learning and six items measure sense of community, while 15 items cover background information on demographics and computer knowledge. Section C has five items to measure perceptions of writing in the blogging context developed by this study's researcher. Section A consisted of a four-point Likert-type scale while sections B and C consisted of a five-point Likert-type scale. The four-point versus five-point discrepancy occurred out of respect for the creators of the questionnaires, one of whom used a four-point scale while the other used a five-point scale.

At the end of the class blogging activity, a post-survey was administered and this same instrument was again administered after the completion of the community blog and student blogs which coincided with the termination of the study. Its questionnaire (see Appendix C) was composed of the same items as the pre-blogging-activity questionnaire except that some items were modified or removed due to the mid and post nature of this survey.

After each of the three surveys, preliminary results were explored in greater depth through focus groups of 6-8 students which lasted about 20 minutes per focus group and one-on-one semi-structured interviews which lasted about 15 minutes each with 4 information-rich students. Questions for the focus groups and interviews were the same. Notes were taken during the focus groups and interviews

The teacher-researcher used descriptive and reflective field notes and kept a journal to answer sub-question 6, *What challenges and opportunities does a teacher face when*

employing blogging as an instructional strategy? A journal and field notes recorded the teacher-researcher's observations of students' work, comments, and behaviours and reflections on teacher-researcher's decisions on blogging and related activities. Content analysis was applied to the data to develop themes.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Features of blogs used in a blended learning environment

A framework based on the literature was developed to address the question of how the features of blogs are used in a blended learning environment (Sim & Hew, 2010; Hall, 2004). Usage of the features is explored primarily through reference to examples from noteworthy school blogs, a review of the literature, the opinions of Dale Scoggins, a colleague who has used blogging, and those of Sue Waters, a blogging expert who is the community facilitator of *edublogs.org*. While blogs have many features, the framework addresses individual ownership, posts, comments, hyperlinks and multimedia, and links including blogrolls and widgets.

Sim and Hew (2010) identify the following four items that blogs typically share: “ (a) individual ownership, (b) hyperlinked post structure, (c) updates displayed in reverse chronological order, and (d) archival of postings” (p.152).

Individual ownership

One of the four features Sim and Hew (2010) present as a key feature of blogs is individual ownership. The sense of individual ownership is embodied by the winner of the 2010 Edublog Awards for best student blog, Emily's Blog (2011). The blog's posts focus on what appears to be important to Emily: nature. Also, Emily welcomes readers to her blog with a recording of her voice using a Voki. Lastly, it is evident that she is proud of and has a sense of responsibility for her blog by the high number of posts, the care put into the blog's design and variety of multimedia used. Dale also

views individual ownership as a key feature. He says that for some students this is the key motivating factor to get them to produce their best work.

Posts

The feature of post is a technical rephrasing of two other factors identified by Sim and Hew (2010) as very important: updates displayed in reverse chronological order and archival of postings. While the latter are fair descriptions of key features, they are overly broad for the purpose of this thesis and are better analyzed through more technical divisions, starting with posts. Posts are the ideal place to begin the technical categorization of the features because they are at heart of a blog; without posts blogs are meaningless, have no content. The purpose of a post can be to build knowledge by either providing information or constructing knowledge individually or socially, to showcase students' work, to induce reflection, to increase sense of community or other social interaction, to evoke emotional support, or a combination there of.

An examination of *Mrs Yollis' Classroom blog* (2011a), an award-winning class blog for third graders, can exemplify one approach. Her blog focuses nearly exclusively on what has taken place in the classroom. The posts tend to be very detailed and multimedia. For example, one post (2011b) has 10 photos with captions plus other images and the text below:

Tuesday, June 14, 2011

An Olympian in our Room!

Ben's mother is an Olympic athlete! Ben's mother is also Nonno's daughter! The Olympics are held every four years and the best athletes in the world come together to represent their country. It is an exciting international event!

Nearly all posts on the latter class blog are used to inform the community about what has taken place during class time.

On the other hand, *Write Out Loud* (2011a), a class blog for a seventh grade English class with over 27 000 visitors over the past two years, demonstrates a variety of posts for different purposes. Like the above blog, the intent of some posts is simply to inform members of the community as to what had taken place in a lesson, though the posts tend to be very terse. For example:

In English E block, we reviewe... (sic)
April 19th, 2010 · No Comments · 2010-11

In English E block, we reviewed the difference between who and whom.
-Alice (Write Out Loud, 2011b)

Conversely, the intent of some posts on *Write Out Loud* appear to be for social interaction. Below is an example where the attempt to build the sense of community occurs by creating a common feeling, specifically, looking forward to a holiday.

Have A Great Summer Everyone!
May 31st, 2011 · No Comments · 2010-11

Well, the 2011 school year has ended for these seventh graders! Have a great summer everyone and safe travels!
Please check back with us in August!
Students, if you want to post and let us know what you are up to this summer, please do! (Write Out Loud, 2011c)

A different strategy on *Write Out Loud* for developing a sense of community was attempted by emphasizing two roles important to a community. The role of elder was expressed by the departing seventh graders and the role of novices was assumed for

the rising seventh graders in a post which requests the former to pass on their “wisdom” to the latter:

Seventh Grade Words Of Wisdom ~ Last Blog Post Of This Year
May 21st, 2011 · 98 Comments · 2010-11

Students, this is your last post of your seventh grade year! Please know that you are always welcome to post to this blog at any time. We would love to hear from you. So, following tradition, you will leave your parting thoughts of the seventh grade experience for next year’s grade. Your words will be the first things my new students read when I introduce them to the blog.

Here are some guidelines to keep in mind:

Think in terms of things you would have liked to have known before entering seventh grade.

What valuable lessons did you learn along the way that you can pass on to others?

What are “the essentials” that every seventh grader should know?

Topics of discussions can be related to academics, sports, drama, stress, late nights, drama, adjustment from sixth, lockers, organization, management, assessments, friendships, Sea Camp, etc.

If you talk about your classes, specifically your teachers: be courteous, respectful, kind, humorous. If I find any comments to be otherwise or offensive, I will remove your post, and you know the rest (Write Out Loud, 2011d).

On the whole, *Write Out Loud* tends to focus on knowledge construction. Below is a post that is part of a unit on William Shakespeare's “Midsummer Night's Dream” where different forms of knowledge- construction take place:

“The Course Of True love Never Did Run Smooth” 1.1.134
March 20th, 2010 · 95 Comments · 09-10

Please answer the following questions. There are 4 different mini prompts. Be sure to use paragraphs to make the reading easier.

What do you think the quote in the above title means?

In the play, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, a dispute between father and daughter has serious consequences. Should parents have the right to control their children’s lives? How should differences between parents and children be resolved?

I know many of you have heard some if not all of the following phrases coined by Shakespeare. What do they mean? Please tell me what you think the meaning is behind each phrase.

a “wild-geese chase”

a “piece of work”
“the be-all, end-all”
“all that glitters is not gold”
“the world is my oyster”
“the green-eyed monster”

By the way, Shakespeare is credited with adding 1700 words to the English language. If he didn't have a word for something he needed, he simply made one up! Some of the words he created that we use today are : birthplace, bedroom, buzzer, luggage, excitement, lonely, and mimic!

The Globe Theater Virtual Tour You'll need the free Quicktime download to view this

Clemson Shakespeare Festival Another virtual tour of the Globe Theater
After looking around the Globe Theater, where do you think the best place to view a play would be? Why?

Part 3 of the BBC Animated Tales has been added to the page at the top (Writer Out Loud, 2011e).

Knowledge is constructed by informing students about Shakespeare's influence on modern English. Not in the post itself but in the elicited comments, knowledge is constructed individually through responding to the prompts, and, lastly, an implicit social construction of knowledge occurs if one assumes students read their peers' comments.

The example below demonstrates how reflection is attempted in *Write Out Loud*.

Exploring Theme In *The Outsiders* ~ Forbidden Love

February 5th, 2011 · 85 Comments · 2010-11

We work our way towards the iPod Project with our first discussion on theme in *The Outsiders*.

Can you tell me what your definition of forbidden love is?

After listening to the lyrics of these two songs, please answer the following the questions:

Why might the Greasers relate to Elvis Presley and the Socs to The Beatles?

Discuss how these two songs relate to the theme of forbidden love in *The Outsiders*. What are the songs talking about?

Can you specifically apply the theme of forbidden love to some characters in the novel? Explain fully (Write Out Loud, 2011f).

The request for a definition should induce reflection on the concept of forbidden love.

Write Out Loud tends to have many posts used to build knowledge through informing students and by requesting comments, some of which are aimed at building a sense of community. It has no specific posts dedicated to reflection, though, as the above example demonstrates, reflection tends to occur as comments in posts whose main purpose is not reflection. Attempts at emotional support and showcasing student work were not found.

An example of a post inviting reflection comes from *Huzzah!* (huzzah.edublogs.org, 2011a) a 6th grade class blog with 17 000 visitors in the past year, where comments on the robot activity would be reflective:

Our Robot Dance-Off

Filed Under (Technology) by Jan Smith on 03-06-2011 and tagged Creativity, dance, engineering, Lego Robotics, robot

Robots are pretty fascinating. And, as we have discovered over the last few weeks, a great challenge and a lot of fun. Here is a video of our efforts. *We are really grateful to our guest judges, Mrs. Mooney, Ms. Janine, Mrs. Crawford, and Mrs. Timmins. Thank you for taking the time to give us feedback!*

Huzzahnians, please comment below and tell us two things: 1. what was your great aha! and 2. what was your *personal* victory in this competition? (Huzzah!, 2011b)

A class blog where most of the posts are dedicated to showing student work is The Electronic Pencil (epencil.edublogs.org/, 2011a), a 6th grade class blog. Below are two examples. The posts' text is below while the actual students' work is accessible from the blog itself.

Your Environmental MultiMedia Poster Collection

Posted in Environmental Essay, Projects, Science | No Comments »

Some students worked on Glogster to create a multimedia companion to their environmental essay projects. The goal was to have a media project that complemented the persuasive stance of their essay writing. There are so many cool posters here. I hope you have some time to explore and learn from each other (The Electronic Pencil, 2011b).

Your Environmental Powerpoint Presentations

Posted in Environmental Essay, Projects, Science | No Comments »

Some of you chose to use Powerpoint to make a presentation about your essay topic (The Electronic Pencil, 2011c).

As can be seen from the above examples, each class blog tends to focus on one of a myriad of potential uses. Interestingly, the class blogs showed few posts where the intent was for reflection or emotional support, though student blogs may be more suitable for these. Rather, these class blogs tended to focus on knowledge construction, sharing of information, and students' work.

The above examples of posts have different starters, either monologuing or questioning. In their analysis of community blogs, Xie, Ke, & Sharma (2010) found that monologuing blog starters consistently wrote more and their writing in the blog posts showed higher cognitive thinking than the questioning starters. However, the students who replied to questioning starters' blog posts demonstrated a higher level of cognitive thinking than those who were in groups with monologue starters.

Comments

Although the comment feature can be turned off, it is usually enabled on class blogs. It is important to note that for those classes that also have student blogs, the latter often takes on the usages that the comment feature would otherwise have on a class or community blog. The comment feature often takes on the roles of reflection, social

knowledge-construction, emotional support, and social interaction which are usually lacking in the posts themselves and may be solicited by a post. Additionally, although a post may explicitly invite a certain type of comment, the actual comments it receives may not reflect this request.

On a regular basis a post does not receive any comment, especially those where the intent is to inform about a lesson. From earlier examples of posts, “In English E block, we review...” (Write Out Loud, 2011b) and “Have A Great Summer Everyone!”(Write Out Loud, 2011c) no comments were requested nor received. Conversely, posts which attempt to build a sense of community such as “Seventh Grade Words Of Wisdom ~ Last Blog Post Of This Year” (Write Out Loud, 2011d) and those where the intent is to elicit students to show their knowledge such as “The Course Of True love Never Did Run Smooth” (Write Out Loud, 2011e) and “Exploring Theme In The Outsiders ~ Forbidden Love” (Write Out Loud, 2011f), usually receive many comments, the above examples receiving many comments, 98, 95 and 85 respectively.

The post “Our Robot Dance-Off” (Huzzah!, 2011b) requested reflection: “1. what was your great aha! and 2. what was your personal victory in this competition?” However, of four comments, only the one by Daniel was reflective:

Kimberley Says:

June 20th, 2011 at 3:57 am

I don't go to your school but I really like your ideas about making a cool robot. I was just wondering how long you have been doing your own blog for? Great work!

Jan Smith Says:

June 22nd, 2011 at 6:10 am

I've had a blog for my class for about three years now, but my students have been blogging for about 8 months. Thanks for visiting, Kimberley!

Daniel Says:

June 25th, 2011 at 12:21 pm

Hi Ms Smith,

I think my favorite part of the dance off was creating our own bot for the challenge, and problem solving the programming. (I wrote this comment from my Wii)

Daniel

Jan Smith Says:

June 25th, 2011 at 12:41 pm

Hey—I didn't know you could do that! Very cool! (Huzzah!, 2011b)

Three of the four comments provide something other than reflection. The responses of Jan Smith, the teacher, provide social support to the commentators by acknowledging the value of their comments and Kimberley's comment also functions as supporting social interaction. The difference between the type of comment requested and the ones received demonstrates that the blog facilitator must accept that some control must be relinquished to the blog's commentators. Dale provides an anecdote about the importance of comments:

I had a student whose effort and work was mediocre. However, one of her poems on her student blogs received a comment from a stranger. This transformed her. The comment was fairly innocuous but it wasn't its content that was critical but knowing someone had read her work and thought it worthy enough to take the time to comment on it. After that she worked diligently on the work that appeared on her blog.

