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Moving Research Journals Online: Using Blogs to Teach Research-based Writing in First-Year Composition

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Moving Research Journals Online:
Using Blogs to Teach Research-based Writing in
First-Year Composition

By

Tanya L. Rodgers

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

Kennesaw, Georgia

2011

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First-Year Composition


Tanya L. Rodgers

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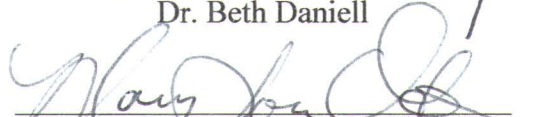
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When I was a college freshman taking English Composition II, I was assigned a research project on the topic of my choosing. It was 1992, and there was a bill being proposed in Congress called, “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” Being an NROTC student and Naval Science minor, I thought it would be an interesting topic for my essay. Up to that point, I had never written anything that long, but since I had been given a minimum source requirement, I started at the library. I still remember the hours I spent at both the university and local libraries: photocopying articles, working the microfilm machine, copying call numbers from the card catalog, searching the stacks for the books I needed. And at the end of each library visit, I checked out a stack of books so high, the only certainty was that I would never be able to read them all. When it was time to write my essay, I sat down at my kitchen table with a Smith-Corona word processor – it was one of the better ones, as you could save documents on a diskette; I read, I wrote, I read some more, I wrote some more. It was quite an arduous process. Whenever there was a draft due, I stayed up all night to finish it. On the night before my final draft and writing folder were due, my nifty word processor froze up, and I was unable to print a copy of my final essay. Thankfully, I had saved it on my diskette, and my teacher accepted the diskette in lieu of the paper copy of my essay. What a coincidence it was that her husband had a Smith-Corona at home.

Almost twenty years later, I was preparing to teach my first Composition II class, and as I wrote my syllabus, I recollected my own research journey in 1992: my trips to the library, my grueling research process, my late nights spent writing, and my battle with

technology. Although students today retain some of the same habits as students in 1992 – I know very few students who do not procrastinate – much has changed with how we research and write. The principles of teaching research-based writing still hold true for today’s students – students must read and write critically about their sources during the research process – but there are distinct differences with today’s students, and these differences must be considered by today’s writing teachers.

In order for students to master research-based writing, they must first be proficient in a number of skills that most college freshmen have yet to learn. They should understand not only research methods but also how to read and evaluate sources, how to talk about them, and how to synthesize what they read in order to join the scholarly conversation that is already taking place. The philosophies about teaching students how to research and, more importantly, how to write about their research, tell us that writing is the first step in the process, not the last. Ann E. Bertoff believes that we should “think of language not as a tool, a single-purpose facilitator, but as an instrument that lets us see in many different ways” (42). Bertoff’s double-entry notebook assignment provides a way for students to use language as a means of learning during the research process. Bruce Ballenger suggests that the writing that takes place in the middle of the research process – the note-taking stage – may be as important, if not more so, than the writing that takes place at the end – composting the draft” (*Curious* 115). In *The Curious Researcher*, Ballenger shares note-taking methods that mimic Bertoff’s double-entry notebook assignment. Bertoff makes the distinction between “reading for meaning” and “reading for message” (42). To read for meaning is to recognize that meanings are not fixed; meanings are based on interpretations that consider context,

perspective, and audience (42-43). In a research-based writing class, we want students to read for meaning.

The research journal assignment, specifically Bertoff's double-entry notebook, teaches these skills. This assignment is effective, but considering today's technology, it is also outdated. Very few students today handwrite class assignments. When Bertoff created the double-entry notebook assignment, computers had not yet become an important writing tool, the Internet was decades from becoming a research tool, and students were not as immersed in technology as they are today. We now live in the "Information Age," and it is called that for a reason. We have instant access to shared knowledge and information. Whether we acknowledge it or not, technology has been assimilated into our daily lives, and the transfer of knowledge is so widespread that students today would have no idea what to do if the Internet ceased to exist. Going to the library, searching through card catalogs, or reading articles through a microfilm machine are completely foreign concepts to today's generation of students. In fact, information is so readily available that few students today have experience with deep reading or research; they may have been able to get by in high school conducting cursory Internet searches for their essays, but this does not qualify as genuine research. Research methods today are different than they were just twenty years ago, and this makes teaching research-based writing challenging.

Rather than ignore the technological advances that our students are adept at using, it is important for us to embrace these differences and acknowledge that our teaching methods must change to meet the needs of emerging technologies. Writing is no longer just a pen and paper activity, and research no longer requires hours at a library. For most

students, writing and research are almost completely digital experiences. Just as the Internet has made it easier for our students to gather information, it can also make teaching these students easier, as well. The Internet is home to a vast number of blogs and discussion boards, some of which are about teaching writing; the experiences shared in these online communities help both new and veteran teachers deal with common issues. Maximizing our use of today's technologies, both in the classroom and out, allows us to utilize the open and collaborative environment that the Internet has to offer. If teachers can benefit from collaborating with other teachers, then students can benefit from collaborating with other students.

As I was planning to teach my first research-based writing class, there was never a question of whether or not I would use technology in my class; I already knew that this was not a choice I needed to make. Technology is already here, and our students are already using it. The question became "How could I best guide my students with today's technologies in the most beneficial and efficient ways to teach them research and writing?" This thesis describes how I used blogs to teach research-based writing in my Composition II class. Blogging is not a new genre of writing, but it is a form that I had never "taught" before in my classes. For years, I have been writing on the web – blogging, contributing to online discussion boards, and participating in social media forums; I made the decision to incorporate one of these forms of online writing into my research essay assignment. I took the principles and theories for teaching research and adapted it to the blog form, thereby merging the pedagogy with the technology, providing a familiar setting for students today. An additional benefit of embracing this technology

is that blogging, as a genre, is collaborative, and I hoped that this would translate to a more collaborative environment for my students.

Incidentally, my high-tech word processor from 1992 never processed another word after my essay on homosexuality in the military. Shortly after that mishap, I finally invested in a PC, and I haven't looked back since. As I worked to create a research blog assignment for my class, I hoped that at the end of the semester, I would be saying something similar: "I finally invested in a collaborative assignment using online writing, and I never looked back."

Chapter 1: Using Journals to Teach Research

Research goes beyond the actual search, and investigation is not just collecting facts. Eddy K.M. Chong, author of “Using Blogging to Enhance the Initiation of Students into Academic Research” states, “Research is an investigative endeavour that aims to arrive at ‘new’ (in a contextual sense) information or understanding, which thereby advances human (or the individual’s) knowledge” (799). Bruce Ballenger differentiates between a “research paper” and a “research essay” stating that the former is formal and argumentative, and the latter is exploratory and less formal (Ballenger, *Curious* xxi). He also defines the “research report” as a form that does not have purpose except to state facts (Ballenger, *Curious* 7). While I agree with some of these distinctions, I prefer to use “researched essay” to describe any essay assignment that involves research whether the essay is argumentative or not; other terms tend to imply focus on the end product only, while an essay that is “researched” implies more focus on the process. I will use the term “researched essay” to mean the final piece of writing that has culminated from the “research project,” which includes all of the assignments associated with the final essay: research assignments, informal writings, drafts, bibliographies, and presentations.

Ballenger highlights some of the pre-conceived notions that students have about writing a research paper including objectivity, originality, strict formatting, a pre-developed thesis, “a specialized audience,” and unfamiliar topics “removed from [the students’] everyday life” (*Beyond* 100). He suggests that one of the ways to change

students' ideas about researched essays is to show them that practically any topic can be researched and written about, and that the less removed a topic is from the student's everyday life, the more enjoyable the assignment will be, the easier it will be for them to write, and the easier it will be for the teacher to read. Writing teachers who do not allow students to choose their own topics (within reason) may reinforce the notion that research essay assignments are boring; not only does this make the research more difficult for students, but the teacher is then forced to drudge through grading essays whose authors are clearly disinterested in their topics. Writing teachers should also show students that a thesis might not always be clear when they are actively researching a topic; views may change during the research process, and the writing might not follow a linear format at first. Sometimes, writers don't completely understand their ideas until they begin writing, and sometimes the introduction is the last thing written.

Ann E. Berthoff states, "writing can't teach writing unless it is understood as a nonlinear, dialectical process in which the writer continually circles back, reviewing and rewriting; certainly, the way to learn to do that is to practice *doing* just that" (3). A good way to both reinforce the research process and help students write researched essays is to assign them to keep a research journal. A research journal can take several forms, but perhaps the most useful approach is the one Berthoff employs, a technique she calls "the double entry notebook" (45). This is unlike the typical journal in that students write on two pages facing one another. On the right side, the student records quotations, reading notes, and observations; on the left side, students dissect what they've written on the right: they summarize, pontificate, comment on, and extract meaning. In essence, students are writing dialectical journal entries, in which "facing pages are in dialogue

with one another” (Berthoff 45). This double-entry notebook method works well with research assignments because it forces students to read their source information critically. On their own, students composing a researched essay do little to challenge their own thinking about their topic. Most often, they have an argument in mind when they begin the research, and they look for sources that only support this view. If Berthoff’s double-entry journal were assigned in association with a researched essay, students would be forced to dissect each individual source, and it would help them to “make meaning” from what they’ve read (Berthoff 45). This reinforces Chong’s definition of research: students would not just be finding sources that agree with their viewpoint; they would be using their sources to find new meaning and understanding.

Although the double-entry journal creates a visual arrangement that encourages repeated dialogue, it is not the only format for a good research journal. Ballenger suggests that when assigning a dialogue journal, teachers should be flexible with the format. As long as the journal is achieving the same purpose, creating a dialogue, students should be able to use different variations in their own journals. Rather than writing on the right and left sides of the journal, students may wish to create a “research log.” This format makes sense when students are writing digitally, rather than keeping a physical journal. In this format, the student first takes notes about the source and writes a response to the text, keeping in mind the questions that would be answered on the right side of the double-entry journal. Then underneath that, the student writes what would typically be written on the left side of the double-entry journal. This variation accomplishes the same goal as the double-entry journal in a slightly different format (Ballenger *Beyond* 134-135).

