



# The Bloggin' Studio

# The Benefits of Writing for Better Student Writing

## *A Review*

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**A**s researchers Nicole B. Ellison and Yuehua Wu (2008) state, “Many educators are excited by the potential for new Internet technologies, such as blogs . . . to reinvigorate student engagement and learning” (p. 100). In this technologically driven era, how do new tools like online blogs actually aid students and teachers in the classroom setting? And more specifically, does blogging help to facilitate better student writing?

In their study, *Blogging in the classroom: A preliminary exploration of student attitudes and impact on comprehension*, Ellison and Wu claim that “millennial-learners”, students aged 8-18, are so involved in, and engaged with, media and technology that they may “respond more positively to teaching practices that

incorporate these tools” (p. 100). One of these tools is the blog, or personal web log. Different from a normal journal or diary, which is typically written in private, one of the most unique features of the blog is public audience. While privacy settings can be customized, the majority of blogs are viewable by anyone with access to the Internet. Further, those reading a blog are also permitted, and often encouraged, to comment on the content. Due not only to the personal nature of blogging, but also the opportunity that students have to give and receive feedback on each other’s work, blogs offer educators a unique and practical tool for the teaching process, particularly in the area of writing.

With the unique feedback feature, Ellison and Wu theorize that students may become more invested in their writing

if done via blogging (p. 105). In other words, by knowing that fellow students, or potentially even a global audience, may be reviewing and commenting on their work, students may think more critically about assignments and care more about their published product. To help prove this claim, Ellison and Wu conducted an experiment focused on student perceptions regarding the educational benefits of blogging. Using undergraduate level students, the researchers asked them to complete classroom assignments via traditional pen and paper method, as well as via online blogs. After completing their assignments using the two different methods, the students were then asked to respond to questions regarding the helpfulness of different features of blogging. Overall, students reported that the opportunity



to read other students' work was perceived as the most helpful feature of blogging, over traditional classroom writing practices. Further, the novelty and convenience of online blogging, along with the less-formal writing voice that the medium allowed for, were also deemed as perceived benefits. Deviating from the authors' original predictions however, resulting data showed that "students believe that gains in understanding are most likely to result from reading other students' blogs as opposed to writing their own entries or reading comments from others about one's entry" (p. 115). Ellison and Wu explain these findings as a result of a lack of guidance regarding how students were to "reconcile their notions of 'blogging' with academic study" (p. 117), in other words, there was a gap

in instruction on how students were to most effectively utilize the blogging process for completing schoolwork, particularly in regards to the commenting feature. The authors conclude that it is only with "explicit guidance in regards to defining their position and reflecting on their ideas . . . can the pedagogical promise of blogging be met" (p. 119).

In a subsequent study, *The Impact of Blogging and Scaffolding on Primary School Pupil's Narrative Writing*, authors Ruth Mei Fen Wong and Khe Foon Hew (2010) take up some of the issues and questions that

the work of Ellison and Wu leave open for discussion. Wong and Hew hypothesize that "in order to achieve increased pupils' performance" certain forms of guidance or assignment-specific "scaffolding" need to be put in place when technological tools, such as blogs, are used in the classroom (p. 4). To seek out proof of their claims Wong and Hew gave students, aged 10-13, pre and post-tests consisting of narrative writing tasks. Between the two tests, over a period of three weeks, students were introduced to blogging and given a writing guide (scaffolding), instructing them



on how to effectively leave comments on others' work. Students went on to create four drafts of their writing, receiving and providing feedback on each other's work at each stage of drafting.

In addition to collecting data on the students' perceived benefits of blogging, (which stated that the receiving of comments from fellow students and writing for a wider audience were the most beneficial features) the most powerful data yielded by Wong and Hew's research was the documented improvements in the student's writing skills. After practicing writing via blogging,

and giving and receiving peer-to-peer feedback, students showed improved skills in all three tested areas of content, language, and overall. Wong and Hew state that the students' "total scores for the post-test showed a significant gain compared to that of their pre-test scores, after the blogging and scaffolding treatment" (p. 10). Thus it is concluded in this study that, "the use of blogging and scaffolding can help improve pupils' narrative writing ability" (p. 10).

From these two studies it may be easy to conclude that the use of blogging in the classroom, when accompanied

with explicit guidelines, can result in improved student writing, both actual and perceived. But what must be taken into further consideration is the particular type of writing that these students engaged in. While Ellison and Wu utilized a read-and-respond method, and Wong and Hew focused on narrative writing, neither study explores the possible benefits of *reflective writing*, nor how this rich method may be applied to blogging in an academic setting.

