

Learning to Write Publicly: Promises and Pitfalls of Using Weblogs in the Composition Classroom

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Abstract

This article reports on a study designed to help writing instructors better understand the promises and pitfalls of assigning blogs – a Web 2.0 technology characterized by its facilitation of a public, networked form of writing – in composition classes. Class blogging offers students the opportunity to experience writing in a public space, where their communication has real value both among class members as well as among a wider, public community of users of the Internet. This sort of writing activity better prepares students for communication in a freeware age, where “network literacy” is essential, and where writing has social meaning and public consequences. Our study examines students’ participation on required class blogs in four English composition classes during the Fall 2007 semester. Our research methods consisted of two questionnaires, one completed at the beginning of the semester and one at the end, an examination of content on the student blogs, and interviews with composition instructors.

Introduction and Objectives

Student writing is most often read only by instructors and classmates, and this context creates a private and controlled environment for experimentation and learning. However, the private nature of classroom writing relies on a falsified context for communication, perhaps leading to a lack of motivation, lack of authority over texts, or lack of responsibility for one’s own written work (consider the recent rise in plagiarism cases). As Jill Walker (2005) notes, blogs can “provide a chance for students to experience writing in a public space where their work can have real value both for their classmates and for a wider community” (112). This sort of writing activity can better prepare students for communication in a networked world, where writing has social meaning and public consequences.

Some writing instructors view the primary goal of their composition classes as preparing

students to learn how to use writing to engage with information and ideas in an academic context.

However, the notion of academic discourse as public discourse has been supported by many writing instructors, and in 2007 was presented in a [CCCC Position Statement on the Multiple Uses of Writing](#).

This statement argues, “[t]o restrict students’ engagement with writing to only academic contexts and forms is to risk narrowing what we as a nation can remember, understand, and create.” As this position statement suggests, and we agree, many genres and uses of writing can be taught in the composition classroom in an effort to move beyond traditional academic discourse and into public discourse. One such form might be “civic discourse that energize all manner of inclusive deliberation, the ideal product of which is just relations among the citizenry, broadly conceived.” It is this goal, to facilitate student participation in civic discourse, that serves as the foundation for this study of class blogging.

Our study of students’ participation on class blogs helps to discern both the advantages and challenges of asking students to learn to write in a public space, where such social meaning and public consequences are real. The study examines students’ participation on required class blogs, which are public forums, over the course of one semester. With an eye toward the implications of public writing as a classroom activity, we have analyzed student blog content and students’ reflections on their blogging practices. Based on our findings, we identify and address the implications of using class blogging to facilitate a more complex view of writing in a networked environment.

The overall objective of this research is to identify the best practices for using blogs as a pedagogical method for developing students’ “network literacy.” Teaching network literacy in the composition classroom supports several student learning objectives that are fundamental to composition pedagogy. These objectives include:

- *Audience awareness.* Asking students to write online means asking them to write to a “real-life” audience of potential readers that includes others beyond their instructor and classmates. Such writing tasks help to teach concepts of audience awareness: students

must anticipate audience needs, backgrounds, and perceptions and prepare writing that will garner appropriate responses online. Writing online presents a challenging context for learning audience awareness, as online audiences are varied and sometimes unknown, extending to a potentially wide public audience. Writing online can help students develop responsibility and accountability for what they share when their writing may reach wide and unknown audiences. Skills in addressing audience can help them to more effectively participate in public discourse and debate.

- *Genre awareness.* Second, teaching writing for online environments also helps students to develop an understanding of how conventions for writing change across genres and rhetorical contexts. While not replacing instruction in traditional academic genres, assignments that ask students to write online can complement those activities by introducing students to new, and complex, native web genres, such as blogs. Writing for the web can complicate students' understanding of genre, as some online spaces do not conform to formal conventions of particular print genres. By understanding how to better navigate across different genres, students can more easily enter into public deliberation on issues that falls outside of academic contexts.
- *Social engagement.* Assignments for the composition classroom often aim to encourage students to better recognize the social and collaborative nature of writing. Online writing is inherently interactive, social and collaborative, with its endless links and two-way communication structure. Teaching network literacy can help students become more adept at participating in the knowledge-building activities that occur through all forms of writing, both in print and online. These types of activities, which are not always present in traditional academic essay writing, characterize public deliberation and civic discourse.

In addition, teaching network literacy can reinforce critical thinking about the implications of technology use for writing practices. While gaining practice with writing in public, online spaces of the Internet, students can reflect on the implications of technology for their writing practices. Class discussions and response papers can be designed to encourage students to think critically about what it means to write in the networked space of the Internet.

A common criticism for integrating forms of technological literacy, such as network literacy, in the composition classroom is that it comes at the expense of other pedagogical goals, or that it may mean that there is a reduced emphasis on teaching other aspects of writing. The instructors participating in our study likewise commented on this challenge. One reported that “[t]he most challenging aspect of the semester was integrating blog-writing into a course that was already packed with goals and assignments,” and another noted that “it seemed like I tried to squeeze too much into the semester.”

Such misgivings, however, at times can overlook the fact that many goals for network literacy are common to goals for traditional composition pedagogy, such as those mentioned above. A focus on network literacy in the composition classroom, then, does not necessarily mean decreased attention to the goals of teaching writing in traditional print genres. The “either-or” myth, or the notion that students are learning either to write for digital environments or for print, is perpetuated in widely read news forums such as the New York Times. As a case in point, a recent New York Times article, [“Literacy Debate: Online, R U Really Reading?”](#) (published July 27, 2008) launched a series titled “The Future of Reading: Digital Versus Print.” The series title – “Digital Versus Print” – while not necessarily representing the viewpoint of the first article, nevertheless encourages this type “either-or” thinking about writing and technology. When designing our study, we relied on the assumption that the lessons learned from writing online can be carried over to writing for other contexts and environments. In fact, writing online often poses even more complex situations for students to address that they may not otherwise be exposed to if teaching network literacy were overlooked.

It is our contention, further, that blogging might help students develop network literacy. As blogs are one of the first native web genres, they are ideal sites for such a study. Blogging software is available for free to instructors and students and requires a relatively low level of technical training. Further, blogs enable key interactive features of social, networked communication, such as linking, commenting, and trackbacking.

Interviews with the instructors who assigned class blogs as part of our study support the notion that class blogging might foster network literacy and reinforce the goals common to many composition classrooms. After the close of the semester, the instructors whose assigned class blogging reported that the assignment helped their students meet pedagogical objectives such as

- learning more about writing for different audiences and within various genres (“blog-writing did help further illustrate to students the significance of genre in determining the shape of their writing” and “I think the blog definitely helped students in the understanding of different genres”);
- connecting students’ writing for class with real-life, meaningful interactions (“students translate[d] lessons learned through those virtual dialogues into action in real life situations”);
- and fostering skills in argumentation (“it eventually helped some students learn to better voice their opinions”).

Required student blogging holds much potential for teaching writing, yet many instructors are concerned with its public nature, and the implications of subjecting student writing to public response. This study explores such concerns and possible means for addressing them. We hope that writing instructors will benefit from the results of this research by gaining insight into key questions that have arisen about teaching network literacy and, more specifically, about the promises and pitfalls of class

blogging, particularly for undergraduate education. More specifically, instructors can explore, based on our report on student perceptions and participation, the potential implications of requiring students to write publicly.

