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Voices in Cyberspace: Testing the Effectiveness of Blogs as a Tool for Improving Voice in Student Writing

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Voices in Cyberspace:
Testing the Effectiveness of Blogs as a Tool for Improving Voice in Student Writing

By

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Professional Writing in the Department of
English

In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of Kennesaw State University

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Contents

Chapter One: Introduction.....3
Chapter Two: Review of Literature.....13
Chapter Three: Method.....30
Chapter Four: Results.....42
Chapter Five: Conclusion.....73
Appendices.....78
Works Cited.....90

Chapter One: Introduction

While researching current trends in student reading and writing, I stumbled upon Rich Motoko's *New York Times* article titled "The Future of Reading." In it, he cites a problem with which most educators are painfully familiar: students' traditional reading, writing, and comprehension skills have plummeted. There are some that feel that this startling development is the result of more and more online activity, but others believe that while these young readers and writers may be behind the curve with regard to traditional, print texts, they possess an entirely different set of equally important digital skills.

The assertions in "The Future of Reading" simply confirm a number of trends that I've observed while working in the Kennesaw State University Writing Center and teaching first year composition courses. Many young writers have good ideas and the desire to succeed, but something stands in their way. Despite the fact that they are digitally active users of Facebook, texting, and other new means of communication, they do not consider themselves writers. As David Bartholomae notes in "Inventing the University," writers entering the academic community for the first time find that they are in unfamiliar territory, despite the fact that they have been participants in public education for the past twelve years. In response, they soon begin to "crudely mimic the language of academia," that which they see in dusty textbooks and scholarly articles (627). By ignoring the importance of writing with voice, these student writers guarantee that their prose will be not only dull, but rhetorically unpersuasive.

Allowing students to write in a less formal space, and one in which the purpose of writing is not simply to "make the grade," but to develop ideas and engage an audience of peers, might help those who are hesitant to put themselves into their writing. In this capstone project, I intend

to address the issue of “voicelessness” in student writing, and determine whether or not the implementation of weblogs into the first year composition classroom will help students begin to see themselves as writers, thus giving them the space and encouragement to develop an individual voice within the environment of academic discourse.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, voice was not only seen as a basic element of writing itself, but also a way of thinking about composition pedagogy. With the onset of this movement, students were asked to write in authentic, “honest” voices and teachers were encouraged to step away from their podiums. As Christopher Burnham notes in “Expressive Pedagogy: Practice/Theory, Theory/Practice,” “the ‘teacherless’ classroom return[ed] the responsibility for and control over learning [writing] to the students” (23). In the context of this expressivist philosophy, seminal texts were no longer the center of attention within the classroom, and student writing took its place as the focal point. Burnham succinctly explains the essence of expressivism in this way: “expressivist pedagogy encourages, even insists upon, a sense of writer presence even in research-based writing” (19).

Expressivism still exists as a form of pedagogy today, but it has since been challenged by other conflicting philosophies. Of these, social constructivism seems to be situated most strongly in opposition to the ideals espoused in the expressivist way of thinking. According to writers and researchers like Bartholomae, we do not write—rather, we are written by our culture and our environment. As such, there is no “authentic” or “individual” voice from a social constructivist viewpoint. Viewed from this perspective, writers, both student and expert, are mirrors of their surroundings, influenced by social and cultural factors. Furthermore, these sorts of courses focus almost exclusively on outside sources, rather than placing student work at the center of a composition course.

Years later, Peter Elbow pauses to reflect on how the scholarly position of voice has fared since this initial clash of ideologies in “Voice in Writing Again: Embracing Contraries.”

Assessing the situation in 2007, Elbow notes that “the concept of voice in writing seems to have been successfully discredited in our journals and books” (169). Judging from my own review of the literature, it seems that Elbow is correct in this assertion. Much of the seminal work on voice, both critical and supportive, seems to have died down around the turn of the millennium.

However, he is also right in noting that, despite the recent dearth of scholarly writing on voice, the concept refuses to fade in everyday practice. Although composition instructors often refrain from placing the word “voice” on rubrics, we still talk about our students’ writing in terms of how it “sounds,” thus reinforcing the idea that language does not exist in a vacuum, but rather is meant to be heard. The question of what “tone” to adopt for any given audience still finds its way into classroom discussions and assignments. The insistence on the presence of voice in all writing is no longer the focal point of current composition pedagogy, but we can still see its vestiges in the way that we talk about tone and audience.

Thomas Newkirk, author of *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*, precedes Elbow in embracing contraries. His concept of voice, which he loosely describes as the “honest presentation of self,” also walks the line between expressive and social constructivist discourse. According to Newkirk, this brand of voice is “the ability to maintain a situation definition consistent with that of the audience,” or the ability to “cue a mutually agreed upon type of performance” (qtd. in Moneyhun 362). Like Elbow, Newkirk emphasizes the importance of an “honest” presentation of “self,” but also recognizes that the audience’s expectations play a key role in what that presentation will look like. Furthermore, Newkirk’s definition suggests that a

voice can be both individual and shaped by outside influences, a theory that nicely toes the line between what many scholars see as two conflicting ideologies.

Like Elbow and Newkirk, I have crafted my own working definition of voice from a “compromise” between several schools of thought: expressive, social constructivist, and process pedagogy. While I believe that the construction of an individual voice is possible, I also assert that it should be tempered by the knowledge and awareness of an audience and rhetorical purpose, or the surrounding environment. In the case of first year composition, this means that student writers can and should learn to use diction, syntax, and organization skillfully to craft an individual, authentic presence on the page, but also understand that their individual voices are in fact meant to be heard as part of a larger conversation, and perhaps the same one that has helped to influence and shape the words that students use to express themselves. Without a listener, voice cannot truly exist; without the consideration and understanding of audience, what I would identify as voice simply becomes style. Many young writers are able to use clever and creative syntax and diction, but when those things are not used to evoke a response from a reader/listener, they cannot come together to represent a writer’s presence on the page.

My desire to situate my definition of individual voice in a rhetorical context stems from two things: the first is the idea that writing does not and should not occur in a vacuum. Journaling and other forms of low stakes writing are crucial to the development of voice, not because they are valuable in isolation, but because they are a means to an end: helping students learn to render, interpret, and analyze, and share their experiences in a safe, non-evaluated environment. Secondly, I believe it is important for students to see writing as valuable and applicable to their own lives before we ask them to truly invest themselves in the activity. Writing for the sake of writing might be automatically attractive to some of our students, but in

the case of the first year composition classroom, we simply cannot assume this. If we expect students to engage in scholarly research in a thoughtful, meaningful way, it is our responsibility to help them understand that their individual voices and perspectives have a place both in and out of the classroom.

In my experience as a first year composition instructor at the university level, I have noted that the current pedagogical trend, like my working definition of voice, is a mixture of several compositional schools of thought. For example, the English department at Kennesaw State University requires that instructors of English 1101 assign approximately four formal essays, or high stakes writing, as well as smaller, less academic pieces, such as “letters” or “memos” (“Expectations for ENGL 1101”). From my own time as a teacher and a peer tutor in the Writing Center, I’ve noted that low-stakes writing assignments often appear in the form of personal narratives or reflective assignments that push students to look back and critically reflect on their work over the course of the semester, which is a distinctly “student-centered” approach. While instructors of first year composition must include outside readings in the course curriculum, students are also given the space to review one another’s work during activities such as peer review, a practice that most of my fellow instructors employ in one form or another.

Here at Kennesaw State University, first year composition students are also offered the opportunity to engage with their writing and to choose topics that matter to them. What is more, the English Department’s description of an “A” paper specifically notes that this caliber of work should be both “original” and “stylistically appealing,” two terms that suggest that personal style, voice, and tone (appropriate to the situation) are more than welcome. However, my fellow instructors and I continue to be frustrated by awkward, lifeless, and voiceless composition. While it is highly possible that students simply do not care to grapple seriously with classroom-related

materials, the possibility that they are afraid to do so still remains. Although many modern curriculums focus on student writing (as opposed to critical cultural environments that steep students in the writing of others), a large percentage of students still feel that they are entering a land of foreign discourse; of course, they are correct. The fact that the essay topic is one of personal interest to the student does not change the nature of academic discourse, that which is characterized by citations, critical analysis, and thoughtful interpretation. Chances are that most students are not well-versed in genres that ask them to interpret experiences rather than simply render them (Elbow 136).

Although the lack of voice in student writing may seem like an insignificant problem, I've observed, both in the classroom and the Writing Center, that the inability to interpret and analyze experiences often goes hand in hand with the absence of voiced writing. Students who are unable to properly contextualize and analyze the research that they find are often the same ones that confuse "academic writing" with regurgitation. For the majority of their intellectual lives, these students have been shown that writing is nothing but a way of measuring the retention of knowledge. Standardized testing reinforces this notion, and in an attempt to help students score well on things like Advanced Placement tests, high school teachers have been known to peddle the five paragraph essay as a panacea for all writing woes. As a result, students bring these same formulaic, voiceless techniques to the college classroom. Unable to "play" with language, these same students find that they are unable to present ideas in a meaningful or individual way.

Conversely, students who are able to critically interpret and analyze research and carve a niche within academic discourse are far more successful writers; similarly, I've noted that these students also comfortably adopt an "individual" voice that still fits into the academic community.

These young writers aren't crafting a voice via "confessional" writing, as some critics of "voicist" philosophy might suggest, but rather by absorbing, interpreting, and finally personalizing the language of the university, much as David Bartholomae describes in "Inventing the University." Although writing with an "individual" voice and joining the academic community's discourse seem like two contradictory ideas, I suggest that they are not. Much as Elbow finds himself "embracing contraries," I argue that voice can indeed exist in the realm of academic writing, and that it can be individual within that community. With careful attention to and use of surface elements such as diction, syntax, and organization, as well as a rhetorical understanding of audience, I believe that first year composition students can and should manifest themselves as identifiable individuals on the page.

Still, many of the writers that I have worked with have trouble reconciling the idea of writing with voice with that of writing for a grade. Perhaps one of the most oft-repeated complaints I hear from first year composition students is that "every teacher grades differently," and thus students feel that they must find out exactly what the professor wants, and then cater exclusively to those preferences. Coupled with our students' familiarity with formal and standardized writing, this general tendency to write only for pleasing such a specific audience makes it difficult for young and inexperienced writers to think of writing as anything but a method of testing. Although most first year composition instructors at Kennesaw State University work to incorporate some degree of low stakes and reflective writing in hopes of giving students space to write as themselves, the writing that we receive is still, more often than not, rife with awkward and alienating language. From these observations, I also argue that it is not enough to offer students low stakes writing assignments, most of which are still evaluated with the same critical eye of the professor. Although we tell our students that these assignments

allow them more freedom, our students see no difference in the composition of high and low stakes writing. For both, they sit down with a word processor, or perhaps a pen and pencil, and write what they believe their instructor wants to read. They see that, regardless of the label we place on any particular essay, they are still handing in a piece of work and waiting to be told whether or not they've hit the mark.

If we expect students to truly embrace the nature of low stakes writing and learn to develop an individual voice in the academic community, I believe that we as instructors need to be willing to significantly alter the environment in which students compose this kind of writing. As M. Bruce King, Jennifer Schroeder, and David Chawaszewski have noted, writing loses something essential the moment that it becomes more about the grade and less about communicating ideas in an individual way (qtd. in Jones 16). The development of an individual identity, which can be identified by the clear, conscious use of syntax, diction, and organization as well as the understanding of the needs of a particular audience, is important to developing a strong, individual written voice in first year composition students. When students write solely for a grade, they have a tendency to distance themselves from the writing process as a whole. If and when their writing does not satisfy the intended audience, who is almost always the professor, students can comfortably disengage themselves from the criticism, and take comfort in the fact that it wasn't really "their" writing in the first place. This is perhaps an unconscious avoidance tactic, but it is one that requires a conscious response from instructors. There is no escaping the reality that we must assign grades in some spaces, but I believe that it is also important to show students that writing can and does exist outside of the realm of points deducted and rubrics.

Unlike the scholarly discussion of voice in writing, which has been quiet as of late, composition and education scholars alike are abuzz with the possibilities presented by the use of

weblogs in the classroom. Because students can interact with each other as well as an audience outside of the classroom, many instructors have explored the potential of blogs as a tool for teaching audience. Others, such as Charles Tryon, see blogs as a means of helping students cease to be “passive consumers” of their education and grow into “active participants” as they use blogs to connect to the “so-called real world” (16). Due to the instantly publishable nature of blogs, J. Elizabeth Clark suggests that they are valuable as a lesson in “quick and dirty” argument as well (34). This same characteristic, Clark claims, helps students place themselves in positions of authority and take responsibility for their digital identities, much as I hope to see students begin to take responsibility for their written identities. At heart, these ringing endorsements for weblogs in the classroom boil down to one main idea: students can learn to be responsible for and engaged in their own texts with the use of in-class blogging. I theorize that students will become more aware of their authority as writers after the use of blogs in the classroom, thus helping them take responsibility for their voices as well as their ideas.

Although I will be using them in a first year composition class, blogs are an accepted form of personal and professional communication outside of academia. Although it is a form of expression adopted by many untrained writers, it is also a platform that students generally associate with “the real world.” Many freelance writers earn an income from creating and maintaining blogs on almost any subject, from hobbies, such as cooking and gaming, to more serious subjects, such as politics. Still others create blogs for the sole purpose of communicating their ideas and interests with a real, live audience. As such, maintaining a blog of their own within the purview of the classroom might help students see writing as less of an “academic” exercise and more of a practical, applicable means of communicating ideas and developing a unique identity.

In conducting this capstone project, I aim to determine whether or not the maintenance of a weblog in a first year composition class aids in the development of student voice, as defined above, in formal, graded texts. By evaluating both formal student texts and survey responses from the study participants, I also hope to gain a better understanding of how students respond to weblogs and identify whether writing in this digital environment helps first year composition students see themselves as writers.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

At the outset of my search for relevant literature, I found myself looking broadly for pieces that contained references to voice and digital composition. Throughout the process, I narrowed my topic to the correlation of voice in student writing and the regular maintenance of a blog. I found few to no resources that combined these two concepts. A number of texts that I encountered dealt strictly with theories of voice in writing, while others focused solely on scholarship related to the use of weblogs in the classroom. Additionally, I came across a number of empirical studies about blogging in the classroom. None of these articles or books did what I intended to do in my own research: test the effectiveness of blogs as a means of improving voice in student composition as well as determine whether or not students have a rhetorical understanding of voice as it relates to audience awareness.

During my preliminary bibliographic research, I focused on names that I remembered from my previous expressivist studies, such as composition scholars Ken Macrorie and Peter Elbow. These sources were of seminal importance for my own research, primarily because of the unabashed emphasis on “authentic” voice. In addition, these sources represented the beginning of a clear discussion of voice in terms of writing in a scholastic setting, rather than couching it in terms of creative or fictional composition. At the heart of the expressivist movement lie the principles of composition scholar Ken Macrorie. In *Telling Writing*, Macrorie makes a firm stand against academic “Engfish.” The distinguishing characteristic of this curious brand of English is that, despite its grammatical correctness, it communicates nothing of any *honest* value. Macrorie insists that “[A]ll good writers speak in honest voices and tell the truth,” and shuns all language in which students hide behind intimidating and so-called “impressive” verbal posturing (299).