Regardless of the format assigned, the end goal of the assignment is to help students learn from sources and advance their thinking and ideas, thereby allowing them to immerse themselves in the process of research-based writing. Berthoff states, “We can best help students develop their own powers by assuring that they have occasions to discover that composing is itself a process of discovery and interpretation, of naming and stating, of seeing relationships and making meanings” (20). For the student, the first step in developing these “powers” is to learn how to read critically, and since writing can help students to extract meaning from what they have read, it can help them learn to be better readers. Berthoff argues that critical reading is important in order to “raise consciousness of texts as intermediary forms” (45). She describes how this works when students read literature:

Writing in a literature class is usually limited to taking notes on lectures and composing critical appreciations, critical essays, or book reports. But writing can help develop a critical method of reading by, first of all, providing for students an example of a text coming into being – their own. And second, by encouraging habits of reflective questioning in the process of reading, chiefly by means of interpretive paraphrase, writing can help students replace the nonquestion, “What is the author trying to say?” with the critical question, “How does it change the meaning when I change the text and put it this way?” (Berthoff 45)

Critical reading is not an easy skill to teach students. Reading is often perceived as a passive activity, so it is no wonder that most students tend to read texts in a superficial way. In actuality, reading is “a deeply active process of exploration” (Elbow, “Breathing” 196). In “Breathing Life into the Text,” Peter Elbow explains an exercise

that is intended to show students that meanings are made gradually, not all at once. He does this by cutting up the text and handing them out one piece at a time. He then asks students to write a detailed response about what was going through their minds when they received each piece of text. Elbow calls these “movies of the mind” (198). Not only does this exercise allow students to make personal connections and meanings to the text, it also reinforces the fact that meaning is highly individual because of our varied experiences and influences (Elbow 198). When students begin to see their ideas and connections to the texts unfold on paper, it validates their thoughts and helps them to explore, moving focus to the process, rather than the product. This focus on process allows students to connect their writing with learning. Janet Emig states, “higher cognitive function, such as analysis and synthesis, seem to develop most fully only with the support system of verbal language – particularly, it seems, of written language” (123). Emig describes how “the symbolic transformation of experience through the specific symbol systems of verbal language is shaped into an icon (the graphic product) by the enactive hand” (126). The act of writing reinforces the words, and therefore, the learning that is taking place is also reinforced. Combining the writing process with the research process provides students with an effective way to learn about their research topics.

One of the challenges of teaching research-based writing is getting students to understand that research is a messy process that can and should lead them down unexpected paths. During the research process, most students are not trying to explore – they are trying to prove. Ballenger describes typical students: “Urged to explore, they revert to proving what they already know. Encouraged to express themselves, they look for places to ‘stick in’ their opinions. Asked to be Hucks, they are more comfortable

being Toms” (*Beyond* 98). Assigning a research journal places the focus on both the research (texts) and the student’s reaction or connection to it (meaning.) By using writing to emphasize the process of research, students will have the opportunity to explore ideas and make mistakes, and they will be better equipped to write the end product – a researched essay. Berthoff states, “We can encourage our students...in learning techniques of revision only if we forego treating false starts, unfruitful beginnings, contradictions, and dead ends as mistakes, and see them, rather, as tentative steps, stages in a process” (22). The research journal takes students through the process of revision before they even begin to write their formal essay. Ironically, as I have been conducting the necessary research in order to write this thesis, I have been using an adapted form of Berthoff’s double-entry notebook; I can attest that the process does work. As I respond to the texts I have read, my thoughts become clearer on the page, and I begin to process and compare the theories of the experts in my field, allowing myself to make connections to my personal experiences as both a student and a teacher. In essence, as I sit here writing, I am “making meaning” using the tools I have learned from Berthoff.

Beyond encouraging dialogic thinking and helping students to “make meaning,” another benefit to assigning a research journal is simply that it gets students writing. Writing for the sake of writing can only help students improve. The research journal allows students to practice writing in a low stakes way. Many students harbor anxieties associated with writing, and often, this stems from the fear of making mistakes. Journal writing creates a safe environment for students to write without this fear. Another advantage is that journals encourage students to express themselves in their own way, allowing “the journal writer’s voice [to] be what it may” (Fulwiler 172). Authentic voice

in writing is something that is difficult to teach students; journals show students that they have a voice, and by using the ideas that they've written about in their journals, student have the opportunity to transfer this voice to their formal essays.

While there are many advantages to students keeping research journals, this assignment comes with an equal number of challenges for the teacher. Some of these issues include how to deal with students who are resistant to the assignment, how to grade the journals, and how often to collect them, if at all. When journals are only collected on a certain date and not used on a daily basis in class, students may have a tendency to procrastinate, compiling several journal entries the night before they are due (Fulwiler 169). One way to combat this is to allow students five to ten minutes of class time each day (or week) to write in their journals and to initiate a class discussion about what was written. This helps students see the value of actively using their journals, rather than reinforcing the idea that it is busy-work (Fulwiler 169). But even if students do “fake it,” if they do it well, they are still learning through the process. Compiling several journal entries in the course of a few days requires students to re-read texts, thinking critically about the material so that they can write intelligent and acceptable responses that appear to have been written over a longer period. Even though it is not ideal, this does not devalue the journal assignment, as some critical thinking is better than none at all (Fulwiler 169-170).

Students may be resistant to any journal assignment. Even if they know they will be writing in their journals at a certain time each week, they may still find the writing tedious and fight against it, not seeing the value of the assignment as they are doing the actual writing. It becomes important for the teacher to keep the writing prompts

interesting and engaging. Making the writing “purposeful” and reinforcing the connections between the assignment and other aspects of the class will show students that what they are writing is important in the context of what they are learning in the class (Fulwiler 170). Fulwiler states, “The best way to demonstrate purpose is to provide challenging journal-writing prompts each week in class, and to use that writing to advance both class discussion and formal writing projects (170). Challenging prompts move beyond asking students to “respond to the text.” Teachers should consider asking students to discuss relationships between the text and something else – an idea, a theory, an event or experience. Or teachers might ask students to pinpoint something specific about the text that they did not understand or to use the rhetorical elements (ethos, logos, pathos) to explain their responses. Having students write about their sources in purposeful ways will help students with the actual writing of their essays, whether the students realize it at first or not. Ballenger suggests that “one way to sell the dialogue journal is to try to convince your students that they are actually writing their drafts *as* they do their research, saving time later on” (*Beyond* 134). Ballenger calls this “writing in the middle” (*Curious* 115).

Another challenge associated with journal writing is that journals must be graded in order for students to take them seriously. But when journals are graded for content, students tend to write for the teacher, rather than writing to explore their ideas. They limit themselves, not wanting to risk getting a bad mark for their journal entry. Elbow believes that just as students are assigned “a spectrum of reading from high stakes to low stakes,” students should also be assigned a spectrum of writing (*Everyone* 294). Not all writing should have high-stakes consequences. This is why he says teachers should not

grade journals for content. Still, if no credit is given, many students will simply not do the assignment. Journals should, at the least, be graded for completion, motivating students to do the assignment while allowing them to make mistakes. Fulwiler has his students submit their top ten journal entries for 10% of their course grade. This allows students some freedom of expression and privacy, as they get to choose which entries to share (“Song” 313-314). Just as journals should not be graded for content, they should also not be graded for grammar and mechanics. If students allow themselves to write as freely and as quickly as they can physically keep up with their thoughts, errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation are bound to happen. The goal in journal writing is not to write well, but to allow the writing to advance the students’ thinking. Journals give the students an opportunity to explore their ideas in their own way, focusing on “writing to learn” rather than “writing to communicate” (Young 33).

Many writing teachers may find grading journals daunting, but one way to make it less so is to have the students read one another’s journals. In her article, “*Reading Writing Journals in the College Composition Classroom*,” Mary Alm discusses a journal-reading exercise that she assigned to her first-semester composition students. In her class, students exchanged journals with one another every few weeks so that each student had five different readers by the end of the semester. After each journal entry, the student readers wrote a comment for the writer. Although Alm occasionally collected the student journals, the responsibility of reading them was left to the students’ peers. Additionally, students were given a “report form” where they answered questions about their reading experience. From reading the student reports, Alm concluded that the journal assignment helped students with the goals of the class. In particular, “students developed confidence

as writers through the discovery that they were not dissimilar from other students in the class” (Alm 101). By reading their peers’ journals, students could also better identify how to improve their own writing. The process of reading other students’ journals became just as important as writing in their own journals because it contributed to them becoming better writers (Alm 98-107). Alm’s assignment clearly demonstrates a socially interactive activity. Kenneth A. Bruffee states that “sense, meaning, perhaps even minds and selves are things we construct through a social process of conversation, negotiation, and collaboration” (8). The conversation about writing that was initiated by Alm’s journal assignment created a collaborative environment for the students. This collaboration is what made the students aware of themselves as writers, and it prompted them to “exercise control over either attitudes about writing or writing behaviors” (Alm 103).

Having students read each other’s writing is a collaborative activity that should be a part of every writing class, but most writing teachers limit this type of peer review to formal essays. Alm’s assignment is uncommon because journal writing is often seen as something private, only to be shared with the teacher for the purpose of grading. In fact, journal writing is a genre that comes with many preconceived notions. When students hear the word “journal” they often think that they will be required to keep a personal diary or something similar. Students may feel embarrassed about sharing anything labeled as “journal writing.” But Bruffee states, “the whole point of writing is to make your private thoughts available to the people you care about in the form you would most like them to be known” (151). Students need more opportunities to write for an audience, even if that audience is their peers.

The traditional research journal assignment has been an effective way to teach students how to research and how to write about it, and since its development, new technologies – specifically, personal computers and the Internet – have made conducting research and maintaining a journal easier for students. Assignments that require digital writing allow students to write faster and more efficiently and make students less resistant to writing. Additionally, students today are avid Internet users, spending several hours a day navigating the Internet for personal recreation. Blogging is a writing genre that incorporates both digital writing and the Internet; it is collaborative and gives students the opportunity for creativity and personal expression by allowing them to create their online environments and identities. Adapting the research journal assignment to the blog form can achieve the same goals as a traditional research journal while adding the collaborative element, making it a socially interactive activity. The next chapter will explore how the traditional research journal can best be adapted to the blog format and why it makes sense to use this technological genre of writing.

Chapter 2: Using Blogs to Teach Research

The Internet is a collaborative entity, based on transferring information and sharing knowledge. A blog, short for “weblog,” is an online journal that exists on the Internet. A blog can be created and maintained by anyone; that is, there is no authority over who publishes a blog. Not only is it a public form of writing, but it is also collaborative. Visitors of a blog have the ability to post comments; sometimes comments must go through a process of approval or are closely moderated by the blogger, and although the comment feature is not exclusive to blogs, this feature combined with the chronological format of the blog differentiates it from other websites. There are a plethora of blogs on the Internet, but the most successful ones are those that maintain a focus around a specific topic, such as politics or cooking. However, there are also successful blogs that simply function as the online diary of the blogger. Regardless of whether or not a blog is topic-centered or personal, the blogger creates the environment and depicts the personality he or she wishes to portray on the Internet.

Most Internet users today are familiar with the term blog and know what a blog looks like, even if they do not actively participate in blogging. A simple search on any search engine will no doubt pull up at least one blog post that includes something about the topic being searched. Because this form of writing is so widespread, it makes sense to channel the popularity of blogs into an effective way to teach writing and critical thinking. In the same way that computers have transitioned us from handwriting to typing to using word processing programs to write, the Internet has changed how we

research, how we write, and how we think. Walter Ong states, “Technologies are not mere exterior aids but also interior transformations of consciousness, and never more than when they affect the word” (23). Students who have never known a world without the Internet think differently and, therefore, must be taught differently than previous generations of students.