### Blogs as a Pedagogical Tool

While blogging is no longer a new technology, research on blogging as a pedagogical tool to help teach writing is relatively new and still in its initial stages. Existing research considers blogs as remediating older genres for classroom writing ([Brooks, Nichols, & Priebe, 2005](#)), explores the value of blogging for composition pedagogy ([Lowe & Williams, 2005](#)), discusses using class blogs in the graduate classroom ([Colby et al., 2005](#)), and offers “primers” on how to use blogs in the writing classroom ([Barrios, 2005](#)). Many discussions to date focus on the logistics of integrating blogs into classroom activities (i.e., what software to use, whether to require individual blogs or a class blogs, the value of rubrics, and parameters for blogging assignments), but few address in depth the related concerns of requiring that students participate in a public forum. Our discussion builds on these useful discussions of how to implement blogs in teaching by exploring, in particular, the implications of asking students to learn to write publicly.

Research relating to technology and teaching writing has addressed the importance of integrating Internet technology in the writing classroom (Selfe, 1999; Selfe and Hilligoss, 1994; Hawisher and Selfe, 1999; Selber, 1997; Breuch, 2002). These works offer useful suggestions for assignments and activities such as evaluating web sources, creating e-portfolios, and engaging in online discussions about course content. These classroom approaches often rely on communication technologies like static webpages and Blackboard and WebCT sites. As Charles Lowe and Terra Williams (2005) rightly point out [in their discussion of class blogging](#), however, it is important to note the ways in which blogs are distinct from other online communication technologies, like Blackboard and WebCT, that might be used for class participation. These electronic spaces allow class members to

communicate with other class members, but not with members outside of a particular classroom community. Blackboard and WebCT, while useful tools for delivering class materials, emphasize content delivery and centralized control by the instructor. These course management websites are accessed online and contain links to other Internet sites, but as students move through the password-protected online environment, they soon recognize that such online class spaces are not part of the social, networked world of the public spaces they often navigate. Instead, these spaces are one-way communication spaces that do not attempt to contribute to the larger, public discourse of the Internet. Even when composition instructors adopt newer communication technologies that are part of the Web 2.0 era in their classes, these technologies can offer limited opportunities for students to connect with the larger public sphere. While social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook can help to establish community increase communication among members of a class, they are also a type of “walled garden,” as they contain many privacy settings and user control over reader access. Wikis are another useful pedagogical tool for content creation, but serve better as technologies for collaborative writing rather than multi-way communication. As such, these various communication technologies, while having a place in composition pedagogy, do not alone foster the type of network literacy that is essential for students today.

### Defining Network Literacy

A primary goal for our study was to determine both the potential for and pitfalls of using class blogs to facilitate the development of network literacy among first-year composition students. As others have pointed out in recent years, the web has now shifted to its second-generation, what might be referred to as Web 2.0, [coined by Tim O'Reilly](#) (2005). The web in its new form is characterized by a new set of conventions, rules, and consequences. Web 2.0 refers to a second generation of web-based communities and uses — including those facilitated by social-networking sites, wikis, and blogs — which are based on collaboration and sharing between users. In other words, the web has shifted the

focus from working individually and locally to working in a networked setting, in which the web is seen as a social, collaborative, and collective space.

As such, Web 2.0 requires a new form of literacy. The notion of literacy as it relates to emerging communication technologies has been widely addressed by writing scholars. Of note is the work of Cynthia Selfe (1999), who makes a distinction between “computer literacy” (the mechanical skills of using computers, software, or the web) and “technological literacy,” which she defines as “a complex set of socially and culturally situated values, practices, and skills involved in operating linguistically within the context of electronic environments” (p. 11). This latter type of literacy focuses on effective and appropriate communication within online spaces, not just the technical “know-how” necessary to access them. Laura Gurak (2001), addressing what she calls “cyberliteracy,” adds further that this form of literacy requires a “conscious interaction with the new technologies” (p. 12). We believe that network literacy likewise focuses on communication practices and on critical reflection on the role of technology in reading and writing practices. We note further, however, that network literacy is distinct from the forms of technological literacy present during the first generation of Internet communication. We assert that network literacy requires responsibilities that extend beyond knowing how to access information on the web, critically reading web content and determining the credibility of online sources (what we might refer to as “information literacy”), all of which are relatively passive forms of Internet communication. In addition, network literacy requires an understanding of the means of participating on the web by writing and connecting to the public sphere. Following Selfe (1999) and Gurak (2001), then, our work is not limited to addressing technical skills and computer literacy. Rather, we focus on network literacy, or an understanding of the ways in which people read, write, and participate actively in the distributed, collaborative environment of the Internet in its current form.

Blogger and blog scholar Jill Walker (2005) offers a more extensive definition of network literacy in her discussion of the usefulness of class blogs in the writing classroom:



Network literacy means linking to what other people have written and inviting comments from others, it means understanding a kind of writing that is a social, collaborative process rather than an act of an individual in solitary. It means learning how to write with an awareness that anyone may read it: your mother, a future employer or the person whose work you're writing about. (117)

Walker raises several points in her definition that are worth exploring further. First, she notes that interactivity with what other people have written is a key factor in networked writing. Writers commonly use the technological capabilities of Web 2.0 writing spaces to link to, comment on, and interact with other content online. Second, Walker notes that an understanding of audience is a key component of network literacy. Since the audience for blogs is multiple, varied, and public, writers should think carefully about the potential reach of their work and consequences arising from it. Relying on Walker's definition, our project studies network literacy by examining students' sense of responsibility for their writing, awareness of potential consequences for such interactivity, and understanding of the complexity of audience when writing online. With this in mind, in our study of class blogs we looked at the following factors to evaluate students' developing understandings of network literacy. It is important to note that these factors do not make up a comprehensive list of all characteristics of network literacy, but rather include only those factors that appeared as points of interest in the context of our study.

- Audience: student writers recognize a multiple, varied, and public online audiences.
- Genre: student writers understand and make use of the formal and rhetorical features of blogs that allow for interactivity with existing web content.
- Social engagement: rather than acting only as passive receivers of web content, student writers participate in writing as a social activity and engage in debate and discourse with

the goal of common understanding and, ultimately, social action.

Our initial questionnaire showed that 95% of the students have used some sort of social networking technology, such as Facebook, MySpace, or blogs, and a clear majority reported that they are “comfortable” with writing in those online public spaces. Only 10.5% expressed any level of uneasiness with writing to a public online space like a blog. Participants explained that their comfort level arises from the fact that they do such writing frequently (“cause i [sic] do it all the time”) and they find it to be a relatively simple task (“Because it is generally easy”) that differs from other writing tasks that may cause them anxiety (“its [sic] just writing online”). Despite these students’ perceptions, we do not feel that writing in the public space of the Internet is “easy,” and are concerned that perhaps some of our students aren’t recognizing the complexity of the audiences for and potential consequences of that writing. Writing in a networked environment with multiple and varied audiences, where there are real consequences for what a writer contributes can, in fact, be very difficult.

### Unique Characteristics of Blogs

As noted above key differences exist between blog technology and previously adopted technologies for teaching. First, blogs are more seamlessly connected to existing web content and users, facilitating interactivity and two-way feedback within a larger community of Internet users. Blogs are characterized by frequent links to other sites and commentary on the other sites’ content. As such, they offer the opportunity for students to interact with texts and users outside of the classroom, in addition to interacting with their classmates. This level of interactivity serves to facilitate the kind of collaborative and social writing that is inherent to the age of Web 2.0, in which the web has become an endless web of links and relies on multi-way communication among users. Blogging thus has the potential to help students become more adept at participating in the knowledge-building activities that commonly occur online.