But one could argue (and many have) that Macrorie's insistence on honest, truthful writing is short-sighted at best; creative writers might benefit from this advice, but in academic and professional settings, it is often the informational value of writing that is valued most—not the ethos of the writer or his or her work. Peter Elbow, another proponent of voice and expressivism, offers up many of the same sorts of thoughts about writing as Macrorie, but also tempers them by pointing out that there is more to the concept and execution of voice than “honesty.” As the author of many “self-help,” instructional texts on writing, such as *Writing with Power* and *Writing without Teachers*, Elbow offers clear, frank advice about how to improve one's style and confidence as a writer by using specific inventive techniques, as well as pointing to the absolute necessity of audience awareness and revision. Tom Romano, a more recent advocate of encouraging student “voice” as a component in the composition classroom, offers students a two part process for achieving voice in their writing: “trust the gush” and “craft the gush” (52-3). Like Elbow, he encourages his students to write honestly first—but to edit later. While Macrorie focuses scholarly attention first and foremost the first stages of composition, both Elbow and Romano insist that there must be a balance between pure voice and careful editing.

Joseph Harris approaches voice from a more neutral perspective; rather than automatically falling into step with the idea that the writer must be an inextricable part of his or her own work, he examines the timeline of the phenomenon of written voice through a theoretical-historical lens in his text *A Teaching Subject*. Harris's attempt to cast an objective, evaluative eye on this complicated and controversial idea was especially helpful as I tried to keep my own research and assumptions in perspective; while having students find their voice might have been popular during the late 1960s and early 1970s, Harris reminds his audience that this wasn't (and still isn't) the only (or ideal) option. He points out that the expressivist movement

has since been challenged by constructivist and socialist theories of composition, which suggest that writers do not write, but rather are written by their environments, and that these new perspectives must be taken into consideration.

I. Hashimoto's "Voice as Juice: Some Reservations about Evangelic Composition," a purely theoretical paper that criticizes voice as a concept, takes a stronger stance in opposition to scholars such as Macrorie and Elbow. He accuses theorists like Elbow of using the "language of religion" to strike fear into those who would be more than happy to simply write "well" (79). Hashimoto draws connections between the evangelical language and the published texts of expressivist scholars and points to the similarities in both tone and diction. He goes on to suggest that the language being used to "exhort" young writers to find themselves is the same language that plays on people's fears and brings them to a religion that will "save" them, often from themselves. The inherent problem with this concept, says Hashimoto, is that not all student writers want to be "saved." He also asserts that spirited voice may be appropriate in some spaces, such as personal narratives, but reminds us that it is not necessary in all; in most situations, students are called upon to communicate a clear, specific, *logos*-driven message. Perhaps even more troubling, Hashimoto notes, is the possibility that young writers may begin to believe that "...with a natural voice, [students] need not worry about content at all" (78). If good writing is labeled "voiced" and bad writing "voiceless," Hashimoto worries that the objective (and necessary) rules and standards of writing may become defunct.

Darsie Bowden expresses similar concerns in *The Mythology of Voice* and "The Rise of a Metaphor: Voice in Composition Pedagogy." In the latter, she reiterates some of Hashimoto's questions while introducing a number of her own, such as how "voice became such a compelling metaphor in writing instruction" (174). In order to find some of the answers to her questions,

Bowden traces the history of “voice” from its inception, which she identifies as the Dartmouth Conference in 1966 (178). Prior to the expressivist interpretation of voice as an expression of self, Bowden points out that the term was used in a strict grammatical sense, specifically in reference to passive and active voice. She attributes the shift in meaning to a number of things, but primarily a change in the cultural landscape.

With the onset of the political and civil unrest in the late sixties, Bowden notes that the purpose of education morphed from a teacher-based to a student-based model (180). New textbooks, such as Peter Elbow’s *Writing without Teachers* and Ken Macrorie’s *Telling Writing*, perpetuated this trend. In this new environment, students were asked to speak and write in their own “voices” and to participate in activities such as peer review that displaced the instructor from his or her normal position at the front of the class (Bowden 180). At the time, this was not only novel, but widely accepted.

But, Bowden points out, times have changed. Since the expressivist movement, many scholars have adopted a different stance on composition, which asserts that a “writer does not write...but is, himself, written by the languages available to him” (Bartholomae 612). David Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University” is a perfect example of this constructivist perspective. While students may exhibit a natural or instinctive voice on the page, it is not something that they honestly lay any true claim to; instead, these scholars tell us that it is simply a by-product of their cultural, social, and economic background. In essence, student writers come to the university with a variety of social and cultural languages that they have already (unknowingly) adopted. Bartholomae and others like him suggest that in order to be successful, student writers must “appropriate or be appropriated by” the language of their environment, which is, in most cases, that of the university (Bartholomae 606). This is not to say that students should betray

themselves or their inner voices by abandoning their social background, but simply that they must acquire *another* discourse. While constructing the chronological history of voice, Darsie Bowden acknowledges this shift in pedagogical and rhetorical perspectives, and questions the relevancy of voice as scholars like Elbow and Macrorie espouse it. While she admits that voice serves as a useful metaphor in the classroom, Bowden cannot bring herself to embrace it in a more literal sense.

In a similar spirit, Carl Leggo poses a series of questions to himself, his students, and his readers in his 1991 article, "Questions I Need to Ask before I Advise My Students to Write in Their Own Voices." Much like Darsie Bowden, he sees the value in voice as a metaphor, but does not have a solution to the inherent difficulty of implementing it in a true pedagogical sense. While his prose shows his audience that he not only values, but also employs voice, he clearly recognizes the problems that it brings about in this introductory passage:

I hope to court contradiction and confusion and consternation in my commitment to shake up and explode the notion of voice in writing, in my interrogation of the rhetorical function and concept of voice, and in my conviction (the only conviction I am ready to defend) that the experience of voice, the device of voice, the personality of voice, the tone of voice, the politics of voice, the intertextuality of voice, the authenticity of voice, the origin of voice, the ubiquity of voice, the energy of voice cannot be conceptualized, schematized, and classified any more than beachstones can be categorized and labeled. (Leggo 143)

In both the structure and the content of the language Leggo employs, he is able to communicate two things: first, that adopting an individual voice is possible and plausible in an academic setting, and second, that voice invites both an endless stream of confusion and a refreshing

number of choices for writers and instructors everywhere. In this passage, he simultaneously glorifies the use of voice and style and, strangely, offers the practical and realistic truth that it is nearly impossible to capture.

But perhaps the most interesting element of Leggo's passage is that he qualifies "voice." Instead of referring to it in creative (and often unhelpful) terms such as "honesty," "truth," or "juice," he makes it clear that he is exploring the "rhetorical function and concept of voice." And while Leggo asserts that it cannot truly be conceptualized, he does allow that it can be viewed through a particular lens.

Hashimoto, Bowden, and Leggo all bring important questions and concerns to the debate about voice: it is important—but where? And how can we dream of teaching it if we can't agree on a singular interpretation or definition? Is "honest" writing as important in an academic setting as it is in a creative one? These questions remain unanswered, but some expressivist scholars have come to the defense of voice in writing in response to these sorts of doubts. In "Voice in Writing Again: Embracing Contraries," Peter Elbow directly addresses Hashimoto's arguments, and points out that many of the quotes used in "Voice as Juice: Some Reservations about Evangelic Composition" are used without regard to their original context. Most of Hashimoto's examples discuss voice in the most visceral terms imaginable—terms that Elbow himself did use—but fail to include the caveat that follows, which is that freewriting is never the final product. Elbow is a proponent of freewriting and writing "honestly," but he also understands the importance of both revision and rhetorical awareness.

While many of the questions that scholars such as Bowden and Hashimoto posit are valuable, some of their queries remain dubious. For instance, in "The Rise of a Metaphor: Voice in Composition Pedagogy," Bowden questions what happens when instructors emphasize

honesty, voice, and “sincere” writing in lieu of grammatically correct writing, as she purports that texts such as *Writing without Teachers* do. This theoretical situation implies that young writers are being denied a proper education in English grammar; but presumably, students that have entered into university-level composition should, by all rights, have a reasonable grasp of grammar, mechanics, and other essentials of writing. While they may be unfamiliar with citation practices and other elements specific to the genre of academic composition, they should have a clear understanding of writing in and of itself. Once students have learned essential rules of writing, it seems strange to argue that they should not be encouraged to hone voice and style. In fact, most “voicists,” as Darsie Bowden dubs them, don’t suggest that young (elementary or middle school level) writers should be exposed to concepts of voice. Rather, these are techniques and ideas that are introduced to writers who have obtained a standard level of sufficiency.

The arguments of those who question voice also fail to do justice to the more practical view of voice espoused by composition and literature teachers such as Rebecca Gemmell. In her short, anecdotal article, “Encouraging Student Voice in Academic Writing,” she recounts her frustration with dull, “robot writing, in which...many students parroted back everything that [I] had said in class” (Gemmell 64). This scenario is common in both high school and college level classes—so much so that it teeters on the edge of becoming a trope. Gemmell, however, found that an assignment that went beyond strict literary analysis, one that asked for student interest and connection to the course materials, caught the interest of her students. She followed her initial instinct and instituted a “Writer’s Notebook”: a place where students could “explore topics freely without worrying about correctness...” (Gemmell 66). Similar to Elbow’s concept of freewriting, Gemmell’s “Writer’s Notebook” encouraged students to indulge in things that interested them in hopes of extracting more depth in composition. Gemmell’s notebook did not

advocate confessional literature, nor did it ask students to pour themselves onto the page. Instead, it encouraged students to use voice as a way to translate academic and literary concepts into terms that they could better understand and engage with.

In “It’s Time for Class: Toward a More Complex Pedagogy of the Narrative,” Amy Robillard joins in the debate regarding the place of the “personal” and the “academic” in the composition classroom, as started by Elbow and Bartholomae. Robillard notes that most teachers are concerned with preparing their students for the next step, be it college, further education, or a career. As a result, composition courses labor to adapt their assignments and materials to strictly academic and analytical conventions. Robillard, like Gemmell, suggests that perhaps we are doing our students a disservice by insisting that the personal has no place in the academic world. After all, Robillard notes, we trust that scholars who open scholarly pieces with personal narratives are doing so in order to introduce or make a point; however, she says, “we don’t always grant this same trust to our students when they tell us their personal stories in writings we assign” (Robillard 75). A good portion of the articles that I’ve drawn upon for this literature review include, at one point or another, personal experience. If scholars and professionals use these techniques on a regular basis, it seems contradictory to eschew similar pedagogical exercises and assignments in the composition classroom. If Robillard is correct in asserting that “students rely on their past experiences to understand new knowledge,” I would suggest that voice and personal experience do have a place in the composition classroom.

Aside from their interest in personal voice and narrative as a means for assimilating new knowledge, it is important to note that Robillard and Gemmell both use the terms “voice,” “narrative,” and “experience” interchangeably. Though it may seem innocuous, this changes the conversation about voice dramatically. Following their usage of the term, “voice” is something

personal (though not necessarily individual), and it implies bringing one's extracurricular life into the classroom in order to analyze new information or make a point in argument. If we look back at the definition offered up by more traditional expressivists, such as Romano or Elbow, we find that voice is described as "the writer's presence on the page" (Romano 50). Still other composition scholars offer an interpretation that is thoroughly rooted in rhetorical concepts, such as audience awareness. Writers and researchers such as Hashimoto and Bowden see this multifaceted concept and wish to narrow it down to one quantifiable interpretation; others, such as Leggo, acknowledge and embrace the multiplicity in their own work, but not necessarily in the classroom. By grappling with the various and often contradictory interpretations of voice, I was able to refine the working definition of voice that I described in the previous chapter: a writer's presence on the page, made visible by concrete, identifiable elements such as syntax, diction, and organization, in combination with a distinct awareness of audience and purpose. This particular definition does not advocate or endorse the tired idea of confessional, self-involved writing, but it also does not presuppose that the personal and the academic must occupy separate rhetorical spaces. Furthermore, it reinforces the idea that voice in writing is very much like Castiglione's *sprezzatura*: "an easy facility in accomplishing difficult actions which hides the conscious effort that went into them" (Rebhorn 33). What most people think of as voice is only the first step of a long and arduous process, rather than an excuse for poor, but "honest" writing.

Together, these sources have helped me to develop not only the definition of voice that I described in the introduction, but also to hone certain elements of my project as a whole. Specifically, reviewing the conflicting but valid perspectives of scholars such as Elbow, Macrorie, Hashimoto, and Bowden allowed me to see both the positive and negative consequences of emphasizing voice in a first year composition classroom. While I agree with

Elbow and Macrorie when they suggest that students must be comfortable writing honestly and authentically, I understand and agree when critics of expressive pedagogy state their concerns about the possible lack of attention to correctness, detail, and rhetorical purpose that might occur when student texts are made the focal point of the class and instructors are asked to step down from their position of authority. These contrasting viewpoints allowed me to identify concrete elements of voice for the purpose of evaluation, and helped me to develop a clear rationale for those choices.

Perhaps even more important to the evolution of this capstone was the discovery of Amy Robillard's "It's Time for Class: Toward a New Pedagogy of the Narrative." As I initially developed the project, I intended to use a personal narrative and a final reflective essay, situated respectively at the beginning of and the end of the semester, to evaluate whether or not the use of weblogs had any impact on the development of voice in formal, graded student writing. As I read through article upon article critiquing voice and the use of the personal in academic writing, such as I. Hashimoto's "Voice as Juice: Some Reservations about Evangelic Composition," I began to question whether or not the assignments I had chosen to evaluate would yield results that could be applied to academic, research-based writing in first year composition classrooms. However, Robillard's argument that the rendering and analysis of past experience (like that of a personal narrative or reflective essay) helps students understand new knowledge suggested that these assignments were valid choices, even in the context of first year composition.

Up to this point, I have focused on the various scholarly perspectives on voice. However, I found that the development and design of this project necessitated a review of the literature discussing the use of weblogs in the composition classroom as well. Before I committed to the implementation of the blogging element, I needed to know more about the experiences of other

composition instructors and researchers before me. The following scholarly articles and accounts shed some light on the motivations and difficulties associated with using digital composition in the classroom, thus preparing me for possible pitfalls. Many of the articles that I found discuss digital composition only in the broadest sense of the term; others focused on the effectiveness of blogs in the composition classroom, but they were often focused on the effects of public writing on the research process or audience awareness. Although none of the following scholarly pieces set out to explore how regular, in-class blogging affects student voice in writing, they all contain unique elements that have helped shape my study and my interpretation of the results.

Although J. Elizabeth Clark's "The Digital Imperative: Making the Case for a Twenty-First Century Pedagogy" does not focus entirely on blogs, it did remark on their usefulness with regard to teaching argument. Due to the instantly publishable nature of blogs, Clark also suggests that students who blog are more likely to take responsibility for their own words. In the context of my own project, I hope that this same quality will encourage students to take responsibility for their own voices as well.

In the article "Blogging as Pedagogic Practice: Artefact and Ecology," Marc O'Donnell also sings the praises of weblogs in the classroom; however, he advises teachers against simply dropping these technologies into a curriculum. Instead, he feels that the surrounding course design should be shaped by the inclusion of new technologies and platforms. In the case of weblogs, this means that writing completed in a blog format shouldn't simply replace the paper version of the same activity. In the case of a blog, we might suppose that this means that the activities performed on the platform be especially suited to audience, as blogging itself offers students the chance to engage with a live audience outside of the professor.