Multimedia and hyperlinks

Sim and Hew (2010) recognize hyperlinks as a key feature. In just the last three posts of the 2011 academic year, *BLOG*, *BLOG BLOG BLOG*, *BLOG SOME MORE* (msvrburton.edublogs.org/, 2011) uses the following hyperlinks: animoto, Wikipedia and other public websites, vimeo, googledocs, slideshare.net and those to another of

the teacher's websites. Huzzah! (2011a) also demonstrates hyperlinks with flickr and vimeo and on one post, an the impressive PhotoPeach (Huzzah!, 2011c). With or without hyperlinks, these and other class blogs demonstrate the potential use of multimedia including texts, photos and other images, slide shows, videos and voice recordings.

The role of the feature of multimedia in blogging was explored by Colombo, Dossena, Balzarotti and Spadola (2010) in a study that used eye-tracking technology to explore the relationship between the reading of blogs and multimedia processing with emotions, in relation to gender, cognitive style, and emotional content. Conclusions showed that females have longer fixations which can be interpreted that they look more carefully at text and titles, indicating “more analytical and sequential style of visual exploration of multimedia contents” (p. 1664). Also, emotional posts are paid more attention to than neutral ones by male and female participants.

Links: widgets and blogroll

Bloggers usually choose to add widgets and blogrolls to their blogs and usually make them accessible from many or all pages. Blogrolls are links on a blog's sidebar which are used to provide easy access to frequently accessed sites. On the blogroll of *Huzzah!* (2011a) are the class's student blogs, an Edublogs.org activity called *Student Challenges*, and class blogs with whom the class has some kind of connection.

There are many widgets--images/text on a blog's sidebar which have little operations or links which are regularly updated--On *Huzzah!* (2011a). A *ClustrMap* shows the number of and locations of visitors to the blog, *Live Traffic Feed* shows realtime

information on visitors, *Akismet* blocks spam, and *shelfari* shows the covers of selected books. Additional widgets include *Flag Counter*, *Google Translate*, *MicroBlogging with Twitter*, and *Twitter Stream*.

Mrs. Yollis' Classroom Blog (2011a) uses some of the same widgets and blogrolls as *Hurrah!*, (2011a) but has additional items which may be more attractive to its younger readers. *Pop a Joke* is a widget that provides a daily joke and *BrainPop Movie* is a widget that shows an animated movie.



Figure 4. A clustrmap (blistr6, 2011a).

ClustrMaps and *Flag Counter* are probably the most popular widgets. According to Sue Walters (2011a), aka the edublogger, “Unless you find ways of displaying visitor numbers and their geographical locations, your students won’t appreciate that they’re publishing posts for a global audience” (Walters, 2011b). Similarly, Murcha, a commenter on Walter's blog states:

I heartily endorse your comments about the value of adding tracking widgets. Students from primary school on, also seem to like using the statistics and this sets them up with some great analytical skills. Over the last couple of years further great widgets have appeared.

A new one that appeared at the end of last year is <http://www.revolvermaps.com> which adds a wonderful 3D animated widget of a revolving globe for added effect and impact to the sidebar which young and old alike enjoy seeing. Flags, cities and state can actually be seen on the larger versions as it revolves (Walters, 2011b).

Dale uses revolvermaps on his class blog and believes that using a device that shows a world audience is essential to an effective blog. He believes that when students know that their audience is anyone with internet access, it motivates them to write. And this is only possible with a device that gives clear proof that strangers have accessed their blogs.

Other features

Banner, tags, pages, calendar, archives, and recent comments are other features used in many class blogs, however, these features are less critical to the uniqueness of blogs. Huzzah! takes advantage of all of these features.

In sum, the features of a blog distinguish them from other websites and other instructional strategies and there is variance in how the features of a blog are used. The emphasis facilitators places on particular features distinguishes their blogs from others in terms of style, overall aims and ultimately the blog's effectiveness.

Students' attitudes and perceptions

Students' attitudes towards and perceptions of blogs were gathered through surveys, focus groups, and interviews done prior to, during and after the blogging activity. Nearly all data gathered suggest that students have very positive attitudes towards and perceptions of blogging as an instructional activity. The surveys addressed blogging in general, the focus groups examined blogging in general, student blogs, class blogs, and community blogs, and the interviews collected data and presented the individual students' attitudes towards and perspectives of blogs experientially.

Survey: Students' attitudes and perceptions of blogging in general

Fifteen questions addressed attitudes towards and perspectives of blogging in general, as summarized in Table 2. In this section of the survey a four-point Likert-type scale (4=Strongly Agree, 3=Agree, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree) was used. The calculation of *Favorable* was calculated differently depending on whether the item was phrased positively or negatively. For the items phrased positively (P), the frequencies of responses scoring 3 or 4 were summed and converted into a percentage while for the items phrased negatively (N), the frequencies of responses scoring 1 or 2 were summed and converted into a percentage. A *Favorability Scale* was developed to provide a referent to the scores: extreme favorability 96-100; very high favorability 85-95; moderately high favorability 75-84; fair favorability 60-74; mildly favorable 50-59; unfavorable <50.

Table 2
Students' Attitudes and Perceptions of Blogging in General

Item	Pre-Activity Survey			Mid-Activity Survey			Post-Activity Survey			Overall		
	Favorable ^a %	n	Mean SD	Favorable ^a %	n	Mean SD	Favorable ^a %	n	Mean SD	Mean SD	Favorable ^a %	
Generally I would feel OK about adding a new position the blog. P ^b	97	38	3.53 0.56	100	38	3.63 0.49	100	38	3.66 0.48	3.61	0.51	99
Blogs do not scare me at all. P	97	38	3.63 0.54	100	38	3.68 0.47	100	38	3.89 0.31	3.74	0.44	99
I would like working with and keeping blogs. P	100	37	3.51 0.65	97	38	3.63 0.54	97	38	3.63 0.54	3.51	0.58	98
Keeping blogs makes me feel uncomfortable and confused. N ^c	94	36	1.50 0.61	97	38	1.37 0.54	97	38	1.39 0.55	1.42	0.57	96
I get a striking (bad) feeling when I think of trying to keep a blog. N	97	37	1.57 0.69	92	38	1.45 0.72	95	37	1.35 0.59	1.46	0.67	95
I will do as little work through blogs as possible. N	97	37	1.42 0.55	95	38	1.42 0.68	89	37	1.62 0.68	1.49	0.64	94
I would feel comfortable in a blog class. P	92	38	3.47 0.65	95	38	3.66 0.58	95	38	3.61 0.68	3.58	0.64	94
I do not feel threatened when others talk about blogs. P	92	37	3.51 0.65	95	38	3.55 0.65	94	37	3.68 0.67	3.58	0.65	94
I'm not the type to do well with blogs. N	89	38	1.68 0.74	95	38	1.53 0.69	92	38	1.50 0.65	1.57	0.69	92
It wouldn't bother me at all to take classes on blogs. P	89	38	3.58 0.68	92	38	3.58 0.64	89	38	3.58 0.68	3.58	0.67	90
I don't understand how some people can spend so much time working with blogs and seem to enjoy it. N	92	38	1.58 0.64	89	38	1.63 0.82	87	38	1.66 0.85	1.62	0.77	89
I don't enjoy talking with others about blogs. N	100	36	1.69 0.86	89	38	1.50 0.69	74	38	1.84 0.95	1.68	0.83	89
I don't think I would enjoy doing advanced blog work. N	84	38	1.74 0.79	84	38	1.74 0.92	82	38	1.89 0.89	1.79	0.87	83
I have a lot of self-confidence when it comes to working with blogs. P	84	37	3.21 0.78	74	38	3.13 1.09	79	38	3.32 0.93	3.22	0.93	79
Once I start to work on a blog, I find it hard to stop. P	66	38	2.82 0.90	60	38	2.89 0.89	50	38	2.66 0.99	2.79	0.93	59

Notes: A four-point Likert-type scale (4=Strongly Agree, 3=Agree, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree);
^aFavorable was calculated differently depending on whether the item was phrased positively or negatively. For the items phrased positively (P), the frequencies of responses of scoring 3 or 4 were summed and converted into a percentage while for the items phrased negatively (N), the frequencies of responses of scoring 1 or 2 were summed and converted into a percentage.
^bP=Positively phrased item.
^cN=Negatively phrased item.
 Favorability Scale: extreme favorability 96-100; very high favorability 85-95; moderately high favorability 75-84; fair favorability 60-74; mildly favorable 50-59; unfavorable <50.

The survey results suggest that students had positive attitudes towards and perceptions of blogs in general. All of the responses were favorable to blogging and changed very little according to the pre-, mid-, and post-surveys. Four items demonstrated extremely favorable attitudes towards blogs (*Generally I would feel OK about adding a new post on the blog* (Favorable=99%, M=3.61, SD=0.51), *Blogs do not scare me at all*, (Favorable=99%, M=3.74, SD=0.44), *I would like working with and keeping blogs* (Favorable=98%, M=3.51, SD=0.58), and *Keeping blogs makes me feel uncomfortable and confused* (Favorable=96%, M=1.42, SD=0.57); eight items showed very high (89%-95%) favorability towards blogs; two items showed moderately high (79%, 83%) favorability and one item was mildly favorable (*Once I start to work on a blog, I find it hard to stop*. (Favorable=59%, M=2.79, SD=0.93), though even the lowest favorability rating was over 50%, demonstrating the overall pro-blogging attitude towards and perception of blogging revealed by the surveys.

Focus group responses

Responses addressing attitudes towards and perceptions of blogs in general

Answers to questions in the focus groups shed light on different attitudes and perceptions of blogs in general and also in particular to student blogs, class blogs, and community blogs.

Table 3
*Focus Group Responses Addressing Attitudes towards and Perceptions of
 Blogs in General*

<u>Questions and Responses</u>	<u>Freq.</u>
<i>What are the differences between a blog and a paper assignment?</i>	
[Blogs are more Interactive]	3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In a blog we can see different points of view • in a blog we share with others and read others' comments • a blog is more interactive. 	
[Blogs are more fun]	6
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a blog is nice because normally we are not using a computer. This is new and I like computers • paper feels more forced. A computer can be adjusted, feels like a privilege, seems more casual, casual feels makes me more willing to do something • technology is fun • it's more fun using computer • a blog is better because it's easier to type • blogs are more fun. In papers assignments you have to erase, although on blogs you can forget what your are typing or want to say 	
in blogging there is a problem because internet can be shut off	1
A class blog is for everyone to see but paper is just for the teacher.	1
It is important to express community ideas. For example, work on a blog would have been shorter because people want shorter things on blogs	1
It depends on the assignment. If writing, it's better on computer, on a blog. Paper is better if you don't need the internet.	1
You can make comment more private on a paper assignment than a blog. On paper there is more privacy than on a blog.	1
You can start a conversation on a blog	1
<i>Would you want to blog next year and if so, what kind of blog?</i>	
I want a community blog because it's fun. When you comment everyone sees and comments too. It helps us because we see our mistakes so it helped learning. Also we try to do better because everyone sees it, they see mistakes, I will be embarrassed if I have mistakes.	1
Blogging is fun and easy so I would like to continue but just class blog because it's easier to see everyone's comments rather than going to each blog. Themes and stuff of student blogs are nice but are not worth the work.	1
I don't think I will use. I prefer Facebook where I have lots of friends. In blog everyone can see but I prefer the privacy of chatting on Facebook	1
Instead of calling, just post on a blog.	1

As can be seen in Table 3, most of the views expressed in the focus groups towards blogging in general were favorable. The most popular perspectives were that blogging is fun, often in relation to the use of computers. Additionally, students appreciated the

interactive nature of blogs. However, students expressed many additional reasons that they were in favor of blogs as an instructional strategy.

Responses addressing attitudes towards and perceptions of student blogs

Students had positive attitudes towards and perceptions of student blogs according to their focus group responses (Table 4). The idea of individualization was especially important because it allowed students to show their own personality and allowed for creativity.

Table 4
Focus Group Responses Addressing Attitudes towards and Perceptions of Student Blogs

<u>Questions and Responses</u>	<u>Freq.</u>
<i>How do you feel about student blogging as part of a class?</i>	
even better than a class blog, because you can make own posts about things important to you	1
it can post some fun stuff and make it a fun place	1
<i>Is it important to individualize your student blog?</i>	
[Individualism is important]	6
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, you tell your personality through individualization that way, can be creative • Yes. Default theme and setting feels boring, even for myself • Yes, I want to be unique • Yes, it shows personality • Edublogs didn't have good themes. I want something more creative than just color. • Let's you have more freedom, more freedom can have more fun 	
It is important because if we post something, we can check that nothing rude to yourself and friends is on the blog	1
Yes, because it expresses better	1

Responses addressing class blogs

Two key themes that arose in the focus groups had to do with blog leadership and interactions (Table 5). Students appreciated the high amount of interactions that a class blog provides, especially in the high number of opinions they could read.

Conversely, in comparison to student blogs, they did not like that they lacked control in a class blog.

Table 5
Focus Group Responses Addressing Attitudes towards and Perceptions of Class Blogs

<u>Questions and Responses</u>	<u>Freq.</u>
<i>Is using a class blog different than a student blog?</i>	
[students have less control in class blogs than student blogs]	3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a class blog is more effective than a student blog because the teacher is responsible in a class blog. • In a student blog you are the leader, but in a class blog you are just commenting. • A weakness of a class blog is that you can't lead your own discussion like you can on a student blog, the teacher does. 	
[class blogs provide a great opportunity for interaction]	7
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In a class blog everyone can see everyone's ideas, therefore everyone is thinking about what others think while commenting • on a class blog you can see the opinions of more than one person because you are required to visit it. • in a class blog everyone can comment, but I don't expect to read others' student blogs. • In a class blog there are more opinions, but in a student blog there are more personal things. • In a class blog you write for the whole class, but in a student blog you are writing for an audience of one. • class blogs are seen by more than one person. You have to explain better so others can learn also. • a class blog is better because it's easier to communicate because in a class blog everyone can see at the same time rather than clicking. 	
They're the same. Doesn't matter. A blog is blog.	1
In a student blog people express more easily, some are shy about a class blog.	1

Responses addressing community blogs

The role of teacher was key to understanding community blogs according to the focus groups (Table 6). Students perceived the teacher as being a better initiator of discussions through better posts and also someone who garnered more respect by virtue of his position. Also, the focus groups suggest that, in comparison to *Moodle* forums, blogs are seen more favorably because they are easier to access and don't have as heavy an academic tone.