The relevance of this kind of interactivity and collaboration with existing texts and writers is

acknowledged by rhetoric and composition scholars like Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede, whose study of collaborative writing (1990) reveals the highly collaborative nature of typical writing tasks even in off-line settings. And Karen Burke LeFevre (1987) asserts that even invention is a social and collaborative act, and stresses its dialectical nature. Her *Invention as a Social Act* places writing within a social context and as part of an open, two-way system

in which an individual who is at the same time a social being interacts in a distinctive way with society and culture to create something. Viewed in this way, rhetorical invention becomes an act that may involve speaking and writing, and that at times involves more than one person; it is furthermore an act initiated by writers and completed by readers, extending over time through a series of transactions of texts. (1)

The interactive nature of blogging has the potential to help students to understand writing, in both print and online settings, as a social and collaborative process, rather than a solitary and individualized activity.

A second key distinction between blog technology and other class tools such as private discussion boards and password-protected class websites and social networks is its public nature. Unlike a password-protected class online space, blogs are publicly accessible and subject to response and scrutiny from virtually any user of the Internet. As such, blog authors must assume a new sense of authority and responsibility for what they write, anticipating response and two-way dialogue concerning what they post. Research in composition and writing studies recognizes a value in having students sharing written texts with readers beyond the classroom setting. As Emily J. Isaacs and Phoebe Jackson (2001) note in their introduction to *Public Works: Student Writing as Public Text*, the work of composition scholar Kenneth Bruffee contributes to our understanding of the importance of public writing by arguing

for students to go public with their writing to receive feedback, on the grounds that

public writing in classrooms deemphasizes teacher authority and promotes student-writers' abilities to see themselves as responsible writers and to view writing as a social activity. (as cited in Lowe and Williams, 2001, p. xii).

It was our hope that these two unique characteristics of blogs – its placement within the larger Internet and its public nature – would contribute to student learning of network literacy. By extending the classroom conversation to a larger community outside of the classroom, as the class blog does, student writers had the opportunity to more regularly confront real rhetorical situations in a social and meaningful setting. Further, by making their writing public, students could begin to take responsibility for and ownership of what they have to say, rather than writing simply to receive a grade from an instructor. Such writing practice gave them practice for the type of networked writing that is now common to many social and workplace interactions.

### Our Study

Sixty-seven students and three instructors across four composition classes at Northern Illinois University participated in our study. Students in each of the classes were asked to participate on a class blog during the Fall 2007 academic term. While all students in the classes were required by their instructors to complete the assignment of class blogging, participation in our study was voluntary. We went through the formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) review and approval process for the project, and collected signed consent forms from students who agreed to participate. In addition, to maintain confidentiality, we did not release information about individual student participation in our study to the instructors. At the beginning of the semester, students were trained in using the free blogging software (Blogger®) to post and leave comments on a class blog created by their instructor for each class. Each student selected an anonymous screen name to use for his or her blog posts, but his or her identity was known to the instructor and other members of the class. Each student was required to post to the class blog once a week on an assigned course-related topic or content of interest linked to on the web. The

instructors guided students in their blog writing by collectively creating a rubric for blog postings. Students were encouraged in this rubric to link to existing web content and to contribute to ongoing online conversations in ways that might elicit response, such as by clearly stating an informed, though perhaps divergent, opinion on the topic. These guidelines were formed with the goal of helping student bloggers to attract outside readers to the blogs.

### Research Methods

Our findings are based on a three-part study, involving questionnaire research, an examination of content on the student blogs, and interviews with instructors.

#### *1. Pre- and Post-Blogging Questionnaires*

The first research method involved asking students to report on their perceptions of and comfort level with writing online. Students were asked to address the same set of issues prior to the blogging assignment and again upon completion. The questionnaires elicited responses regarding students':

- Prior experiences with writing online (e.g., creating websites, participating in discussion boards or listserves, using MySpace accounts, etc.)
- Perception of the public and private nature of online writing spaces
- Perception of the audience for online writing (i.e., who is reading their writing)
- Comfort level when writing online
- Sense of authority and responsibility for online content (i.e., understanding of the potential consequences for what they write)

We did not code survey responses based on individual responses, so were not able to match pre-survey responses with post-survey responses for each student. However, by comparing pre- and post-survey response trends across our sample we were able to note general patterns in differences in perceptions.

(See Appendix A for the survey questions.)

## 2. *Analysis of Blog Content*

The second method of research relied on analysis of the class blog content. We analyzed student blog entries and comments, with particular attention given to any changes over time. We identified the following in posts and comments, noting differences between early blog posts (written during the first two weeks of the semester), mid-semester posts (written during weeks seven and eight) and later blog posts (written during the final two weeks of the semester):

- Whether students wrote to a public or private audience. Did students address only class members or a larger audience of Internet readers? Blog posts that we determined to be addressed primarily to class members contained references to “we” and “us” and “the class,” or included references to community-based knowledge, such as building names on the NIU campus or discussions held during class, without providing context.
- To what extent student writers anticipated responses to posts. Did students exhibit sensitivity to possible responses (and criticism) from readers of their posts? This was largely determined by whether students supported any claims they made in blog posts with evidence from class material or from other sources online. In addition, we also interpreted any questions posed to readers or requests for others’ ideas and feedback as an awareness of audience.
- Level of interactivity. Did students interact with others online through linking, commenting, and responding to comments?

In addition to this qualitative analysis of blog content, we also created a dataset that offered quantitative information about comments made to the class blogs. This dataset allowed us to examine more closely the level of interaction among students participating on the class blog by calculating the number of comments made to blog posts, their frequency, and the quality of that interaction in terms of

content. The quality of students' interaction was based on a coding scheme that one of the researchers used to categorize each comment as:

- On-topic vs. off-topic with the post it responds to
- Supportive/friendly vs. hostile in tone
- Contributing new information/posing a new but related line of inquiry vs. contributing no new information (i.e., stopping at "I agree")

As we coded responses, it became clear that because each instructor had differences in goals for his/her class(es), the blogs seemed to belong to separate genres and suggested different rhetorical situations, making such kinds of inquiry problematic (e.g., should we judge threads about baseball rivalries under the same criteria we judge threads about gender neutrality in the workplace?). Our analysis takes into account the genre of each blog and we tried to code responses accordingly.

### *3. Interviews*

The final method of research we used involved interviewing the three instructors of the four classes that were part of our study. While we had frequent consultations with the instructors throughout the study, we did not solicit formal interviews until several months after the end of the blogging semester. At this time, we asked instructors to offer their reflections on three topics: 1) their pedagogical goals for using blogging in their composition class(es), 2) whether they felt these goals were met, and 3) the most and least rewarding aspects of the class blogging assignment. We were granted interviews from two of the three instructors.

The data gathered from the questionnaires, class blog analysis, and interviews revealed insight into the level of interactivity students engaged in on the class blogs, and whether students were aware of the networked and public nature of writing online and the potential consequences for such public writings as participants in the class blogging activity.

## Audience

One complexity of writing in an online public space is the notion of audience. When composition students engage in preparing traditional academic essays, journals, and research papers, their writing is often only read by their instructor, a very limited audience. The instructors participating in our study reported that a common goal for the blogging assignment was to foster a stronger sense of audience in student writing: for example, one reported that she wanted “the students to become aware of the needs of different audiences.” It was our hope that class blogging might better prepare students for the multiple and varied audiences that characterize much Internet communication in the Web 2.0 era.