Most of the empirical studies with regard to blogging do not focus on stylistic concerns. For example, Eddy Chong's "Using Blogging to Enhance the Initiation of Students into Academic Research" deals only with how blogs can function as a public research journal. Zhang Wei's "Blogging for Doing English: Student Evaluations," also focused primarily on how regular blogging affected the research process of L2 students, but several of the students interviewed noted that the blogs themselves helped them develop an online identity—a concept that matches up with the early expressivist concept of "voice." Olivia Halic's article "To Blog or Not to Blog: Student Perceptions of Blog Effectiveness for Learning in a College-Level Course" focused entirely on student feedback; instead of simply buying into the idea that blogs are the panacea for all writing ills, Halic and her fellow researchers took the time to test for student responses to forced blogging. In particular, Halic notes that the majority of the study participants "reported that their blog experience was positive and enhanced their overall learning" (210). Furthermore, the students who participated in Halic's study also acknowledged that the blogging element of the course aided the sharing of knowledge between peers, thus reinforcing the notion that weblogs are especially useful for teaching and expanding audiences.

In the same vein, John Benson and Jessica Reyman's empirical study, "Learning to Write Publicly: Promises and Pitfalls of Using Weblogs in the Composition Classroom," also makes an effort to discover how students respond to blogging in the composition classroom. Benson and Reyman's study was of particular interest; while the students had surprising difficulty grasping the concept of a public audience, they did seem to understand the importance of voice. One student even went so far as to say that "...the only way that [you] could have a bad blog post is if [you] did not write how you truly felt" (24). Conversely, only eight percent of the

students surveyed in Benson and Reyman's study recognized that someone outside of the insular classroom environment might read their blogs (27).

In recent years, many instructors have worked to implement weblogs into learning disabled (LD) and ESL/EFL classrooms, as seen in the aforementioned "Blogging for Doing English." Sarah R. Jones's "Digital Access" explores how the use of blogs in her LD classroom has helped her students better understand the social and communicative nature of writing, rather than simply focusing on its relation to grades, tests, and performance evaluations. Rightly so, Jones points out that "the moment writing becomes more about getting a grade than communicating an idea, it loses something essential—it becomes artificial" (16). Of course, this is a systemic problem not only in an LD environment, but in nearly every composition classroom; when the audience consists solely of the professor or instructor, student writing falls flat. Similarly, Vahid Najafi and Masoud Hashemi discuss the benefits of blogging as a means of encouraging a "social construction of knowledge and meaning making" in "Using Blogs in English Language Classes" (600). Though their study is primarily observational, they also include a great deal of student feedback about the process as a whole. Though the researchers did not see the number of posts that they'd hoped for, the vast majority of the students surveyed agreed that incorporating blogs in the course curriculum was a positive and productive idea.

Charles Tryon's "Writing and Citizenship" provides further evidence of the benefits of including blogs in writing-based courses. As part of a course that emphasized the importance of writing as part of a democratic and equal society, Tryon asked his students to create their own blogs, on which they posted responses to established bloggers, such as political pundits. Much to Tryon's surprise, the professional bloggers noted the increase in traffic and responded publicly on Tryon's own weblog. As one might imagine, Tryon's students were surprised by the

appearance of a true audience, and instructors everywhere might feel that placing students in such a public sphere could have its flaws, especially when it comes to online privacy. Still, this instructor experienced what many of the previously cited researchers only hoped for: a real, live audience outside of the classroom, as well as an exercise in the social construction of knowledge and language.

Despite the successful experiences of many scholars and instructors, there are some researchers that still regard the inclusion of weblogs in the classroom with careful skepticism. In “The Unrealistic Claims for the Effects of Classroom Blogging on English as a Second Language, Students’ Writing Performance,” Ming-Huei Lin, Chin-Ying Lin, and Pi-Ying Hsu question whether or not blogging is a justifiable replacement for traditional teaching methods, specifically in an ESL/EFL setting. The researchers acknowledge that students often feel more comfortable expressing themselves and more motivated to write on a weblog platform, but the technology offers no substantial advantage over pen and paper when it comes to student performance. What’s more, Lin, Lin, and Hsu point out that the extra effort required of instructors who implement blogs in the composition classroom is hardly worth the long-term results. While this may be the case, blogs are not always introduced into a classroom environment to simply “improve” writing. Instead, they are more commonly viewed as a way to encourage student engagement with writing and provide an audience other than the instructor. The value of blogs does not stem from an ability to improve the technical aspects of student composition.

Surprisingly, Jason Tougaw’s “Dream Bloggers Invent the University,” was the only study that discussed both blogging and voice simultaneously. Although this is good for the sake of establishing my own research niche, it seems odd that more researchers and instructors have

not latched onto the idea of blogs as a means of voice development; after all, they offer students a platform outside of any university sanctioned digital interface, such as Blackboard, and also allow for student customization.

To my disappointment, it seemed that Tougaw's case study did little to truly promote voice as a viable subject for analysis; instead, by choosing to have his students blog about their personal dreams, Tougaw confirmed the suspicions of scholars like Hashimoto: those social-constructivist nay-sayers who insist that all this talk of voice obscures the real issue at hand: teaching students how to write well. But despite this, Tougaw stands out from the other scholars who I encountered in that he tried to test directly for voice using a rhetorical (not expressive) definition: "the persona of a writer, expressed, represented or constructed through distinctive patterns of language" (252). Furthermore, Tougaw links the concept of voice to that of inquiry, which he defines as "the process through which [a] writer gathers information, generates ideas, and formulates language for communicating with an audience" (252). Tougaw's careful study of his students' dream blogs is more than an attempt to incorporate relevant and modern technology in the classroom; rather, it is a serious and honest effort to connect voice and inquiry as well as their seemingly conflicting ideologies, expressivism and constructivism (252).

Aside from these student-oriented empirical studies, there were several useful articles that studied current trends in both academia and the "real world." In "The Use of Weblogs in Higher Education: A Review of Empirical Research," Jeffrey Wee Sin Sim compiles the existing literature on student blogs in education in an effort to determine whether or not the technology was truly effective. Although he does not dismiss the use of blogs in the classroom outright, Wee Sin Sim points out that most of the studies he found lasted no more than semester; as such, the relative success of these studies may be partially as result of the novelty of the platform. In

another research article, “Bridging the Gap: A Genre Analysis of Weblogs,” Susan Herring and her colleagues examine 203 randomly selected public blogs to determine how they are being used outside of a university environment. Surprisingly, Herring found that many of the blogs she encountered were strongly voiced and personal; although many weblogs were maintained by “professionals,” such as cooks, writers, or political pundits or candidates, the entries were written in an engaging fashion, one which was ostensibly meant to directly connect with an audience.

From the time that I initially began my research on voice and digital composition, there has been an unbelievable proliferation of studies that bring blogging, social networking, and other web-based forms of writing into the first year composition classroom. As more and more technologically aware students have entered colleges and universities, researchers and instructors alike have worked to bridge the gap between the academic and the public spheres.

But despite the fact that digital composition and blogging have become commonplace in many connected classrooms, voice still seems like a dirty word. Weblogs are tangible—we can see them, define them, and regulate them; on the other hand, voice remains a tangled and contested concept. While at first I was discouraged by the lack of scholarly research on the concept, I soon came to realize that these ideas were interconnected; one cannot display voice without an awareness of audience, and one cannot grasp a language without placing his or herself within it. Although I did find a number of useful and enlightening sources during the research process, there is still a place for a rhetorical exploration of the development of voice through the use of student blogs in the classroom.

The articles cited above have helped me to not only carve a space for my own research, but also offered me important insights into the experimental process. In particular, I looked to Jason Tougaw’s “Dream Bloggers Invent the University,” because its purposes and theory

aligned well with my own. However, I found Tougaw's results and conclusions inapplicable on a larger scale; like Benson and Reyman, he used his own students for the purpose of the study, something that I felt would create the possibility for researcher bias. In addition, I chose not to use my own students because I feared that they would, despite all protestations, believe that their grades would be affected by their level of participation. In addition, I noted that many studies, including Tougaw's, failed to include student responses to blogging activities. Those that did include a survey or interview element, such as Zhang Wei's "Blogging for Doing English: Student Evaluations," seemed to have more conclusive results. From these observations, I crafted my own method for testing the effectiveness of weblogs as a tool for improving voice in student writing, as described in the next chapter.

Chapter Three: Method

While voice has been a topic in the field of composition since the expressivist movement of the late 60s and early 70s, the means of testing for it are, by nature, qualitative. Because levels of voice are difficult (if not impossible) to rate quantitatively, and because many scholars and researchers subscribe to different definitions and interpretations, those who wish to study voice are hard-pressed to come up with hard, statistical evidence for its existence, development, or absence. Most studies that involve voice and student writing consist of a general discussion of theory followed by several pieces of student writing analyzed through that lens. In order to give my own study more depth, I decided to go one step further. While a good portion of my method and design revolved around the use of textual analysis, I also drew from student surveys that offered feedback on the experience of writing with voice, as introduced by an initial lesson on the subject and reinforced by the host instructor's curriculum. The following description of method outlines the various steps involved in this research study, beginning with the introduction of the concept of voice and ending with the process of defining and analyzing what constitutes voice in two different sets of student essays.

This IRB approved study, which investigated whether or not a correlation exists between routine, low-stakes in-class blogging and the development of student voice in graded, high-stakes composition, was conducted in one of Leeann Elliott's English 1101 sections during the fall semester of 2012. At the time, Elliott's position as a Teaching Assistant in the Kennesaw State University's Master of Arts in Professional Writing program made her responsible for the course design, development, and teaching of two English 1101 sections. Although most introductory composition courses at Kennesaw State University contain twenty-six students, this particular

course only had a head count of twenty-five. Demographically speaking, the class was also imbalanced; of those twenty-five students, only five were female.

Although composition classes at Kennesaw State University must adhere to certain standards, there is room for flexibility in course planning and execution. Elliott relied on a partially expressivist pedagogy within her classroom; in addition to the in-class prompts and reflective writing completed on the blog itself, students were expected to participate in freewriting and workshop activities and throughout the semester. Students engaged in two peer review sessions for each assignment; the first session was conducted in a group setting, and students were expected to bring multiple copies of an extremely “rough” draft—in Elliott’s words, these were often “nearly freewriting.” In these workshops, students took turns reading their work aloud to their fellow group members, and then waited quietly and listened to the verbal feedback provided by their peers. A week later, students were asked to complete a more refined draft for the purpose of intensive, one-on-one peer review. As evidenced by the heavy focus on revision, drafting, and peer review, Elliott had adopted process pedagogy, thus providing an environment in which students could first “trust the gush” and later “craft the gush.”

Classroom Instruction: Formal Introduction to Voice

During the second week of class, Elliott introduced me and the purpose of my short lesson on voice, and then stepped outside so as not to pressure students into responding during the activity or participating in the study. Before beginning the lesson itself, I informed the students that this lesson was part of a larger study on voice, in which I hoped to determine whether or not the maintenance of a weblog over the course of the semester had any effect on the development of their written voices in formal, graded assignments. Furthermore, I explained that

the instruction and activities we were about to engage in were meant to introduce the idea of voice to some and to help others develop their existing knowledge on the subject.

As described on the consent form listed as Appendix A, students who agreed to participate in the study were asked to submit copies of their first and last assignments to their instructor, who would then pass the essays on to me. At the beginning of the semester, all students, whether they consented to the study or not, were also asked to create a personal blog to use for freewriting, topic development, and other in-class writing assignments. However, I made it clear that I would not be using the blogs or essays of those who had not agreed to the study as a whole. In addition, I explained that no work would be published with student names attached. On the last day of class, those students who agreed to submit their work and participate in the study were also asked to fill out a short online survey detailing their experiences.

To begin the lesson, I asked the class as whole to offer up their initial impressions of the term “voice” with relation to their own writing. Although most of them acknowledged that they had heard the term before, only about a third of the class was willing to volunteer and describe their interpretation of the concept. This reluctance to participate could have been a result of the fact that I was someone other than their normal instructor; however, Elliott informed me that, as a general rule, the class’s willingness to discuss and participate was low. Nevertheless, we compiled and recorded a list of identifiable elements that often contribute to voice, such as sentence length, diction, tone, structure, and audience.

After approximately ten minutes of a full class discussion on the subject, I asked students to gather into groups of four or five. In order to reinforce the concepts that we had just discussed, I handed out copies of three separate passages taken from different authors, subjects, and genres

(See Appendix B). Before the students began to read the passages, I projected an instructional prompt onto the screen and asked them to consider it as they read. The directions read:

1. Describe the voice in each paragraph. Is it serious, scholarly, satirical, humorous, or self-deprecating?
2. Find concrete evidence in the paragraph, such as specific diction, syntax, or structure that supports your answer in question #1.

Before beginning the activity itself, I took the time to explain both questions. The sample “voices” offered in the first question, such as “serious,” “scholarly,” or “humorous,” were meant to be suggestions to prompt thinking. Students were encouraged to think of their own ways of describing the voice in each passage. Similarly, the second question provided the students with a few concrete identifiers of voice, but was by no means restricted to those in the prompt itself.

The first paragraph the students were asked to analyze in terms of voice was taken from a text by Leonard Shlain entitled *The Alphabet versus the Goddess*. While it received national acclaim, Shlain’s text grapples with distinctly academic subjects, such as history, religion, language, and gender relations, all from a researcher’s perspective. Unlike many popular texts that rely on research, such as Malcolm Gladwell’s *The Tipping Point* or Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner’s *Freakonomics*, this book is not readily accessible to the general public. Though it is not as dense as something you might find in an exclusively academic publication, it does retain the same elevated tone and vocabulary.

For the second passage, I chose a lighter text with a similarly research-minded approach. Taken from Bill Bryson’s *The Mother Tongue: English and How It Got That Way*, this particular paragraph tackles its subject with more levity than reverence; nevertheless, it raises distinctly academic issues and challenges its readers. An observer may note that Bryson’s passage in no

way mimics academic language; yet, it does raise questions that most students would not read about in their daily travels on the Internet or in any typical magazine. What is more, it asks those important questions in a way that both entertains and informs the reader, all the while putting a clear, vibrant voice on the page.

The last passage was taken from a short piece written by American essayist David Sedaris. Unlike the first two choices, Sedaris's essay, "The Inconstant Quad," does not seek to develop a research question; however, since the students enrolled in this introductory composition were expected to write a personal narrative, it seemed reasonable to offer students an example of how to maximize voice in such a rhetorical situation. Furthermore, Sedaris's essay offers students a glimpse into how scholarly writers blend the personal and the academic. As noted in Bartholomae's "Inventing the University," academic writing is different from the writing that students perform in high school because it asks them to adopt an unfamiliar perspective of authority and analysis. The excerpt from Sedaris's piece is personal, but it also has an element of the academic, in that he is "consistently and dramatically conscious of [himself] forming something to say out of what has been said *and* what [he] has been saying in the act of writing..." (Bartholomae 620). In composing both their personal narratives and reflective essays, the students in Elliott's class would be asked to meld the personal and academic in much the same way.

In choosing these three passages, I attempted to find three distinctly different styles of writing, all of which could be easily analyzed and described in terms of voice by a student who may not have had much exposure to the concept in previous English courses. In addition, the passages from both Shlain's and Bryson's texts were academic in content and tone; many students can easily identify voice in something personal, such as Sedaris' narrative, but the real

challenge is helping students understand and identify voice in a rhetorical situation in which the writer is not writing solely about personal experiences.

At the end of the class session, I handed out consent forms and asked the students to return them to me with a signature if they wished to participate in the study. Out of the total twenty-five students, nineteen provided me with completed consent forms. Unfortunately, one of the nineteen students did not submit his final essay for review, so I was left with eighteen. However, all nineteen students who initially agreed to participate in the study completed the end of semester survey, so I was left with one extra survey response.

In addition to the in-class activity that I designed to clarify and discuss voice, I asked Elliott to have her students read Tom Romano's "Writing with Voice," a short essay that describes and defines voice as well as the means of achieving it. In doing so, I hoped to further reinforce and solidify the concepts that we had discussed that day. Elliott posted the text to the learning management system and the students took time out of that same class period to read it. As a class, the students discussed the reading, and Elliott often referenced it throughout the semester to remind students of the importance of voice and style, particularly in reference to developing a voice suited for the audience of each formal assignment throughout the semester.