Table 6
*Focus Group Responses Addressing Attitudes towards and Perceptions of
 Community Blogs*

<u>Questions and Responses</u>	<u>Freq</u>
<i>What are the strengths of a community blogging as part of a class?</i>	
You can express things and can share. Instead of going to everyone individually can just post it.	1
In a class blog you can't post but in a community blog you can.	1
<i>What are the weaknesses of community blogging as part of a class?</i>	
It can be dangerous if you give away personal information which more people will see because it's not just a comment but is a post.	1
No weaknesses because you choose theme, write and post things.	1
<i>Did you read the community blog? Why/why not?</i>	
Yes, often, because it's a community blog so everyone posts, had more opinions. Student blogs have just one perspective.	1
<i>How do community blogs and forums on Moodle compare?</i>	
[A community blog is superior to a Moodle forum]	3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A community blog can show whatever you want but Moodle posts only what the teacher wants. It's not your choice to change topic. • A community blog has much less clicking so it's easier. • You might not look at Moodle everyday but you might look at the blog everyday because you are curious about what your friends commented on or posted. Moodle is just about homework and grades. 	
<i>Is posting on a community blog different than on a student blog or class blog?</i>	
[The role of the teacher]	4
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • they're the same because both need to be approved by the teacher. • they're the same because just the post writer changes. • class blog is better than community blog because we respect the teacher's posts more than the students'. • I was more interested in what the teacher writes because the teacher writes homework, gives grades, more important ideas and writes better. 	
a community blog is easier than a student blog because of less clicking.	1
[community blogs receive higher traffic than student blogs]	2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • on a student blog maybe no one will look. • different. Everyone looks at the community blog more because we have to do it sometimes so we have to be more careful. 	
[community blogs feel more public than student blogs.]	2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • comparing a class blog to a community blog: a class blog class feels closed to the public, feels like it focuses on the class because of its name: "class" blog. • Different. In the class blog we learned more things about English. In the community blog there were more topics away from school. 	
<i>It looked like people were less interested in the community blog than the class blog. What do you think?</i>	
[students post less effectively than the teacher.]	2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, because in the community blog, not everyone is interested in the topic chosen by the student. • yes, it's hard to find a good topic to post on the community blog. I don't know about American football or something like that. 	
we needed to respond to the teacher's posts but for students don't give the same respect.	1
[heavy workload reduces community blog usage.]	3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • we have a lot of work to do right now so class or community blog didn't make a difference. • It's a part of life. Especially because of exams we were very busy so not a community blog problem just busy problem. • homework and exams are heavy now. 	

Attitudes towards and perceptions of blogs: an interview with Seda (pseudonym)

Seda is one of the top students in the 6th grade and an avid equestrian. She started a personal blog in the 4th grade as a computer-class activity but began to blog actively in the 5th grade in an effort to publicize the plight of race horses upon hearing that Turkish race horses are slaughtered once their racing careers are over. Socially, she has a few close friends but is not one of the most popular girls.

Seda likes blogging because of its communicative power and because it is done using a computer. In fact, she likes using computers so much that she would prefer more homework if it would mean that more class time would be spent using computers for activities such as blogging. Additionally, she appreciates blogs' ability to easily facilitate communication. She appreciates that on blogs millions of people may see, comment and share views. "Our class is very small; blogging gives different perspectives". She finds blogs very different to paper assignment because traditional assignments "can't be passed on to people easily but a blog is seen directly so it's easier to find and comment. If communicating verbally, it's hard to keep track of what people say but on a blog you can do it even if weeks have passed". On the other hand a blog needs the internet to be working. "TTN [my internet service provider] slows down at night a lot so I had to do work early in the evening".

She enjoyed and cared about designing her student blog. "I liked to individualize because it feels like its original, only mine, doesn't look like anyone else's". She tried every theme available and finally chose one that was "nice but not too fancy because if it's too fancy people will look at the background instead of reading the content". She has a sophisticated perspective of blogs' multimedia potential. Multimedia is an important feature of blogs because "they catch the readers' interest and people like to

learn in different ways, not just reading”. For her first post, she took her time to find an impressive, powerful photo of a horse because of what she views as images' great power in forming her readers' views. On the other hand, she is realistic, saying, “photos are important but I didn’t use them a lot because sometimes I don’t want to bother searching for things on the internet”. Her one frustration with student blogs is that sometimes readers didn't choose to comment so she didn't get much feedback except for comments from her teacher.

For Seda, the interactive nature of blogs transfers to class blogs and community blogs as well. “On a class blog and community blog, we see each other’s comments, not just our own so we get ideas from other comments”. She sees a democratization of class politics through blogs: “If a person is not respected, on the blog people may still read his blog because when you scan the content you may not pay attention to who posted it”. Also, she believes that people may use computers for teasing but “this shouldn't be a problem if the teacher monitors the blog”. She would like to have a class blog again next year because “it's a fun way of doing class.”

Use of blogging as an instructional strategy

Data on students' perceptions of learning as supported by the use of blogging as an instructional strategy of blogs were gathered through surveys, focus groups, and interviews done prior to, during and after the blogging activity. Nearly all data gathered suggest that students perceived that they learned well using blogging.

Survey: Students' perceptions of learning as supported by the use of blogging as an instructional strategy

Seven questions addressed perceived learning as supported by blogging in general, as summarized in Table 7. In this section of the survey a five-point Likert-type scale (5=Strongly Agree, 4=Agree, 3=Neutral, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree) was used. As all questions were phrased positively, the calculation of *Favorable* was calculated by adding the frequencies of responses of Strongly Agree and Agree and converting them into a percentage. A Favorability Scale was developed to provide a referent to the scores: extreme favorability 96-100; very high favorability 85-95; moderately high favorability 75-84; fair favorability 60-74; mildly favorable 50-59; unfavorable <50.

The survey results (Table 7) suggest that students had favorable perceptions of learning as supported by the use of blogging as an instructional strategy. All of the responses were favorable to blogging. They changed very little according to the pre-, mid-, and post-surveys, with the exception of *My point of view has been accepted by my classmates and/or discussion leader in this class*, which increased ($M_{pre}=3.76$, $M_{mid}=4.34$, $M_{post}=4.53$). Five items showed very high (85%-91%) favorability towards blogs, the highest two being (*Overall using the blog has helped me learn* (Favorable=91%, $M=4.41$, $SD=0.68$); and *Other students' comments on my blog posts were important* (Favorable=88%, $M=4.44$, $SD=0.72$); two items had moderately high favorability (80%,81%); one item had fair favorability (71%); and one item had a mildly favorable rating, *I have visited our English blog more than required by my teacher* (Favorable=59%, $M=3.79$, $SD=1.19$). The survey results demonstrate favorable perceptions of learning as supported by the use of blogging as an instructional strategy.

Table 7
Students' Perceptions of Learning as Supported by the use of Blogging as an Instructional Strategy

Item	Pre-Activity Survey			Mid-Activity Survey			Post-Activity Survey			Overall		
	Favorable+ %	n	Mean SD	Favorable+ %	n	Mean SD	Favorable+ %	n	Mean SD	Mean	SD	Favorable+ %
Overall using the blog has helped me learn.	92	38	4.34 0.71	89	38	4.39 0.68	92	38	4.5 0.65	4.41	0.68	91
Other students' comments on my blog posts were important.	87	38	4.26 0.76	87	38	4.55 0.72	89	38	4.5 0.69	4.44	0.72	88
The blog discussions helped me to share my knowledge and experience with my peers.	89	38	4.42 0.68	82	38	4.13 0.93	87	38	4.42 0.72	4.32	0.78	86
Blog discussions have helped me understand other points of view.	89	36	4.31 0.89	76	38	4.24 0.88	89	37	4.54 0.77	4.36	0.85	85
I believe that incorporating blogs with teaching increased my learning experience in general.	84	38	4.29 0.73	82	38	4.21 0.96	76	37	4.24 0.83	4.25	0.84	81
My point of view has been accepted by my classmates and/or discussion leader in this class.	68	38	3.76 0.75	84	38	4.34 0.81	87	38	4.53 0.73	4.21	0.76	80
Blog discussions have made me think about English concepts outside of this class.	74	38	4.03 0.94	66	38	3.95 1.06	74	38	4.16 0.97	4.04	0.99	71
I have visited our English blog more than required by my teacher.	53	38	3.61 1.17	66	38	3.97 1.17	59	38	3.79 1.23	3.79	1.19	59

Notes: A five-point Likert-type scale (5=Strongly Agree, 4=Agree, 3=Neutral, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree).

As all questions were phrased positively, the calculation of Favorable was calculated by adding the frequencies of responses scoring 4 or 5 and converting them into a percentage.

Favorability Scale: extreme favorability 96-100; very high favorability 85-95; moderately high favorability 75-84; fair favorability 60-74; mildly favorable 50-59; unfavorable <50.

Focus group responses addressing student perceptions of learning with blogs

As can be seen in Table 8, most students perceived that reading and writing during the blogging activity aided their learning. Nearly all responses were positive. The most popular perspectives were that by reading posts one can learn new information and can gather new points of view, learning occurs most frequently from the teacher's actions, reading comments on own posts improves one's own work, and reading comments on others' posts helps one's own comment-writing skills. On the negative side, students believed that blogs do not have a significant effect on technical skills such as keyboarding skills.

Table 8
Focus Group Responses Addressing Student Perceptions of Learning with Blogs

<u>Questions and Responses</u>	<u>Freq</u>
<i>Does reading posts contribute to your learning?</i>	
[one can learn new information]	2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, if they provide specific information. • Kind of, you can learn from their recommendations, for example, you can get facts from videos they post. 	
Yes. There are different points of view. They think one thing but I think something else, there is a different or better point of view.	1
Yes, for example, you can make better sentences by looking at friends' posts, see how others do it and copy their grammar.	1
Yes, because when I read friends' post, I learned how they feel on emotional post.	1
Some posts were boring-like Mehmet's about...A post can be an action one like the one about martians which to me was interesting because I also wonder about space.	1
It depends on the person writing, but could be a lot.	1
[The teacher helps learning the most.]	3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From the teacher's posts maybe be learn how to improve. • Yes, because hopefully/usually the teacher gives good info. • Some posts are boring but the teacher's posts are good. You need to want to respond to it. It needs to say, 'come on, comment to me!' 	
<i>Do comments on your post contribute to your learning?</i>	
[comments are important to learning.]	2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher comments are more important, they know the effectiveness of our writing. • I disagree because both [teacher's and students' comments] are important because we learn what both friends and teacher think although more teacher because because teacher knows best 	
When you read others comments you get their point of view.	1
[readings others' comments is helpful to develop own ideas.]	3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some student comments had good ideas which I used in my writing. • I got their ideas and changed some things if I thought their ideas were useful, that is, I agreed with them. • Yes. My commenting improved by reading others' effective comments. 	
<i>Does reading students' comments on others' posts contribute to your learning?</i>	
[I learned about my self or my own work from others' comments.]	3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, more than learning, made me think. Some factual, others like "what make me smile" made me reflect about myself and I learned about others through their comments. • From comment I also learned about mistakes, some good things about writing. • I learned how to write a good comment to not make student feel bad and tell his/her mistakes at the same time. 	
[I learned about friends' from others' comments.]	2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I can learn from posted things, gives information about person writing and content like short stories. • I can learn others' points of view like there was a post asking which was your favorite book this year and E.'s post about Love that Dog. I learned students' perspectives. 	
<i>Did using a blog make it easier/harder/different to do homework, connect classwork with homework?</i>	
It made it easier. Instead of a planner, I just look at the site.	1
<i>Can you transfer what you learned in blogs to other situations?</i>	
Yes, post/comment then use idea with homework/group/life.	1
<i>Talk about technical skills gained with blogs such as typing skills, computer skills, internet skills.</i>	
this was not improved on with blogs.	Con sen sus

Perceptions of learning as supported by the use of blogging as an instructional strategy: an interview with Naz (pseudonym)

Naz has been at BLIS for eight years and has many friends in and out of school. She says that she cares a great deal about her lessons and is an average student.

She believes many activities in blogging contributed to her learning. She found reading her friends' posts was helpful because she could see different types of writing from her peers which opened her eyes. Students' comments were also helpful because "they know me as a person." The comments were mostly restricted to whether her writing was interesting or boring, but for more academic issues she dismisses their feedback: "Their comments actually don't help learning because they're just students like me.... What they have to say about grammar I don't really care". Conversely, Naz places a great deal of value in her teacher's posts and comments: "I really care about what the teacher posts. Teacher posts are great because the teacher knows what is important". She also gives great authority to the teacher in comments: "They are really important because the teacher knows the right writing skills and there's no chance to make a wrong comment".

She also believes she learns when she posts her own work. "I care about what I put on the blog more than normal because friends will read my work and think bad things [if I write poorly] so I am rechecking. I can see my mistakes and am able to change and when I change it is helpful to learning".

She would like to have blogging again next year because she thinks it'll help her English skills. However, she does not want it for other subjects because she does not

believe it will help them. In her opinion, English is unique because it is a second language and therefore students make more mistakes. To her, learning happens by learning from mistakes.