In their responses to our first questionnaire, 55% of students reported that they believe most blogs are read only by friends and relatives, and 42% recognized a wider potential public audience of Internet users. Many student comments suggest that they have a relatively sophisticated understanding of the public nature of blogs, explaining that the blog space is public and open to any reader who has Internet access, and some noted the mechanisms that are in place that ensure a level of “privacy.” Such mechanisms include using the technological capabilities of certain software applications to restrict access (13% of our participants acknowledged this capability) and using a screen name that cannot be traced to your physical identity (10% noted the common use of pseudonyms online). As one student pointed out, while blogs are publicly accessible they offer a sense of privacy through the use of a screen name: “you can be whoever you want online and you can create an identity [sic].”

Even though many students reported an understanding of blogs as public spaces with the potential to reach a wide and unknown audience in a multiple choice question on our first survey, their written comments to an open-ended question on this same pre-blogging questionnaire revealed that this understanding of audience does not necessarily lead to a strong sense of the potential consequences for their public writings. Rather, many participants reported that they do not or would not censor



themselves or think about their public audience and potential consequences when writing to a blog. As characterized by one student, blogs allow writers to “voice there [sic] honest opinions without the fear of consequences for their actions.” A blog, for this student, offers a writing space that is free and protected from the consequences that might occur with communication in the physical world. A comment by another student suggests further that the opportunities for creating a sense of privacy through the use of a screen name would encourage him or her to write with less attention to audience, “because most of the time you can use whatever nickname you want so that it would be difficult for others to know who you are.” One concern with this reliance on the anonymity of a screen name is the fact that many online writers create an on-screen identity that, over time, is easily traceable to their physical identity. In fact, it is not uncommon for bloggers to share their physical world names and affiliations, or at least to share identifying information and personal stories that allow identities to be traced.

Student responses to our first questionnaire also exhibited the perception that blogging is an appropriate space to share personal information, such as that which could be included in a journal or in the context of a private face-to-face conversation. One student reported:

I feel comfortable about writing blogs only because it is the same way as writing a paper or writing in a journal. It would be my way to express myself. Art is another way I express myself and writing is definetly [sic] another way I relieve my stress. If anybody would like to know my feelings then maybe they can benefit from it or maybe they just won't like it. However, writing or blogging to me is a way to express and nothing is going to stop me express [sic] how I feel.

Another student reported a similar sentiment, revealing a perceived sense of privacy in online spaces: “I don't think anyone should censor themselves.... You should express exactly how you feel, as if you were talking to your best friend.”

Examining writings to the class blogs, we found evidence of this sense of a limited, private audience, in this case consisting of peers and classmates, in the ways in which students addressed their posts. For instance, in one sample post, a student posed the question, “We have been posting and commenting on this class blog for the majority of the semester. Did your experience writing on the blog change the way you write in class?” First, it is interesting to note this student’s use of the pronoun “we” and the reference to shared experience (“your experience,” “in class”). This writer clearly understood the audience for writing to be his or her classmates. Responses to this post provide further evidence of writing to a limited audience, one that is not public: one student wrote, “[w]hen writing on the blog I wrote as if I was talking to one of my friends.” At times, the use of pseudonyms actually contributed to an even more familiar form of writing. Another student reported, “My favorite part about the blog is that it is anonymous. This way you can be honest about everything your writing and not have to worry what people will think of you.” Posts like these confirm that the students, while noting that blogs have the potential to reach a public audience, had a perceived sense of a private, exclusive audience when writing to the class blogs.

Surprisingly, only two students in our initial questionnaire reported thinking about the potential consequences of reaching a wider audience when writing online. One noted that “[a]nyone can read this blog, such as a future employer or my pastor” and another explained that he or she would think carefully about what he or she wrote “[b]ecause anybody could see what you are writing and you dont [sic] want the wrong person to read the wrong thing.” Outside of these two comments, the predominant perception among our participants was that blogs are spaces in which writers can freely share personal content with a relatively limited and friendly audience. Such a discrepancy between an acknowledgement of the public nature of blogs and a lack of attention to a public audience reveals that these are issues that simply must be addressed and, arguably, in the writing classroom.

If 95% of our students are already presenting content online and actively engaging in social

writing spaces, then we as writing instructors should be aware of this, encouraging and augmenting skills they already have, fostering critical awareness around their practice and helping those who are not as skilled to participate in this new public sphere.

Generally speaking, our findings show that the class blog project did encourage attention to audience and potential consequences for writing, but that the conception of audience remained fairly limited throughout the study. In the post-blogging questionnaire, 42% of the students reported that the assignment helped them to improve their writing for online spaces. While many noted improvements on how they are able to use the technology itself (i.e., understanding how to hyperlink, how to embed videos, etc.), some reported on how the blogging experience could help them to more clearly consider the potential reach and consequences for their writing. For instance, one student reported that the class blogging “made me more conscious [sic] of what I wrote or displayed” and another reported that the assignment “improved how I have to be careful and watch what I write on things like Facebook etc.” One challenge of assigning blogging in a classroom setting, however, is the potential for transferability of the skills. Will students transfer what they’ve learned from the class blogging experience to their writing in other online networked writing spaces? One student’s comment reveals a lack of such transferability:

I would say that the blogging gave me insite [sic] on realizing that a blog is almost the same as a paper, and we should use proper English and writing styles; However, I still feel that when blogging on personal webpages (such as emails, myspace and facebook etc...) you shouldn't have to worry about proper English. Thusfore [sic] on my personal pages, I still post blogs how I ust [sic] to only because its [sic] almost like a freestyle to me. If im [sic] posting some where [sic] publicly or outside of relaxation, I do use the learned techniques.

In this comment, we see a differentiation between the type of writing done for class and that which

takes place in other online spaces. Despite the fact that the potential reach of communication is the same, the type of polished writing with attention to an academic audience that was practiced by students for the class assignment, for this student, has little relevance for other online spaces.

While the students who participated in our study may have understood the potential reach of blog writing, this understanding does not, as they reported in the post-blogging questionnaire, subsequently lead them to adjust their writing practices in online spaces with potential consequences in mind. Writing with a perceived sense of limited audience and privacy, students reported that online writing is more like talking to a “best friend” than talking to a public audience. While blogs have the potential to reach a wider public audience, many students reported that they felt that the anonymity of writing with a screen name and the perceived sense of writing for friends and classmates, as opposed to a larger public audience, made thinking carefully about potential negative consequences for their writing irrelevant.

### Genre

Only 23.9% of the students who participated in our study reported having read or written for a blog at the beginning of the semester. It follows that most students would have been largely unaware of blogging conventions prior to participating in this study. Interviews with the instructors who assigned the class blogs confirmed this lack of familiarity with the generic conventions of blogging.

One reported that “[i]t seems that very few college freshmen regularly read or contribute to blogs.” Thus, despite the “strong [scholarly] agreement on the central features that make a blog a blog” that [Carolyn R. Miller and Dawn Shepherd](#) (2005) note, many of these students might not have even been able to distinguish a blog from other forms of online writing, at least initially. This is somewhat surprising given that over 70% of students acknowledged using MySpace, which itself has a dedicated blogging feature; but most did not report awareness of having previously read or written to a blog.

*Formal Conventions of Blogs: Interactivity*

Blogs are often characterized by these formal features: they contain a series of individual entries called posts that are arranged in reverse chronological order, and generally these posts include a mix of personal commentary and links to existing content on external websites. Blogs may also include multimedia components like videos, pictures, and sound clips that link to outside web content. While blog posts are often created by writers in response to events and conversations that happen elsewhere, both in the physical and online worlds, blogs also invite readers to contribute to the blog by commenting on the posts. Thus, even single-authored blogs have an interactive component.