In “Technologies for Transcending a Focus on Error: Blogs and Democratic Aspirations in First-Year Composition,” Cheryl Smith describes how students have been influenced by technology and how it shows up in their writing styles and reading practices. She states, “Students today write more, but in less conventionally academic ways, than students a decade ago, and they arrive on our campuses with entirely new skills sets and a new relationship to composition and expression” (Smith 35). Writing teachers must be able to use these skills sets by embracing current technologies. With the invention of portable devices, such as laptops and smartphones, students type almost exclusively. In fact, on the first day teaching my Composition II class, I asked each student to introduce themselves, telling me the last thing they read and the last thing they wrote. Without exception, all of my students responded that they wrote something electronically, whether it was an e-mail, a text message, an essay, or a Facebook update. Not one student told me that they wrote something by hand. Then why should we require students to keep a handwritten journal? Requiring students to handwrite journal entries might make them more resistant to the assignment. Some detractors of electronic journaling might argue that handwriting slows things down in a way that makes what we’re writing make sense. Or they might say that when we handwrite, we think differently, which Ong would agree with. But students find handwriting tedious and even

physically painful, and they have told me that writing digitally allows them to get their thoughts down quickly; when they hand write, they are more likely to lose their train of thought because it is difficult for their hands to keep up. When given the option to write by hand or write digitally for in-class assignments, my students always choose to use a computer.

In “Teaching and Reading the Millennial Generation Through Media Literacy,” David Considine, Julie Horton, and Gary Moorman argue the importance of incorporating media literacy, which is defined as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and effectively communicate in a variety of forms including print and nonprint texts,” into school curricula (472). “Millenials,” students who have grown up since the advent of the Internet, are different from previous generations of students; they are “digital natives,” “‘native speakers’ of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet” (Considine et al. 473, Prensky 1). They have access to an infinite amount of information and are more likely than any previous generation to continue to use new technologies in their everyday lives. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, “84% of [American] teenagers reported owning one or more personal media device, and 87% use the Internet; 51% reported going online daily” (Considine et al 473). Not only do digital natives actively use digital technologies, they are also actively creating online content (Considine et al. 473). They are comfortable in the digital world, unlike many of their teachers who are “digital immigrants,” those who have not completely abandoned their pre-digital habits. Marc Prensky, author of “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants,” describes the digital immigrant accent as “turning to the Internet for information second rather than first, or in reading the manual for a program rather than

assuming that the program itself will teach us to use it” (2). When the teacher is an immigrant and the student a native, this difference causes a divide. Teachers should remember who they are teaching and be aware that traditional methods are less effective on this new generation of students.

Although digital natives are adept at using technology, they lack the expertise to be true researchers. A digital immigrant might look to the library first when conducting academic research, but a digital native will always start with an Internet search. This is why teachers need to guide students on how to conduct Internet research effectively. One issue with student research today is that so much is available on the Internet. According to Eddy K.M. Chong, “students are increasingly turning to search engines offered by Google, Yahoo or the like as their first if not sole source of information, neglecting print materials which are primarily text-based and non-interactive” (798). In this sense, research becomes more about “information gathering” than synthesizing the information and enabling critical thought about a topic (Chong 798). Students, with their “cut-and-paste tendencies,” belittle the research process, only thinking about the end product: the graded essay (Chong 798). Academics know that research enables the advancement of knowledge, but students often seem to think that research is collecting as many facts as possible to quote or cite in their essays in order to meet the page requirement set by the instructor. One reason I chose Bruce Ballenger’s *The Curious Researcher* as the main text in my Composition II class was that it encourages inquiry, and my plan to have my students create a research blog fit in perfectly with this text.

Blogging is a good way for students to explore their research topics, and it can also help students to “negotiate the tensions of error” (Smith 37). It can certainly be the

type of low stakes writing encouraged by expressivist pedagogy. Blogs allow students to explore and express themselves, they provide a collaborative environment to assist in brainstorming and peer review, and they are forms that students of the “millennial generation” are familiar with. Blogging can also make students feel that they are being heard. In ““That's Online Writing, Not Boring School Writing: Writing with Blogs and the Talkback Project,” Shelbie Witte describes a project in which students were given the opportunity to blog about literature, but because of issues with the administration, the blog was removed and the students were assigned traditional journaling to replace the blogging. When the project ended unexpectedly, students reacted in a negative way to this change in medium. Many students claimed that their “voice” had been taken away with the removal of the blog, and one student even commented that “It's like we've gone back to using leeches instead of nuclear medicine” (qtd. in Witte 95). The “Talkback Project” shows that once students begin to blog, they feel more involved in the course material, and for many students, they find their voice. This makes blogging extremely beneficial for students who would not normally talk in class. Unlike a traditional class discussion, blogging allows all students to be able to participate equally. Above all, blogging facilitates collaborative learning, allowing students to respond to each other's ideas in a thought-provoking way. A study conducted by Krentler and Willis-Flurry found “that students' use of technology had a significant main effect on students learning in that the more students participated . . . , the higher their grades” (Ellison and Wu 103). This is because students become more engaged with the course content, as it is continually being reinforced through the blogs.

When Cheryl Smith decided to incorporate a blog in her freshman composition class, she asked the students to post a writer's profile as their first blog assignment. She found that although the tone and voice of the students was casual and "chatty," students took the assignment seriously and spent time responding to one another's posts. In this particular post, students revealed their insecurities in regards to writing, which gave her insight to her students' experiences. The blogging created a community over the course of the semester, and it helped students to "bounce ideas off one another and develop new trains of thought that they might not have considered on their own" (Smith 45). Nicole B. Ellison and Yuehua Wu, authors of "Blogging in the Classroom: A Preliminary Exploration on Student Attitudes and Impact on Comprehension," attribute the success of blogging to the fact that "the critical skill of writing is central to the act of blogging" (105). Students begin to think more critically through the act of writing, reading, and responding to their classmates on blogs. Students who are asked to respond to readings on a blog are more likely to read the assignment carefully because they know that their response to the reading will be read by their classmates (Ellison and Wu 106). Because blogging gives students a real audience to write to, students are more invested in what they write, and blogs make it easier for teachers to create a collaborative environment. Students assigned to keep a research blog may pay closer attention to how they interpret their source information, and they may put more effort into each post; they may not put the same effort into a handwritten journal that is read only by the teacher.

Teachers who assign blogging may find that while students become engaged in the course material, they do so in an individual way, displaying different discourses and identities. Kathleen C. West, a high school literature teacher, used blogging to see

whether students would respond differently on a blog than they would on paper. West uses James Paul Gee's definition of "socially situated identities" to help her understand her students' responses via blog. Gee defines a discourse as "a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network'" ("Literacy" 537). Discourses and identities are, therefore, connected ("Literacy" 529). Gee's book, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, describes students as having multiple identities. When students interact with others in a virtual world, such as a video game or on the Internet, they end up with three main identities: a virtual identity, a real identity, and a projected identity, which combines the virtual and the real.

In West's study, each student used elements from some type of secondary discourse in their blog responses, mixing multiple identities to create their online identities. West discusses three particular students from her class. In her analysis of the student named Katherine, West designates the student's virtual identity as "relationship-savvy teen" because Katherine used language such as "obnoxious, crazy, and unbelievably obsessed" to describe the character of Abigail in *The Crucible* (592). The student named Evan is described as "a tempered rebel" because of the way he resisted blogging on the day it was assigned. Evan begins his blog saying, "i really have not to much to blog about. I feel kinda sick today and i don't feel like writing. But anywho..." (592). Evan also chooses to use the acronym "wtf" in his blog, which stands for "what the fuck" (592). Again, this reinforces his rebel identity, but because he does not spell it out, it tempers it somewhat. The third student, Lucy, is described as a "pop-cultured

humorist” (594). While describing *Huckleberry Finn*, Lucy states, “on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being Christy Brown and 10 being The Illest Diva, I would give it a 5.5” (594). Lucy’s blogs are deliberately humorous and filled with pop-culture references. West’s research shows how students rely on their digital language (or literacy) to more fully explain their ideas and further establish their online identities. West’s analysis of the study concludes that all three students built “identities as ‘serious literature students’ and ‘Web-literate communicators’ within their entries” in addition to the virtual identities she observed (596). She concludes that the discourse she observed in the blogs is “normative” and it is also “creative” (597).

The blogosphere is full of many different discourses and identities. As of April 2007, there were more than 70 million blogs on the Internet (Murray and Hourigan 83). In “Blogs for Specific Purposes: Expressivist or Socio-Cognitivist Approach?” Liam Murray and Triona Hourigan explain that “blogs offer refuge and sanctuary from the chaotic world of the web and encourage users to reflect more on their activities” (83). The encouragement for reflection is one reason why blogging makes sense as a replacement for the traditional research journal. Because the act of writing develops thought, then blogging should also develop thought. By combining blogging with research journaling, we should be able to assume that blogging about research will help students develop their critical thinking about their topic, thereby advancing their knowledge and helping them to write about what they have learned or are learning.

Research blogging is not a new form of blogging. In fact, many blogs that are topic-centered are effectively writing researched commentary whether the blogger realizes it or not. One of my favorite blogs is Frugal Coupon Living

(<http://www.frugalcouponliving.com/>). In each blog post, the blogger presents her researched findings to share savings opportunities with her visitors. Because of her blog, I always know where to shop for the best diaper deals in any given week. Although this blog would not typically be considered a research blog, the blogger is sharing her research with her visitors. More typical research blogs are kept by companies, students, scientists, and academics. An example of an effective research blog kept by a company is Google's Research Blog (<http://googleresearch.blogspot.com/>), where Google researchers share their latest findings. Even NASA maintains a myriad of blogs about its people and programs (<http://blogs.nasa.gov/cm/newui/blog/blogs.jsp>).

Blogging, when assigned in conjunction with a research project, can easily replace the research journal of the past. In "Using Blogging to Enhance the Initiation of Students into Academic Research," three students who are enrolled in a music elective are assigned blogging as a way to "initiate them into the world of music research" (Chong 799). In Chong's study, the students were introduced to both online and print resources, and discussions were initiated about how to qualify sources, particularly those on the Internet. Students were able to choose their own course-related topic, and the final assignment for the course would be a formal research term paper. Each student would be required to create and maintain a blog that would serve as a "research diary" (Chong 800). The students could respond to one another's blogs, and the teacher would provide feedback to each student by responding on their individual blogs.