Writing skills as supported by the use of blogging as an instructional strategy

Students' perceptions of their writing skills as supported by the use of blogging as an instructional strategy were gathered through surveys, focus groups, and interviews done prior to, during and after the blogging activity. The survey and focus group responses show that students perceive blogging as helpful to their writing skills, though the interview suggests otherwise.

Survey: Students' perceptions of writing skills as supported by blogging

Five questions addressed how students perceive their writing skills as supported by the use of blogging as an instructional strategy, as summarized in Table 9. In this section of the survey a five-point Likert-type scale (5=Strongly Agree, 4=Agree, 3=Neutral, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree) was used. As all questions were phrased positively, the calculation of *Favorable* was calculated by adding the frequencies of responses of Strongly Agree and Agree and converting them into a percentage. A Favorability Scale was developed to provide a referent to the scores: extreme favorability 96-100; very high favorability 85-95; moderately high favorability 75-84; fair favorability 60-74; mildly favorable 50-59; unfavorable <50.

Table 9
Students' Perceptions of Writing Skills as Supported by Blogging

Item	Pre-Activity Survey			Mid-Activity Survey			Post-Activity Survey			Overall		
	Favorable ^a %	n	Mean SD	Favorable ^a %	n	Mean SD	Favorable ^a %	n	Mean SD	Mean	SD	Favorable ^a %
Using a blog has helped my writing skills.	89	38	4.42 0.76	87	38	4.34 0.94	95	38	4.53 0.69	4.43	0.79	90
Using a blog has helped my English skills.	87	38	4.34 0.78	71	38	4.13 1.00	87	38	4.42 0.79	4.30	0.87	82
I spent more time on my writing because other students and not just my teacher read my work on blogs.	71	38	4.05 0.99	76	38	4.21 0.87	92	36	4.47 0.84	4.24	0.90	80
I spent more time on my writing because perhaps people from outside BLIS and not just my teacher read my work on blogs.	76	38	4.13 0.96	68	38	4.16 1.13	87	38	4.50 0.89	4.26	0.99	77
I was able to express myself better by uploading pictures and videos.	84	38	4.24 0.88	59	38	3.92 1.00	59	38	3.82 1.14	3.99	1.01	67

Notes: A five-point Likert-type scale (5=Strongly Agree, 4=Agree, 3=Neutral, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree).

As all questions were phrased positively, the calculation of Favorable was calculated by adding the frequencies of responses scoring 4 or 5 and converting them into a percentage.

Favorability Scale: extreme favorability 96-100; very high favorability 85-95; moderately high favorability 75-84; fair favorability 60-74; mildly favorable 50-59; unfavorable <50.

The survey results suggest that students had favorable perceptions of how blogging supported their writing skills. All of the responses were favorable to blogging. There was some change over the pre-, mid-, and post-surveys. The response to *I spent more time on my writing because other students and not just my teacher read my work on blogs* increased ($M_{pre}=4.05$, $M_{mid}=4.21$, $M_{post}=4.47$) while *I was able to express myself better by uploading pictures and videos* decreased ($M_{pre}=4.24$, $M_{mid}=3.92$, $M_{post}=3.82$). Very high favorability was shown by one item, *Using a blog has helped my writing skills* (Favorable=90%, $M=4.43$, $SD=0.79$); three items had moderately-high favorability ratings (77%-82%); and one item, *I was able to express myself better by uploading pictures and videos* (Favorable=67%, $M=3.99$, $SD=1.01$), had moderately high favorability.

Focus group responses addressing student perceptions of blogging's impact on their writing skills

Table 10 shows that most students perceived blogging to be helpful to their writing skills as nearly all responses were positive. The most frequent favorable responses suggest that having a wider audience than the teacher and even more so outside the BLIS community makes students take greater ownership of their work and the fear of embarrassment motives them to be more careful and that writing skills should improve due to comments and extra care. On the other hand, technical difficulties with concrete poems frustrated students. There were two issues whose location on the positive-negative continuum is debatable. First, students believed that they would write shorter pieces for blogs because on this media writing tends to be shorter, and second, students said that they would not write differently with different media available to them in a blogging context.

Table 10
Focus Group Responses Addressing Student Perceptions of Blogging's Impact on Their Writing Skills

<u>Questions and Responses</u>	<u>Freq.</u>
<i>Does having a wider audience affect your writing?</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, because I feel special. That makes you write more and more carefully because others look at your posts. • Before I didn't care about my writing because no one will look at it but after two weeks I saw many people saw my blog and commented. That made me really careful about my writing. I personally changed. Now I always check my work twice or triple because now I care about my writing. • Yes, because you want to make people come to your blog more often. • I was happy. Other people asked questions about my writing which showed that they really read it. 	2 2 2
[Fear of embarrassment motivates some students to work harder.]	6
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It makes it better because you don't want everybody looking and saying " he can't write". • We try to do better because everyone sees it, they see mistakes, I will be embarrassed. • People's comment may be important. For example, if a poem is embarrassing you may not do poem again. • A lot of people will read so I don't want something foolish to be shown to them so you will write the best that you can, will work harder not to be embarrassed. • fear of embarrassment • I don't want to be embarrassed 	
I tried to not offend someone because with a wider audience you need to think about everyone.	1
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Now I take people's comments more seriously, more in consideration because when we first started I didn't think they would be that important but now I see they could improve my writing, can make comments which open a debate or improve my writing or can give a comment like a teacher does. • Because we are trying our best it should improve our writing skills. 	2 2
Blogging helps me look at a piece of writing from different points of view. Some people commented and it made me see other views.	1
(Pre-focus group) I expect that on one or very few people will read it. Why would they read it?	1
[Writing will be shorter.]	5
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It will make my writing shorter because I don't want to spend an hour reading a blog. • I agree with this opinion. • Not very long but not too short is important but may be looking for info. • Short cuts for words are better. • I like short cuts too 	
<i>Do you write differently with the different media available?</i>	
No	c'sus
Yes, because reader can use video instead of reading that part	1
<i>Has anyone from outside the school read your posts? How do you know? How did this make you feel?</i>	
I don't know because I don't have a ClustrMap.	1
[People from outside BLIS have read students' posts.]	5
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mom, dad, brother, one uncle grandma and grandpa maybe a couple other people from my family because they told me and say they like it. • Someone looked at my blog from California. Makes a difference to writing except friends family, you want to do your best. • More people read my blog which encouraged me to continue blogging and do my blog. • In my student blog two people looked for fun from The States. It feels great because I feel other people from other countries looked. • Yes, because ClustrMap showed others read too. Made me feel good because it would be good...in 5th grade on one looked just 1-2 people . I was sad because no one looked. 	
Did it make a difference to how you wrote your short stories that they were going to be posted?	

Yes, everyone is in 6th grade so everyone reads it so I wrote more carefully. Spelling, length, ideas, everything changed. 1

[technical problems.] 3

- It was harder to post a concrete poem. Scanning etc took 20 minutes for 1 poem. Worth it because cool thing and had fun putting it on the blog.
- Concrete poem was hard. I just wrote it directly on the blog and put spaces. But it was hard because when I published it, things moved so I had to change it
- Another problem was one them had spaces between lines but I couldn't see it so when I changed themes spaces came up which I couldn't see before

Student perceptions of blogging's impact on their writing skills: An interview with Kaan (pseudonym)

“I have a good imagination and believe in unusual things like dragons and Minotaurs” Kaan admits when describing himself. He further admits that he does not study for tests or do much homework with the exception of that which he can do by building or drawing something. He is also not a model student in English class where he frequently talks in Turkish even though it is forbidden. He prefers working in groups because he can get help from his friends. Perhaps unexpectedly, he loves to write fantasy stories, although he admits that in English they are usually riddled with grammar or punctuation errors.

He says that blogging has not affected his writing. He does not have a *ClustrMap* on his blog so has no knowledge of visitors to his blog except for comments on the blog or comments made to him orally. He does not really care if anyone reads his work on the blog because he shares his stories with neighborhood friends and an audience of one is no worse to him than a large one. It would make no difference to him if a Canadian or any other stranger read his work because “people are people”.

Social aspects of a blogging-enhanced teaching-learning environment

Students' perceptions of the social aspects of a blogging-enhanced teaching-learning environment were gathered through surveys, focus groups, and interviews done prior to, during and after the blogging activity. The surveys focused on a sense of community, an important social aspect. The focus group and interview looked at a sense of community and other aspects of this construction. The data shows that students perceive the social aspects of a blogging-enhanced teaching-learning environment favorably.

Survey: Students' perceptions of the social aspects of a blogging-enhanced teaching-learning environment

Six questions addressed how students perceive a sense of community, an important social aspects of a blogging-enhanced teaching-learning environment, as summarized in Table 11. In this section of the survey a five-point Likert-type scale (5=Strongly Agree, 4=Agree, 3=Neutral, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree) was used. As all questions were phrased positively, the calculation of *Favorable* was calculated by adding the frequencies of responses of Strongly Agree and Agree and converting them into a percentage. A Favorability Scale was developed to provide a referent to the scores: extreme favorability 96-100; very high favorability 85-95; moderately high favorability 75-84; fair favorability 60-74; mildly favorable 50-59; unfavorable <50.

Table 11

Students' Perceptions of the Social Aspects of a Blogging-Enhanced Teaching-Learning Environment

Item	Pre-Activity Survey			Mid-Activity Survey			Post-Activity Survey			Overall		
	Favorable* %	n	Mean SD	Favorable* %	n	Mean SD	Favorable* %	n	Mean SD	Mean SD	Favorable* %	
Due to the blog, I feel that I am an important part of our classroom community.	74	38	4.18 1.01	74	38	3.92 1.08	76	38	4.16 0.86	4.09 0.98	75	
The blog has helped me feel connected to other students in this class.	71	38	4.05 0.98	71	38	3.95 1.01	76	38	4.21 0.87	4.07 0.96	73	
In comparison to my other classes, the quality of interaction with other students in this class has increased due to the blog.	76	38	4.11 0.89	66	38	4.00 0.96	68	37	4.05 0.91	4.05 0.92	70	
In comparison to my other classes, the amount of my interaction with other students in this class has increased due to the blog.	71	38	3.97 0.94	63	38	3.84 1.00	68	38	4.03 0.82	3.95 0.92	67	
I have been stimulated to do additional readings or research on topics discussed on the blog.	74	38	3.95 0.98	66	38	3.92 0.97	59	38	3.84 1.08	3.90 1.01	66	
I have visited our English blog more than required by my teacher.	53	38	3.61 1.17	66	38	3.97 1.17	59	38	3.79 1.23	3.79 1.19	59	

Notes: A five-point Likert-type scale (5=Strongly Agree, 4=Agree, 3=Neutral, 2=Disagree, 1=Strongly Disagree);

As all questions were phrased positively, the calculation of Favorable was calculated by adding the frequencies of responses scoring 4 or 5 and converting them into a percentage.

Favorability Scale: extreme favorability 96-100; very high favorability 85-95; moderately high favorability 75-84; fair favorability 60-74; mildly favorable 50-59; unfavorable <50.

The survey results suggest that students had favorable perceptions of a sense of community. There was little change over the pre-, mid-, and post-surveys. One item had moderately high favorability, *Due to the blog, I feel that I am an important member of our classroom community* (Favorable=75%, M=4.09, SD=0.98); four items showed fair favorability (66%-73%); and one item (*I have visited our English blog more than required by my teacher* (Favorable=59%, M=3.79, SD=1.19)) received a mildly favorable rating.

Focus group responses addressing student perceptions of the social aspects of blogging

The results of the focus groups, as seen in Table 11, show that most students perceived the social aspects of a blogging-enhanced teaching-learning environment positively. Students demonstrated they valued their peers socially by seeking their perspectives, being interested in them and wanting to get to know them better. They were also concerned about not hurting their feelings. On the other hand, some students felt that they did not need a blog for social interactions because they occurred during other times.

Table 12
Focus Group Responses Addressing Student Perceptions of the Social Aspects of Blogging

<u>Questions and Responses</u>	<u>Fre</u>
<i>Are you looking forward to reading what your classmates post?</i>	
[Students were interested in peers comments.]	6
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes. I expect different and interesting things from friends. They write differently on the internet, less formally. • Yes, I expect interesting things from my friends. • Interesting, you can see what they think of your or others' posts. • I am a little excited to see what friends write and what ideas they have. • It also excited me to see that my friends wanted to read friends' short stories and stuff to see if anyone wrote anything interesting. • Yes, because I wanted to see what they were writing about, thinking. 	
[Students value their peers' varying perspectives.]	7
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, because you get different perspectives. • Another point of view, way of knowing them, way of knowing their ideas. • Yes, because I expect it to be interesting because there are different views, perspectives. • Point of view is important. You can suggest to them, request a comment to see their point of view, feel good if others comment and are very positive. Negative comments: depends on comment whether it effects you. • Yes because you learn your friends' thoughts, learn what they think of you is better. • Yes, same ideas as the one above, thought about different topics, ideas about them. • It is great to read other comments to your ideas. You want to understand how others think of you. 	
• Content is more important than who is writing it.	1
• It is fun to look at friends' design and content of blog.	2
• I wanted to see how they did their story and blog theme.	
• <i>Did blogging connect you to others in grade 6?</i>	
• From posts I learned what they like or think about in their free time so we get to know them better.	2
• Yes, because from posts we can learn what you have in common. We can get to know them and them to know you more too.	
• No, because I know everyone and blog doesn't make me become friends.	2
• No, because I didn't really comment with friends. I didn't really make comments.	
• <i>Were you afraid of offending anyone?</i>	
• people when commenting sometimes, because not it's not easy to say a bad thing to a person if they made a mistake but I wanted them to improve.	2
• No, because the teacher said use sandwich method. Sandwich method was sometimes hard because sometimes I can't find good and bad stuff to say.	
• <i>How do you find the social side of blogging to be in the areas of emotional support, companionship, advice?</i>	
If people didn't comment you would feel bad because you shared and they didn't comment. I want to learn their thoughts.	1
I don't care about student comments because they usually think like me but teacher comments I care about because teacher controls the report card. I want feedback on work and it's also important for teacher to know me and me to know teacher. I connected to teacher through blog different than class.	1
when I read a friends' post, I learned how they feel on an emotional post	1

Student perceptions of social aspects of a blogging-enhanced teaching-learning environment: an interview with Damla (pseudonym)

Damla is a very popular and social girl who likes to have fun. She sometimes gets in trouble in class because her priorities are not academic.