Since most students were demonstrably unaware of blogs as online writing spaces at the beginning of our study, we were interested to see how their understanding of the formal features of blogging would develop when asked to participate on a class blog. Early posts made by students had little in the way of features that would distinguish them from other forms of writing aside from their placement in the Blogger architecture. For example, most students did not include hyperlinks to outside sources or add pictures or video clips. Instead, early posts were text based and included very little in the way of interactivity with other web content and users through the formal feature of hyperlinking.

Consider the first student post to one of the class blogs:

Well hello there, my name is Bobby Light. I am speaking for my group who include [sic] Mark Twain, the infamous Charlie Murphy, and Kicklor 14. We are going to be commenting on the short essay called “In Our Glory” by Bell Hooks [sic]. Overall the essay was the better of the 3, it was very detailed and thorough, while still including interesting characteristics of the father’s picture. One explanatory line that i [sic] liked was when she stated “his dark skin mingling w/ the shadows in the photograph.” Its [sic] cool how the author pickes [sic] up every and any aspect of her fathers [sic] picture and gives it a reason or meaning behind it. For example when she states “there is such boldness, such feirce [sic] openness [sic] in the way he faces the camera”. Another

question we had was why she choose [sic] to tell us that her sister is a lesbian? All in all this was a very intresting [sic] essay, and an intising [sic] read.

This example illustrates a willingness to incorporate the words of others into a blog post by quoting a bell hooks essay, but reveals that the student does not make use of the technical feature of hyperlinking to existing web content directly. As the semester progressed, some students began to write according to the formal features of the blog genre, separating text into chunks and gradually incorporating pasted URLs, and then working hyperlinks, into their posts. In one blog, posts in early October typically included written URLs followed by commentary, such as in this example:

Blogs about memories are a way for bloggers to share there [sic] experiences with others. Memory blogs give good insight to others about someone's life and the things that have affected them. A good example of this is the blog "Alice Ghostley".

<http://www.doriengreyandme.blogspot.com/>. The blog talks about an older actress from the show Bewitched and how the blogger remembered watching her and being amazed by her acting. The blogger also goes into the death of the actress and how it truely sadden [sic] him.

Two weeks later some class members were hyperlinking certain words to other sources ("A blog gives a person the freedom to express his or her self's [individuality](#) and creativity..."). By the end of the semester, many students were making use of hyperlinks, in addition to incorporating multimedia elements such as embedding pictures and videos into their posts as a way of bolstering their written text. In one class blog, students used YouTube videos to preface or follow a point; in another, students relied more heavily on pictures, including one student who shared a poster from the Department of Labor that helped raise further questions about gender equality in the workplace. By doing so, students demonstrated an understanding of at least some of the interactive, formal features of the blog genre by not only referencing other sources and commenting on them, but also using the technology to include

hyperlinks in a way that is stylistically consistent with the interactivity of the blog genre.

The use of formal blog features was aided in part by technology training sessions given to students during class. One of us was asked to give a mid-semester presentation to one class on the more technical aspects of blogging. The instructor approached us because she wanted her students to be able to experiment more with the multimedia aspects of blogging but was not yet comfortable enough with the software interface to do it herself. Following the lesson, an overwhelming number of students demonstrated an ability and willingness to incorporate pictures, video, and hyperlinks into their individual posts. Indeed, following the lesson, 24 of the remaining 27 posts on that class blog included at least one of the aforementioned technical features.

Of course making use of the technological features of the blogging software does not necessarily translate into an understanding blogs as a rhetorical genre. In the second questionnaire, when asked, “What distinguishes a ‘good’ blog post from a ‘bad’ blog post?” some students reported these formal features to be of paramount importance, trumping the content component itself. One student reported that a good blog post “has pictures and videos and not just writing” and another suggests “[a] good blog [post] has writing/pictures/videos.” To these students, blogs are by definition multimedia and hyperlinked, and are understood primarily in terms of their technical architecture. In other words, the blog genre was characterized primarily by its incorporation of more than just written text on a static page and should include hyperlinks and multimedia elements.

*Rhetorical Conventions of Blogging: Merging Academic Discourse and Personal Blogging*

Other student responses to our post-blogging questionnaire suggest that the content is the most important feature that characterizes a blog post. As Miller and Shepherd (2005) point out in their genre analysis of blogging, self-expression is a common purpose for blogging. The blog genre can be characterized in part by the element of self-expression, which requires honesty, sincerity, and personal investment in a topic. For many of the participants in our study, these same characteristics are what

make a blog post worth reading. One student wrote, “I think the only way you could have a bad blog post is if you did not write how you truly felt.” Such sentiment is echoed by others who note that a good blog post “shows thought and makes you ask questions” or “contains emotion of the writer and an interest in the subject.” Further, student writings to the class blogs revealed that they understood the blog genre to be most similar to a personal diary or perhaps a conversation with a trusted friend, where self-expression and disclosure of personal experience is valued. One example is a student’s blogged response to an issue raised in class:

A few weeks ago one of our classmates presented a persuasive speech regarding the negative sides of plastic surgery [ . . . ] I’m here to stand up for plastic surgery and say that it has had a positive impact on my life, better yet, my health.

When I was younger, my brother accidently [sic] hit my face with a basketball and broke my nose. It was painful. At first the injury was not so noticeable, but as I grew older my face changed and the broken bone was affecting my breathing. This breathing problem held me back from playing certain sports in school. I grew tired of it, and I decided to undergo rhinoplasty, also know [sic] as the nose job. Everything turned out great during and after my surgery. I can’t imagine how much worst my health would be if I hadn’t found a solution to my breathing problem.

To this student and others, self-expression seemed to be the primary goal for writing. The best blog posts were the ones that were provocative or easy to identify with among class peers.

At the same time, other students reported a concern for writing in a style characteristic of traditional academic writing. These students expressed a concern about grammar, clarity, and brevity and made no mention of personal expression. One remarked:

I have learned that Punctuation [sic] and the tone of the response plays a major part in a good or bad blog. A bad blog would have little or no correct punctuation, and run on



sentences. A good blog might have paragraphs and proper English.

Responses like this one suggest that some students believe that following the rhetorical conventions of blogging has little, if anything, to do with self-expression, but whether a post adheres to standard conventions of a formal or academic writing style. In the post-blogging questionnaire, some students reported that neglecting these stylistic conventions can get in the way of attracting reader interest if not fully considered: “You can tell when someone just slapped something up there, and if they did, it makes the reader not want to take the time to read it.”

When asked about the purpose of their blogging assignment in the second questionnaire (excluding those who only mentioned the blog as a requirement for the course), half of the students in our study said that the purpose of their class blog was to share ideas and/or help them to communicate with classmates. Some (14%) suggested the possibility that one could speak on the blog more freely than in the space of the classroom. One student reported that “the class blog wasn’t really an assignment, it was just something you could go to for fun, or to express an opinion you had.” Other students reported similar opinions: the class blog is a space to “share ideas,” “interact,” or “learn about each other.” Noting that the blog space allowed for writing that was free from the academic discourse of the classroom, students reported the blog was useful for “show[ing] your opinions to the class,” allowing them to “be able to express our views without people knowing exactly who was who so there was no Pre-Judged [sic] opinions.” Students felt that it was a space that complemented the work done in the classroom, allowing them “to try a different medium of writing” and, hopefully, “to become a better writer.” The class blogs “allowed [students] to explore the issues and ideas presented in class a little more,” and students found that this purpose helped others keep “an open mind” where students may “express [their] true feelings” and “speak freely.”