Discussing the benefits of reflective writing within an academic environment, in their article and guide *Helping students meet the challenges of academic writing*, authors Linda Fernsten and Mary Reda (2011) find that "by systematically exploring writer identity issues [via the authors' specific reflective writing exercises] in a series of assignments,



our students demonstrate a clearer understanding of the sophisticated and multi-layered challenges writers face in an academic environment" (p. 173). Overall, the authors found that reflective practices "do substantially alter students' self-perceptions as writers and, ultimately, their ability to write more effectively".

The benefits of reflective "learning journals" have been known for some time. Author Paul Trafford (2005), in his article *Mobile Blogs, Personal Reflections and Learning Environment* describes the basic learning journal as a way of "documenting learning and collecting information for self analysis and reflection" (p. 60). In an attempt to translate these benefits as they might apply to online blogs, Trafford asks, "So how does blogging differ from the non-electronic learning journal?" (p. 62). To answer his

question he reiterates what we have learned here, that unlike traditional reflective learning journals, blogs are public. Again, the advantage of this feature, as he explains, is that "other students in the class, or other visitors, can read the logs, and in this respect, the learning is a shared experience or studying is a shared experience" (p. 62). Researchers Faizah Majid and Najmiyyah Adnan (2011) also sought to investigate how reflective blogging could help develop better writers, in their study *Personal blogs and reflective writing: a case study*, and found the following features to be indicated as strengths of blogging:

- Autonomous learning
- Providing alternative 'voice'
- Promoting personal development
- Encourage higher quality writing
- Thinking of the audience
- Exposure to technology

resources

- Easy editing application  
(p. 621)

It has become widely accepted that reflective writing practices in an academic setting, including reflective learning journals, can help enhance students' willingness and ability to write. Considering these recent studies it can then be suggested that the benefits of such methods can be developed even further when applied to the public medium of online blogs. Whether we are discussing reflective writing, reader comprehension, or narrative composition, many of the above noted features have been indicated as beneficial qualities of blogging in facilitating better writing. Overall, it appears that offering students the chance to take control of their work and of their positions as writers,



as well as giving them the opportunity to share their work with an audience outside of the traditional student-teacher relationship, make blogging an effective tool in the classroom setting.

One final feature of blogging remains, however, which must be considered before we can confidently answer the question regarding the benefits of blogging for student writing. In their article *Writing therapy using new technologies- the art of blogging*, authors DeeAnna Nagel and Kate Anthony (2009) discuss a number of potentially harmful features of online communication tools, including the blog. Coined by psychotherapist Kali Munro in 2002, Nagel and Anthony describe one such issue known as “emotional hit and run”, and how it applies to the blogging world: “A person blogs in

response to thought, action, or occurrence. The blog entry may be impromptu with little forethought given. Within minutes, the blog appears on the World Wide Web. Similarly, a person may comment onto a blog with a quick and affective response. In either case, the blogger or the person leaving a comment has no control over when any response may be read” (p. 42). Nagel and Anthony explain that there is a permanency when utilizing the medium of blogging, for both writers and commenters (p. 42). Blog and comment postings that are done publicly can follow a student for a lifetime. When we add the feature of immediacy, issues of emotion play a part in the ethical concerns of blogging. Should students at the primary, senior, or even college level be subjected to having their narrative writing abilities, or personal reflections available for all to see, for years to come?

While having a public audience is claimed by many students to be one of the most beneficial features of blogging, there is an obvious need for further discussion regarding the ethical concerns this presents. As Nagel and Anthony describe, the “aftermath that follows the use of blogging as journaling” must be considered (p. 42).

Regarding the question “does blogging help to facilitate better student writing?” the answer is, yes. Recent literature provide a clear indication that online blogging can aid students in a variety of areas of academic writing, when accompanied by explicit guidelines regarding writing and commenting. Peer-to-peer feedback, writing for a broader audience, and the ability to share in the reflection process, are indicated as most beneficial in aiding the student writing process and product,



on both student-perceived and teacher-tested levels. What is apparent from this discussion however, is the need for further investigation into the ethical implications of the public feature of online blogs, due to the potential immediacy and permanency of students' writing. Overall however, it can be said that blogging in the classroom can and should be considered and utilized as an effective tool for facilitating better student writing. 🌻

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