Damla made many comments on her peers' blogs and received quite a few herself. She usually commented on her friends' posts, most of whom are popular students themselves, yet she also commented on a few, less popular classmates' posts. She made a point of being positive and polite when commenting. Her voraciousness to comment started inadvertently. On the first assignment she was required to make comments on two blogs, but made many more because “it's fun to comment to make people notice something”. In fact, she did not see commenting as a social activity but a personal one: “I started with two comments because we had to do that but I saw that it was enjoyable to read stories which surprised me because they wrote so creatively so it was fun to read. Then I thought if I'm reading I should comment”.

Damla was not afraid of expressing her views openly because she was not worried people would laugh at her in the same way people do not laugh at her in person. In her mind commenting on the blog is the same as face-to-face communication. Similarly, she is not concerned about offending others because she rarely offends them at other times. Friends didn't write “annoying” comments, just wanted her to improve, so she listened to their advice. “Mostly they said the same thing: spelling”.

She found blogging supportive in terms of emotional support, companionship and advice because blogging is good social and academic feedback. In fact Damla found it hard to separate or express the difference between the academic and social side of

blogging. For a girl who is extremely social and not very academic, this may either be due to difficulty in identifying or expressing the difference or because the two have melded in the blogging experience.

Challenges and opportunities

To answer this sub-question *What challenges and opportunities a teacher faces when employing blogging as an instructional strategy*, the teacher-researcher used descriptive and reflective field notes and kept a journal to record observations of students' work, comments, and behaviors and reflections on teacher-researcher's decisions on blogging and related activities. Content analysis of the data led to the development of several themes centered around what would perhaps be natural for a teacher to consider: how to use blogging as a teaching strategy to maximize students' learning and to create a safe, positive, learning environment in cyberspace but also one that supported the classroom and homework. The themes identified are: Safety, blog vision, blog design, pacing of blogging activities, technical training of students, and learning through commenting.

Safety

When educators plan an activity which relinquishes some control to students, especially if has the potential of involving people from outside the classroom community, safety has to be a primary concern. The easiest way of eliminating most of the dangers of blogs would be to make the blogs only visible to members of the class. However, as this eliminates many of the positive features of blogging and some measures can be taken to reduce most risks, it was decided that the dangers were outweighed by the advantages of allowing public access to the blogs.

The issue of blog safety needs to be addressed regarding several dangers. Students' privacy has to be protected from their classmates, others in the community and beyond. As students were already posting information on the internet, it was an opportunistic learning moment to expand the issue of safety beyond blogs to the field of internet safety in general and then to bring the focus back to the blogging activity. An informal survey of students' internet-use practices quickly revealed that students regularly posted publicly on *Facebook* or other sites personal information such as their first and last name, date of birth, name of school, etc. After a brief discussion of the risks, students commented on the benefits of keeping this information private. Students were provided with a list of information that was not to be posted on their blogs and were only then permitted to set up their blogs. Most students complied with these restrictions, though despite being explicitly forbidden to post any of a dozen specific personal items on their posts, on two occasions students attempted to post their last names and one attempted to post his email address. When queried about these acts, the students explained that they forgot or it was "automatic", not an unexpected answer for students in this age-group.

One important item students have the potential of posting on blogs which has particular security implications is their photo, as this is commonly perceived to be a dangerous source of information for predators prowling the internet. To deal with this issue, parents were asked whether or not they permitted their child's photo to be posted on the blogs, which four parents decided to not allow. To comply with these parents' wishes, the teacher monitored all the blogs to ensure that those students' photos were not posted, which was the case.

In addition to students posting dangerous data on the blogs, another safety concern involves individuals outside the school community posting dangerous information on the blogs as comments or using comments to solicit private information from the students. The easiest way to deal with this would be not to allow any comments on blogs or only allow students in the class to comment. This consideration was dismissed after the risks and benefits of commenting being permitted to everyone was thought through, though some prudent measures had to be applied. The first step in reducing the potential dangers of commenting was to select an option provided by the blog provider, *edublogs.org*, of requiring anyone who wished to comment to provide an email address and to enter a security code to pass the anti-spam guard.

Additionally, all comments for the class/community blog and all student blogs had to be approved by the teacher before appearing on the blog. The approval process involved every comment being sent to the teacher's email account, getting reviewed by the teacher and, if approved, getting posted on the blog. No dangerous comments were attempted, though three spam messages made it through the anti-spam guard and were pending comments in the teacher's email inbox. However, these were innocuous advertisements for clothing and such products and regardless, were rejected by the teacher prior to becoming visible on the blogs.

The above issues about safety demonstrate that the two key factors in creating a safe blogging environment are that first, the teacher vigilantly monitors all information entering and leaving the blogs and second, the teacher has full authorization to edit every aspect of the blogs. The teacher's absolute monitoring and maximum authorization are key to safely conducting educational blogging.

However, even with the above taking place, if the educational benefits of blogging are maximized, there is still a small risk of inappropriate comments getting read by students. This is because comments pending approval are sent to a folder that can be read by the blog owner while simultaneously being sent to the teacher's email address. Consequently, pending comments can be viewed by students if they look for pending comments on their own blogs, though once deleted by the teacher they cannot be viewed. Again, careful monitoring by the teacher minimizes this risk.

This risk exists due to a defect in *edublog.org*'s access system. While the access system provides five levels of increasing authorization, each level is also inexorably linked to access of information, consequently maximum authorization can only occur with maximum access to information. Authorization is critical to blog's educational benefits because control of themes, widgets and plugins is critical for students' individualization of their blogs. However, maximum access to information can lead to students reading unvetted comments. Hence, *edublog.org*'s access system, by linking authorization and access to information, has created a conflict between a blog's educational benefits and ability to operate at optimal safety. When this defect was discovered by the teacher, he informed the principal and director of the educational benefits and potential dangers of giving students full access to their blogs and suggested that the teacher's vigilance could reduce the risk to a miniscule level. The administrators agreed and the teacher monitored comments on a daily basis.

Fortunately, no inappropriate comments were sent. Lastly, if blogging was going to be pursued further, the teacher would contact Sue Waters of *edublogs.org* to request that the access system be changed to detach authorization and access statuses. Not only have others commented on *edublogs.org*'s blog that this is a problem for them as well,

Ms. Waters has been proficient at responding to the teacher-researcher's queries and *edublogs.org* makes improvements on a regular basis that are made in response to users' requests. This issue can be examined further by analyzing how it is dealt with by other blog providers.

The above situation demonstrates that there are some safety issues with blogging, though these can be overcome for the most part. Additionally, for ethical purposes, teachers must raise safety concerns about blogging activities and receive approval by administrators in the same way that they would with traditional classroom activities.

Blog vision

The teacher must have a vision for the kind of blog he wants. It is an advantage of blogs that they are malleable, though the many choices can be troublesome as there are many large and small decisions to be made. After looking at various blogs for inspiration, considering the curriculum to be taught, the students' needs, technological and other resources at the school and finally the teacher's own needs, desires, skills, and style, the teacher made some decisions that shaped the blogging activity.

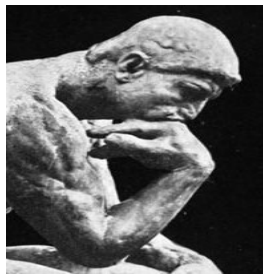


Figure 5. Two images used in the class blog (blistr6, 2011b)

First, the vision for the blogging activity was that it would encourage students to participate by making it as much as possible an engaging activity and a social locale. At the same time, it would be more of an academic blog than a social or fun blog. To accomplish both apparently contradictory aims, the teacher attempted to create activities for students which were educational and addressed the curriculum and students' learning needs in ways that engaged them and/or encourage social interplay. For example, the teacher worked hard to include a graphic image with every post, usually one that he thought would have appeal to the student audience. For instance, Rodin's "The Thinker" was juxtaposed with a thinking chimpanzee on a post about how to comment (blistr6, 2011b; Also, see Figure 5).

Videos were similarly used, such as on a post whose intention was to develop greater understanding of a *Whodunit Mystery*, a genre being studied as per the curriculum. When formative assessments showed that many students understood most traits of a Whodunit but found it difficult to understand that the lack of a few key traits meant it could not be a *Whodunit*, a blogging activity using video was utilized to great effect. The activity involved posting two videos, a segment of *CSI: New York*, a popular television show that has many traits of a *Whodunit* but lacks a few key ones, and a well-crafted *Whodunit* (blistr6, 2011c). Students were required to compare and contrast them with reference to the criteria of the whodunit genre. To create a social space, students were encouraged to comment on each others' work and were taught how to comment in a way that would be helpful without being overly critical. One method that proved useful was the "sandwich" approach, in which comments began with a positive statement, followed by a constructive negative statement, followed by a positive statement (blistr6, 2011d).

In informal discussions with students, they regularly remarked how the videos and graphics were engaging and commenting, receiving comments, and reading others' comments before responding helped them learn content and about their classmates in a new way that they liked and brought them closer to their peers. Dale, a colleague who also uses blogging with his high school students, mentioned that these blogs received many more comments from classmates than his blogs and that the comments were of quality and that they added to student learning and a sense of community. He and the teacher-researcher compared and contrasted their blogging methodologies which revealed that the teacher-researcher required students to comment while Dale left it as a voluntary activity. In sum, the blog fulfilled its vision in that it was mostly an academic activity which emphasized student learning of what was on the curriculum, yet at the same time, it attempted to appeal to the students' personal and social needs.

Blog design

Another important means of achieving success with the blogs is more subtle than the above but is just as critical: blog design. The blog's design needs to be both functional and attractive in meeting the blog's vision. The teacher spent many hours searching for a look for the blog including its theme, banner, widgets and plugins.

To understand the process of developing the blog's look, it may be useful to dismantle the thinking process with a representational consideration: selecting the blog's banner--a large picture that appears at the top of the blog. The teacher finally settled upon a picture of a black swan for several reasons. First, it was an attractive picture, second, several students were interested in the film of the same name which had

recently come out in the theater and may therefore spur some interesting discussions, third, it was appealing to the teacher for the very personal reason that he has an interest in the black swan phenomenon, and fourth, the curriculum encourages critical thinking which this image may inspire. Collectively, it would appear that the picture matched the blog's vision.

Pacing of blogging activities

The pre-blogging activity survey and focus groups suggested that students had very favorable attitudes and perspectives of blogging. It was essential to maintain this positive outlook right from the onset of blogging and to build on it for the goals of the blogging activity. Activities had to be carefully selected to create a progression in terms of student confidence, engagement, and interaction skills, in balance with curricular needs. It was critical to begin with an activity which required few technical skills, did not require high levels of interaction skills, though was full of engagement. An activity which accomplished the above should give students confidence and continue the positive view of blogging so that when more challenging content and skills were required, they would persevere. The students needed to be positively inclined toward all the blogging that would follow, therefore for this critical first activity, enthusiasm had to trump all curricular needs. The activity asked students to post something that "made them smile" which could be interpreted in the broadest possible way. Some students shared anecdotes, some their thoughts, others images and still others videos. Students were thrilled to post and equally eager to read their friends' posts in an activity that created enthusiasm and a positive, fun branding of blogging.

Later activities built on the above by demanding and teaching increasingly difficult technical and interactive skills, and by making the content more challenging.

Technical skills and interactive skills are discussed below and content can be understood from the example of the comparison and contrast comments needed for the *Whodunit* genre mentioned above.

Technical training of students

One reason to start with a class blog is that students can become competent with a few simple features such as commenting before they begin their student blogs where they must learn more sophisticated features such as choosing a theme, adding a widget or posting. The teacher-researcher's many years of experience with middle-schoolers in an ICT setting and in particular their attempts at setting up turnitin.com accounts made him certain that most students would need close, face-to-face technical and emotional support if they were to set up their student blogs successfully. Therefore, rather than directing students to set up the blogs on their own at home, the computer lab was used. Students fairly independently followed written instructions on how to set-up their student blogs, though they needed some emotional support and/or technical support at key steps. An added feature of working in a collective setting was that students could choose to work independently, with teacher support, or peer support.

In fact, the student blogs could have more easily and quickly been set-up by the teacher-researcher, though this contradicted his pedagogical view that the technical skills gained here could be useful in later life, but even more importantly, that by

going through this procedure, students would have a greater sense of ownership of their student blog.

Several procedures made the experience easier to manage. When setting up their blogs, students were required to name their blog according to the following url convention: `firstnameblistr6@edublogs.org`. This made searching for particular student blogs later on much easier. Also, before they left the lab, they had to invite the teacher-researcher to be an administrator on their blog which gave him full access to it. Additionally, students were required to add a *ClustrMap* to their blog which counted the number and geographical origins of visitors to their blog. Later, this proved to be a powerful tool to show that their student blogs were receiving readers from around the world. Over the course of the blogging activity, while a few students were consistently forgetting how to log onto their blogs or were forgetting their passwords, roughly an equally low number were showing exceptional technical prowess and interest by spending a great deal of time and energy personalizing their blogs by manipulating features such as widgets and themes.