With this in mind, we found that the exposure to blogs did lead to a more nuanced understanding of the genre of blogging as a space for self-expression and identification with an

interactive online community. Interestingly, however, while the students who participated in our study valued the blog postings that contained self-expression and “speaking freely” to an audience of social peers, they also were concerned about the formal features of speaking and writing that are specific to classroom discourse. Our findings are similar to those of a study conducted by Kevin Brooks, Cindy Nichols, and Sybil Priebe (2005), where blogs were primarily understood by students as remediated forms of other kinds of writing, many of which are common to the classroom context. In their study, the instructors emphasized that “weblogging is not a radically new way of writing, but a repurposing of familiar [. . .] print genres” including the journal, the academic notebook, and the filter (notecard) entry. The class blogs for our study likewise resembled, at times, the academic notebook for reflecting on readings, at others, the personal journal, where honesty and expression take precedence over formal presentation and, at others, more formal debate and discussion in an academic style. Thus, while we agree with Brooks et al. (2005) that “[w]orking with technology (regardless of genre) has the potential to motivate student writers,” our findings reveal that the nature of the class blog poses a unique writing situation in which students must navigate between personal expression and academic discourse that is not necessarily characteristic of the larger blogosphere.

### Social Engagement

Another factor of network literacy that we hoped to foster with the class blogging assignment is that of engagement with a larger social network. Blogs allow for the kind of connectivity that is largely specific to Web 2.0, in which the boundaries between readers and writers become blurred and user participation in the activity of creating online content is key. Instead of the one-way presentation and passive reception of content characteristic of static webpages, blogging is a social and collaborative writing space. We noted earlier that writing is a social and collaborative activity, carrying meaning only when connected to the social contexts in which writers and readers are situated. Following LeFevre (1987), who acknowledges that writing is an open, two-way system “in which an individual who is at

the same time a social being interacts in a distinctive way with society and culture to create something” and Bruffee (1984), who emphasizes the importance of viewing writing as a “social activity,” we believe that the interactive nature of blogging can help students understand the social and collaborative nature of writing that is even more pertinent online: rather than purporting a false image of the solitary student writer tapping into his or her individual genius, student bloggers can practice composing in a space that is highly interactive, with real readers and the potential for real responses. Class blogging activities can offer students the kind of dialogue, collaboration, and community interaction that allows them to see the social nature of writing. The class blogs can serve as open forums where students interact with one another to arrive at common understandings. Through the class blogs, student writing can be informed not only by their interactions with an instructor, but the shared experiences of the class community and, potentially, the contributions of a myriad of readers and writers online.

While blogging offers such potential, the students in our study reported that they did not expect their writing to reach a larger social network outside of the classroom. Rather, they felt they were writing for an audience of their peers when they participated on the class blogs. As reported in the post-blogging questionnaire, only 8% of our participants believed their class blogs reached a wider audience; 88% percent of students considered their classmates to be among the intended audience for their blog posts. Interestingly, however, only 50% of our participants identified their instructor as an audience for the class blogs. It follows that the general consensus is not that class blogging is “just another assignment” for an instructor, but a social writing space that speaks to classroom peers rather than to an authority or outside audience. With our above concerns about students’ misperceptions about privacy in mind, we are nevertheless optimistic about the potential for students to participate in a highly social and collaborative writing space with a community of their social peers when writing for class blogs. Such community-based writing is a key component to network literacy and, we think, to engaging with the online world at large.

One reason for our optimism rests in the frequency in which students anticipated and responded to posts written by their classmates. Of the students in our study, 40% reported commenting on others' posts at least once per week, 40% commented at least once every two weeks, and all but two students offered a response to others' writings at least once during the semester. Taken together, based on our quantitative analysis of comments on the class blogs, the four blogs are made up of 257 posts and 486 comments, or approximately 17.13 posts and 32.4 comments per week. In other words, each blog averaged at least four original posts and eight comments on said posts each week. Many students claimed the motivation for responding to other students' posts was merely to fulfill a course requirement ("we were required to," "we had to," "I only post to get a good grade."); however, even the complaint of "forced blogging" was often qualified by a desire to respond to posts they found "interesting," "appealing," or when one "had a good argument [in response]." An analysis of students' posts reveals that these comments were rarely off-topic (4.73%) and were generally supportive (97.33%) in tone, even when the commenter disagreed with the original poster. Others said nothing of a course requirement and simply reported feeling compelled to comment when the issue at hand was one they could identify with or otherwise had an existing opinion on (e.g., "I felt the need to state my opinion on each post that I made," "I only left comments if I really liked what they had to say or wanted to put my two cents in.").

Responding to other students' writings on the class blog, then, became common practice on all the class blogs. In order for written responses to lead to a "social activity" that has real value, however, a dialogue must take place in which comments become two-way communication, showing that they are received and responded to in a meaningful way. A closer look at the nature of those comments on the class blogs reveals that 46.7% of the comments served to signify an agreement with or general support of the original post without shaping, expanding upon, or otherwise adding dimension to the existing post. As a case in point, one post details a student's appreciation for Will Ferrell movies, and the

student responses that follow merely agree with or recycle the same themes of the original post (e.g., “I totally agree, Will Ferrell is hilarious.”; “Yeah I agree with what everyone’s said. Will Ferrell is unique and has his own way of making a regular comedy absolutely hilarious.”; “I could not agree more that Will Ferrell is one of the best comedic actors of our time.”). These comments did little to further the conversation, but instead simply stalled the dialogue by echoing sentiments that have already been expressed without adding new information.

However, other students reported that they commented when they “had something important . . . to add” or “wanted to argue against” another student’s position; there is evidence of at least one or the other in about 53.3% of posts on the blogs. One example from a class blog illustrates this heightened level of engagement in a social and collaborative online writing space. In response to a class reading, Thomas Jefferson’s “Notes on the State of Virginia,” a student created a post that offered a brief summary of the text and a relevant quotation, followed by his or her own feelings of surprise about Jefferson’s remarks. The student then anticipated a possible counterargument to his or her claim: “However, in his defense, although he was racist for our times, he was at least for the abolishment of slavery.” The student then invited other students to respond, asking for others to weigh in on whether Jefferson was “a cold hearted soul that should be removed from the textbooks” or justified in his actions and perhaps “even a little ahead of his time?” Two students posted in Jefferson’s defense while a third, claiming to agree with the first commenter, actually charged Jefferson with hypocrisy, not racism, and thus attempted to shift the direction of the debate. A different student then attempted to clarify the communal stance (“It seems that we are all in agreement that he was a slaveholder, but not a racist man”) and added further speculation about Jefferson’s life. Two other students added comments that seem directed at the original post and not at the ongoing discussion in the comments section, and the thread ends. This example illustrates a variety of opinions represented by different students from the class, where individuals raised questions, agreed and disagreed with others’ claims, attempted to

clarify the debate and arrive at consensus, and added new information. Such posts illustrate the type of social and collaborative activity that can be facilitated by the interactive nature of blog technologies.