Class Activities and Assignments

Although only nineteen students agreed to yield their essays to an outside reader, all of the students in the course set up a public weblog using WordPress and responded to a series of prompts on these platforms over the course of the semester. There were a total of fourteen prompts over the semester, and most were completed during class. Elliott wrote the prompts, which we agreed ahead of time should be informal in nature. The prompts, listed in Appendix C, mainly call for freewriting and reflective writing related to assignments and activities that were

completed during the semester. Several of the prompts asked students to critically reflect on their peer review experiences and identify how they intended to revise their work after receiving student feedback, while others asked students to freewrite and brainstorm in anticipation of a larger essay or assignment. As noted in the description of the study, I did not code the contents of the blogs themselves, primarily because I was more interested in where the students started and where they ended up in terms of voice. However, I did review all of the posts submitted by the study participants for two reasons: one, it was important to note how many of the required posts they had completed, and two, because I wanted to compare their writing style on the blog platform to that of their formal, graded work.

In addition, all students were asked to complete the same assignments throughout the semester; these assignments included a personal narrative, the “Hall of Fame” essay, the “Policy Change” proposal, the “Visual Analysis” essay, and a final “reflective” essay that asked student writers to critically reflect on their experiences in English 1101. In addition to these major essays, students were required to complete three “low-stakes” response papers over the course of the semester. While voice was not the focal point of all of the course’s assignments, it played a significant role in terms of audience; Elliott consistently reinforced the idea that voice, style, and tone work together to affect an audience, and placed these elements of writing on the list of writing goals and objectives found at the bottom of her assignment sheets.

Aside from the instruction I provided on voice, Elliott introduced and discussed a number of other voice-related texts, such as Ken Macrorie’s “The Poison Fish” and Peter Elbow’s “Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic: A Conflict in Goals.” On each assignment sheet, Elliott warned students to avoid “Engfish” and instead rely on strong verbs, detailed descriptions, and appropriate voice and style for the genre. Additionally, she placed a great deal of emphasis on

audience awareness by assigning a specific audience to each essay. For instance, the “Personal Narrative” was meant to be written for an audience of peers, and the final “Reflective” essay was meant to be written with Elliott as the intended audience.

Out of all the assignments completed over the semester, I only collected the personal narrative and the final reflective essay for study and analysis (See Appendix D). I chose assignments of this nature because they were similar enough for direct comparison, and I assumed that most students would be more comfortable writing with a distinctive, individual “voice” when discussing events, impressions, and experiences from their own lives. Respectively, these were the first and last formal assignments submitted in the course.

By looking at the relative mastery of voice demonstrated by the eighteen study participants at the beginning and the end of the semester, I hoped to gain a clearer picture of how the use of blogs influenced the students’ understanding and implementation of voice and style, both in low and high stakes academic writing. By combining a textual analysis of student work and surveying students for their impressions of the connections between voice and the blogging element, I hoped to accomplish two things: first, I felt that including student responses would reduce any chance of bias and allow me to see the personal reaction to the blogging element. Many of the studies that I reviewed in preparation for this project neglected to include student feedback, and this often struck me as a myopic perspective, especially with regard to voice. If the participants in my study continued to view blogs as yet another assigned class activity, the chances of honestly improving voice through a weblog platform were slim. Second, I envisioned that the addition of a student survey would allow me to better pinpoint the cause of the results. If students responded negatively to the blogging element, but improved with regard to voice over the course of the semester, I would then have to question whether or not the blogs themselves

were the catalyst for change. Similarly, if students both improved with regard to voice and identified a connection between voice and blogging, I could more comfortably assert that the maintenance of a blog has a positive effect on the development of written voice in first year composition students.

Data Collection

In keeping with our original plan, Elliott provided me with the URLs for her students' blogs. Elliott had divided the students into permanent groups for the purposes of workshopping formal essays, and she placed them in those same groups for the blogging component of the course. Students were offered the opportunity to respond to one another's work, but this was not a graded element of the class. After she had collected the personal narratives, Elliott submitted them to me. I asked her to send me all of the student papers, just as she had sent me all of the URLs for student blogs; after sorting through the essays, I disposed of all of those that belonged to students who did not consent to the study. Then, I colored over the name of each student and assigned the each essay a different letter. Similarly, I only consulted the blogs of the eighteen study participants to determine if there was any evidence of development from the beginning to the end of the semester. Unfortunately, there was no way for me to avoid the presence of names on the blogs themselves; however, I used pseudonyms for all students that I planned to discuss within the project itself.

At the end of the semester, Elliott submitted the second set of papers to me. As with the first group, I disposed of all essays that did not belong to the eighteen consenting students. After both sets of papers had been collected and stored, I sent a link to the online survey to Elliott (See Appendix E). In turn, she asked the students who had consented to the study to complete the questions while she stepped out of the room. Although the bulk of the data related to this study

was based on the analysis of student work, I also wanted to get a clear sense of how the students felt about the blogs and their own progress as writers, as noted previously.

Evaluation

Before beginning the textual analysis, I chose one other colleague from the Master of Arts in Professional Writing program at Kennesaw State University to help me code both sets of essays. Although I considered coding the papers by myself, I noted that most of the quantitative studies that discussed the various uses of weblogs included a bevy of raters. While my study was qualitative in nature, I wanted to lend credibility to my own analysis and detract from any possible bias by involving another reader in the coding process. In order to bring in a completely outside perspective, I specifically chose a reader who did not have experience teaching introductory composition courses. By doing this, I hoped to invite discussion and debate. Since I was conducting the study, I obviously hoped to see improvement in the second set of essays, thus suggesting that the use of weblogs in the classroom could have a positive impact on the development of voice in formal, graded assignments; in order to further validate my claim that the blogs were the primary catalyst for this development (or lack thereof), I also evaluated the surveys submitted by the students, which I hoped would offer some insight into the connection between voice and the blogging element. Because I felt assured that I could collate the results of the surveys objectively, I collected and evaluated these without the help of my co-reader.

For the sake of this study, we defined the three levels of “voice” in this way: essays that constructed a writer’s presence on the page, made visible by concrete, identifiable elements such as syntax, diction, and organization, in combination with a distinct awareness of audience and purpose were labeled “Level 3.” Those that showed some awareness of voice displayed an acceptable level of these concepts, but only intermittently, and, in all likelihood, unintentionally.

These essays, which inconsistently displayed the writer's presence on the page, were labeled "Level 2." Lastly, those essays that fell below expectations, using inappropriate tone, as evidenced by poor diction, repetitive or incorrect sentence structure, and showed no awareness of an outside audience, were placed in "Level 1."

Prior to reading the essays, my co-reader and I met and normalized our interpretations of syntax, diction, audience awareness, as well as the overarching concept of the writer's presence on the page. First, we agreed that the concrete elements of style that we were using as signposts were just that; if an essay used good diction and syntax in some places, but did not do so with any continuity, then it could not be categorized as "Level 3." We planned to use these identifiable elements as support for our final evaluations, but also understood that in the case of voice, the individual parts do not always come together to form a whole.

More specifically, we agreed that diction that exemplified voice should be specific and reflective of the content. The use of common "crutch words," such as "really" and "very" were labeled as "Level 1" and "Level 2" signposts, and often paved the way for weak word choice in general. We chose to look for strong action verbs and detailed descriptions, as well the avoidance of "English." More than anything, we looked for consistency; since we knew we weren't going to be judging whether or not a voice was "good" or "bad," we wanted to see that the writer did not break the mood by using inappropriate diction in a situation where he or she had already established a definitive tone.

Syntax was a little more difficult to pinpoint, as its proper execution often hinges on the rhetorical situation. In the case of the personal narrative and the final essay, we planned to look for purposeful sentence structure that was reflective of the content itself. Depending on what the student writer was trying to communicate, we acknowledged that this might vary. However, we

expected that the best examples of syntax would display varied sentence length and structure.

Writing samples that used repetitive structure without the use of any rhetorical device, such as anaphora, were to be placed in “Level 1” and “Level 2.”

After careful consideration, we decided that audience awareness would be most evident in the content itself; students that provided too little information, or failed to describe elements of their writing that were unique to their own experience would be placed in “Level 1” and “Level 2,” while students that took the time and effort to bridge the gap between writer and reader would be placed in “Level 3.” Since both assignments were directed at different audiences, we knew that we would have to take this into consideration as well.

In order to reduce bias, we also agreed to code individually, and then meet again to review our results. As we read, we divided the essays into three basic groups: those that exemplified voice, those that displayed some awareness of voice, and those that lacked voice entirely. As we sorted the papers into the three basic groups, we searched for three particular identifiers described above: diction, syntax, and audience awareness. Segments that contained effective or ineffective examples of these three elements were highlighted and marked accordingly. After completing the coding process individually, we met again and discussed our results. In the event that my co-reader and I disagreed on the categorization of a particular paper, we compared the evidence for our decisions, such as marked passages and other notes, and discussed our rationale until we came to a shared conclusion.

Chapter Four: Results

In this chapter, I have divided the results of the study as a whole into several sections. First, I will detail the experience of coding the papers, discuss the blogs of the study participants, and offer the quantitative results of the study. Following this, I will showcase student work in two case studies. The first case study will identify and explore student work, taken from formal essays and blog posts, that exemplifies “Level 1,” “Level 2,” and “Level 3” mastery of voice. The second study will describe the writing of a student who improved with regard to voice over the course of the semester and analyze both his formal work and his blog posts. After the discussion of individual student work, I will discuss the survey results and explore the greater implications of the student impressions of the blogging element of the course. Lastly, I will discuss the possible problems inherent in the study and how they might be avoided in future studies involving weblogs and the development of voice in student writers.

Textual Analysis

Evaluating the first set of papers was a smoother process than both my co-reader and I anticipated; despite the personal nature of the subject matter, it was not difficult to identify which narratives were voiced and which were not. Of the eighteen papers, my co-reader and I placed five in “Level 1,” signifying that they fell below expectations with regard to voice. To elaborate, these essays displayed inappropriate and often inconsistent tone, tense, and perspective, as evidenced by poor diction, syntax, and a lack of audience awareness. Together, these elements prevented my co-reader and me from identifying each of these writers’ presences on the page. Eight of the eighteen essays fit the description of “Level 2,” meaning that we determined that they intermittently (and perhaps unintentionally) showed occasional glimpses of voice through the use of thoughtful word choice, sentence structure, and purpose; however, like “Level 1,”

these papers were often inconsistent in quality. Four of the essays in the first set fit our initial description of “Level 3.” These narratives were unique in several ways; of course, they displayed a superior execution of the main identifiers, such as diction, syntax, and tone. But perhaps more importantly, the voice in these papers clearly reflected the content of the narrative itself. While the other fourteen papers may have intermittently shown evidence of voice, if at all, we noted that the “Level 3” narratives allowed for the complete synthesis of content, voice, and presentation.

The reflective essays proved more difficult to objectively evaluate. Although these essays were less personal than the narratives, both my co-reader and I assumed that they would be equally individual; after all, each student was asked to recount what he or she had learned and experienced over the course of English 1101, and certainly those experiences would be unique. No outside sources were required, but students were asked to include specific examples of class readings and assignments to support their main argument. Unlike the narratives, it was difficult to tell one essay from the next; not only did each student employ almost identical language, but they also seemed to have similar organizational styles and perspectives. While many of the students seemed to write “honestly” enough, pinpointing specific elements of diction, syntax, and audience awareness that contributed to an overall presence on the page was difficult because of the similarity in content and tone. Of the eighteen reflective essays, we categorized six of them as “Level 1,” eight of them as “Level 2,” and four of them as “Level 3.” As the table below indicates, my co-reader and I found that only two of the eighteen essays showed any positive change over the course of the semester, while the remaining sixteen showed either no change or, more disappointingly, a regression with regard to voice.

Table 1 identifies the ratings for the first and second essays and notes how many blog entries each student completed.

Student	Narrative	Reflective Essay	# of Blog Entries
A	1	1	9
B	2	2	13
C	2	2	13
D	1	1	9
E	2	3	6
F	1	1	14
G	1	1	10
H	2	2	13
I	2	2	13
J	2	3	10
K	3	3	14
L	2	2	10
M	2	2	10
N	1	1	14
O	3	3	11
P	3	2	12
Q	3	2	12
R	2	1	13

Over the course of the semester, I periodically checked the content of the blogs of students who had agreed to participate in the study. Although I did not separately code the work of these students, I wanted to ensure that the study participants were posting regularly and writing substantial entries. Almost all of the posts were at least a paragraph long, while some spanned three to four paragraphs. Most of the students completed over seventy-five percent of the required posts, with only one student completing less than half of the fourteen total assignments (see table 1). This overwhelming rate of participation may have had something to do with the fact that the blog prompts comprised fifteen percent of the students' total grade in the course. This theory is supported by the fact that none of the study participants mentioned the blogging element of the course in their reflective essays, a space in which they were asked to reflect on and critically discuss their experience in the course. Given that the students were

required to complete a total of fourteen substantial blog posts over the course of the semester, I found it surprising and somewhat disappointing that none of the study participants came forward to validate the merit of the blogging activity.

If one were to simply look at the numbers in this study, it would be easy to dismiss the use of weblogs in the classroom with a wave of the hand. Half of the students who completed ten to fourteen of the given blog assignments saw no improvement with regard to voice, which is hardly a ringing endorsement for the use of weblogs for that particular purpose in a first year composition course. However, I maintain that the lack of a strong correlation between regular, in-class blogging and the improvement of student voice does not automatically render this project a fruitless effort. Instead of focusing only on broad conclusions, I believe there is merit in examining the occurrence of voice and the effects of weblogs in the classroom on more specific groups of participants within the larger study. First, I would like to closely examine the similarities and differences between three students who exemplified the three categories described above and determine what can be concluded about the nature of voice and the effect of maintaining a weblog in a first year composition class. Then, I would like to delve deeper and explore the progress of the one student who improved with regard to voice over the course of the semester, using both his first and last essays and excerpts from his weblog.

Case Study #1: Naomi, Catherine, and Kyle

This case study will focus on three students who represented the three different levels of mastery with regard to voice. Although they were not the only students who remained stagnant with regard to voice over the course of the semester, I chose these three study participants because they had each completed almost all of the blog assignments, thus offering me the clearest picture of how the blogs figured into their concept of voice. Since none of them

improved or regressed, this segment will also focus on the manifestation of voice and how to pinpoint it in student writing. As I compare and contrast the “Level 1,” “Level 2,” and “Level 3” work of students “N,” “C,” and “K,” I will refer to them pseudonymously as Naomi, Catherine, and Kyle.

In her personal narrative, Naomi chose to describe her lifelong love for music. Rather than focusing on a particular memory that exemplified her relationship with music, she chose to describe the various points in her life that it affected. Each paragraph was short, terse, and began with the words “I remember.” Upon first glance, this instance of anaphora seemed like a clever rhetorical device; however, there was so little viable content that the repetition itself felt like more of a crutch than a carefully employed manifestation of voice. Also, the assignment for the personal narrative offered this trope as a loose structural guideline, so it is difficult to attribute even this to Naomi. As a result, her work was categorized as “Level 1.”

Aside from this use of anaphora, neither my co-reader nor I marked anything related to syntax or diction in Naomi’s narrative. Perhaps the most telling example of this dearth can be found in the following passage:

I remember when fourth grade came along, and I finally had an opportunity to really learn an instrument. I chose trumpet for no reason at all; I really have no idea why I picked it.