At the end of the term, Chong used all of the students' writing, from the proposal and blog postings to the final paper, along with an end-of-semester survey, to evaluate whether or not the blogs enhanced the research process for the students. The findings

were highly individual, but across the board, “the chronicling nature of blogging helped surface learning difficulties faced by the students” (Chong 803). Although each student approached the assignment differently, each student encountered challenges with the research. Because of the blogging process, the students were able to get guidance from their teacher that would help them get past their hurdles. Chong relates one student’s experience:

...she gradually realized that her initial interpretation of the musical form as essentially multi-sectional needed to recognize the sonata form elements present. In her case, the teacher-student blog interaction (in lieu of a face-to-face individual tutorial) helped improve her music-analytical thinking. (803)

When looking at the students’ final papers, it was apparent that much of the blog writing was transferred to the paper, although the students did change the tone of their writing from casual to academic. This transference of the writing is to be expected, as the students were actually “writing in the middle” while composing their blog posts. Chong found that, overwhelmingly, the students felt that the blogging assignment helped them with their research, and it proved to be a constant source of confirmation that they were proceeding in the right direction.

Chong’s blogging assignment functioned in much the same way that a traditional research journal would function; an exception is that with the blog, students were afforded more opportunities for teacher feedback. Although the students in the class were allowed to post comments on one another’s blogs, Chong did not discuss whether or not any of the students found the peer comments useful or influential. My guess is that there were not an abundance of peer comments, as the students were more focused on the

teacher (grader) feedback. One of the advantages of a blog over a hand-written journal is that a blog is collaborative. In the case of Chong's study, although the blog assignment was successful, it was hardly collaborative. The teacher was the main commenter, and his main function was to provide guidance. Rather than helping students to collaborate with one another, Chong's assignment reinforced dependency on the instructor (Bruffee 152). The blog achieved Chong's goals for helping his students with their research projects, and it provided students with more teacher-student interaction; but although peer collaboration was not a focus of Chong's assignment, there was the potential for the blog to serve this purpose.

Because a research blog functions in much the same way as a research journal, the teacher must face some of the same challenges. Many of Fulwiler's suggestions about assigning research journals are equally relevant when assigning blogs. There will always be a certain amount of resistance from students in regards to writing assignments, particularly if it is daily writing, but fortunately, the issue of collecting research journals is eliminated when the format is a blog. Ideally, students should be writing their blog posts as they are assigned, and because the blog is public, the teacher has more oversight as to whether or not the assignment is being done on time. But mandatory blog posts come with their own challenges. When a student writes in a journal, even if the teacher collects and grades the journal, it is still basically a form of private literacy (Szwed 425-427). A benefit to this form is that the student is afforded some privacy. When keeping a blog, students lose anonymity, but since anonymity can actually inhibit collaboration, the blog has more positive than negative consequences (Bruffee 152). While students may have anxiety about writing for an audience, the fact that there is an audience gives

students the opportunity to respond appropriately to that audience; it's an experience that cannot be replicated by keeping a traditional journal.

Still, students may resist a blog assignment because it is a public form of writing, and they may anticipate feeling embarrassed. In order to keep students engaged with the blogs, teachers should assign blog posts the same way that journal posts are assigned. That is, they must keep the writing prompts interesting, and they should also reinforce the connections between the blog assignment and other aspects of the class. In the case of a research blog, the teacher should use the blog to help students advance their thinking about their sources and topics.

Since the goal of the blog is not good writing, and students should have the freedom to write without inhibition, blogs should not be graded for grammar or mechanics. Instead, blogs should be graded similarly to journals. The easiest way to grade a blog is by the number of posts or paragraphs, but teachers should design clear guidelines for students on what defines an acceptable post. The best incentive for students to maintain their blogs is that it will make the writing of their essay seem easy, as much of the writing will have already been done. By reinforcing the idea that students are "writing in the middle," teachers may find less resistance to the assignment. Students might also be more willing to blog on their own if they know that others are reading what they write. The only way to emphasize the collaborative aspect of blogging is to require students to read and comment on their peers' blogs as well as maintaining their own. For this cooperation to occur, students must have access to one another's blogs.

Like journals, the blog format should be flexible as long as the same goals are achieved. There are many platforms for blogging software. If students are comfortable

using a particular platform, such as *Blogger* or *Wordpress*, teachers may choose to allow students their choice of technology; an advantage to allowing students this freedom is that the learning curve associated with using new technologies is bypassed by the students. However, this might be a disadvantage for a teacher who is a “digital immigrant,” as the teacher might have difficulty learning to navigate several different blogging technologies. For the “digital immigrant” teacher, having students all use the same platform makes grading the blogs easier. Fortunately for both teachers and students, blogging technologies today are easy to use and most have similar features.

Understanding the benefits that the blogging experience would have on my students, I decided to incorporate a blogging assignment in my Composition II class, which focuses on research-based writing. My main reasons for creating a blogging assignment were to choose a writing medium my students might enjoy and to incorporate a technology they might already be familiar with. If I had not used blogging in my class, I would have required that each student keep a research journal. The traditional research journal is an effective way of helping students with research essay assignments, and my intent with moving this form to a blog was to use the latest technologies and make the assignment more collaborative.

Chapter 3: Creating and Evaluating the Research Blog Assignment

While teaching Composition I, I assigned peer review to assist students with writing their formal essays, and I received positive feedback from my classes about this experience. The in-class writing for Composition I, however, was mostly used to initiate class discussions, and I was the sole reader of these assignments. While preparing to teach Composition II, research-based writing, I knew that I would use peer review again, but I also wanted to elaborate on the idea of assigning more socially interactive activities – exercises and assignments that encourage and value collaboration with other students (Bruffee 1). Peer review is a socially interactive activity that works well because it allows students to read, write, and speak constructively with one another about what they are reading and writing (Bruffee 169). One of peer review’s benefits is that it provides students with the opportunity to build relationships with other students, and this helps them to open up as writers. I knew from teaching Composition I that keeping students in the same peer review group throughout the semester allowed students to bond with one another, so I decided to reinforce this bond through the research blog assignment. A blog can be collaborative only when there are readers, and the students would only be readers of their peers’ blogs if it was a requirement for the class. I hoped that by making the students the primary readers of the blogs, this assignment would mimic Alm’s journal assignment, which shifted the journal-reading responsibility from the teacher to the students; one of the outcomes of Alm’s assignment was that students put more care into writing their journal entries because they knew other students would be reading what they

wrote. Additionally, Alm's students learned how to improve their own writing by reading other students' journals (Alm 101). By having my students read the blogs of their peer review group, I anticipated that when it was time for them to peer review the final essay, each group will have already gained a familiarity with each writer's topic, voice, and style of writing, making the peer review process even more beneficial for the writer.

As I envisioned the blog assignment working, I knew that I had to provide my students with an incentive to keep up with it. In order for my students to take the blog seriously, I made the assignment worth 15% of the final course grade. This was a percentage equal to one of the smaller formal essays of the semester. At the same time, I did not want to inhibit students from exploring their topics, so I did not grade the blogs for grammar or mechanics, and I allowed the students to choose any research topic within reason. Rather than assigning traditional grades to the individual blog assignments, I used a points system. An average blog post would receive two points, an above average post would receive three points, and a below average post would receive one point. I created a detailed assignment sheet for students that outlined what was expected in the blog posts, and I stressed to the class that they should strive for a three-point post, but that these posts would need to go above and beyond the set requirements; most posts would receive two points (See Appendix A: The Research Blog Assignment). Examples of thoughtful, above-average blog posts were also posted on the course website so that students would better understand the criteria for grading. Students were asked to set a goal of twenty posts over the course of the semester, twelve of which I would assign in class. This meant that students had the chance to begin most of their blog posts during

class time, but it also meant that students would have to take the initiative to blog on their own. I also required that each student read and comment on the blogs of their group members, although there were no points associated with posting comments. I hoped that by setting aside some class time every few weeks for students to read and comment on their peers' blogs, the collaboration would begin to happen naturally.

As I planned the details of this assignment, I created a list of objectives that the blogs would help to accomplish in regards to the final researched essay. The individual blog assignments that I would assign in class were written with these goals in mind. The blogs would help students do the following:

1. Explore topics
2. Find a good research question
3. Find sources
4. Read, analyze, and respond to sources
5. Plan the final essay
6. Find and fill any holes in the research
7. Improve collaboration and peer review
8. Write the essay
9. Battle procrastination

Rather than requiring that students use a particular platform for blogging, I allowed them to choose whatever platform they were comfortable with. Most blogging platforms function equally, and I didn't want there to be too much of a learning curve associated with the assignment. However, on the day that we created the blogs in class, I found that many of my students had never blogged before and looked to me to

recommend a blogging platform. When this was the case, I suggested they use *Wordpress*, as this interface is one of the most user-friendly.

The first post of the semester was assigned the second week of class. I asked that the students write an introductory post that included what they were interested in; I wanted them to start thinking about topics that could hold their interest over the course of the semester. Shortly after this assignment, my class attended a presentation that showed them how to use the research tools at the university library. The librarian instructed students on how to find articles using the various databases, along with the other library resources. After the library instruction, I asked the students to write a blog post about the library instruction, including where they might start to find information about their potential topics. My intent for this assignment was to get them thinking about where to begin, and it was also a way to reinforce the library instruction. I wanted them to become accustomed to keeping track of their research process; that is, I wanted them to become more aware of where their sources were coming from. I reinforced the idea of them having a topic-centered approach to their research. A student researching breakdancing will rely on different types of sources than someone researching the medical experiments done in concentration camps.

Now that I had my class thinking about which databases and library resources made sense for their particular topics, we were able to jump right into the research. The very next blog assignment required that they find any article about a potential topic. Clearly, I did not expect students to have settled on a research topic this early in the semester, but I did want them to begin thinking about topics that they were interested in and begin to use the appropriate research tools to get a basic understanding of these

topics. Ballenger suggests that students do preliminary research to develop a working knowledge for any potential research topic (*Curious* 39). This blog assignment was intended for this purpose. Once they found an article about the topic, they were asked to write a blog post adhering to the following guidelines:

1. Introduce the source and explain how you found it.
2. Provide some rhetorical context about the source and write a summary (one paragraph)
3. Respond to your source by asking these questions:
 - What did you learn?
 - What is the value of the source to your topic or to you?
 - Where do you want to go from here?

Students were encouraged to evaluate not only the article, but also their interest level in the topic. I wanted them to understand that it was okay to change topics at this point in the semester; the goal at this time was to find a topic that would hold their interest for an extensive research project. Many of the blog assignments that followed had a similar format: they were centered on dialectical responses to the sources that students were reading both in class and on their own (See Appendix A: The Research Blog Assignment).