A similar situation happened in a different class blog, where the original post drew thirteen comments in response to the provocative suggestion that the residence halls on our campus are racially segregated by the university. While some students speculated on the validity of that claim, others raised questions about the nature of segregation and self-segregation in current society, theorizing on why it still exists and offering solutions to the problems on both a local level and for the greater community. As the instructor of this particular class noted, “in all of these comments, students displayed an awareness of differing views and the necessity of mediatory language and rhetoric to build bridges between people in the class (i.e. their audience) that have different perspectives on the issue of segregation.” Such building of bridges and attempts to come to agreement reveals the potential for collaborative meaning-making in the blogosphere. In addition, this instructor mentioned that this particular debate led students to take action outside of class based on the blog dialogue: one student further discussed these issues with her peers in the student government, though there is no evidence that a formal investigation took place. While this example is not necessarily the norm for class blog postings, it nevertheless is emblematic of the potential for a networked environment such as a blog to encourage interactive dialogue that can have implications for the “real world” outside of a classroom space.

During a post-semester interview, the instructor of the blog discussed in the previous paragraph reported that “[t]he most rewarding aspect of the blogging assignment, for me, was watching students mediate difficult social situations in a virtual written environment, and then translate lessons learned through those virtual dialogues into action in real life situations.” Our analysis of the blog content confirms this idea that social engagement can be fostered, at least in part, through class blogging. The results of our study reveal that students can become engaged with and write about issues with relevance

to their lives outside of the classroom without necessarily having a wider public audience in mind. This level of writing as social action, however, cannot occur unless students go beyond merely assenting to an original post by raising related questions, challenging arguments, and otherwise adding new information relevant to the issue at hand. It is not enough to ask students to treat a class blog in the same manner as a paper that might only be read by an instructor; students must take advantage of the social and interactive writing environment that blogs invite through the comment function. Ideally, students would do this themselves, without instructor intervention, but we would do well to actively encourage this sort of two-way communication. Simply requiring students to comment on each other's work may lead some to respond to ideas they already identify with or agree with, without the expectation of furthering dialogue or working together to refine ideas and formulate new, informed thoughts and positions. We have already noted that even those who claim a course requirement as the primary motivation for leaving comments still gravitate towards topics that interest them. In this study, nobody "forced" a student to relay class discussions to the student government, after all, but the blog space made such activity possible. Thus, while students did not necessarily engage with other bloggers outside of the class blog, they nevertheless were socially engaged and practiced the type of interactive writing with their peers that has the potential to promote writing as a social activity outside of traditional classroom spaces.

#### Conclusions: Lessons Learned from Our Study of Class Blogs

Based on the results of our study, we conclude that the nature of assigning class blogging, or forced blogging as it is called among some instructors, presents unique challenges to instructors using the popular Web 2.0 technology to facilitate network literacy. While the networked nature of blogging offers opportunities for extending learning into the public sphere, it at the same time requires that the writing space in which students participate is a safe and protected one. Given the implications of asking students to learn to write in a public forum, it is important to balance the goal of creating an open,

publicly available space for writing with the responsibility to provide a safe space for learning. Our study offers a preliminary view of the potential for assigning class blogs, revealing both promises and pitfalls. While much more research is needed to determine whether class blogging facilitates students' understanding of network literacy, below we present several "lessons learned" from this preliminary work.

*Lesson 1: Class blogs offer much potential for teaching network literacy.*

Our study confirmed our initial thoughts about the importance for teaching network literacy in writing classes. If 95% of our students are already participating in the public, online writing spaces facilitated by Web 2.0 technologies, such as Facebook, MySpace, or blogs, we have a clear obligation to help them to participate thoughtfully and responsibly. There is certainly no shortage of news stories about the potential negative consequences of revealing too much personal information, too many opinions about an authority figure, or too harsh criticisms against an unanticipated reader when writing online. Inappropriate participation on public online spaces can be a product of the lack of a sense of the multiple and varied audiences of online texts, coupled by a perceived sense of privacy when writing online. To our concern, at the outset of our study the students reported a naïve understanding of the complexities of writing in a public online environment (i.e. "its [sic] just writing online"), putting them at risk of facing some of these negative consequences. While many of the student writers in our study understood blogs as public spaces, they also reported that they felt that they could share personal information and write as if communicating with a "best friend." Such a perception of privacy arose out of the use of screen names and subsequent anonymity.

Despite this naïve understanding of the consequences for writing in a public online space, we feel that our study supports the notion that class blogging can help students to better understand both the rewards and challenges of writing in a networked environment with multiple and varied audiences, where there are real consequences for what a writer contributes. While the perceived audience for the



class blogs was limited, consisting mainly of classmates, our results revealed that the class blogging assignment did help students to form a more informed understanding of this particular audience when writing. Many students reported that good blog posts are those that draw positive attention from their readers and provoke intelligent responses in the form of comments. Our analysis of the blog content supports this notion; many blog posts appear in the form of questions directed toward other classmates, and regular discussion via comments occurs on all of the class blogs. While the students in our study, for the most part, perceived their readers to be classmates, they also revealed a strong sense of that audience when addressing them. Therefore, it is clear that most of the students who participated in our study did write with an audience other than their instructor in mind, though they did not fully recognize their audience as potentially public.

*Lesson 2: Instructors assigning class blogs have a responsibility to protect students' privacy in a public writing space.*

As noted above, many students in our study revealed a misperception of privacy when writing to the class blogs, as revealed through their comments and through their class blogging practices. While in our initial questionnaire 42% of the students reported that they understand that writing to blog spaces is public writing, other comments and the class blog participation revealed a perceived sense of privacy in the blog space. This perception, that a public writing space is in fact private, led to some concerns for us as instructors. We feel that because the students adopted a naïve understanding of their public audience when writing online, we have a responsibility to take measures to mitigate any potential consequences that may arise from this misperception. The instructors in our study did take such measures to protect students' privacy online by requiring students to adopt screen names, maintaining administrative control over the blogs, and reminding students periodically of the public nature of the class blogs throughout the semester. The results of our study lead us to argue even more strongly for adopting similar measures to protect students' privacy when requiring that they participate in a public

writing space.

It may seem contradictory that we are encouraging instructors to monitor closely student writing to protect their privacy when writing to a public space. This contradiction, however, is not surprising based on research by Internet communication scholars, who recognize the increasing concerns among computer users about the potential privacy issues posed by the global reach of the Internet and the ease with which information can be recorded, exchanged, and distributed. Gurak (1997) notes computer users' fears about privacy issues emerging as early as the 1970s and 1980s, when online activists raised concerns about "Big Brother" (p. 47). Our findings provide reason for remembering such concerns about student participation on class blogs today. We believe that student privacy can be protected in ways other than using technological controls to exclude access to student writing and make the blog space itself private. Instead, we advocate an approach that requires that instructors carefully monitor and guide student writing in the public space, using student errors in judgment as learning opportunities without larger consequences. We encourage instructors to review online activity to ensure that students' writings do not offer information that may have potential negative consequences, such as blog posts that include details that may enable an outside reader to identify an individual student or content that could have negative consequences if distributed widely and read by someone other than classmates. Such monitoring may require removing content, and using such occurrences as teachable moments for a class of student bloggers. We agree with Gurak (2001) that "[a] good guideline for cyberliteracy is that you should never post anything on the Internet, whether on a Web site or via email, that you would regret seeing in a different context" (p. 113). Based on our study, however, for a generation of writers who have grown up with writing in online environments, reminding students of potential consequences may not be enough. It may require some additional administrative attention to blog content with student privacy in mind.