And I remember my parents threatening me not to quit band. They were paying a lot for my instrument, they said, and they would be very angry if I just gave up in a few months or years.

While the repetition of “I remember” ties these two statements together, little else does. Naomi tells us little about the experience of band or playing trumpet. Instead, she only tells us that she

“really [has] no idea why [she] picked it.” Although there is nothing wrong with the way that this is written, it gives the reader no sense of the author behind the “I.” And despite the fact that this is not the “phony, pretentious language of the schools,” I would daresay that Macrorie would peg this as dishonest writing. Naomi’s language is fairly simple in this passage—that’s part of the appeal. But, it tells us nothing about her or her experience—she reiterates her love for music, but the audience is never granted the opportunity to see it.

Although Naomi completed all of the required blog responses, her posts reflect a similar lack of engagement. Despite the fact that students were given ample time in class to compose substantial and detailed responses to the questions provided by Elliott, most of her posts are approximately a paragraph long. Much like her narrative and reflective essays, these low stakes assignments are vague and often full of oddly formal language. When asked to describe her writing process, Naomi has this to say: “When I sit down to write a paper, the first thing I do is think about what point I am trying to get across. I need to have the topic clear in my brain before I start to write, or else I end up feeling like my knowledge of the subject is inadequate. After clarifying specifically what I am writing about, I begin to work on my thesis statement.” Naomi’s response seems promising at first, but there are several issues here. Like many first year composition students, she seems to think that writing only serves as a means of delivering ready-made information. Exercises such as low-stakes writing and freewriting do not enter her mind, because she assumes that all writers must know what they intend to say before they say it. Since she does not allow the “gush” that Romano references to occur, she does not allow herself the space to craft it into something voiced. In addition, the words she uses here, such as “clarify” and “inadequate” seem out of place in a blog post. This use of formal language only serves to indicate her discomfort with the writing process as a whole.

The response cited above was written early in the semester, but the same issues surface in Naomi's final blog post. When asked to reflect on her experiences over the course of the semester, she notes that:

My least favorite class was English 1101. I do not like being challenged in subjects that I do not enjoy. I want my work to be easy. I was always one of the best writers in high school, and then I came here. I feel like I just got a difficult teacher, because my friends in other classes are getting A's on their papers, meanwhile I try hard just to get a B-. It frustrates me beyond belief.

This passage is telling for a number of reasons. First, Naomi was aware that her instructor would read this post. Given the content, it seems clear that she had little to no understanding of or concern with her audience. In addition, Naomi seems to imply that she does not enjoy writing or composition. There is nothing inherently wrong with this statement—all students have different strengths and weaknesses. However, she goes on to tell her readers that she was “one of the best writers in high school,” which doesn't seem congruous with the suggestion that she does not like writing. Again, it seems that Naomi's enjoyment (or lack thereof) in any space is directly affected by whether or not an outside figure tells her that she is “good.” Instead of focusing on her improving her writing, Naomi detaches herself from the situation and waits for the affirmation of an outsider.

Naomi's reflective essay contains many of the same issues. While she is honest about her struggles with college writing, she reveals little else. Most strikingly, Naomi spends the majority of her essay referring to grade-related concerns. This preoccupation with measurable performance permeates the essay, and it is highly possible that it also precludes her from

thinking about her writing as something that she wields or controls. This is perhaps most evident in the following passage:

I ended up rewriting that paper three times and changing bands twice. I received an F on the paper and needed to rewrite it. On the rewrite I received a B plus, resulting in a C minus for me overall. Earning a B plus on the rewrite obviously showed that I did make some progress in learning how to write an argumentative paper, but it was still very difficult for me. I wish I could have learned without sacrificing so much of my grade, as the Hall of Fame essay was fifteen percent of our overall grade.

Aside from issues of repetitive diction and syntax, Naomi passes up an important opportunity to truly reflect on her improvement as a writer and a student. What's more, the only evidence she has for the improvement she does acknowledge is that her instructor awarded her with a higher grade. This is perhaps a result of the fact that most students have ample experience with writing that asks them to render their experiences, which is what Naomi has done both in her personal narrative and her reflective essay. However, when asked to critically think about and interpret the experiences that they have described, these same students are at a loss.

In the first essay of the semester, Naomi faces a similar crossroads: she tells us about a negative experience in which someone named "John" has told her that she isn't good enough to be a professional musician. Rather than delving deeply into this experience and sharing something meaningful, she tells her audience that she "remember[s] receiving the news that made [her] realize that John was wrong. [She] had made All State band." In the case of English 1101, Naomi also waits for an authority figure to tell her that her writing has improved, rather than looking to pinpoint elements that changed from the first and last drafts of her essay.

At first glance, Naomi's tendency to wait for an outside reader to either confirm or deny her abilities seems like a lack of critical thinking, which is exactly right. However, the ubiquitous lack of voice here is part of the same problem; without the ability to engage with and own their language, students such as Naomi find that they are also unable to critically think about the problems they encounter both in life and in the academic world.

Like Naomi's, Catherine's personal narrative also begins with a series of vignettes; however, she uses the context she provides about her relationship with her brother to lead up to a singular event: her brother's bout with bacterial meningitis. At first, it seems that Catherine's narrative is taking the same route as Naomi's: "I remember my brother Brian really hated me when we were growing up. I hated him too. We were always fighting and getting each other in trouble. We never really cared much about each other." Not only does Catherine also use the "I remember" phrase, she seems to offer little honest information. She tells us that she and her brother never got along, but she doesn't show us any content. This same lack of content is reflected in the redundant sentence structure and diction that Catherine employs.

However, Catherine seems to have a plan; as the narrative progresses, she provides specific details about her and her brother's interactions that slowly reveal something new. Unlike Naomi's narrative, which brought in disjointed and incomplete information in each paragraph, Catherine's builds on itself. After describing several instances in which she and her brother fought, she transitions into a discussion of how she defended her older brother from bullies. After intimating that things were changing between them, she tells us: "I remember playing with my brother all the time. We'd pretend we were the only people left on earth and we were adrift on a boat, and with us we had a pair of all the species in the world. Those were the days. My brother and I had a lot of fun together." There are several things of note in this passage; first,

there is a level of detail that never surfaced in Naomi's "Level 1" narrative. Not only does she tell us that they played together and that they had a "lot of fun together," she also shows us exactly what kinds of activities the two engaged in. Catherine also makes good use of syntax in this segment; she follows a longer sentence describing their wistful childhood games with a short, punchy "[T]hose were the days." This, however, is where she runs into trouble. Unsure of whether or not her content has the ability to stand alone, Catherine feels the need to clearly and explicitly state that she and her brother had fun. Aside from the lack of confidence that this belies, it also suggests that Catherine's grasp of audience is somewhat tenuous. Most readers would grasp that this activity and the wistful "[T]hose were the days" was her way of *showing* that she and her brother had fun, despite their sibling rivalry.

From the start of the semester, Catherine's blog posts reveal a writing process and style that allow for the existence of voice. Unlike Naomi, she doesn't worry about using "big" words to make her writing sound impressive. Instead, she writes honestly and without frills. What is more, she explicitly states that a first draft does not have to be a perfect draft, and she allows herself the opportunity to "gush" before she goes back to craft and refine her voice. When asked to describe her writing process with regard to the personal narrative, she has this to say:

When I wrote my rough draft I basically was just jotting down memories I have of my brother and me. I did not intend for there to be any structure in my rough draft, it was just an idea. When I went back to revise is when I created a structure and added detail. Since I had all my ideas down it was easy to go back, take out what didn't need to be there, add what did need to be there, and create some sort of structure. After the peer revision I went back to revise some more so that my rough draft could be as close to perfect as possible.

Compared to some of her peers in first year composition, Catherine has a clear understanding of the writing process and the importance of revision. She also seems to inherently grasp that in order to go back and add structure and detail, which both work together to develop voice, she had to have the “gush” down first. In fact, she notes that it was easier to go back and revise when she had something to work with. Unlike Naomi’s, Catherine’s response shows us that she understands that writing is not simply a process of regurgitation, but one of discovery as well.

Despite her success with the blog posts, Catherine’s reflective essay remains inconsistent when it comes to voice. It begins with a series of short, choppy sentences that could be read as a kind of rhetorical device; however, it’s difficult to tell whether or not the writer intended for her repetitive syntax to make an impact or not. Take, for instance, the opening segment: “I love writing. I write all the time. I write about things that happen in life—about what makes me sad, or happy. I write to figure out why I’m feeling so angry. I write because I want to tell a story, but have no one to tell it to. Writing has always been a big part of my life. Now that I’m in college it’s become an even bigger part.” Much like the opening paragraph of her narrative, she employs redundant syntax and simplistic word choice; although it works better in the context of the reflective essay, it’s difficult to tell whether she is working with a specifically crafted voice, or simply lacks the ability to vary her sentence structure.

As in the personal narrative, Catherine’s voice becomes stronger as the reflective essay continues. Like Naomi, she too struggled with the transition into college writing, and was surprised to find that existing composition skills did not make the grade. However, Catherine digs deeper and tries to theorize as to why she did not do as well as she would have liked in the course. She tells us:

I walked into my first semester of college with a “can do” attitude, and because of my positivity I did pretty well in my classes. But my English class was a different story, because I walked in there with a stubborn “I got this” attitude. I definitely didn’t have it. I’m not an academic writer, I write strictly for myself. My first semester of college English has taught me that just writing for myself isn’t good enough.

Naomi’s “Level 1” reflective essay would have stopped at the realization that she “definitely didn’t have it,” but Catherine tries to figure out why she didn’t have it: she doesn’t write for an audience. Surprisingly, her guess is fairly accurate, as the main problem in her personal narrative was that she was writing with a voice that she did not expect her audience to hear. Along with the stronger voice that Catherine presents comes a clearer sense of self-awareness, ownership of language, and critical thinking. Because she has put herself and her voice into her writing, she is better able to analyze where she went wrong.

As she continues to reflect on her first semester of college writing, Catherine notes, “If I’m not an expert on my topic, or if I don’t personally know my audience then I have a problem writing ... I’m just so used to writing with my own voice.” Here she stumbles upon an important point. Catherine remarks that she feels comfortable, if not accustomed to writing with her own voice. However, she also realizes that that is not enough. For a voice to be heard, it must be tailored to the reader’s ears, something that Catherine clearly struggles with in both writing samples. Although she has difficulty addressing her audience, she at least sees that this is where her “authentic” voice fails her. Unlike Naomi, she is able to do more than render her experiences—she looks at them as an outsider, and analyzes what the experiences mean for her as a writer.

Kyle's personal narrative focused on a singular event: his parents' divorce. His essay was the strongest of all eighteen, primarily because it employed specific diction and syntax that matched the context of the event. Furthermore, Kyle was able to differentiate between the younger iteration of his psyche and his older, wiser perspective with the skillful use of dialogue and description. This ability to "switch" voices can be seen most clearly in the penultimate paragraph of his narrative:

...it took me two or three rings to snap out of the trance I was in and answer. Dad had called back. He wanted to speak to Mom. I knocked on her door and said, "Mom, Dad wants to talk to you." Her answer was abrupt and unexpected: "Tell him to go to Hell." I was stunned. Mom and Dad didn't talk to each other that way or at least, they weren't supposed to. I could feel the tears forming. "What'd she say?" my Dad asked. I managed to choke the words, "I want...to...go to sleep" out between quiet sobs. There was a sigh on the other line as if he understood and then he replied, "Okay Buddy. Goodnight."

For the majority of this passage, Kyle's voice makes it abundantly clear that he is looking back on this experience as a young adult. Although he uses strong diction in the surrounding context, such as "trance," "choked," and "sobs," he also manages to capture the thoughts of a small boy upon hearing his mother swear at his father in saying, "Mom and Dad didn't talk to each other that way..." The sudden change in sentence structure and language indicate that we are switching to a different perspective, although Kyle does not explicitly state this. Here, Kyle both renders and interprets his experiences, all while maintaining a clear sense of audience awareness. As readers, both my colleague and I were able to see Kyle's presence on the page, alternately as a young boy and a wiser young man.

Kyle's mastery of voice clearly exceeds that of his peers in this instance, and my co-reader and I could not help but wonder if this was a result of his emotional connection with the topic. While my definition of voice is not entirely relegated to personal writing, I do believe that it is enhanced by engagement and connection to the subject, two elements which Kyle clearly displays.

Kyle's blog posts reflect a similar level of mastery when it comes to voice. Like Catherine, he seems to enter the classroom with a better understanding of how to let his writing and his voice develop through the process of "prewriting" and freewriting. When asked about his writing process, Kyle notes that:

My writing process is more of a creative one than strictly academic and by the books. I free write most of the time to get ideas down, but contrary to prewriting, my free writing has no structure and is very fragmented. I tend not to do any prewriting unless I do not know much about the topic, in which case I both prewrite and do research...Once I begin writing, it is not uncommon for me to stray from my original outline, or freewriting notes...I make corrections mid-way through my paper also when I finish....

Like Catherine's, Kyle's understanding of the writing process goes beyond the "I think about what I want to say, and then I say it" approach that Naomi adopted. However, Kyle's understanding of how to craft his initial "gush" goes one step further; instead of relegating freewriting to the beginning of the writing process, he points out that he makes changes and strays from his initial thoughts in the middle of the process. This level of awareness, both of self and audience, is one that translates into Kyle's formal work in the classroom. Kyle also notes that he "tend[s] to have ideas about how to word certain phrases that might conflict with another

part of [his] paper.” Instead of waiting for the outside reader to pass judgment on his work, as Naomi does, Kyle anticipates how “certain phrases” might impact his audience. In doing so, he takes full responsibility and ownership for his writing, and understands that his particular diction and syntax has an effect on how his ideas are perceived.

This same level of voice translates into Kyle’s reflective essay. Although he seems to have entered the course with a better mastery of voice than most of his peers, he notes that he has learned that he still has room to improve, specifically in terms of perspective. “While it is true that I had a good grip on writing,” Kyle writes, “my grip may have been on writing from the perspective of the writer instead of both the writer and the reader (academic), as referenced from Peter Elbow’s ‘Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic: A Conflict in Goals.’” Many of the students voiced a similar sentiment in their reflections, suggesting that they too struggled with the idea of writing for someone outside of themselves as well as crafting a voice that was meant to be shared. However, the positive note here is that the students who identified themselves as “writers, not academics” were doing something that students like Naomi didn’t: situating themselves in their writing. This is a crucial step in the development of voice; without truly putting themselves in their texts, it seems that students have little to no hope of becoming thoughtful, voiced writers. There is a risk involved, but that is an inevitable consequence of investment.

Given the essay and blog examples taken from Naomi’s, Catherine’s, and Kyle’s work, I was able to better determine exactly how voice on the page is formed from the seemingly simple combination of word choice, syntax, and audience awareness. Used deftly, these three elements of basic composition can help a writer better place his or herself in a text. Furthermore, I was able to attain a clearer picture of how the average first year composition student views voice and

its place in the writing process. While these results did not surprise my co-reader and me, we were intrigued to find that there seemed to be an interesting correlation between the occurrence of voice and that of critical reflection. Perhaps, as Elbow suggests, the use of academic discourse, which can often be characterized by a particular disengagement and objectivity, “masks a lack of understanding” (137). Given the results of this study, it seems that writers who truly grapple with a text or an idea and situate themselves in their writing have a better chance of understanding and synthesizing the materials that they engage with.