Other blog assignments were tied to other objectives (See Appendix B: Sample Blog Assignments). To assist students with brainstorming potential topics for the final research project, I assigned Ballenger's classroom exercise, "The Myth of the Boring Topic." I divided the class into groups and gave each group an everyday object about which they were to create a list of questions (*Beyond* 103). Intended to show students

how to generate questions about any topic, this exercise provided the framework for a blog post. When we finished the exercise, students were instructed to create a list of questions about their potential research topic, even if they had not made a final decision about the topic. Rather than having the students respond on paper as they did in the original exercise, I asked that they create a blog post. At the end of class, they were given time to read their group members' blogs, adding their own questions about the topic as a comment to the post. By moving this in-class exercise to the blog format, students were afforded more dialog about their topic, as each group worked and wrote collaboratively. They were also able to refer back to their blog and continue the conversation with their group members even after class ended. Later in the semester, I assigned a similar blog post intended to further narrow the proposed topic. In this post, I allowed myself to comment on the blogs if I felt that the student was having an issue that was not being addressed by the peer group. Most often, I found that no comment was necessary, as the students themselves offered great suggestions for one another.

Once the students had created the blogs, I assigned at least one blog post a week. Because this was a two-day a week class, I typically set aside some class time on the second day for students to begin their post for that week. On some days, students were asked to have already chosen and read an article about their topic before coming to class, and the blog post would require that they consider a set of questions about the source they chose. On another day, I might give students directions to find a source contrary to the source they had blogged about the week before. In an effort to get them to blog more on their own, I reminded students weekly that they should be posting more than just during class time.

Late in the semester, when the students began to peer review drafts of their essays, I began to transition the research blogs into something more. Now that most of the research was done, and the students were focused on the writing part of the project, I began assigning blog posts intended to evaluate and reflect on their writing process for their drafts, discuss changes they needed to make based on peer review, discuss holes in their research that needed to be filled, or just blog about how they might be feeling about their writing so far. I had not anticipated that the research blogs would take this turn, but looking back, I find it to be a natural transition for the blogs, and it just made sense to continue blogging even when most of the active research had ended and my objectives for the blog had been met. At the start of the semester, I imagined that my goals for the assignment would be realized by the time the first draft had been written. Students would have explored topics, found a good research question to focus on, found and analyzed their sources, and planned the essay by the time that first draft was due. Throughout this process, students would have received constant peer feedback, and I believed that the blogs would prevent most students from procrastinating. Because the blogging continued after the first draft, in addition to the goals I outlined, students were also able to focus on improving their writing processes. By the end of the semester, I had a complete picture of each student's research journey, from choosing a topic and finding sources to writing and revising the final essay.

In order to assess the effectiveness of the research blog assignment, I asked the students to complete a survey at the end of the semester (See Appendix C: Student Survey). I made the survey anonymous in hopes that students would be as honest as possible about the assignment. The survey consisted of twenty-one statements, which the

students would rate their agreement on a scale of one to ten. My reason for choosing a ten-point scale was to allow students a broad range that would allow me to see the intensity of their feelings about each statement. In order to force a decision for each statement, either positive or negative, I used an even-numbered scale. A one indicates complete disagreement, and a ten indicates complete agreement.

I chose statements that spoke to my objectives for creating the blogging assignment. I included several statements intended to evaluate whether or not the blogs helped students with their research and writing process:

- The blog helped me to be a better writer.
- The blog made me more aware of my writing process.
- The blog helped me with my research for the class.
- The blog kept me from procrastinating with my research project.

I included statements that would show me how students perceived blogging as a writing medium. I wanted to know how students felt about blogging compared to other writing that they did both in class and out, and I also wanted to know how students were affected by their perceived blogging audience:

- I was aware of my audience while writing on my blog.
- Compared to other writing I did in this class, the blog was most enjoyable.
- When I wrote on my blog, I was aware of how my writing might be perceived by others.
- I always edited and revised my work before posting to my blog.
- I was concerned with making grammatical errors while writing my blog posts.

In order to see how collaborative the blogging assignment felt to students, I included statements about their connections with other students:

- Writing on my blog made me feel like I was being heard.
- The blog helped me to get feedback from my peers.
- The blog made me feel connected to the rest of the class.

I also included statements intended to gauge students' experiences with blogging and their interest-level in blogs and the blog assignment, and I included statements that would allow me to see what students knew about blogging in general:

- This was the first time that I wrote or maintained a blog
- I enjoyed the blog assignment.
- In the future, I plan to maintain my own blog unrelated to this class.
- I read blogs for personal enjoyment outside of this class.
- The blog felt like busy work.
- I found the blog assignment difficult.
- I write on or maintain a blog for personal enjoyment outside of this class.
- Blogs are public.
- Blogs are anonymous.

At the end of the survey, students were asked to write a comment that best describes their experience with their research blog. Additionally, I asked each student to write a final blog post once they had turned in their researched essay. This post was an opportunity for them to talk about their research journey, including their experience with the blog. Using the survey combined with the blogs themselves, I could effectively evaluate whether or not this blog assignment worked as intended.

Chapter 4: Students' Responses to the Research Blog

In this chapter I report on the students' responses in the end-of-semester survey about the research blog assignment. Of the twenty-four students enrolled in my class at the end of the semester, nineteen students voluntarily completed this anonymous survey. As previously discussed, the bulk of the survey consisted of a list of statements to which the students were to rate their agreement from one to ten (See Appendix C: Student Survey). For the purpose of this analysis, I will group these responses into four categories:

- Disagree (1, 2 or 3)
- Disagree somewhat (4 or 5)
- Agree somewhat (6 or 7)
- Agree (8, 9, or 10)

Going against the theory that blogs are a familiar form for students in the “millennial generation,” very few students in my class actively read or wrote blogs; it was a form that they actually had to learn to complete the assignment. Based on the results of the survey, not one student was currently writing on or maintaining a blog for personal enjoyment outside of class. Additionally, only 16% of students surveyed either agreed or agreed somewhat that they read blogs for personal enjoyment outside of class. Only 11% of those surveyed had ever written on or maintained a blog prior to this research blog assignment. This leads me to believe that the students' previous experience

with blogging was related to a school project, either in high school or in their first semester of college. Of the 11% who had blogged before, one student disagreed with “I enjoyed the blog assignment”; 58% of students surveyed either agreed or agreed somewhat, while 32% of students disagreed somewhat that they enjoyed the blog assignment. 32% of students were interested in creating their own blogs unrelated to the class. On the first day of class, I found out via a quick show of hands that all of my students knew what a blog was, and they understood the difference between a blog and other types of websites. The relationship between blogs and students’ experiences with them might then be akin to noting that most students know what journals or diaries are, but they may not actively read or write in one.

In a statement comparing the blog assignment to other writing assigned in the class, 68% of students either agreed or agreed somewhat that the blogs were most enjoyable; 32% of students disagreed that the blogs were most enjoyable. No students found the blog assignment difficult, but 79% either agreed or agreed somewhat that the blog felt like busy work. When asked if the blog helped them with their research, 89% of students agreed or agreed somewhat. No students disagreed with this statement, even if they agreed that the blog felt like busy work and even if they did not enjoy the blog assignment. When asked if the blog kept them from procrastinating with their research projects, 63% of students either agreed or agreed somewhat.

In response to the statement, “The blog helped me to be a better writer,” 79% of students either agreed or agreed somewhat. Only 21% of students either disagreed or disagreed somewhat. In response to “This blog made me more aware of my writing process,” 89% of students either agreed or agreed somewhat, while 11% of students

either disagreed or disagreed somewhat. Of the students who agreed that the blog helped them to be a better writer, all of them rated their agreement to the second statement either the same or higher. If students felt that their writing improved, they were also more aware of their writing process as a result of the blog.

89% of students agreed or agreed somewhat that blogs are public. 68% of students agreed that they were aware of their audience while writing on their blogs, and 79% of students agreed that while writing on their blogs, they were aware of how their writing might be perceived by others. 37% of students either disagreed or disagreed somewhat to “I always edited and revised my work before posting to my blog.” The 11% that disagreed that they edited their work before posting also disagreed with “I was concerned with making grammatical errors while writing my blog posts.” 63% of students agreed or agreed somewhat that they edited and revised their writing before posting, but of those students, only 25% agreed that they were concerned with making grammatical errors on their blogs. Overall, 58% of students were concerned or somewhat concerned with making grammatical errors. Although the majority of blogs are anonymous, the research blogs in my class were not; if they had been anonymous, collaboration within the peer groups would have been inhibited (Bruffee 152). When asked if blogs are anonymous, 58% of students disagreed or disagreed somewhat, while 37% agreed that they were.

63% of students either agreed or agreed somewhat that writing on their blogs made them feel like they were being heard. When asked whether or not the blog helped the students get feedback from their peers, 68% agreed or agreed somewhat. 63% agreed or agreed somewhat that the blog made them feel connected with the rest of the class.

This means that more than half of the class felt that the blog connected them with other students, and a similar percentage thought that the blog helped them get peer feedback.

Of the nineteen students who filled out the survey, eleven students wrote in the open comments section. Most of these comments were positive, and overall, the students seemed to understand the value of the assignment, even if they were resistant to doing the work or did not put forth the effort required to make the assignment beneficial for them:

- “I liked the blog assignment and I believe it would have been more helpful if I had kept up with it.”
- “My experience with a research blog was that [it’s] helpful to research and mostly enjoyable.”
- “The blog is a useful tool to piecing together a final research paper. It should not be looked at as a task but rather a mode of bringing everything together.”
- “I truly enjoyed the blogs.”
- “The blog helped me keep up with my research throughout the semester although at times it seemed like a hassle.”

Two students wrote comments that indicated that the blog was not useful for them:

- “I can see where, for some, this may have been a huge help, however, for me, it seemed to be more busy work.”
- “I didn’t like it but I didn’t dislike it either. It was just ok. Didn’t help, didn’t hurt.”

Four students commented on the value of the blog as part of their research and/or writing process:

- “I found it easy to organize my research with my blog and plan to continue blogging!!”
- “It was very helpful to use the blog to be able to ponder my research topic all semester.”
- “The blog helped me to see my thoughts in a physical form and made me feel better about writing a research paper.”
- “The blog really helped me see the process of writing my research paper.”

In their final blog posts of the semester, students were asked to sum up their thoughts about their research, including their experience with their blogs and writing their final essays. As with some of the comments on the survey, even when students admitted their lack of effort, they valued the assignment highly. One student claimed that although he neglected the blog for a while, it did help him with his proposal, thereby helping him with his essay. This student also commented that it was the first time he had not procrastinated with an essay. Many students were in agreement that at the very least, being required to maintain a blog about their research prevented them from procrastinating.

Another student’s final blog post described how her interest in her research topic helped her stay interested in the class itself, and her grade was a direct reflection of her interest and effort. This student’s final post was among several that spoke to the experience of completing the research project over the course of the semester, rather than having just the final essay due at the end. Several students wrote about how the blog

helped their writing process, and many students commented on how the process of research and writing that we used for this project was different from what they had done in the past. One student even said that it seemed “out of order” from her normal process. Accustomed to outlining first rather than researching first, this student turned in a well-written research essay, even though she struggled the first half of the semester to free herself of the process she was used to.