An important consideration in training is the resources available and students' technical skills. The school has one computer lab that is shared by all middle school and high school students, approximately 350 students, and not enough students could bring their personal laptops to school to make that option feasible. As a result, careful planning was needed to ensure that the computer lab was available when needed, usually two weeks in advance. Additionally, the school did not have on staff a teacher dedicated to support ICT lessons or teach ICT in the secondary school and students' computer skills were varied from expert to novice. Consequently, peer-to-peer support

was used more, perhaps, than if students had greater skills or there was a lower student:teacher ratio.

Learning through commenting

Prior to the activity, the teacher assumed that learning would take place in equal measure from reading the teacher's and peers' posts, posting themselves, technically developing their blogs, and commenting on others' posts. In review of the data, it appears that while students learned from all of these areas, commenting was the most beneficial activity in terms of learning. This was probably due to the types of posts required of them and the ones made by the teacher, the technical expectations set by him, the way commenting was structured by the teacher, and the students' own abilities, needs and interests.

The above is too complex to analyze in great detail, but one salient factor worthy of further discussion is whether to follow the advice of most educational bloggers which is to start with a class blog and then move onto student blogs. Starting from the more teacher-centered class blog and then going to student blogs, according to the experience of this blogging activity, may have led to few students taking the initiative to post on their own blogs without being required to do so. Alternative explanations for the lack of student initiative are that it may have been a matter of the students' personalities, circumstances, or the structuring of the blogging activity. Additionally, starting with the class blog has many advantages which may outweigh this possible negative. Nonetheless, starting with the more student-centered student blogs should be considered as well when starting educational blogging.

Commenting, on the other hand, took on great prominence in this blogging experience, whether commenting on a post or on another comment. To maximize the effectiveness of the commenting, several steps were taken that appear to have worked. Foremost, the blogging space needed to be a comfortable place where students would not fear being publicly criticized or teased. Commenting etiquette, therefore, was critical in creating a positive learning environment. It was developed through classroom discussions of expectations, a lesson on commenting etiquette, reinforcement with the “sandwich” approach commenting technique mentioned earlier and through the occasional private, face-to-face reminder of the expectations to students who breached the etiquette rules. The teacher also had to model proper etiquette and vet all comments.

Commenting as feedback on students’ work is an important learning strategy for both the giver and the receiver of the comment as the former must analyze the work according to the criteria of assessment and articulately communicate this analysis while the latter learns how his writing is perceived by a reader. Commenting on a blog functions much like traditional peer feedback with the exception that this occurs in a public forum, placing pressure on some students to perform with greater diligence. Peer feedback was a classroom activity studied and conducted throughout the year and doing it on the blogs was an extension of this classroom practice. When giving feedback, students usually correctly pointed out the strengths and weaknesses of their peers’ work when commenting on the blogs. For example, Deniz’s story had many positive comments but also some specific, constructive ones (Deniz, 2011).

Comments can be used to develop and express understanding. The public context of blogging, however, has the potential of intimidating shyer students. Consequently in this blogging experience, the expected sophistication of comments was gradually increased. At the outset, students were expected to merely respond to a prompt by sharing an experience or opinion or even by posting a non-text media or link, as in the “what makes you smile” post (blistr6, 2011e). Later, they were asked for their opinions with some support (blistr6, 2011f). Lastly, more complex ideas were required and the writing expectations were raised (blistr6, 2011c). As a result of this process, the quality of students’ comments increased in a non-threatening way which was essential, as this was the method of greatest learning on their part.

In sum, safety, blog vision, blog design, pacing of blogging activities, technical training of students, and learning through commenting are important considerations when using blogging in an educational context.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The results demonstrate that blogging has high potential in a middle-school English class context. Students had positive attitudes towards and perceptions of their learning, English skills, and sense of community as facilitated by blogs. There are some essential features which define blogging and some key decisions teachers must make if they are to undertake blogging as a teaching strategy in the middle school.

Blog's features as applied to teaching

Had the pedagogical use of an established computer application such as PowerPoint been the focus of this thesis, then probably its features would be so widely known that their discussion would hardly be necessary. However, blogging is a growing teaching approach, requiring a breakdown of its features. While Sim and Hew (2010) focus on four features shared by blogs, namely, individual ownership, hyperlinked blog structure, update displayed in reverse chronological order, and archiving, in this study only individual ownership proved a key feature and the others secondary, though some other features came to the fore. Individual ownership was indispensable for students to take pride in the style and content of their cyberspace locale. Student blogs not only reflected the individuality of their owners, but their owners took pride in their blogs and attempted to engage their readers through widgets, themes, and content. Thus pride motivated some students to work harder and presumably gain English skills in the process.

The other features identified by Sim and Hew, namely hyperlinked blog structure, update displayed in reverse chronological order, and archiving, while relevant, proved to be less important than others. This may be owing to the context of this blogging activity. Sim and Hew investigated blogging in a post-secondary environment while this activity was in the context of a grade six middle school class. The hyperlinks may have been more important at the university-level where perhaps blog owners would link to many sources of information. At the middle-school level, conversely, there was the sense that perhaps due to their slower reading speed and reduced reading expectations, students were less liable to readily click on hyperlinks to other websites. This is mirrored in the use of Moodle at BLIS, where middle-school teachers tend to provide instructions with Moodle while high-school teachers often use Moodle to provide multiple, sometimes lengthy documents and/or links to be selectively read. Another feature, reverse-chronological order, is simply an organizational approach that is convenient rather than the only possible one. Lastly, the archival feature appeared hardly relevant, as once a topic had been on the blog it nearly never received any comments. Students may have reread older posts, though this was never raised as a prevalent action, leading to other features of blogging to being key in the grade six context.

Additional features that proved critical to many blogs are posts and comments. Reviewing blogs used in the school setting found that posts achieve many things. They are critical in the building of knowledge by either providing information or constructing knowledge individually or socially, showcasing students' work, inducing reflection, increasing a sense of community or other social interaction, and evoking emotional support. The public nature of posts motivated some participants in the

study to work harder to avoid embarrassment, though ultimately the data shows that students were not actually embarrassed. Ultimately, it is a blog's purpose that determines the types of posts chosen. In this blogging activity, social knowledge-construction and reflection were emphasized, reflecting the constructivist philosophy of the teacher who led the class both in the classroom and in the blogs. Woo and Reeves (2007) suggest that blogging is an effective tool for Constructivists. They point out some elements of effective constructivist teaching which blogs appear to support, namely, providing the opportunity to collaborate, reflect, and create published products valuable in their own right. That both the teacher's pedagogical philosophy and the method of instruction were both constructivist may, in fact, have attributed to the effectiveness of the blogging activity while a teacher with a different pedagogical approach would have probably been less successful with blogs as an instructional approach.

Despite the pedagogical view of the teacher who led this blogging activity, due to the context in which he teaches, his classroom tends to be less constructivist and more authoritarian than he would like, and this is reflected in the blog spaces as well. Students' feedback in the focus groups suggests that they value the teacher's posts rather than students' community blog posts because the teacher was a better writer or in deference to his position, assuming that he knew better than the students by virtue of being the teacher. This challenges Maor (2008) which suggests that blogs can break down the traditional class power structure and empower students. This disagreement with Maor may be due to differences in the studies' participants' age or nationalities, school culture, or the teacher's and/or students' idiosyncrasies. That the participants in this study tended to be obedient to authority in equal measure in the blog and in the

classroom suggests that the forces creating this structure are greater than issues related to blogging *per se*. Goh, Quek and Lee (2010) found that students in an East Asian context had very different perceptions of blogging than their Western counterparts, suggesting that culture is a key influence of students' perceptions of blogs.

It should be no surprise that with a teacher who espouses constructivism, comments should have a critical role in learning. Comments have proved themselves to be great motivators for some students in this study and others (Top, Yukselturk & Inan, 2010; Deng & Yuen, 2011; Witte, 2007), especially those from strangers. Furthermore, this study demonstrated that writing and reading comments was shown to benefit the learning of the commenter and the readers of those comments, whether the latter were the recipients of the commentary or third party readers who learned vicariously. Additionally, comments proved helpful to the sense of community in the class and other social interactions by getting students to know one another better, especially those that knew each other less well. Other studies (Halic, Lee, Paulus & Spence, 2010; Davi, Frydenberg & Gulati, 2007; Kuzu, 2007) found comments helped socially, though Goh, Quek and Lee (2010) found that Singaporean students were reticent to comment honestly and Deng & Yuen (2011) and Ellison and Wu (2008) questioned the amount of academic benefits comments provided. In this blogging activity, the teacher encouraged more substantial comments, leading to these taking place. Comments on other school-age blogs proved to vary greatly, from reflective, to instructive, to provident of emotional support.

In this study comments were greatly used for emotional support, reflection and knowledge construction. The latter can best be explained through an example. To help

students understand the genre of a Whodunnit Mystery, a post was posted which had a video of a Whodunnit Mystery and a video of a crime drama. Students were required to comment on why the former was a Whodunnit Mystery while the latter was not. Students constructed their knowledge not only by considering and expressing their ideas but also by reading their peers' comments.

Hyperlinks, multimedia, widgets, and blogrolls are features that on some class, community and student blogs proved to be heavily used while on others only slightly used, apparently reflecting the blog owner's skills or interests. These features at times are effective vehicles for conveying content and other times have a greater role in adding a high-tech feel to a blog. It is likely that as additional media are available and as students and teachers gain skills in these media, blogging will become more sophisticated. Conversely, the lack of media on some blogs suggests that like most adoptions of technology, there is a small group of innovative adopters, a mass who follow them, and a group that resists new technology. Additionally, it appears that class blogs which are led by teachers often have a greater variety of and usage of media than students blogs, challenging the argument that today's students are all "digital natives" and teachers are "digital immigrants" (Prensky, 2001). While it appears that the variety of media in blogging will increase due to the pull of innovators, the findings of this study suggest that at present text continues to dominate in the educational context at this age group.

Students' attitudes towards and perceptions of using a class blog, community blog and student blog

Students' attitudes towards and perceptions of blogging in general and the specific types of blogs were consistently high in this study. Students were nearly unanimous in their comfort and lack of fear or confusion with blogging and found it to be fun, with fun being linked to using computers and being interactive. Student blogs were valued for their ability to reflect the blog owners' personality in a creative manner, class blogs provided opportunities to interact, though community blogs proved less appreciated, lacking the teacher's authority a class blog provides. The popularity of the class blogs is hardly surprising in light of the literature, and the sociability and technology-mindedness of the study's participants. The lack of interest in the community blog is a little surprising, and may be attributed to the relatively young age of the students and the cultural emphasis in Turkey to be obedient to authority due to its cultural characteristics. In other words, these students were not ready for the restructuring of the power hierarchy that a community blog requires. It would be worthwhile to investigate students' attitudes and perceptions of a community blog with older Turkish students.

Students' perceptions of learning

Students were favorably inclined towards learning through blogging. One noteworthy item was *My point of view has been accepted by my classmates and/or discussion leader in this class* ($M_{pre}=3.76$, $M_{mid}=4.34$, $M_{post}=4.53$, on a 5-point scale). While it is natural to have some trepidations about public expressions of approval/disapproval, especially for preteens, the data actually suggests that students had fairly high expectations of respect from the teacher and their peers prior to the blogging. The

high score measured prior to the blogging activity is significant in that students were already positively inclined, probably reflecting their positive expectations of their peers and teacher. The rise in the sense of acceptance of their perspective over the course of the activity may be due to their observation that no-one received critical comments. Ellison and Wu (2008) found that some students were uncomfortable with the public nature of commenting, though they attribute this to their participants' inexperience with peer feedback.

Students' perceptions of their writing skills

Students had favorable perceptions of how blogging supported their writing skills. The survey showed that students believed that blogging helped their writing. The mean of one item, *I was able to express myself better by uploading pictures and videos* decreased over the course of the activity ($M_{pre}=4.24$, $M_{mid}=3.92$, $M_{post}=3.82$), reflecting the relatively low frequency of students' usage of non-text media. As Seda pointed out in her interview, it takes time to find photos and videos which is sometimes not worth it. The focus groups revealed that having a world audience and concern over embarrassment were motivators to posting posts of better quality. Certainly Dale agrees that the potential audience of millions is a motivator for his high school blogging students as well. Students responded that they would shorten their writing when posting on blogs over traditional paper assignments demonstrates a media savviness, though this is tempered by their lack of understanding that non-text media should influence their writing. Crowhurts (1978) demonstrates that age is a factor in cognitive development in relation to writing skills and that middle-schoolers can write differently according to their target audience.

Students' perceptions of the social aspects of a blogging-enhanced learning environment

Although this was the section of the surveys with the lowest favorability score, participants nonetheless were favorably inclined towards the social aspects of blogging. In other words, while participants were more favorably inclined in other sections of the survey, they were nonetheless favorably inclined about blogging's sociability. These results contradict other studies (Halic, Lee, Paulus & Spence, 2010; Yukselturk & Inan, 2010) which found that sociability was the most favorable feature of blogging. However, the other studies took place in the university context. This contextual difference explains much of this study's contrast to the literature as the middle-schoolers had less of a need to socialize with the blog. The participants in this study usually interacted on a daily basis in and out of class, and most of them had known each other for over five years. In contrast, university students typically intermingle only in their classes and may not even know each other's names, thus the social side of blogging is a lesser element of the lives of the middle school students who participated in this study.

Challenges and opportunities a teacher may face

The themes that arose in the blogging activity were over safety, blog vision, blog design, pacing of blogging activities, technical training of students, and learning through commenting.