*Lesson 3: It is difficult for instructors to "manufacture" a public audience for student writing.*

Those who teach writing and those who have taught using class blogs have noted the value of assigning writing tasks that reach an audience beyond an instructor in an effort to teach the social nature of writing. Likewise, we feel that class blogs offer students an opportunity to better understand their writing as a social activity. With that in mind, we launched this study with the intention of exposing students to writing to a public audience when writing to a blog space. As other instructors familiar with class blogging have noted, however, attracting a public audience for student writing is not easy. Despite our efforts at encouraging students to use techniques to attract outside readers (such as frequent linking and the presentation of provocative but well-grounded commentary), what we discovered as the semester progressed was that while all of the class blogs had the potential to reach a public audience, virtually none of them were doing so. That is, there was no evidence on any of the class blogs that they were being read by anyone other than classmates and the instructors participating in our study. While we did not employ tracking mechanisms to reveal who was reading (though we can certainly see the usefulness in this approach), we did note that no comments from outside readers appeared during the semester. Therefore, while the class blogging assignment offered students the opportunity to write to a public audience, it did not facilitate the creation of that audience.

There are many additional ways that writers are able to attract readers to their blogs. While one is contributing writings of interest to readers, others include creating blogrolls with other members of a blogging community, using the trackbacking features, and reading and commenting regularly on popular existing blogs. Such requirements were not put in place given that these tasks are time-consuming, requiring either a higher level of technological attention to the blogs from instructors or efforts to gain membership in other blog communities from students, and could not be facilitated in the space of one semester. While our instructors were not able to successfully manufacture a public audience simply by encouraging students to link to other web content in their writings, at the conclusion of our study we began talking about ways that a more public audience might be garnered.

Other methods for creating a more public audience might include cross-class collaboration, or even cross-university collaboration on class blogs.

With these lessons in mind, we remain optimistic that blogs are useful tools for teaching writing in the undergraduate classroom. Despite the fact that the students in our study remained largely unaware or unwilling to engage a larger, public audience while writing to class blogs, their attention to their perceived, insular audience of classmates (and, at times, instructors) suggests that they at least understand writing to be a social, collaborative activity and are therefore able to write in a meaningful way beyond the classroom. This is especially important in the context of Web 2.0, where the construction and dissemination of knowledge depends on the participation of multiple parties. When 95% of our students are already reading and writing to these spaces online, it is no longer sufficient, or even necessary, to simply teach them how to access these technologies. Just as most already possess basic computer skills before entering the undergraduate classroom, the vast majority of our students suggest they are proficient—even comfortable—in using Web 2.0 technologies. Since our traditional goals of helping students better understand how audience, genre, and purpose relate to academic writing ought to be skills that are transferable to spheres outside of the classroom, we believe embracing pedagogical tools—in this case, blogs—that help students foster an understanding of network literacy is more important than ever. And though we lack evidence that the participants in our study attracted a public audience that actively engaged with the class blogs, our analysis of the blogs reveals that students ultimately have the potential to write and shape conversations outside the classroom. It is our hope that composition instructors will continue to embrace the spaces in which our students are already reading and writing to in order to help them understand writing not as a solitary activity that must be endured, but as a collaborative effort that can have meaningful implications for their social communities.

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## Appendix A

### Surveys and Interviews

#### *Pre-blogging Questionnaire*

1. Have you ever read or written to the following Internet spaces (check all that apply):  
Discussion board; MySpace; Facebook; Blog; None of the above; Other
2. How many total hours per week do you spend reading and writing to the sites checked above?  
Select one. 0; 1-5; 6-10; 11-15; 16-20; over 20
3. How often do you post or leave comments when you are visiting the sites you checked in Question 1? Select one. Never; Every once in a while; Sometimes; Somewhat often; Very often
4. Do you have your own blog? Yes; No
5. Do you read and/or leave comments on others' blogs? Yes; No
6. If you have a blog, who do you think your readers are? If you don't have a blog, who do you think would read your blog if you started one?
7. Have you ever used a blog for a class assignment? Yes; No
8. Would you describe a blog as a public or private writing space? Public; Private; Both
9. How comfortable are you (or would you be, if asked) with writing to a blog? Select one. Very comfortable; Somewhat comfortable; Neutral; Somewhat uncomfortable; Very uncomfortable
10. How important is it to censor yourself when writing to a blog? Select one. Very important; Somewhat important; Neutral; Not very important; Not at all important

#### *Post-blogging Survey*

1. On average, how many hours per week did you spend reading and writing on your class blog?  
Select one. Less than one hour; 1-2; 3-4; 5+ hours (please specify)
2. When posting to your class blog, who did you consider your audience to be? Mark all that apply. Your instructor; Your classmates; Your friends and family; Other (please specify)



3. How did your understanding of your audience limit, change, or otherwise affect what you wrote on your class blog?
4. How much did the class blogging assignment help you to feel part of a community inside and outside of the class? Not at all; Very little; Somewhat; Quite a bit; A lot. (Explain how.)
5. What distinguishes a “good” blog post from a “bad” blog post?
6. Which of the following did you use when writing to your class blog? Check all that apply. Text; Hyperlinks; Pictures; Video; Other (please specify)
7. How often did you leave comments on other class members' blog posts or class blogs? At least once a week; About once every two weeks; About once every month; Less frequently than once a month; Never. What made you decide to leave a comment when you did?
8. In your opinion, what was the purpose of your class blog? How did it complement your other activities for this class?
9. How did the blogging assignment change or help you to improve your writing for digital media (including Facebook, MySpace, discussion boards, email, etc.)?
10. Did the blogging assignment change or help you to improve your academic writing in any of the following areas? Mark all that apply. Coming up with a topic; planning and organizing my essays; analyzing sources; writing persuasive arguments; choosing an appropriate style and tone for my writing; establishing my own credibility as a writer; blogging had no effect on my writing

### *Instructors' Survey*

Following our study, we asked the participating instructors to respond to these questions:

1. What were your pedagogical goals for the class blogging assignment (i.e., what learning objectives did it support in your classroom)?
2. Did you feel that those goals were met (i.e., did the assignment go as planned or did it take

another direction)? Explain.

3. What was the most rewarding aspect of the class blogging assignment for you?
4. What was the least rewarding or most challenging aspect of the class blogging assignment?

## Appendix B

### Rubric for Blog Postings

#### **An “A” blog post...**

...clearly states an opinion and describes that stance using logic and sources to support it.

...includes working links to relevant sources.

...follows online linking conventions (ex. only underlining links).

...has been proofread and is free of grammatical and mechanical errors.

...has a clear title that forecasts the content of the post and contains your main argument or claim

...is formatted for on-screen readability, which may include bullet points, lists, and shorter paragraphs.

...is of a suitable length to maintain interest and appropriately deal with the topic.

#### **A “B” blog post...**

...clearly states an opinion and attempts to describe and support it.

...links to external sources.

...generally follows online conventions in regards to linking and visual cues.

...has been proofread and is nearly free of grammatical and mechanical errors.

...has a clear title that forecasts the content of the post and attempts to present your main claim or argument.

...is near to a suitable length for interest and topic.

#### **A “C” blog post...**

...offers an opinion with little support, or offers details without stating an opinion.

...does not link to external sources.

...does not display knowledge of linking conventions and visual cues.

...has not been proofread and contains grammatical or mechanical errors.

...has clear title that forecasts the content of the post

...is unnecessarily long or short.

**A “D” blog post...**

...does not make a point, offer an opinion, or provide relevant details.

...does not link to external sources.

...does not display knowledge of conventions and visual cues.

...may “flame” another writer or use a hostile tone of voice.

...has not been proofread and contains grammatical or mechanical errors.

...does not have a clear or descriptive title

...is unnecessarily long or short.

## Appendix C

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