Several students wrote of their dissatisfaction with the number of blog posts that were required for the assignment, but most of these students also wrote that they found the assignment beneficial overall. Other than complaints about the amount of work or number of posts required for the blog and researched essay assignments, there were no negative comments on the students’ final blog posts. Most students recognized that without the research blog, they would have had a much harder time putting together the first draft of their essay. Several students commented that when it was time to write the essay, they felt like they had already done a lot of the writing. In this regard, the blogs had achieved the goal of having students “write in the middle.”

Chapter 5: The Research Blog's Effect on Student Writing

When I read my students' final researched essays at the end of the semester, I was satisfied with the outcome. It was some of the best student writing I had read, and I was pleased with how engaged my students were with the topics they had chosen. Only a small handful of students chose topics that I would categorize as "typical" research topics: eating disorders, drunk driving, etc. Most students found something that they were truly curious about. I read interesting essays about breakdancing, tattoos, sports corruption, service dogs, surrogate mothers, reality T.V. shows, and even a serial killer. I felt that the research blogs had contributed to my students being more prepared overall when it was time to start writing their essays. The students themselves also felt more prepared, as evidenced by the fact that 89% of students surveyed agreed that the blog helped them with their research, and 63% thought that the research blog assignment kept them from procrastinating with their research project.

One of the challenges previously encountered while grading researched essays is that students will often insert their sources into their essay using mostly direct quotations. These quotations are then followed by simple explanations with sometimes nebulous connections to the student's thesis or claim. Getting students to paraphrase rather than quote their sources has proved to be difficult. Because the students in this class were required to analyze their sources well in advance of writing their essays, they had the chance to think about how the source fit in with their topic or research question. Overall, the sources within the students' essays seemed more connected than previous classes, and

there was just as much paraphrase in these essays as there were direct quotations. This shows me that students were actually synthesizing what they were reading about their topics all semester. It illustrates that the method employed by Bertoff's double-entry notebook can work in other mediums, such as blogs. The dialectical process is still present in a blog format, and this helps students read and analyze their source information critically.

Another issue I have encountered with researched essays is that, unless specifically asked to refute a source, students often only use sources that back up their thesis, ignoring the sources that disagree. In this set of essays, several students discussed sources that opposed or questioned their argument, and these students were successful at refuting the opposition, demonstrating good use of the straw man organization in their essays (Bruffee 65-68). My assumption about this difference is that when the students were conducting their research, they did not initially have a particular research question in mind; they were researching for the sake of curiosity, and therefore, they were exposed to a number of viewpoints. Rather than searching out sources that agreed with their thesis, they gave all sources equal time because they needed to blog about it. When it was time to write to their research question, any opposing viewpoints they came across were still present in their thinking, creating a need for the students to justify their own points and refute the opposition. Not only did students include varied sources within their essays, they were also more likely to compare sources, discussing relationships between the different viewpoints they read. They were truly "making meaning." This successful outcome is one that would probably be consistent in any class that employed

the use of a dialectical research journal in any form, but the collaborative format of the blog provided the opportunity for even more dialogue.

I also noted that several students used some form of first person narrative in their essays, showing their readers their personal connection to the topic. As with any research essay assignment, the students who chose topics based on their curiosity and interest-level wrote more engaging essays. In this class, because they were required to blog about their research all semester, most of the students were careful in selecting a topic that would sustain their interest. There were only a few essays from this class that would have me question the student writer's level of interest: essays about Egypt, psychopathology, and drunk driving.

Additionally, I actually felt like I could "hear" my students in their essays. Consistent with the students in Chong's study, my students used what they had written on their blogs and transferred this writing to their researched essays, changing the tone somewhat by eliminating any slang and the casual style. Even in a more academic style, the student essays retained the authentic voice of their authors. This made reading the essays fun and interesting, and it made grading them much less daunting.

Of the nine objectives that I set out to accomplish with the research blog assignment, I am confident that most of these were achieved. The research blog assignment helped students to explore topics; find a good research question; read, analyze, and respond to sources; plan the final essay; find and fill holes in the research; write the essay; and battle procrastination. The objectives that fell short from meeting my expectations were my ideas that the blogs could help the students find sources and that peer collaboration would be improved. I do think that the blogs helped with these

objectives; however, I was not completely satisfied with the outcome. I plan further modification of the assignment in future classes, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

One of the successes of the research blog assignment is that when the students blogged and read the blogs of other students in their peer review groups, in-person peer collaboration became easier; in fact, all but one peer group was closely bonded by the end of the semester. The level of written and verbal peer review was greatly improved, and as I had anticipated, students were more comfortable giving feedback, as they were familiar with each group member's topic and style of writing. In the latter part of the semester, I made one small change to the peer groups because of a student withdrawing from the class. This change actually disrupted the group who found the withdrawn student replaced by someone from another group. Although it was not a significant enough disruption to inhibit the group, there was enough of a difference for me to notice a change in the group's dialogue when the new member's essay was being discussed – the other students were more timid with their feedback to the new group member. Overall, having students read and comment on the blogs of the other students in their groups helped to reinforce peer collaboration. The shortfall of this assignment meeting my high expectation of improved peer collaboration may have been a direct result of my choice to allow students their choice of technology.

Because this assignment involved technology, it is important to review how well that technology was used to achieve the objectives I hoped to accomplish. User interface can affect the success of any assignment involving technology. Students in my class were given the choice of blogging platforms to use; all but one of the students used either *WordPress* or *Blogger*. Of the twenty-six students in the class, fifteen used *WordPress*,

eight used *Blogger*, and one used *Blog.com*. After the students created their blogs, I posted a list (by peer group) of all of the blog URLs, which made it easier for students to access their peers' blogs. They could simply open the document and click the link listed under each student's name.

The first assignment that required students to comment on their peers' blogs was fairly early in the semester. Students were given class time to read the blogs and provide feedback via a comment about the potential topic that the student had in mind for the research project. These initial comments were short, and most often, were either an admission of common interests or words of encouragement. I took time to read the blog posts and comments, and when I felt that I could add something useful, I took the time to comment on some of the student's blogs. It was this first comment cycle that made me realize that by having students choose their own blogging platform, I was also forcing students to adhere to whatever their peers had chosen for the purpose of posting comments. The differences in the commenting process for each blogging platform forced students to learn more than their chosen blogging technology.

Blogger requires that user comments be attached to some type of user ID: Google Account, LiveJournal, WordPress, TypePad, AIM, or OpenID. There is an option to allow an anonymous comment or to allow users to post comments by entering a name and URL, but this option is something that must be activated by the blogger. To leave a comment on either *WordPress* or *Blog.com*, the user only has to enter a name and e-mail address, which is not published. Additionally, all blogging platforms allow the blogger to require pre-approval before the comments are published.

Because I had not addressed the nuances of each blogging platform, the students chose what options they wanted for the administration of their blogs. This made the first round of comments difficult for some students in the class. If a student had chosen *Wordpress* for his or her blog, but other members of the peer group had used *Blogger*, the student who used *Wordpress* needed to register some type of online ID in order to comment on the other blogs in the group. If the blogger had opted to pre-approve all comments, the students' comments might not show up for days until the blogger approved them. Anything that makes it more difficult for students to complete an assignment should be avoided. In order to remedy the issue that this created, I asked the eight students who chose *Blogger* to change the setting on their blogs to allow comments with just a Name and URL. This should have eliminated the perceived barrier for students to comment on one another's blogs. Still, overall, comments from peers were less than I had envisioned. Removing the issue created by the different blogging platforms did not increase the number of comments that students posted. Most students in the class only read and commented on their peers' blogs when they were given class time to do so. Unless I gave students specific instructions for comment assignments, student comments were generally short and limited to encouragement. However, when students were asked to contribute to the list of research questions on their peers' blogs, most of the students received helpful comments. This was probably due to the nature of the comment assignment, i.e. add to the list of questions.

Comment assignments were slightly different from blog post assignments, as they were intended to increase peer collaboration. The individual comment assignments did achieve this goal, but overall, online comments were less than expected. Initially, I was

disappointed in what I perceived as a lack of collaboration, but when I listened in on the conversations of the peer review groups, I realized that the students were reading each other's blogs and giving more verbal feedback than online feedback. The fact that 68% of students surveyed agreed or agreed somewhat that the blogs helped them get feedback from their peers shows that the blog assignment did improve peer collaboration, whether the feedback received was entirely online or a combination of online and verbal feedback.

One benefit to maintaining a research blog that is viewable to the public is that comments can come from unexpected places. One of my students received a thoughtful comment from a blogger called ProJoe. ProJoe blogs about writing, and according to his blog, he is an experienced writing tutor and the Treasurer of the Northeast Writing Centers Association. When my student wrote a blog post about narrowing her research question, ProJoe gave her good advice on how to turn this research question into a thesis statement. He also included a link to a blog post that he wrote, elaborating on this topic. His advice was not only a helpful comment for my student, but it also reinforced the presence of an audience for her blog. 68% of students surveyed agreed that they were aware of their audience while writing on their blogs. If the only comments that students receive are from other students in the class, this might limit their idea of audience. If I had assigned a research journal instead of a blog, this student would not have been fortunate enough to receive this advice, and this collaboration would never have occurred. On the other hand, if the blogger had offered poor advice, I would have felt the need to comment on the blog myself so that the student could get another perspective.

When I had originally assigned the research blogs, I anticipated being able to see differences between my students' virtual, real, and projected identities. In order to better

see my students' "socially situated identities," I analyzed my students' blogs for language differences (Gee, "Literacy" 537). Most of the students in my class maintained a similar discourse and identity both online and in person. But just as West was able to describe the projected identities of three of her students, I noticed that two of my students used a secondary discourse that altered their projected identities. Both of these students were females, and both students' virtual identities differed from the "real" identities they projected in class. The first student, who dropped the class about halfway through the semester, named her blog "cusimsingle," which stands for "because I'm single." The research topic she chose was "friends with benefits" relationships. She did not stay in the class long enough to narrow her topic into a specific research question, but the posts that she did write were somewhat personal, and at times, seemed like part research journal, part diary. In her introductory post, she described herself as "the damn cutest cherry haired goddess of love on the endangered species list." I would describe her online identity as a free-loving, openly sexual, attention-seeking diva, but her in-class identity was much more reserved. The second student was also reserved in class, and although she did participate regularly in class discussions, I would have described her classroom identity as focused and academic. However, her virtual identity was sarcastic and relaxed, and she was fluent in the discourse of online gaming, which was present in all of her posts. Her researched essay made the claim that video games can improve rather than hinder social skills. She often used texting and gaming acronyms; her final blog post was titled, "Content cleared >.> LF Break." It was interesting to see how these students and others in the class portrayed themselves online, and although these two students showed the most obvious differences between their virtual and "real" identities, other students in

the class used their blogs to reveal more of their personalities, which they may not have done during class. This aspect of the blogs is something that probably contributed to the overall camaraderie of the peer review groups because the students were afforded more opportunity for discussion or at the very least, more chances to learn about their peers.