Case Study #2: Lance

Of the eighteen essays reviewed for this study, only two improved with regard to voice over the course of the semester. In this case study, I will only take a closer look at the work of Student “L,” who will be referred to pseudonymously as Lance. Although Student “E” also improved over the course of the semester, he was an ESL student; as such, he continued to struggle with grammatical and syntactical problems, even in his reflective essay. Although his use of voice is impressive, the language itself is flawed. In order to avoid the perception that good voice trumps good writing, I have chosen to leave the work of “Student E” out of the case study. In addition, this particular student only completed six of the assigned blog prompts; as such, his progress cannot tell us much about the influence of blogging in the classroom.

Lance started the semester with a personal narrative that was placed in “Level 2.” This was one of the toughest coding decisions that my co-reader and I faced because the voice that Lance presented was in turn incredible and mundane. In the end, we decided that consistency was crucial to the mastery of voice, and thus, the narrative fell just short of “Level 3.” Perhaps the most inconsistent passage of Lance’s narrative was the introduction:

I remember childhood as being joyful, summer days spent playing baseball and water gun fighting, cool nights filled with stargazing and manhunt. Now don't let the name fool you, Manhunt isn't played by hunters and bate [sic], but with teams and darkness. After teams and boundaries are set, one team hides as the other searches. The team in hiding tries to make its way back to the base...before the other team tags them. Those days, in those moments, we were infinite. The world was ours and nothing was going to stand in our way.

This paragraph opens and concludes with the same voice and tone, but the segment in between seems dreadfully out of place. This is perhaps because the game that Lance goes to such great pains to describe is not really the focal point of this narrative. As I read through the blogs that he posted over the course of the semester, I was surprised to learn that this description wasn't in his original draft; instead, Lance notes that one of his peers suggested that he add the rules of "Manhunt" into his essay for those who weren't familiar with the game. Although this is a good example of revising for one's audience, I fear that his peer readers didn't quite understand that the narrative was not about "Manhunt." In Lance's own words, this narrative actually concerned "[his] childhood, memories long since past [sic], memories that brought the joy and warm longing of nostalgia." This is most evident in the following passage, taken directly from the assignment:

I remember we cheered and laughed and made jokes with no meaning. We feasted as kings, tearing, chewing, and savoring each bite while making a mess of the floor. We arose from our thrones ready for another round of the hunt, my step-mother bid us farewell as we marched out the door. The night was young and our hearts filled with childish wonder as we entered the wild lands, our home, our

country. On we ran as kings of the night, lords of summer, royalty we were.

Manhunt continued on and as the others went and hid I turned to Graham and asked with a smile on my face, “Shall we hunt?”...

As this paragraph shows, “Manhunt” is only the framework for a particular feeling that Lance is trying to convey. The words that he uses to describe the dinner that he and his companions share, “tearing,” “chewing,” and “savoring,” are perhaps more important than those that he uses to describe “Manhunt” in the first paragraph. In all actuality, he and his friends could be returning from dinner to play anything: tag, hide and seek, or capture the flag—however, the element of nostalgia that is imbued here is what drives the narrative. While the language might be overwrought at times, it is distinctive, it is crafted, and most of all, it tells us something about Lance’s childhood that a simple description of “Manhunt” or any other game could never accomplish.

Of all the study participants, Lance’s blog posts displayed the clearest mastery of diction, syntax, and audience awareness. In addition, he seemed to better grasp the concept of freewriting. Where many of his peers simply responded to the questions asked, Lance allowed his opinions (and occasionally grievances) to permeate the writing he composed on the blog. Even when responding to a prompt asking him to describe his strengths and weaknesses with regard to college writing, Lance holds nothing back:

...I’m still struggling with arguing my argument. Apparently I put too much extraneous detail about the contents of the arguments rather than putting more argument into my argument. This of course never made sense to me because I truly believe that the contents of the argument, aka what is being argued, is as important or even more important than the argument itself. Of course in an

argumentative essay, I can see why this would pose a problem but, I believe that the background and characteristics of the contents give credibility and perspective to the argument. It also makes the paper interesting as most don't want to read it anyways.

Lance addresses the prompt in that he is reflecting on an element of college writing that he continues to struggle with. But unlike his peers, he goes a step further and complicates his response; in comparing his understanding of what is important in a formal argument to what he believes he is being taught, Lance shows that he is critically reflecting on the conflict that this gap in understanding has caused. Furthermore, he points out that the “extraneous” details that he adds, such as the “background and characteristics of the contents” have an impact on the audience. Without them, he asserts, the writing is less interesting and will detract from the level of engagement he wishes to create. Here, we see that Lance is grappling with the goals of both writers and academics, as noted in the Elbow article that Elliott assigned. He understands that an argumentative essay must contain certain elements in order to be considered “academic,” but as a writer, he wishes to appeal to his audience on a different level. This investment signals that Lance not only keeps his readers in mind, but is fully aware of how his particular writing style affects them.

Lance's identification as a writer, not an academic, is explicitly stated in the introduction of his reflective essay. But even had he not stated this directly, his tendency to compose with the writer in mind is obvious. In a discussion of things that he feels he needs to improve upon with regard to his writing, Lance has this to say:

Sometimes, when I'm writing about certain subjects that I feel strongly for or against, I tend to get a little bit moody and sarcastic. This, I have been told, turns

off the readers and alienates them from me. They are of course assuming that I care about the readers, and if the readers are my professors than [sic] I do care, but if they're just some bloke that I don't know, why should I care?

From this statement, it is clear that Lance is aware of his audience. He understands that the voice that he adopts, including that of this particular paper, has a specific effect on his readers; the trouble is, he doesn't seem to be entirely worried about what his readers think. Judging from the other papers that my co-reader and I evaluated, this is an anomalous case. In general, most students are overly concerned about what others will think of their writing, and thus they have a tendency to avoid writing with any voice or personal engagement. Lance, on the other hand, has a fairly good idea of what his audience expects from him, as he has further demonstrated in this statement: "I know that the reader of this paper won't be terribly happy to know this, but the truth is, this paper, this reflection of my writing in college, is quite dull, isn't it? I have always found it quite hard to write a fulfilling, english free paper from a completely and unequivocally bland subject..." Again, it is clear that Lance is aware of his audience, and he knows the impact that his sardonic and biting tone will have; however, because he views himself as a writer, and thus the ultimate authority, he feels comfortable asserting himself and his voice in this essay.

The fact that Lance has written with voice in his final reflective essay is undeniable; his presence is as palpable as the paper itself. However, his use of "authentic" voice makes me wonder why he was the only student to embrace the idea of voice to this extent. It seems that the nature of the second assignment kept many students from writing with a distinctive style. Although they had a semester's worth of practice behind them, I fear that many of the students felt boxed in by the specific audience, the professor, as well as the content. Although the reflective essay did require students to talk about their own experiences in English 1101, they

were not allowed the authorial freedom that they had been granted in the personal narrative. To further complicate the issue, I assume that few students were as enthralled with writing about writing as they had been about reliving a vivid childhood memory. And, as Lance notes, it is often difficult for young writers to avoid “Engfish” when they have no interest in their subject.

Survey Analysis

In addition to evaluating the eighteen study participants’ work on its own merit, I asked the students to respond to a survey describing their experiences with the blogging component of the course. Since one of the most appealing elements of blogging in the classroom is student engagement, it was important to hear what the students thought about the activity and how it related to the development of voice.

As noted previously, students who consented to participate in the study at the start of the semester were asked to fill out an online survey after the final reflective essay was submitted. Elliott asked students to respond to this survey at the same time that they completed their course evaluations, so she was not in the room to supervise its completion. However, a total of nineteen students responded, which included the one student who did not submit his final essay.

In the survey, students were asked to respond to four open-ended questions:

1. Were you aware of the concept of voice before this course? If so, what were your experiences with voice and writing?
2. Prior to this course, how did you view audience? Did you write for yourself, your teachers, or a different audience altogether?
3. What were your impressions of the blogging element of this study? For example, did you find it helpful as a tool for improving your writing, or did it seem like a chore? Why or why not?

4. Do you think that your writing has changed over the course of the semester? If so, how?

Because I was looking for honest responses, I chose to word the third and fourth questions objectively. Although I was looking for a specific connection between voice and blogging, as my first question suggests, I did not want to pose the questions in a way that made it seem as though there was one “right” answer. By asking the study participants whether or not they felt the blogging component helped them improve their writing, rather than asking if they saw a connection between voice and blogging, I hoped to receive more genuine responses. Similarly, I asked students whether or not their writing “changed” over the semester, rather than whether it improved; in doing so, I hoped that they would think more critically about the change, rather than simply saying whether it was better or worse.

The first question was meant to accomplish two things: one, determine whether the act of blogging, which offers student writers the opportunity to see their writing as public, changed the study participants’ view of audience, and two, identify whether students were able to see the connection between voice and audience after writing for someone other than the professor. The responses to this question may have been influenced by the fact that Elliott put such a heavy emphasis on audience awareness in each of her assignments, so any change in perspective could be attributed to a combination of these two course elements.

The responses to the first question were mixed; many of the students freely admitted that they had no concept of voice before entering the course, but a number of others stated that they had already been exposed to the idea. Several students said that they knew of voice, but had never been expected to implement it. These overall results were not surprising, but they did afford a great deal of insight.

In particular, one student's response to the first question caught my eye: "I was not really aware of voice because I was not taught about voice, I was just taught about how to write formally and robotically." While I understand that most incoming college freshmen have only been taught the basics of writing, it was disturbing to see that this student was instructed only to write "formally and robotically" for several reasons. First, teaching this form of writing has not done this student any favors; he or she still has trouble with the basics of grammar, and has used poor diction in this response. Second, there is nothing inherently wrong with "formal" writing, but the fact that this student feels that he or she has only been told to write "robotically" suggests that this student does not see writing as a form of inquiry, discovery, or argument, which are all important parts of academic success. Instead, this student's response suggests that he or she views writing as nothing but a means of regurgitating information, which goes against both the idea of voice and academic inquiry.

Another student offers a more promising response to the first question when he or she stated that: "Yes, I understood the concepts of voice, however, not in great detail. I knew the basics and I knew how to cooperate [sic] voice into journalistic writing, not the kind of writing we did in class." While it is good to know that this student was exposed to voice as a concept, it is strange that he or she suggests that journalistic writing is a better venue for voice. In the truest sense of the word, journalistic writing reports the facts—in fact, there is probably no other genre that is less suited for voice. Many articles that appear in the average newspaper are published by the Associated Press, and they are distributed to papers across the world. These articles are intentionally voiceless; they are meant to communicate the facts, and nothing more. To me, this gap in perception suggests that the student in question still does not understand the concept of voice and how it fits into academic writing; rather than seeing composition as a means of

exploring oneself and one's surroundings, this student again sees it strictly as a means of communication. While this is certainly an element of writing, it does not allow room for the idea that it is also a mode of personal and academic discovery.

The responses to the second question were far more unilateral. With the exception of four study participants, all of the students admitted that they wrote primarily for their teachers or “for the assignment,” meaning that they focused on basic things such as page requirements. The four outlying students clearly noted that they wrote for themselves, though they had a greater understanding of audience after the completion of the course. Not only did the other students write for the sole audience of their instructors, but they also noted that grades were first and foremost on their minds. One student in particular was able to articulate this sentiment with surprising insight: “Audience for me, especially in high school, was usually my teachers and only my teachers. I never considered any other kind of audience because high school curriculum tends to only focus—accidentally or not—on a teacher’s perception.” Although student writing often lacks voice and audience awareness, it is primarily because most of them have never been taught that it is okay to write for an audience outside of the teacher.

In response to the third question, only one of the nineteen students surveyed was clearly against the blogging element; what’s more, the response given didn’t fully answer the question: “It was honestly kind of weird to start blogging. In a sense it felt like some sort of personal diary which I was not fond of.” In this instance, the student does provide a clear impression of the blogging activity, but doesn’t address how it did or did not influence his or her writing. In addition, a blog is not meant to be “personal” in the sense that the student describes here; rather, it is a public platform on which students and professional writers alike are able to craft a

particular voice and identity. In the case of this course, the blog was meant to be shared, at least within the context of the class.

The fact that this student completely overlooked the fact that most weblogs are public and accessible to anyone with an Internet connection suggests several things. First, one might assume that he or she does not quite grasp the concept of audience or what it means to construct a voice that is meant to be heard. However, it also suggests that this student, if not the entire class, needed some level of specific instruction with regard to blogging conventions and practices. In Elliott's course, the students' blogs were technically public, but students were not taught to write with blogging techniques, such as linking to other blogs and encouraging reader engagement. Although the blogs were more public than a journal, the chances that someone outside of the class might stumble across one of the study participants' web logs was slim. In addition, the students did not often comment on one another's posts, furthering the idea that this was some sort of "private journal" to which other readers had random access. In light of this, I think that it is important to clarify the specific purpose of weblogs within the classroom. If we want our students to engage an audience broader than the class, we must create prompts and teach techniques that ask students to consider a larger audience as well. For the purposes of this project, however, readers outside of the classroom were not a crucial element. Blogs were included in this study because they provided a digital space for composition "outside" the traditional constraints of the classroom and offered the opportunity for student interaction. For future studies and curricula that do not ask students to engage with an audience outside of the course, it might be more practical to limit the visibility of student blogs.

Perhaps more encouraging to future studies combining voice and blogging were the comments of several other students; one reported that "[T]he blogging was definitely helpful.

Having an informal outlet for my writing helped me develop more of an idea of myself as a writer.” Another stated that “The blogging element really helped in expressing how we felt about writing. Sometimes it seemed like we were forced to do it but once we started typing the words just flew right onto the screen.” Although these two students did not explicitly connect blogging to voice, both of them have touched on the kind of engagement that pushes writers to develop a presence in their own writing. Judging from the first student’s comment, it seems that he or she had little to no experience with writing outside of formal essays. Without the space to develop as a writer, students are less likely to see themselves as writers and take responsibility and ownership of their own language. The second student makes a similar point. Because students are generally taught that writing is nothing more than a way to prove what they’ve learned, it is more than likely that they’ve never considered their relationship to writing. Having the opportunity to explore writing in a space that seems to lie outside of classroom jurisdiction, such as a weblog, can offer students the chance to view themselves as writers.

Of the nineteen students surveyed, three asserted that that their writing had not changed over the course of the semester. The remaining sixteen stated that they felt that they had progressed, and eight of them explicitly stated that they noticed improvements with regard to audience and voice. Although this cannot be entirely attributed to the use of blogs, the correlation between the overwhelmingly positive reactions to blogs as part of the curriculum cannot be ignored. With the combination of Elliott’s focus on audience and the inclusion of blogging as a means of self-exploration and topic development, the feedback provided by the students suggests that they gained a greater understanding of their role as a writer in relation to a variety of audiences. This is not the exact definition of voice that I submitted in previous

chapters, but it does show that students are taking a closer look at themselves as writers, which is the first step in developing the awareness that is crucial to crafted voice.

After reading through the student survey responses, it seems that there is a discrepancy between how the students executed voice in their graded work and how they perceived their own progress. According to my co-reader's and my evaluations, only two of the eighteen participants visibly improved over the course of the semester. However, many of the students seemed to feel that they had learned a great deal about voice and audience, as well as asserting that the blogs were a good place to develop their skills and identities as writers. Although this dichotomy seems strange at first, I think that it communicates two things about the use of weblogs in a first year composition classroom: one, whether or not weblogs affect the development of voice in first year composition students is difficult to determine, especially without a control group, and two, they are useful in that they help students start to see themselves as writers. Although students may not make great strides in terms of actual development of voice, the implementation of blogs, along with a curriculum that emphasizes audience and voice, can help students start to situate themselves within their writing, rather than writing only for a grade or the professor. For students who are accustomed to writing only formal, graded essays, this time spent writing in a low stakes environment a variety of audiences could be crucial.