The results showed that there is an inverse relationship between blogging safety and its educational potential, though this is not a mutually exclusive scenario, as some prudent measures can lead to blogging that is for all intents and purposes safe while

its educational potential is maximized. To blog securely, the teacher must understand the blogging features available, prepare the students, have the ability to monitor and change all facets of the blogs, and diligently monitor the blogging. The existence of two factors suggests that the marketplace should make blogging nearly perfectly safe very easily. First, it should be easy for *edublogs.org* to remedy the deficiency in their technical structure which makes safety a greater issue than it needs to be. Secondly, many blog facilitators have expressed concerns about safety on *edublogs.org*. Consequently, it should only be a matter of time before either *edublogs.org* corrects its problem or, conversely, a competitor arises that provides a solution to the problem and attracts edubloggers to its own enterprise.

Like most serious ventures, a blog needs a mission that attempts to put into practice its vision. Without a vision, a blog has no driving force, no *raison d'etre*, to make it an activity worthy of passionate action rather than merely going through the motions. Creating a vision for a blog involves taking into account the curriculum to be taught, the students' needs, technological and other resources at the school and finally the teacher's own needs, desires, skills, and style. Taking the above into consideration, in this study the teacher's vision of the blog included two broad goals: to create one in which most students were intrinsically motivated to participate because it engaged them personally and socially, and also to create a place to learn the objectives set by the curriculum. Student engagement and pursuing the curriculum were made easier because nearly all participants had very positive attitudes towards and perceptions of blogging even before the activity began. Had this not been the case, probably more time would have been spent at the outset on creating a positive impression of blogging, perhaps at the expense of the curriculum. However, the latter is a moot

point, and for this study, the focus became on maintaining the high favorability of the blog while addressing curricular needs. Graphics and videos on the class blog proved particularly effective in doing so, partially because carefully chosen media can provide knowledge more efficiently than text, partially because most students have an affinity towards audio-visual media, and partially because having images and videos makes the blog a more appealing locale in its own right. The blog's vision included making it a social space for various reasons, including the literature suggesting that this was a common blogging strength, the teacher's constructivist views, the Piagetian developmental stage of 12-year-olds which suggests that peer-to-peer social interactions are extremely important to them, and finally the social nature of these particular students. Thus, the teacher encouraged students to comment and taught them commenting etiquette, resulting in students for the most part composing comments that provided effective feedback in a polite manner.

There were other means of engagement through additional media that were not utilized, as the blogging activity only lasted two months. Other media such as for video (animoto) and images (Picasa, flickr) were not used, and neither were those for sound (VoiceThread, Podcast), online notice boards (Wallwisher), data collection (Survey Monkey) and many others could have been used and brought engagement through novelty and their individual merits. Additionally, social engagement could have been increased through the *edublogs.org* options of connecting to Facebook and Twitter. These media could have not only increased engagement but have also aided the teaching of the curriculum. However, they were not attempted because the other media available were effective enough and due to time restrictions, as the blogging activity lasted only 10 weeks. Had blogging been pursued the whole year, it would

probably been helpful for the teacher to have brought into play additional media on the class/community blog for not only engagement purposes, but also to take advantage of their unique knowledge-construction strengths. Whether class time would have been used to teach these media (so that students could use them in their student blogs) is speculative as that decision is based on value versus time cost. A positive aspect of blogging is that media are readily available on the internet so direct teacher instruction is not always necessary. In the blogging activity, some students on their own discovered and used widgets, so perhaps simple exposure would have inspired interested students to investigate these other media.

A blog's design must match its vision. To be engaging and meet curricular needs, the design of the class/community blog needed to be attractive and functional for its users. Informal conversations with students suggested that visuals were important to them and that they liked the theme and widgets chosen by the teacher. When the class blog evolved into the community blog which gave students the authority to add widgets, some did so, suggesting this was important at the very least to these students. Their own student blogs demonstrated that most students spent time choosing a theme that appeared to match their personalities and some added widgets. This concurs with Duffy and Bruns (2006) who draw the distinction between discussion fora and a blog, suggesting that it is individualization which brings the individual to the forefront in blogging rather than the group being more important in the discussion board. Blog design has been addressed by designer, Nick La (2011), who believes paying attention to fine details is the key to blog design, though this approach demands too much time for most teachers in relation to the pedagogical benefits it may provide.

For effective progression in blogging activities, knowledge of the students and curriculum are vital. Collecting data on students' technical skills and attitudes and perceptions of blogging prior to commenting the activity were essential but so was knowing the students in other ways such as English skills, ambition, organizational skills, etc., which the teacher was acquainted with from having taught them for eight months. The teacher's professional experience was also important in knowing how to pace units and what in the curriculum should be emphasized. This is not to say that blogging is unsuitable in other contexts—perhaps starting the blogging at the beginning of the year would have been beneficial in developing a class community—but is to say that if the blogging activity had been longer or commenced at a different time of the year, carried out by an inexperienced teacher, or with different students, a different approach would have probably been needed.

Knowing the students and the technical skills to be required of them were important in planning the blogging activity. In contrast to web page development and usage a decade ago, currently blogging does not require knowledge of HTML or another programming language. Nonetheless, blogs' technical aspects can still be perplexing or create anxiety for novice users. As many of the students considered themselves technological novices or at best beginners, it was important to start simply, in a setting where teacher and/or peer support was readily available both for technical and emotional reasons. It is conceivable that students even at this age group would be technical experts—at least if we believe Prensky (2001) and his cohorts—and had that been the case, more sophisticated applications could have been taught more independently. As it was, students' continued enthusiasm and developing technical skills demonstrate that the steady increase of skills was the appropriate practice.

Working together in the computer lab had advantages, but perhaps the ideal context would have been in a laptop-equipped classroom. This setting would have allowed more flexible scheduling and more authentic and integrated practice. For example, a didactic lesson could have led to a discussion that would have been addressed on the class blog; a journaling assignment could have been done directly on the student blog; short stories could have been written on the student blog and feedback been given immediately; group work could have taken place online. Any technical issues would have had been addressed immediately and when most needed, thereby adding to their authenticity.

Prior to the study, it was anticipated that a large amount of knowledge construction, that is, learning, was going to take place from reading and writing posts. However, findings suggest that commenting was the most popular and effective feature for learning. This was probably due to the types of posts required of the students and the ones made by the teacher, the technical expectations set by him, the way commenting was structured by the teacher, and the students' own abilities, needs and interests. These, in turn, were a reflection of the blog's vision, students and instructor. The contrast between the study's findings and the pre-study expectations can be partially attributed to the traditional view of education which is that more is learned when information is provided rather than in its exploration through discussion. A review of other school-age blogs such as *Write Out Loud* (2011a) demonstrates that they sometimes rely on posts for knowledge-construction, suggesting that a blog's vision is key to determining the relative influence of posts on knowledge construction.

Commenting helps the commenter, receiver and third-person readers as the first must analyze and express, the second benefits from the feedback while the third learn both vicariously. The public nature of commenting on a blog distinguishes it from most traditional forms of feedback. The emotional implications of a public forum cannot be underestimated for this age group and in this blogging activity it was important to scaffold the commenting expectations from a simple response, to an opinion with some support, to more complex ideas with raised writing expectations, to providing feedback on peers' work. Clumsy handling of commenting may have led to hurt feelings which could have damaged the sense of community and stifled the students' willingness to give or receive comments.

Implications for practice

The finding suggest several implications for teachers:

Safety is an essential concern for every educator. While blogging safety may be sensationalized by the media and exaggerated by parents, perception is nonetheless reality. Regardless of whether the fear over the dangers of blogging is overblown, the reality is that if anything inappropriate takes place or even the appearance of it taking place ever occurs, the results could be catastrophic. The blog must be as safe a place as the classroom. Additionally, open, transparent dialogue with and support from administration are also crucial; the only available study about blogging in the middle-school context (Witte, 2007) was terminated due to a seemingly over-zealous administrator, demonstrating the need for the teacher to be supported from above from the outset.

A vision of the blog is essential for its success. The flexible nature of blogs (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus and Wright, 2004) may have its advantages, however, it is so malleable a media that without a strong rudder it can be carried astray by the slightest breeze of tentative “inspiration”. A blog's mission, expressed through its design, features emphasized, and type of and pacing of instruction must ultimately refer back to the blog’s vision. Ironically, once a vision has been established, the mission and corresponding practices readily fall into place. To develop a vision for the blog, a teacher must examine the curriculum, students’ needs, abilities, and interests, technological and other resources at the school, and the teacher’s own needs, desires, skills, and style.

Once a teacher decides to blog, to make their workload easier over the long run they would benefit from planning the blogging activity so that their time is spent efficiently. For example, ensuring that students use naming conventions for their student blogs makes finding them very easy and subscribing to RSS feeds means that posts on student blogs are automatically sent directly to the teacher so that s/he does not need to check the student blogs. Blogging requires plenty of time even if run efficiently; the pitfall of the information age is not finding information but organizing it.

While the educational benefits of blogging for students suggest that it is an effective teaching strategy, blogging takes a great deal of time on the teacher's part and students’ part. Whether the time expended on it merits the apparent advantages is an important decision a teacher must make before beginning.

Attitudes and perceptions of students towards blogs suggests that blogging can be a great intrinsic motivator. For teachers seeking a motivating activity, blogging should be seriously considered.

Blogs can be an effective platform to teach new literacies, that is, literacies involving the internet and related technologies.

Implications for further research

It would be worthwhile to explore which factors led to the various attitudes and perspectives of blogging. More specifically, factor analysis of the roles of age, gender, personality, computer experience, sense of community, learning styles, and culture could provide insights into who may most benefit from blogging.

Some educators may be interested in learning the impact of using blogs as a teaching strategy on standardized tests or other formal assessments while others may be interested in how a bloggers' understanding of their audience impacts on their writing, especially in an ESL/EFL context.

Another area worthy of investigation is why participants in this study were more reticent to a restructuring of the power structure of the class, contradicting Maor (2008). It was particularly evident in the community blog that most participants were resistant to seeing their peers as equals to the teacher in the quality of posts and feedback, especially in the community blog. Whether this deference to authority is due to age, nationality, culture, participants' individualities, or another factor can be investigated.

Other nascent technologies can be explored for their educational applications. Twitter and Facebook are two examples of media in some ways similar to blogs which can be incorporated into teaching practice.

Additionally, the relationship between engagement and learning needs to be explored. It is necessary or perhaps harmful to knowledge construction for students to be engaged through fun or other means. Is it good or bad practice to try to engage students, and if it is good practice, what are the factors that make it so?

The collaborative nature of blogging and other Web 2.0 technologies have implications on pedagogical theory and practice in 21st century. If one truly values collaboration, how does this impact on assessment, plagiarism, grouping, privacy? The role of technology has specific implications for the teaching of English. In “Writing in the 21st century: A report from the National Council of Teachers of English” (www.ncte.org, 2009) Kathleen Blake Yancey argues that the present mode of process writing needs to be revamped due to new technologies. She points out that not only writers but audiences are “everywhere” (p. 5), yet the public as an audience is yet to be addressed in curricula. She also posits that “Our current model(s) of composing are located largely in print, and it’s a model that culminates in publication. When composers blog as a form of invention or prewriting...what does that do to our print-based model(s) of composing that universally culminate in publication?” (p. 6) Research into the impact of technology on pedagogy in English classes still looks at older models of instruction for inspiration rather than looking forward to the 21st century.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, the results are specific to the general context of the study, that is, to a grade six English class in Turkey. Secondly, the roles of the teacher and students cannot be underestimated. The teacher determines the blog's vision, the nature of and quantity of blogging activities and his involvement in it; students bring their own personalities into any activity in which they are participants, especially one so dependent on motivation for its success. Thirdly, the survey instrument used an ordinal scale rather than an interval scale which was done in respect to the questionnaire's authors and because it may have helped the students of this age group comprehend the questions, however, an interval scale could have allowed more data analysis options. Fourth, the students' positive attitudes and perceptions could have been due to the Hawthorne effect, as they may have demonstrated a positive attitude by virtue of receiving attention from the teacher. This limitation and the following one demonstrate the dangers of self-reported data. Fifth, the students' positive attitudes and perceptions could have been due to their desire to please their teacher. Sixth, the study took place over two months, so novelty could have been a positive influence the students' attitudes. Seventh, perceived learning was measured rather than real learning, the two not necessarily being the same. Lastly, the researcher was also a participant in the activity as the teacher, challenging the expectation that the researcher should be an impartial observer.

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APPENDIX A: English Version of Pre- Questionnaire

	Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	Blogs do not scare me at all.				
2	I would like working with and keeping blogs.				
3	I do not feel threatened when others talk about blogs.				
4	It wouldn't bother me at all to take classes on blogs.				
5	Generally I would feel OK about adding a new post on the blog.				
6	I would feel at ease in a blog class.				
7	I don't think I would enjoy doing advanced blog work.				
8	I get a sinking (bad) feeling when I think of trying to keep a blog.				
9	I'm not the type to do well with blogs.				
10	I don't understand how some people can spend so much time working with blogs and seem to enjoy it.				
11	Once I start to work on a blog, I would find it hard to stop.				
12	I will do as little work through blogs as possible.				
13	Keeping blogs make me feel uneasy and confused.				
14	I don't enjoy talking with others about blogs.				
15	I have a lot of self-confidence when it comes to working with blogs.				

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
16	Using a blog will help my English skills.					
17	Using a blog will help my writing skills.					
18	I will spend more time on my writing because other students and not just my teacher will read my work on blogs.					
19	I will spend more time on my writing because perhaps people from outside BLIS and not just my teacher will read my work on blogs.					
20	I will be able to express myself better by uploading pictures and videos.					
21	The blog discussions will help me to share my knowledge and experience with my peers.					
22	I believe that incorporating blogs with teaching can increase my learning experience in general.					
23	Other students' comments on my blog posts will be important.					
24	Blog discussions will help me understand other points of view.					
25	Blog discussions will make me think about English concepts outside of this class.					