One of my personal challenges with the research blog assignment turned out to be my process for grading. I knew what parameters I wanted to use for assigning individual blog entries, and these were largely based on Fulwiler's advice for assigning journals and the Expressivist ideas about grading low-stakes writing. I applied several of these recommendations throughout the semester: I had students start most blog assignments during class; I tried to make the prompts varied and interesting; I did not grade for grammar or mechanics; and in addition to talking about some of the blog entries in class, I also left occasional comments to show students that I was reading the blogs. Even so, there were times when I felt that the students were not putting forth the effort that I expected: entries were sometimes safe or superficial, and at times there were signs that a few students posted several entries in a single night. I tried to remember that, though it is not ideal, even when students "fake it," they still do the work (Fulwiler, "When Journals" 169). I graded these entries as I did everyone else's. As expected, most students received two points for writing an average blog post as detailed on the assignment sheet (See Appendix A: The Research Blog Assignment). Students that put in less effort or did not include everything required received one point for their posts, and students who really grappled with their sources, analyzing, comparing, and really going above and beyond their peers received three points for their posts. Most often, students who wrote three-point posts maintained that level throughout their blogs, and students who wrote one-

point posts also maintained that level. Students who wrote mostly two-point posts sometimes had a few three-point posts, but rarely had any one-point posts. The students who wrote mostly three-point posts also received A's on most of their other assignments in the class, which suggests that no matter what the assignment is, on average, students do the same level of work on all of their assignments. Therefore, the grade students received on their blogs turned out to be similar to their other grades in the class.

One assignment that I required with the research project was a formal, annotated bibliography. My objective for this assignment was to have students "formalize" what they were writing on their blogs into something that they could hand in on paper. This bibliography was to be turned in with their research proposal. The outcome of this assignment was that it had a negative impact on some of the students' blogs. The students who had fallen behind on their blog posts used what they had written in their annotated bibliography to create blog posts after the fact. Of course, this was a small minority of students, but because the blog posts were based on a points system, these students received somewhat of an advantage in their overall blog grade.

The fact that the blogs felt like busy work to 79% of students surveyed leads me to believe that the annotated bibliography contributed to this feeling. If the students had not had to turn in this formal assignment, they may have felt differently about the blogs; because the annotated bibliography was handed in on paper and described as "formal," these details may have made the blog assignment seem less important. Admittedly, I had envisioned my students loving to blog, which of course is unrealistic. My students' perceptions about the blog were really no different than their perceptions about other in-class writing assignments; there is resistance to the work no matter how "fun" we try to

make it. But because 68% of students surveyed either agreed or agreed somewhat that they enjoyed blogging more than the other writing done in the class, my guess is the blog assignment was somewhat less painful than other assignments. And no matter what the students' perceptions were about maintaining a research blog, they did understand why it was being assigned and how it would help them with their final research projects. In the end, it was a productive assignment; it helped me achieve my goals of getting students to do research and write about it in a critical way, which translated into a stack of well-written researched essays.

Chapter 6: Improving the Research Blog Assignment

In order to teach students in my Composition II class research-based writing, I adapted Berthoff's double-entry notebook to create a research blog assignment. Students maintained blogs in which they discussed and analyzed their research over the course of the semester. More than half of the blog posts were assigned in class, giving students class time to write on their blogs, but students were also expected to write additional posts on their own. Initially, students used the blog to generate ideas for their research topics and find a good research question, but eventually, most blog posts were dialogic responses to the academic sources students read as they actively researched their topics. At the end of the semester, the blogs transitioned to include commentary on organizing, drafting, and finalizing the final researched essay. In addition to maintaining their own blogs, students were asked to comment on the blogs of students in their peer review groups. I set the goal of each student having at least 20 posts by the end of the semester with the final blog post serving as a reflection of the student's research journey.

The students' response to this assignment was positive overall. Not only did most of the class feel that the blog helped them with their research process, but they also enjoyed blogging more than other writing that was done in the class. Students did show some resistance to the assignment, but it was no more than they would show to any assignment that required time and effort. Many students felt that the blog assignment helped them to stay on top of their research and prevented them from procrastinating. Even students who did not enjoy the blog assignment or felt that it was busy work placed

some value in the assignment, commenting that it helped them with their research project. Other students revealed that the blog assignment made them more aware of their writing process, and this helped to improve their writing. As a result of the blog, students felt more connected to their peers and found that the blog provided them with the opportunity to get more peer feedback.

Knowing how much the research blog assignment helped my students with their research projects, I would not hesitate to use this assignment in another class. Not only did the blog help to achieve my goals for teaching students how to research and write about their research, it also had the added benefit of making students more aware of their writing process, an awareness which helped them to improve as writers. This outcome was reminiscent of Alm's journal-reading assignment; by reading the journals of other students in their class, Alm's students were able to better analyze their own writing. They found that they were not unlike their peers, and they were able to use what they learned about the writing processes of other students to improve their own writing (Alm 98-107). Many of my students relayed to me that reading their peers' blogs made them feel connected to their classmates, especially while composing their drafts; students felt that they were not alone, as many of their peers had similar experiences. This outcome is one benefit to assigning socially interactive activities, and it was why my colleague, Imani Marshall, also assigned a blog in her Composition II class. Marshall's blog assignment was not a research blog:

My goal was to give my students an interactive space in which they could write about their writing process. I really wanted them to reflect upon how they wrote and how they saw themselves evolving as writers. I also

wanted them to think about how often they write and in how many different ways. It was a space for them to share their frustrations and triumphs with fellow students who were going through the same process. (Marshall)

Although our goals for assigning a blog were different, the outcomes of our assignments were similar in that the act of blogging helped students to improve their writing process. Knowing how much this helped my students, I plan to introduce blogging in my Composition I classes. First-year composition students would benefit from more collaborative activities, and blogging is a form that is suitable for this purpose. In my Composition II class, the peer review process was made easier through the blogging assignment; because students were able to read and comment on one another's posts throughout the semester, when it was time for the formal peer review discussions, the groups were already familiar with their peers' topics and style of writing. This familiarity helped to build camaraderie within the groups, allowing students to feel more comfortable providing constructive criticism. This outcome alone would make the blog assignment worth repeating in any writing class. Now that I've had time to analyze the research blog assignment, I see several ways to improve it.

The first change I will make is to require that students use the same blogging platform, preferably *Wordpress*, as it is the most user-friendly. By taking some class time to set up the blogs, I can also ensure that all students choose the same settings, making it easy for their peers to leave comments. I have considered the possibility of having each peer review group create a blog, rather than the students having their own blogs; this would make grading the blogs easier for me. But ultimately, this would not

allow students the opportunity to be creative and showcase their individuality. One of my favorite things about reading my students' blogs was being able to enjoy how different they all were.

Another change I will make is to modify my peer review process to create more synergy with the blogs. In my classes, students exchange drafts of their essays one class before the scheduled peer review discussion. On the day of peer review, students have already read their peers' essays and have prepared a one-page typed critique in the form of a letter for each of their peers. When the groups meet face-to-face, students take turns reading their essays aloud, and this is followed by a discussion of that essay. In order to encourage more online collaboration, I will consider creating a discussion board for each peer group. This will enable all group members to post their drafts and provide comments in the same location. Not only will this save paper for my students, it will also make grading peer review easier for me, as I will be able to see everyone's drafts and comments (date-stamped) in the same location. This will also hold students accountable for providing their draft to their peers and critiquing their peers' essays, even if they are absent from class; students will be given a strict deadline for posting their essays and critiques online. I anticipate that this change in the peer review process will allow students to continue the peer review discussion, as questions can be asked or answered even after the face-to-face peer group meeting. The discussion board would also be a convenient location for posting links to the students' blogs. Hopefully, this will help students stay organized and provide more of an incentive to keep up with the blogs.

If one of the goals of the blog assignment is to improve peer collaboration, specifically, online collaboration, I will also need to change how the blog comments are

graded. On one hand, I want to refrain from forcing students to write comments that serve no purpose, but I do want students to place more importance on helping their peers. To remedy this situation, I will create a guidelines sheet that outlines standards for leaving constructive comments; this guidelines sheet will also assign a points value for the different types of comments left for other students: comments that give students advice on essay organization or comments that suggest additional resources might receive three points, whereas comments that only offer encouragement would receive one point. These points can then be added to the total points for each student's blog. The students' blog grades will then be divided; 80% of the blog grade will be tied to maintaining their own research blogs, and 20% of the grade will be tied to leaving comments for other students. This change in how the blog grade is calculated will give students more of an incentive to help their peers in a constructive way.

Fine-tuning how the blogs are graded will give students more focus within the overall research project. Another change I will make in this regard is to remove the annotated bibliography assignment. This assignment does not achieve any goals that are not already being achieved with the research blog assignment; in fact, the research blog does a better job at fostering inquiry and creating useful writing that can then be used in the final essay. By removing the annotated bibliography assignment from the research project, the blog assignment will have more emphasis. The research blog can then be weighted more heavily in the overall research project grade, which may lead to students taking it more seriously. In addition to removing the annotated bibliography, I will also require a minimum number of sources be analyzed on the blog. I will still use a points system to grade the blogs, and the post/paragraph requirement will remain the same, but

by setting a minimum source requirement, all students should have an ample number of sources when they begin their first drafts; this change will give students an additional way to measure their own progress on their projects. Since most of the individual blog assignments seemed to work well overall, I will not change the existing assignments, but I will consider adding more topic-generating blog assignments at the beginning of the semester. These changes and additions will make the research blog assignment more successful.

When I consider how Berthoff's double-entry notebook and Ballenger's focus on inquiry help to teach students research-based writing, it is clear why the research blog assignment worked in my class; the assignment follows the same principles and is at least equally effective as other dialogic methods. Additionally, blogs can also improve student writing through the act of daily writing. Writing for the sake of writing is always a good thing, and the blog provides students with the opportunity to write in a personalized way, as students set the tone on their blogs. It is a low-stakes way for students to explore, rather than prove, because they can write without the anxiety of making grammatical errors. As the students in my class continued to blog about their topics and sources, they essentially wrote their research essays over a longer period of time, and when it was time to put together the first draft, students found that they were not starting from scratch, as much of the writing had already been done. This allowed the students to be true researchers; it emphasized inquiry, and it removed the common practice of only writing about sources that agree with a particular viewpoint (Ballenger, *Curious* xx). It also reinforced the research process, rather than focusing only on the final essay. Many of my students commented that the blog helped them with their "research process," which tells

me that they actually saw it as a process and understood that the blog was a part of that process.