Reflection

After my co-reader and I completed the coding process and analyzed the results, we discussed a number of possible reasons for the failure to establish a definitive connection between the development of voice and regular blogging. First, we looked to the research design, including how the weblogs functioned within the course itself; we also considered the possibility that blogs simply weren't a good tool for the development of voice. Lastly, we examined the

structure and atmosphere of the classroom and the possible effects that it may have had on the study.

My main concern with the design of this study was the nature of the two essays that we chose to evaluate. Prior to conducting this study, I assumed that focusing on assignments that implicitly allowed for the personal would be easier to code for voice; although I firmly believe that voice has a place in academic writing, students who have just entered the realm of the university may not; as it is, I find that my own students are often surprised to find that they are allowed to use first person in a formal paper. Knowing this, I believed that I would be setting myself and the study participants up for failure by evaluating a rhetorical analysis or a typical research paper for voice. Also, the weblogs themselves were meant to be an informal platform or outlet; as I planned for this study, it seemed more likely that students would allow the voices that they had cultivated on their blogs to surface in a personal narrative or a reflective essay. As the results show, this was not the case for the majority of the students who participated in the study.

Conversely, choosing such personal assignments for my “sign posts” may have left room for several negative consequences. First, the results (had they been successful) may not have assuaged the fears of scholars who still don’t believe that the personal and the academic should intersect. In fact, my choice of essays may have proven that the writings of scholars such as Darsie Bowden and David Bartholomae were correct: there is a language of the university, and it doesn’t fit with the “contrary” of embracing individual voice as well. Similarly, the knowledge that an outside reader would be evaluating the first and last essays for voice, but not the ones in between, may have mistakenly led students to believe that voice did not have a place in the other papers, despite its presence as a writing objective. As a result, these writers may have

constructed a habit of writing without voice that was difficult to break for the final reflective essay.

On a far more practical note, I looked to the implementation of blogs within the class itself; since I was not teaching the course in which this study occurred, I did not write the prompts for weblog assignments. As noted previously, Elliott and I decided that these in-class writings should consist of reading responses and freewriting exercises related to the essays that were assigned throughout the semester. Elliott also placed the students in assigned groups, which were the same ones that met with in order to workshop their formal essays, but most of the students did not respond to one another's work. Although Elliott suggested that there would be time in class allotted specifically for responding to one another's posts, it seems that this was difficult to actually implement. As such, students had the chance to play with syntax and diction in a low-stakes, isolated setting, but the public platform element of the weblog experience was lost.

The structure of the blog prompts themselves may have been an influential factor as well. Although one or two of the assignment descriptions asked students to freewrite, many others were written precisely and included many questions intended to prompt student thinking. The students had a great deal of practice with writing three to five paragraphs at a time in a non-formal setting, but given the structured nature of many of the prompts, the study participants may not have felt entirely comfortable writing in what my co-reader and I would consider their individual voices. From this, I would conclude that perhaps assigning specific prompts might make already timid student writers feel as though they cannot write freely, and thus defeating the purpose of allowing students their own space to write.

Although I was initially concerned that the influence of another instructor, both in the class and through the creation of the assignments, contributed to the project's disappointing results, I still stand by the design that we chose. Had I conducted this study in my own class, I do not think that I would have obtained objective results; after all, I teach my course from a different perspective than Elliott, and that may have influenced students to write in a certain way, regardless of the inclusion of blogs. As a result, I could have mistakenly come to the conclusion that blogs are a useful tool for the development of voice in student writing, when in actuality, they were not the catalyst. However, I can now see the benefit in conducting the study in two classes: one with the inclusion of blogs, and one without. In the future, this might help rule out some of the experimental factors.

Despite the necessity for an objective environment, I think that further collaboration between Elliott and me outside of the classroom would have been beneficial to the overall results; although we both emphasize process pedagogy, my colleague's style of evaluation and grading is far different from my own. In the reflective essays, a surprising number of students remarked that one of the most memorable things they took from the course was a better understanding of grammar and mechanics. While this may have been a positive result for the students in Elliott's course, I worry that the student preoccupation with the technical aspects of writing may have stood in the way of developing their voices; after all, exercises such as freewriting ask the writer to eschew concerns such as commas, spelling, and run-on sentences until he or she has honest, valuable content. Similarly, Tom Romano asks students to first "trust the gush," and to later go back and "craft the gush." This practice is as important for published writers and scholars as it is for inexperienced ones.

Lastly, I'd like to consider the possibility that weblogs simply aren't the right tool for improving voice in student writing. Looking back to some of the literature on weblogs in the composition classroom, it is easy to see how they function as an important lesson in audience awareness, as well as offering students the opportunity to take responsibility for their own "writerness," which are both important elements in the development of personal voice. But these characteristics alone do not make voice; rather, it is a complex combination of the technical aspects of writing, such as syntax and diction, a clear picture of the rhetorical situation and audience, and the awareness and motivation of the writer. Perhaps it is this final element that cannot be incorporated into any curriculum, regardless of whether students participate in low-stakes writing on paper or on a personal weblog. Although the surveys indicated that students seemed to enjoy the blog component of the course, it is possible that they may not have been fully engaged in the idea of seeing themselves as writers and owning the responsibility that comes with that mantle.

Chapter Five: Conclusions

As the results indicate, this study did not lead me to a definitive conclusion as to whether or not the implementation of weblogs in a first year composition classroom fosters the development of voice in student writers. Looking strictly at the evaluative results of the two separate essays, it would be fairly easy to dismiss the use of weblogs for the purpose of developing voice. However, many of the students who participated in the study seemed to think that writing on the blogs allowed them both the space and the opportunity to see themselves as writers, not just students. I found this sentiment surprising, as the blog assignments that were implemented in this study were more restrictive than what most would classify as freewriting exercises and reflective prompts. In future studies connecting blogging with elements such as voice and audience, I imagine that more carefully crafted prompts, which would allow students to respond more freely, would garner better results as well as better student reactions.

Still, there is a gap here that cannot be ignored. Although my co-reader and I were unable to see definitive progress, the students did, which suggests that there may have been a higher level of engagement as a result of the implementation of blogs. The majority of the study participants may have felt compelled to write in a certain way to connect with their audience, the instructor, in the final reflective essay, but their general enthusiasm about maintaining a blog throughout the semester is promising. This also makes me wonder if perhaps I simply chose the wrong essay to evaluate at the end of the study; perhaps an essay that allowed students to write about what they wanted to write about, rather than their experiences of English 1101, would have yielded more accurate results.

In addition, I cannot help but think that this study would have produced more definitive results, one way or another, had I chosen to conduct the experiment in two classes: one that

implemented routine blogging and one that did not. While the inclusion of survey responses certainly helped to inform my results and conclusions, they were not enough to clearly point to the success or failure of blogs as a tool for developing voice in first year composition courses.

Having read both sets of essays, my co-reader and I were both struck by the correlation between critical analysis and voice. As noted in the case studies, many of the students who fell into the second and third categories of voice seemed better equipped to truly analyze their experiences, both in and out of the classroom. Student essays that were labeled “Level 1” consistently displayed a lack of engagement with both the written word and the content of the papers. Naomi, for instance, failed to make any larger suppositions about her time in English 1101, and instead focused on grade-related concerns; Kyle and Lance, both students who displayed higher mastery of voice, took the time to identify themselves as writers and analyze their success (or lack thereof) in the course as a whole.

Although I did not initially list the identification of oneself as a writer as a characteristic or indicator of voice, I now think that this connection is worth exploring, especially in light of the fact that the study participants were required to read Peter Elbow’s “Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic: A Conflict in Goals.” In this piece, Elbow describes a “writer” as someone who derives “deep satisfaction from discovering meanings by writing” (73). Conversely, an “academic” is described as someone who enjoys “reading knowledgeable books, wrestling ... through important issues with fellows, [and] figuring out hard questions” (73). Although academics write, Elbow sees the primary distinction between the two roles in the purpose that writing serves for writers and academics. Writers write to discover meaning, to communicate with others, and to gain a better sense of self. Furthermore, Elbow notes, writers “usually want some ‘ownership,’ some say, some control over what the text means” (75). Both Kyle and Lance

identified themselves as writers, and they both displayed an above average awareness of audience; what made Kyle's and Lance's writing voiced was that they wanted to communicate something specific with that audience, and knew that with the careful use of syntax, diction, and organization, they could make meaning.

Although there is no definitive proof, the writing of both Kyle and Lance suggests that students who identify themselves as writers, and thus maintain some degree of ownership of their language, are also able to better interpret and analyze their experiences. Because our students so often come from a place where they are asked only to repeat or render experiences or information, I believe that this connection between voice, identity, and critical analysis is especially important. Reflecting on this, I can't help but think of Robillard's "It's Time for Class: Toward a New Pedagogy of the Narrative." Students and scholars alike use personal experiences to frame and understand new information, but we aren't offering our young writers the chance to practice this crucial skill in a low stakes environment. Although this study did not draw a clear connection between blogging and the improvement of student voice, I believe that first year composition instructors can still use the activity to help students compare and contrast previous experiences with new information, thus allowing them to critically consider and synthesize what they learn in our classrooms.

Despite this study's inability to prove with certainty whether or not blogs affect the development of student voice, the conclusions drawn from looking at specific student essays and survey responses contain important implications for future research on voice and the use of blogging in first year composition classrooms. First, the survey responses from the study participants suggest that the use of weblogs in the classroom does seem to foster student engagement with writing; this information correlates with almost all of the scholarly literature on

weblogs. Even Ming-Huei Lin, Chin-Ying Lin, and Pi-Ying Hsu, who argue that blogs create more work for instructors with the same result as non-blog based composition, admit that students were more enthusiastic about participating in low-stakes writing in the blogging environment. Because so many of our students enter the university with no experience writing outside of formal essays, I believe it is important to latch on to any platform that encourages students to participate in public, reflective, low-stakes writing. Without this experience, first year composition students may never learn to see writing as a means of invention, discovery, and personal expression.

Furthermore, I still assert that blogs have the potential for use as a tool for improving voice in student writing. In my own future courses, for example, I will ensure that the curriculum surrounding the inclusion of weblogs reinforces the objective of creating an individual voice within the academic community more consistently. Clearly, the use of blogs in and of themselves does not foster voice in student writers, but a more carefully crafted course design, along with blog prompts that encourage students to respond more openly, honestly, and sincerely, may help first year composition students become more comfortable with their writing, and, in turn, their subjects.

Perhaps most importantly, the results of this study have left me with compelling questions about the relationship between voice and critical thinking. Critics of voice, as referenced in the review of literature, have often accused expressive pedagogy of accepting “honest” writing in the place of quality writing; similarly, composition theorists such as Darsie Bowden have suggested that the concept of voice is not only outdated, but also harmful to the goals of first year composition programs. However, this study has left me with the puzzling correlation between thoughtful, critical analysis of personal experiences and the demonstration of

strong, voiced writing. I would like to know more about this connection, and find ways to encourage my own students to write not only with voice, which I previously defined as “the use of syntax, diction, organization and audience awareness to create an authentic, voiced presence on the page,” but also to interpret critically and analyze both personal experiences and new knowledge.

Appendix A: Consent Form

I agree to participate in the research project “Voice in Cyberspace: Testing the Effectiveness of Blogs as a Tool for Improving Voice in Student Writing,” which is being conducted by Caitlin Martinez. I understand that this participation is voluntary; I can withdraw my consent at any time without penalty.

The following points have been explained to me:

1. The reason for the research is to determine whether or not regular blogging improves voice in my writing, as evidenced by distinct changes in syntax, word choice, and other elements of style. The benefit that I may expect from it is a clearer, more distinct voice in my own writing.
2. The procedures are as follows:
 - My instructor will give anonymous copies of the first narrative essay to Caitlin Martinez for review. At this point, I will create a personal blog to use for freewriting, topic development, and other writing assignments. Ms. Martinez will have access to my blog entries, but will never publish anything with my name attached. At the end of the semester, the instructor will submit the last reflective essay to Ms. Martinez for review, and I will fill out a short survey about my experiences.
3. There are no known discomforts or stresses associated with this observational study.
4. There are no known risks associated with this observational study.
5. The results of this participation will be confidential and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without the prior consent of the participant unless required by law. Names will be removed from all writing samples and excerpts from blogs.
6. Inclusion criteria for participation: Student writers of and between the ages of 18 and 50.

Signature of Investigator, Date

Signature of Participant, Date

The purpose of this research has been explained and my participation is voluntary. I have the right to stop participation at any time without penalty. I understand that the research has no known risks, and I will not be identified. By completing this survey, I am agreeing to participate in this research project.

THIS PAGE MAY BE REMOVED AND KEPT BY EACH PARTICIPANT

Appendix B: Sample Passages for Student Instruction

Passage #1: *The Alphabet and the Goddess*

In one of the most famous paintings in Western culture—Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling—God reaches out his finger to touch the finger of Adam. The artist implies that with this contact, the human adventure began. Part of this image’s power lies in the fact that because God is stretching to touch Adam, He is pointing. So, too, is Adam. The viewer’s eye jumps across the small but significant gap between God’s finger and Adam’s. To make the journey across the small break between their fingers is to recapitulate the leap across the immense chasm crossed by our hominid ancestors in the distant past—from concrete mentation to abstract thinking—a leap that transformed them into us (Shlain).

Passage #2: *The Mother Tongue: English and How it Got that Way*

To be fair, English is full of booby traps for the unwary foreigner. Any language where the unassuming word fly signifies an annoying insect, a means of travel, and a critical part of a gentleman’s apparel is clearly asking to be mangled. Imagine being a foreigner and having to learn that in English one tells a lie but the truth, that a person who says “I could care less” means the same thing as someone who says “I couldn’t care less,” that a sign in a store saying ALL ITEMS NOT ON SALE doesn’t literally mean what it says (that every item is not on sale) but rather that only some of the items are on sale, that when a person says to you, “How do you do?” he will be taken aback if you reply, with impeccable logic, “How do I do what?” (Bryson)

Passage #3: “The Inconstant Quad”

I spent my high-school years staring at the pine trees outside my classroom window and picturing myself on the campus of an Ivy League university, where my wealthy roommate Colgate would leave me notes reading, “Meet me on the quad at five.” I wasn’t sure what a quad was, but I knew I wanted one desperately. My college friends would own horses and monogrammed shoehorns. I’d spend weekends at my roommate’s estate, where his mother would say things like “I’ve instructed Helvetica to prepare those little pancakes you’re so fond of, but she’s had a devil of a time locating fresh cape gooseberries.” This woman would have really big teeth that she’d reveal every time she threw back her head to laugh at one of my many witticisms. “You’re an absolute caution,” she’d bray. “Tell me you’ll at least consider joining us this Christmas at Bridle Haven; it just wouldn’t be the same without you.”

I fantasized with the nagging suspicion that there was something missing, something I was forgetting. This something turned out to be grades. It was with profound disappointment I discovered it took more than a C average to attend Harvard. Average, that was the word that got to me. C and average, the two went hand in hand. (Sedaris)

Appendix C: In-Class Blog Prompts

Blog Entry: Writing the Personal Narrative

Write a blog entry about your experiences writing the personal narrative and sharing your work with your classmates. Here are some questions to help you get started, but you should not just go through and answer them. Instead, write a coherent narrative about your impressions about writing your narrative and going through the entire feather circle process.