Continuation of pre-blogging questionnaire		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
26	My point of view will be accepted by my classmates and/or discussion leader in this class.					
27	Overall using the blog will help me learn.					
28	I will visit our English blog more than required by my teacher.					
29	The blog will help me feel connected to other students in this class.					
30	Due to the class blog, I feel that I will be an important part of our classroom community.					
31	I will be stimulated to do additional readings or research on topics discussed on the blog.					
32	In comparison to my other classes, the amount of my interaction with other students in this class will be increased due to the blog.					
33	In comparison to my other classes, the quality of interaction with other students in this class will be increased due to the blog.					
34	I am very concerned about using blogs in English class (i.e., lack of time, lack of technical skills).					
35	My knowledge of computer technology is quite limited.					
36	My familiarity with computer technology will increase because of this class.					
37	It is important for the blog to be user-friendly.					
38	A large number of posts will not reduce my ability to communicate.					
39	My comfort level when using blogs will be very high.					
40	I believe that blogs will eventually replace normal classes.					
41	I regularly use other technology tools (i.e., Facebook, iTunes, video gaming).					

42	Age: I am _____ years, _____ months old.
43	Gender: Please circle one: female male
44	Years at BLIS: This is my _____ year at BLIS.
45	My nationality is _____.
46	Number of years of previous experience using blogs: Please circle one: 0 1 2 3 4 5
47	I would rate my level of computer expertise as: Please circle one: total beginner intermediate advanced expert
48	The grade I expect to receive in English class this year is _____.

APPENDIX B: Turkish Translation of Pre Questionnaire

		Kesinlikle katılıyorum	Katılıyorum	Katılmıyorum	Kesinlikle katılmıyorum
1	Bloglar beni hiç korkutmazlar				
2	Blogla çalışmayı ve blog tutmayı isterim				
3	Başkalarının blog hakkında konuşması beni rahatsız etmez				
4	Blog ile ders almak beni rahatsız etmez				
5	Bloga bir yorum eklemek benim için sorun değildir				
6	Bir blog sınıfında kendimi rahat hissedirim				
7	İleri düzeyde blog çalışması yapmanın bana keyif vereceğini zannetmiyorum				
8	Blog tutma düşüncesi bende kötü bir his uyandırıyor				
9	Blogda iyi olacak birisi değilim				
10	İnsanların blogla uzun süre çalışıp nasıl bundan keyif aldıklarını anlamıyorum				
11	Blogla çalışmaya bir kez başladım mı bırakması zor oluyor				
12	Blogla mümkün olduğunca az iş yapmaya çalışacağım				
13	Blog tutmak beni tedirgin eder ve kafamı karıştırır				
14	İnsanlarla blog hakkında konuşmaktan keyif almıyorum				
15	Blog ile çalışma konusunda kendime güvenim tamdır				

		Kesinlikle katılıyorum	Katılıyorum	Tarafsızım	Katılmıyorum	Kesinlikle Katılmıyorum
16	Blog kullanmak İngilizce becerilerimi geliştirecektir					
17	Blog kullanmak yazma becerimin gelişmesine yardımcı olacaktır					
18	Yazmaya daha fazla zaman ayıracağım çünkü blogdaki çalışmamı diğer öğrenciler okuyacaklar; çalışmamı okuyan yalnızca öğretmenim olmayacak.					
19	Yazmaya daha fazla zaman ayıracağım çünkü belki BLIS dışından insanlar da çalışmamı okuyacaklar; çalışmamı okuyan yalnızca öğretmenim olmayacak.					
20	Resim ve videolar yükleyerek kendimi daha iyi ifade edebileceğim.					
21	Blog tartışmaları yaşittirimle bilgi ve deneyimi paylaşmama yardımcı olacak.					
22	Blogların öğretime dahil edilmesi genel olarak öğrenme deneyimi artırabileceğine inanıyorum.					
23	Diğer öğrencilerin blog postalarını ilgili yaptıkları yorumlar benim için önemli olacaktır.					
24	Blog tartışmaları başka görüşleri anlamama yardımcı olacaktır.					
25	Blog tartışmaları İngilizce dersinde öğrenilenler üzerinde sınıf dışında düşünmemi sağlayacaktır.					



		Kesinlikle Katılıyorum	Katılıyorum	Tarafsızım	Katılmıyorum	Kesinlikle Katılmıyorum
26	Benim görüşüm sınıf arkadaşlarım ve/veya tartışma liderim tarafından kabul edilecektir.					
27	Blog kullanmak öğrenmeye yardımcı olacaktır.					
28	İngilizce Blogumuzu öğretmenimizin gerekli gördüğünden daha sık ziyaret edeceğim.					
29	Blog kendimi sınıftaki diğer öğrencilere bağlı hissetmeye yardımcı olacak.					
30	Sınıf blogu sayesinde sınıfın önemli bir parçası olacağımı hissediyorum.					
31	Tartışılan konularla ilgili ilave okumalar ve araştırma yapma isteğim artacaktır.					
32	Diğer derslerimle karşılaştığımda, başka öğrencilerle etkileşimin bu derste blog nedeniyle artacak.					
33	Diğer derslerimle karşılaştığımda, başka öğrencilerle etkileşiminin kalitesi bu derste blog nedeniyle artacak.					
34	İngilizce dersinde blog kullanma konusunda endişelerim var (örn. zaman yetersizliği, teknik becerilerin eksikliği).					
35	Bilgisayar teknolojisi ile ilgili bilgim oldukça sınırlı.					
36	Bu ders sayesinde bilgisayar teknolojisi bilgim artacaktır.					
37	Blogun kullanımı kolay olması önemlidir.					
38	Çok fazla sayıda yorum ile ilişim kurma becerimi azaltmayacaktır.					
39	Blog kullanırken kendimi çok rahat hissedeceğim.					
40	Blogların zamanla alışılan derslerin yerini alacağına inanıyorum.					
41	Düzenli olarak diğer teknoloji araçlarını kullanırım (örn. Facebook, iTunes, bilgisayar oyunları).					

42	Yaş:
43	Cinsiyet (Cevabınızı yuvarlak içine alınız) Kız Erkek
44	BLIS'te yıldır eğitim görmekteyim.
45	Uyruğum: vatandaşım.
46	Blog kullanıyor musunuz? (Cevabınızı yuvarlak içine alınız) Evet Hayır
47	46. Soruya cevabınız "Evet"se kaç yıldır blog kullanıyorsunuz? (Lütfen daire içine alınız) 0 1 2 3 4 5
48	Bilgisayar kullanma düzeyim: (Cevabınızı yuvarlak içine alınız) Başlangıç Orta İleri Uzman
49	Bu yıl İngilizce dersinde almayı beklediğim not:



APPENDIX C: English Version of Mid-/Post Questionnaire

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				
9				
10				
11				
12				
13				
14				
15				

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
16					
17					
18					
19					
20					
21					
22					
23					
24					
25					

Continuation of post-blogging questionnaire		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
26	My point of view has been accepted by my classmates and/or discussion leader in this class.					
27	Overall using the blog has helped me learn.					
28	I have visited our English blog more than required by my teacher.					
29	The blog has helped me feel connected to other students in this class.					
30	Due to the blog, I feel that I am an important part of our classroom community.					
31	I have been stimulated to do additional readings or research on topics discussed on the blog.					
32	In comparison to my other classes, the amount of my interaction with other students in this class has increased due to the blog.					
33	In comparison to my other classes, the quality of interaction with other students in this class has increased due to the blog.					
34	I was very concerned about using blogs in English class (i.e., lack of time, lack of technical skills).					
35	My knowledge of computer technology is quite limited.					
36	My familiarity with computer technology has increased because of this class.					
37	It is important for the blog to be user-friendly.					
38	A large number of posts has not reduced my ability to communicate.					
39	My comfort level when using blogs has been very high.					
40	I believe that blogs will eventually replace normal classes.					
41	I regularly use other technology tools (i.e., Facebook, iTunes, video gaming).					

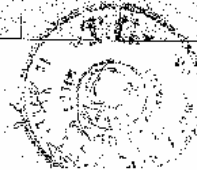
42	Age: I am _____ years, _____ months old.
43	Gender: Please circle one: female male
44	Years at BLIS: This is my _____ year at BLIS.
45	My nationality is _____.
46	Number of years of previous experience using blogs: Please circle one: 0 1 2 3 4 5
47	I would rate my level of computer expertise as: Please circle one: total beginner intermediate advanced expert
48	The grade I expect to receive in English class this year is _____.

APPENDIX D: Turkish Translation of Mid-/Post Questionnaire

Ek B: Ağı Güncesi (Blog) Uygulama Sonrası Anketi

		Kesinlikle katılıyorum	Katılıyorum	Katılmıyorum	Kesinlikle katılmıyorum
1	Bloglar beni hiç korkutmazlar				
2	Blogla çalışmayı ve blog tutmayı isterim				
3	Başkalarının blog hakkında konuşması beni rahatsız etmez				
4	Blog ile ders almak beni rahatsız etmez				
5	Bloga bir yorum eklemek benim için sorun değildir				
6	Bir blog sınıfında kendimi rahat hissederim				
7	İleri düzeyde blog çalışması yapmanın bana keyif vereceğini zanhetmiyorum				
8	Blog tutma düşüncesi bende kötü bir his uyandırıyor				
9	Blogda iyi olacak birisi değilim				
10	İnsanların blogla uzun süre çalışıp nasıl bundan keyif aldıklarını anlamıyorum				
11	Blogla çalışmaya bir kez başladım mı bırakması zor oluyor				
12	Blogla mümkün olduğunca az iş yapmaya çalışacağım				
13	Blog tutmak beni tedirgin eder ve kafamı karıştırır				
14	İnsanlarla blog hakkında konuşmaktan keyif almıyorum				
15	Blog ile çalışma konusunda kendime güvenim tamdır				

		Kesinlikle katılıyorum	Katılıyorum	Tarafsızım	Katılmıyorum	Kesinlikle katılmıyorum
16	Blog kullanmak İngilizce becerilerimi geliştirdi.					
17	Blog kullanmak yazma becerimin gelişmesine yardımcı oldu					
18	Yazmaya daha fazla zaman ayırdım çünkü blogdaki çalışmamı diğer öğrenciler de okudu; çalışmamı okuyan yalnızca öğretmenim olmadı.					
19	Yazmaya daha fazla zaman ayırdım çünkü belki BİLİS dışından insanlarda çalışmamı okudular; çalışmamı okuyan yalnızca öğretmenim değildi.					
20	Resim ve videolar yükleyerek kendimi daha iyi ifade edebildim.					
21	Blog tartışmaları yaşantılarımla bilgi ve deneyimimi paylaşmama yardımcı oldu.					
22	Blogların öğretime dahil edilmesi genel olarak öğrenme deneyimimi arttırdığına inanıyorum.					
23	Diğer öğrencilerin blog postalarımla ilgili yaptıkları yorumlar benim için önemliydi.					
24	Blog tartışmaları başka görüşleri anlamama yardımcı oldu.					
25	Blog tartışmaları İngilizce dersinde öğrenilenler üzerinde sınıf dışında düşünmemi sağladı.					



		Kesinlikle katılıyorum	Katılıyorum	Tarafsızım	Katılmıyorum	Kesinlikle Katılmıyorum
26	Benim görüşüm sınıf arkadaşlarım ve/veya tartışma liderim tarafından kabul edildi.					
27	Blog kullanmak öğrenimeme yardımcı oldu.					
28	İngilizce Blogumuzu öğretmenimizin gerekli gördüğünden daha sık ziyaret ettim.					
29	Blog kendimi sınıftaki diğer öğrencilere bağlı hissetmeme yardımcı oldu.					
30	Sınıf blogu sayesinde, sınıfın önemli bir parçası olacağımı hissettim.					
31	Tartışılan konularla ilgili ilave okumalar ve araştırma yapma isteğim kamçılandı.					
32	Diğer derslerimle karşılaştırdığımda, başka öğrencilerle etkileşimim bu derste blog nedeniyle arttı.					
33	Diğer derslerimle karşılaştırdığımda, başka öğrencilerle etkileşimimin kalitesi bu derste blog nedeniyle arttı.					
34	İngilizce dersinde blog kullanma konusunda endişelerim vardı (örn: zaman yetersizliği, teknik becerilerin eksikliği).					
35	Bilgisayar teknolojisi ile ilgili bilgim oldukça sınırlı.					
36	Bu ders sayesinde bilgisayar teknolojisi bilgim arttı.					
37	Blogun kullanımı kolay olması önemlidir.					
38	Çok fazla sayıda yorum iletişim kurma becerimi azaltmadı.					
39	Blog kullanırken kendimi çok rahat hissettim.					
40	Blogların zamanla alışılan derslerin yerini alacağına inanıyorum.					
41	Düzenli olarak diğer teknoloji araçlarını kullanırım (örn: Facebook, iTunes, bilgisayar oyunları).					

42	Yaş:	
43	Cinsiyet: (Cevabınızı yuvarlak içine alınız)	Kız Erkek
44	BLIS'te yıldır eğitim görmekteyim.	
45	Uyruğum: vatandaşıyım.	
46	Blog kullanıyor musunuz (Cevabınızı yuvarlak içine alınız)	Evet Hayır
47	46. soruya cevabınız "Evet"se kaç yıldır blog kullanıyorsunuz?	0 1 2 3 4 5
48	Bilgisayar kullanma düzeyim: (Cevabınızı yuvarlak içine alınız)	Başlangıç Orta İleri Uzman
49	Bu yıl İngilizce dersinde almayı beklediğim not:	