When the final essays were drafted, students were engaged with their topics and part of a scholarly conversation. Because of the way my research blog assignment mimics Berthoff's double-entry notebook, the research blog is dialogic; students read their source information, they summarize it, they quote from it, they comment on it, and they extract meaning (Berthoff 45). They do this in each of their blog posts, always connecting and referring to earlier posts or sources, or discussing relationships between what they're reading and something else – an event, a theory, an experience. The act of writing about what they are reading helps students to read and think more critically about their research. It also helps them to synthesize the readings in a greater capacity than they would by reading without writing about it. Rather than focusing on one viewpoint for a short amount of time, students spend an entire semester exposing themselves to multiple viewpoints, and through the blogging assignment, they are asked to consider opposing arguments and write about them; this consideration of varied perspectives makes for more reflective student essays, and this gradual way of considering readings is consistent with Elbow's theory that reading is not just a passive activity (Elbow, "Breathing" 196). The blog is a way for students to be active readers and it allows them time to explore and process their sources in a deeper way.

Another benefit of moving the double-entry notebook to the blog genre is that the blog enables students to have discussions with one another. This collaboration is difficult to replicate in any other writing form. Not only are students writing dialogic blog posts, but the discussion is continued when other students read the posts and contribute to the

discussion via a comment. Students are given the opportunity to think beyond their personal connections and are able to consider the connections that their peers make about what they've written on the blog. This opens up the possibility for collaborative learning. The blog form is unique because it can be many things: a research log, a dialogic reading journal, a place for collaborative study and writing, a record of the student's research journey, and a place to showcase individual voice and writing style.

It is difficult to teach students how to retain their authentic voice in their academic writing. Student research essays can sound dull and lifeless when students attempt to sound "academic." But with the research blog assignment, there are several changes in the student's writing process that make it easier for the student to retain his or her voice. As students become accustomed to blogging as a writing form, they allow more of their personalities to shine through, and each student's voice is usually present on the blog. When it comes time to draft the formal essay, students often find that they have already written much of their essay on the blog, so they copy and paste select paragraphs for use in the essay. They then have the meat of the essay, which they add to, edit, reorganize, and revise. But one thing that does not seem to happen is the student editing out his or her authentic voice. As the student edits the blog writing to sound more "academic," much of the student's authentic voice remains present in the essay. This is probably because it is much easier to remove slang and retain much of the same sentence structure than it is to rewrite entire passages. The research blog enables students to retain their voice, and it eliminates the need for writing teachers to try to teach this skill.

Blogs also provide students with an audience to write to. According to the Outcomes Statement of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, one of the goals

of teaching composition is to have students write in a variety of genres while responding to the needs of different audiences (WPA). Assigning blogging helps to achieve these goals, and when the blog is specifically a research blog, it also encourages critical reading, writing, and thinking. Students who maintain a research blog learn that research and writing are both processes, and that using the blog as part of the research process can make for an easier writing process; the end result is an exemplary product – a well-written and well-researched essay.

Appendix A: The Research Blog Assignment

For this assignment, you will create and maintain a blog where you will comment on and analyze your research journey. Initially, you may want to blog about your process for finding a topic to research, but the majority of your blog posts should be about the academic sources that you come across in your research.

In addition to maintaining your own blog, you will also comment on your classmates' blogs. The class will be divided into groups, and each student will comment on the blogs of the other students in their group.

At the close of the semester, you should have at least 20 posts. Your final blog post will serve as a reflection of your research journey.

Here are some guidelines for your blog posts:

- Establish questions about the topic you have chosen and explain why you are interested in it.
- Provide any relevant information about your topic or issue.
- Introduce your source and explain how you found it and why you chose to write about it.
- Provide some rhetorical context about your source.
- Summarize your source, highlighting the main idea.
- Respond to your source. (You may choose to use some of the suggestions about writing a reading response.)
- Talk about how this source contributes to your topic/issue.
- Answer these questions:
 - What did you learn?
 - What is the value of this source to your topic or to you?
 - What is missing from this source, and how will you go about filling that gap?
 - Where do you want to go from here?

Your individual blog posts and comments will not receive a traditional grade. They will be graded on a scale of 0-3 as follows:

- 0 – Did not complete the assignment.
- 1 – Completed the assignment, but not to the guidelines listed.

- 2 – Completed the assignment according to the guidelines. (Most posts will receive this grade.)
- 3 – Exceptional post or comment.

Appendix B: Sample Blog Assignments

Blog Assignment #4

1. Look for an article on your topic using a library database or GALILEO.
2. Read the article.
3. Create a blog post with the following information:
 - Introduce your source and explain how you found it.
 - Provide some rhetorical context about your source and write a summary (one paragraph).
 - Respond to your source by answering these questions: What did you learn? What is the value of this source to your topic or to you? Where do you want to go from here?

Blog Assignment #6

From *The Curious Researcher*, page 32:

1. Generate a list of questions – as many as you can – that you'd love to explore about your topic.
2. Post this list to your blog, along with a paragraph reflecting on the outcome of this exercise as it applies to you and your topic/research.

Blog Assignment #7

Find your focusing question.

From *The Curious Researcher*, page 50:

1. Write the one question that you think would be the most interesting focus for your paper.
2. Now build a list of new questions under the first one. What else do you need to know to answer your focusing question?

Keep in mind that the best research questions do one of the following:

- Sense-making: What are possible explanations?
- Hypothesizing. What assumptions does it challenge?
- Relationships: What is relationship between ____ and ____?

Blog Assignment #8

In the introduction to *The Curious Researcher*, Ballenger discusses an essay he wrote titled, “The Bothersome Beauty of Pigeons.” (18-25) In a blog post, answer these questions adapted from pages 17 & 18 of the text:

1. When you write your research essay, what techniques or methods could you use to keep the essay interesting to readers even if it is fact-based?
2. In what ways was “The Bothersome Beauty of Pigeons” unlike what you understood to be a research paper? Does it challenge those assumptions in ways that make you more interested in researching your own topic? What questions does the essay raise about what you’re supposed to do in your research assignment?
3. Explore your thoughts about the contents of the essay. Did you find that you could relate in some way to what the essay seemed to say? How do you imagine this influencing how you write your research essay?

Appendix C: End-of-Semester Survey

Circle the number that best describes whether you agree or disagree with the following statements, with *1 meaning disagree completely*, and *10 meaning agree completely*.

Choose N/A for any statement that does not apply to your experience.

This was the first time that I wrote or maintained a blog.

Disagree

Agree

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

The blog helped me to be a better writer.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

The blog made me more aware of my writing process.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

The blog felt like busy work.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

Writing on my blog made me feel like I was being heard.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

The blog helped me to get feedback from my peers.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

I enjoyed the blog assignment.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

The blog helped me with my research for the class.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

The blog made me feel connected to the rest of the class.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

Compared to other writing I did in this class, the blog was most enjoyable.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

I found the blog assignment difficult.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

I was aware of my audience while writing on my blog.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

When I wrote on my blog, I was aware of how my writing might be perceived by others.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

I always edited and revised my work before posting to my blog.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

I was concerned with making grammatical errors while writing my blog posts.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

The blog kept me from procrastinating with my research project.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

In the future, I plan on creating my own blog unrelated to this class.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

Blogs are public.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

Blogs are anonymous.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

I read blogs for personal enjoyment outside of this class.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

I write on or maintain a blog for personal enjoyment outside of this class.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

Please take a moment to write a comment in the space below that best describes your experience maintaining a blog in this class:

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| Education | <p>Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA, 2008-2011 M. A. in Professional Writing, Concentration: Composition/Rhetoric</p> <p>Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA, 2005 – 2008 B. A. in English, G.P.A. 3.98 (Summa Cum Laude) Honor Societies: Phi Kappa Phi, Golden Key, Sigma Tau Delta</p> |
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| Professional Experience | |
| 08/08 – 12/11 | <p>Graduate Teaching Assistant/Graduate Research Assistant, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taught ENGL 1101: Composition I and ENGL 1102: Composition II. • Tutored students in the KSU Writing Center. • Compiled grade reports for Gen-Ed courses within the Dept. of English. • Developed and maintained a website for the First-Year Composition Program • Wrote and edited one issue of <i>Writing Kennesaw</i>, a newsletter for KSU First-Year Composition and the Writing Center. • Developed a website for the MAPW Program. |
| 04/03 – 03/10 | <p>Massage Therapist, Jolie the Day Spa and Hair Design, Atlanta, GA.</p> |
| 06/02 – 04/03 | <p>Configuration Manager, Program Executive Office (PEO) Aircraft Carriers, Refuel and Carrier Over Haul (RCOH), Carrier Engineering Team (CET), contracted through Computer Sciences Corporation, Advanced Marine Center, Washington, D.C.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintained the RCOH Engineering Program Schedule in MS Project, providing reports and receiving inputs to/from the Ship Design Managers and Systems Engineering Managers. • Coordinated the development of a web-based activity log system for all of PEO Aircraft Carriers; conducted group training sessions on this system. |

02/01 – 06/02

Senior Project Assistant, Computer Sciences Corporation, Expeditionary Warfare (EXW) Performance Center, CSC Advanced Marine Center, Washington, D.C.

- Tracked the status of all EXW Programs using Costpoint.
- Compiled and edited monthly progress reports, final technical reports, and program assessments.
- Provided administrative support including proposal editing, creating excel spreadsheets and graphs, maintaining group calendar in Lotus Notes, and updating the Human Resource database (GEMS).
- Assisted the Director of Operations in the coordination of an office move from Arlington, Virginia to Washington, DC for 400+ employees.

02/00 – 02/01

Executive Administrative Assistant to the Vice President of CSC Advanced Marine Center, Computer Sciences Corporation, Arlington, VA.

- Maintained calendar, arranged travel, and prepared expense reports for the Vice President.
- Coordinated all executive level meetings, including reserving equipment and rooms, catering, and operating presentations and other media equipment.
- Provided Human Resource support by typing offer letters, arranging travel, and preparing weekly staffing reports.

08/97 - 02/00

Training Center Manager, Aris Corporation, Fairfax, VA.

- Managed operations staff including hiring, career development, and training of all education administrative employees.
- Oversaw operations of the training facility including facility upkeep, build-outs, expense reports, timesheets, accounts payables, and petty cash.
- Maintained class and seminar schedule, ordered courseware, and maintained electronic inventory in MAS90.

Publications

“The Promotion” published in *The Red Clay Review*, Issue 4, 2011.

Awards

- KSU Foundation Fellows, KSU, 2008-2010
 - Glen Hollingsworth Jr. Memorial Scholarship, KSU, 2007-2008
 - Letter of Commendation, PEO Aircraft Carriers, 2003
 - CSC Excellence Award, Administration, CSC, 2002
 - Team Player of the Year Award, Education, Aris Corporation, 1998
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