- How did you pick what you were going to write about?
- Was it difficult to start the rough draft?
- How did the workshop go—were you nervous to read your work aloud and get feedback? Did you feel comfortable giving your group members feedback?
- When it came time to sit down and revise, did you stick to the revision plan you outlined in your blog? If not, why not?
- Were you confident in giving peer feedback to your partner during the revised draft workshop?
- How did you further edit your story when you got home—did you read it aloud, do a reverse outline, go to the Writing Center, etc.?
- How was the feather circle process? What emotions did you experience as you went into it? Did you enjoy hearing your classmates' stories? Did you like sharing yours with them?
- What about the “thank you” notes—were they easy to write? Did you wonder what other people would write in their notes to you?
- What did you think about the feather circle process after you received your “thank you” notes? Did your opinion change at all?

Blog Writing: Favorite Music Artist

Write a blog entry about your favorite music artist. Why is this artist your favorite over all others? When and how did you discover this artist? What are your favorite memories about this artist? Have you ever seen this artist perform live? If so, describe the experience. What about this artist's music affects you so much? What are your favorite songs by this artist? Include some of the artist's lyrics (if applicable) and explain why you chose to include those specific lyrics. What do the lyrics say about the artist and about you?

As always, these questions are just to help you get started; you shouldn't go through and answer all these questions one by one. Instead, create a coherent narrative about the affect your favorite music artist has had on you.

Blog Writing: Artist's History

Based on the research you've done, write a blog entry that answers the following questions. Make sure your blog entry is coherent—that it makes sense, is well-organized, and contains necessary transitions, i.e. don't just go through and answer each question in a choppy manner:

What is the history of the artist you've chosen to write about? How successful has the artist been—has the artist had any number one songs or album? Has the artist been on successful tours? Is the artist involved in charities? What has the artist discussed in interviews? What have critics written about the artist's work?

If you have trouble answering these questions, then you know that you need to do more research before turning in the final copy of your hall of fame essay.

Blog Entry: Writing the Hall of Fame Essay

Describe your experiences with writing the Hall of Fame essay and analyzing your classmate's essay. You don't have to answer the questions below, but they might help you get started. Your entry should be a cohesive narrative that consists of a minimum of three paragraphs:

- Did you immediately know which band or artist you were writing about? If so, why? If not, how did you eventually make that decision?
- What was the most difficult part of the assignment for you, and why do you think it was so challenging?
- How did the research go: where did you search, what search terms did you use, and how did you determine if a source was credible?
- Was it easy to describe the personal effect your artist has had on you? What about the artist's shows: was it easy to put those experiences into words?
- How did your writing workshop and peer reviews go? Do you wish you had more constructive feedback from your peers? Did you have trouble coming up with things to say about other drafts?
- How did you approach revising and editing? Did you stick to your revision plan? Did you go to the Writing Center for help? Did you read your paper to friends or roommates and ask their advice?
- Were you confident turning in your final essay? If not, what were you concerned about? If so, what made you so confident?
- How did you approach rhetorically analyzing your peer's draft? Did you find it easy to analyze their argument, or was it more challenging than you expected? Did you re-look at the rhetorical analysis student examples on Vista as you were analyzing, and if so, did that help?
- Do you feel more comfortable using sources now, or does it seem even more stressful? Explain.
- Which assignment did you like better: the personal narrative or the hall of fame essay, and why?

Extended Blog Entry: Rhetorical Analysis

Objective: Write a blog entry that discusses the *NY Times* article “Placing the Blame as Students are Buried in Debt.”

Instructions: You should rhetorically analyze Ron Lieber's argument about the student loan crisis and who is to blame for it. This is not a straight-forward argument like you may be used to

seeing. Here is how you should structure your blog entry, paragraph by paragraph (make sure you answer everything and provide specific examples from the article):

- I. Summarize the article and Lieber’s argument. What is the primary argument? What other claims does Lieber make? Who does Lieber blame more, and what evidence does he use to back up his claims?
- II. Look at the ethos, pathos, and logos in the argument. Does Lieber rely more heavily on one than the other, and if so, why do you think that is? Does he neglect any of the three appeals? What are examples of each?
- III. Evaluate the argument. Are you personally convinced by the argument? Why/why not? If so, what about it pushed you over the edge? If not, what could the writer have done differently to convince you?
- IV. Finally, propose a solution to the primary problem (as you see it) in the article. Be specific and give details about how the change should be implemented and who should be responsible for implementing your plan.

Blog Entry: Kohn’s “From Degrading to De-grading”

Write a blog entry about the Kohn article “From Degrading to De-grading.” You should start by briefly discussing the article itself and then go into your own experiences with grading, both on the high school and college level. Your blog entry should be at least three paragraphs and should primarily focus on your own opinions about the article and about grading.

Here are some questions you can (but don’t have to) answer in your response:

- If you like grading, why do you think it’s an accurate measurement of student performance?
- Are there any instances when it’s not? Explain.
- If you don’t like grading, what are some alternatives to grading?
- Are there any instances when grading works? Explain.

*When you are finished, go in and add the tags “Alfie Kohn” and “From Degrading to De-grading” to your entry. Make sure you also mention the author and the title of the article in the title of your blog entry.

Blog Entry: Reflective Writing

Reflect on your experiences with writing so far this semester. What, if anything, have you enjoyed about writing? Which assignment has been your favorite so far and why? Least favorite? What part of college-level writing has been the most difficult for you? Easiest? What have you learned about writing or yourself as a writer that you didn’t know before? What specific aspects of writing are you struggling the most with—argument, sources, punctuation, MLA, etc.? What do you plan to do to improve in these areas?

You don’t have to answer these questions directly; they are more here to guide you while you are freewriting. Write for 15 minutes straight. Do not stop typing until time has been called. At that

point and only at that point should you post your entry. Just make sure you are being honest and that you keep writing!

Blog Entry: Policy Change Proposal and Response Letter Assignments

Now that you've read and responded to your classmate's proposal, think back to your own proposal and write a coherent entry of 3 or 4 paragraphs about your experience with the proposal and response letter assignments. You should consider the following questions as you write, but as always with these blog entries, you don't have to respond to all of them:

- What did you learn about your own writing—and about yourself as a writer—after you responded to your classmate's proposal?
- Is there anything you wish you would have done differently in your own proposal based on what you saw in your classmate's?
- What was your biggest challenge when writing and revising your proposal?
- What are you most proud of in your proposal?
- Are you becoming more comfortable giving feedback to your classmates during workshop days, or are you still struggling with finding something constructive to say during the reviews? Why do you think that is?
- What about receiving feedback—are you more comfortable receiving constructive criticism about your writing, or do you still find it difficult not to take it personally?
- Is it easier for you to consider audience when writing after doing this assignment, or are you still having trouble?
- Did you enjoy writing the response letter to your classmate, or did you find it to be more challenging than you originally thought, and why?

Extended Blog Entry: Visual Analysis

Write about your impressions of the ad on the projector screen. First, describe both the general content of the ad (Joe Camel looking cool next to attractive woman and fighter jets, for example) as well as the ad's visual components—color, contrast, focus, foreground vs. background, medium, placement of humans and objects, how the text looks and works either with the visual or against it, etc.

Then, talk about the creators of the ad, the ad's purpose, and the ad's intended audience. Why did the creators choose this particular visual to sell their product? What are they hoping that consumers will pay attention and not to pay attention to? Why do they want consumers' focus to be on certain parts of the ad over others? What do they hope consumers will remember about the ad? Also, who is the intended audience for this ad, and how did you come to that conclusion?

Next, talk about the three rhetorical appeals to audience in the ad. Start with pathos: what emotion is the ad trying to evoke in consumers? Also, what emotion is the ad trying to get consumers to associate with the brand? What about ethos—how does the ad establish brand credibility? Are there any appeals to the audience's sense of character or morality (i.e. patriotism in the Joe Camel ad)? Lastly, don't forget about the logical appeals in the ad—does

the ad rely on logic to get consumers to buy the product advertised? Are there any logical inconsistencies or lapses in logic in the ad?

Finally, write about the underlying societal biases and stereotypes in the ad, as well as the psychological—or even physical—consequences for consumers who accept the ad’s message. What is the core message or messages of the ad? What does the ad portray as positive, and what does it portray as negative—and why do you think that is?

Blog Entry 11/20

After you’re finished with the Writing Workshop, write a blog entry of at least two paragraphs that answers all of the following questions:

Paragraph One:

- What advice did your group members give you about your draft? Do you agree with this advice? Why/why not?
- Which sections of your rough draft do **you** think need the most revising work? Why? How do you plan to revise these sections?
- What content do you still need to add to your essay to meet all the assignment requirements?

Paragraph Two:

- Do you feel more confident about your draft after reading your draft aloud and seeing your peer’s drafts? Why/why not?
- What type of advice did you give your peers about their drafts?
- Is there anything about the assignment that you or your group is confused about or unsure of? Which part?

After you finish your blog entry, you should go back and finish the previous two blog entries—(1) policy change proposal/response letter entry and (2) visual analysis extended entry—because I will posting your next blog grade over Thanksgiving break. So, if you don’t have time to finish everything in class, make sure you finish the three entries by tomorrow night (Weds. 11/21) at midnight.

Blog Entry 11/27

Write 3 or 4 paragraphs about your Thanksgiving break. What did you do? Where did you go? Who did you see? What did you eat on Thanksgiving Day? Did anything exciting happen? Did you partake in the black Friday madness, or did you sleep in and laugh at everyone who got up at 4am just to stand in line?

***Remember, don’t just answer all the questions; instead, write a coherent narrative about your experiences over the break.**

Final Blog Entry 12/4

For your final blog entry, write about your experiences in college this semester. The following questions are there to guide you, but you don't have to answer them all. Instead, write a coherent narrative of at least four paragraphs about your first semester in college.

- What did you enjoy the most about college vs. high school?
- What part of college was the most stressful for you this semester?
- Do you feel like you have a good idea of what you want to major in? If so, what? Did your plan change over the course of the semester and why? And if you still aren't sure about your major, what are some majors you are leaning towards and why?
- Which class was your favorite and why?
- Which class was your least favorite and why?
- Did you make a lot of friends? Did you join any clubs or organizations to help make your social life stronger?
- Do you work? If so, was it difficult to balance work and school? If not, do you plan to get a job next semester?
- Did you live on campus? If so, what was the most difficult part about living with your roommates? If not, what was the most difficult part about continuing to live with your parents?
- Do you feel confident about your grades this semester? If not, why not? If so, what did you do to ensure academic success?
- And finally, a question we can all answer about our first semesters of college: what do you wish you had done differently this semester and why?

Appendix D: Assignment Sheets

Personal Narrative Assignment

Rough Draft: 8/31

Revised Draft: 9/7

Final Draft: 9/12

Assignment:

We will be writing a personal narrative based on the memory maps you drew in our prewriting activity in class. You will pick an event (or multiple events) from your memory map to write about, keeping your intended audience—your classmates and your professor—in mind as you write. The assignment should loosely follow this format:

“I remember...”

“I remember...”

“I remember...”

“I remember...”

“I remember...”

“But mostly, I remember...”

Though your entire narrative will have a clear trajectory and should focus on a main purpose or theme, each paragraph (or “I Remember” section) should also have its own mini-theme. Your paragraphs should build on one another as you advance your overall theme. Also, even though this is a personal narrative, don’t forget that you are still making an argument and should use language that appropriately advances it. If you are unsure what your argument is, think about what motivated you to share this particular story—and what you want your readers to take away from it. Finally, because this is personal writing, you *should* use “I” to tell your story. We will look at some examples together in class to help you better understand what you will be doing.

Requirements

This essay should be 750-1,000 words and written in 12 pt. Times New Roman font. *You will need 10 copies of your final draft on 9/12.* You may choose to double space the entire document, but you may single space it to save money and paper. However, if you do choose single spacing, you should still have a blank line in between each paragraph for better readability. *You will also need to turn in one copy of your rough draft and one copy of your revised draft.* As always, you should consult your syllabus for specific departmental grading standards.

Drafting and Revising

Please keep in mind that writing is a process. No writer gets it “right” with only one draft, no matter how much experience he or she has. As such, we will be writing multiple drafts of this assignment and all of the assignments we complete in this class. You should remember to bring *four* unmarked copies of your rough draft of the personal narrative to class on 8/31 for a writing workshop. We will also be working with copies of your revised draft in class on 9/7, so be sure to make revisions after the writing workshop and bring in *two* new unmarked drafts of your

revised work on this day. Failure to participate in our workshop and/or review days will directly impact your in-class writing grade and will also indirectly affect your final grade on this paper.

A Successful Essay Will Contain...

- A central theme or purpose (i.e. loss of innocence, trying to fit in, learning a lesson, etc.)
- An overall argument—can be either explicit or implicit
- Paragraphs that have coherent topics individually but all contribute to the whole of the narrative and build on one another
- Narrative elements like plot, characters, setting, and dialogue if appropriate
- Vivid details and imagery to help the reader visualize the narrative elements
- Strong nouns, verbs, and adjectives—no English!
- Few or no careless errors in grammar and usage
- No instances of the second person (“you”), unless placed within dialogue

Ultimate Writing Objectives:

- ✓ Become more familiar with the drafting process
- ✓ Use narrative elements and strong language to create an argument
- ✓ Write focused paragraphs
- ✓ Remain on topic
- ✓ Choose precise words to more accurately convey ideas
- ✓ Understand how tone, style, and voice work together to affect an audience
- ✓ Tighten up language to create more compelling writing
- ✓ Avoid errors by careful proofreading

Final Reflective Assignment

Due: Monday, December 12th

Assignment

In the final reflective essay, you will reflect upon your experiences as a writer in this class throughout the course of the semester. Your essay may answer the following questions:

- What do you know about writing now that you didn't know before this class? What assignments, lessons, and readings helped you to achieve this new awareness?
- What elements of writing (argumentation, organization, tone, style, voice, transitions, grammar/punctuation, etc.) do you think you have most improved on this semester? What elements do you still need to work on the most, and how will you try to improve?
- What goals do you have for yourself as a writer going into English 1102 next semester? And what actions will you take to ensure that you accomplish these goals?

Though you don't have to directly address all of these questions, they should act as a framework for developing your argument. You may also have other writing-related topics that you want to touch on in your essay based on what we've talked about this semester. Your essay must have a central purpose or thesis about your progress as a writer throughout the semester, and you should use the work you've done in and out of class this semester as evidence to back up your claims about yourself as a writer.

Requirements

The reflective essay should be 2-3 pages double-spaced. As this is a formal essay, it should be written in MLA format. Because it is reflective, you *should* be writing in the first person. You should turn in your final draft at the beginning of the final exam period for our class. This essay cannot be revised once it is turned in, so make sure that you spend enough time on it to ensure a successful essay. Please keep in mind that your must be a minimum of two full pages. Your grade will also be negatively impacted if you do not meet these minimum content requirements.

A Successful Reflective Essay Will...

- Contain a clear thesis/purpose/central argument
- Provide appropriate evidence from the course to back up your argument
- Use specific examples and details to support claims
- Demonstrate deep, reflective, *metacognitive* thought
- Be organized in a logical, reasonable manner
- Have effective transitional elements
- Use voice, style, and tone appropriate for the genre
- Avoid repetition, obvious statements, and "Engfish"
- Be clearly phrased and precisely worded
- Not have any faulty reasoning or logical inconsistencies
- Contain correct grammar, punctuation, format, and length
- Never use the second person ("you")

Appendix E: Survey Questions

1. Were you aware of the concept of voice before this course? If so, what were your experiences with voice and writing?
2. Prior to this course, how did you view audience? Did you write for yourself, your teachers, or a different audience altogether?
3. What were your impressions of the blogging element of this study? For example, did you find it helpful as a tool for improving your writing, or did it seem like a chore? Why or why not?
4. Do you think that your writing has changed over the course of the semester? If so, how?

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