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Blogging About Summer Reading

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BLOGGING ABOUT SUMMER READING: THE
LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT OF HIGH SCHOOL
STUDENTS USING INTERACTIVE TECHNOLOGY

BY

JANICE BECKER PLACE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

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OF
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate what happened when grade 11 high school honors students blogged about their summer reading under the monitoring of a teacher during vacation. I proposed that an educational blog might serve as an effective tool during summer vacation to help students retain skills or learning while at a physical distance from their school and teacher.

In addition to the blog's transcripts, a pre-project survey, post-project survey, and post-project interviews provided complementary data to inform my analysis. Qualitative analysis was applied to the blog discussion entries for evidence of peer learning, scaffolding, critical thinking, and literary discussion techniques. Several particular aspects of the experience were part of the research focus:

- Did blogging provide the students with a worthwhile experience that would make them want to continue doing so in the future?
- Did blogging help to engage students in a steady reading pace so learning would continue through summer?
- Did blogging help students in their constructs of meaning through peer learning?

As no studies on this topic could be found, blogging about summer reading under an educator's guidance and facilitation may be rarely practiced. The study's results showed the students found the experience worthwhile enough to make them want to participate in a summer reading blog again. Although all of the students indicated they finished their books in time for school, and one student in an interview agreed the blog changed her usual summer reading pace, a limitation of the study was

that there was not enough information to be certain of the blog's influence on reading pace for other participants. Also, there was no way of knowing for certain if all the participants read the entries of their classmates, limiting my analysis for determining if everyone achieved a co-construction of learning. Another limitation of this study was in my demographics of already successful students.

However, many examples of critical thinking were found in the blog discussion entries, along with several examples of peer learning, scaffolding, and the frequent application of literary discussion techniques. The implications call for a future study to examine how less successful students may respond to a summer reading blog, and to continue analyzing the merits of teachers blogging with students during summer vacation.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

To continue students' learning while on vacation, teachers often assign summer reading work to high school students. According to Guthrie (2000), however, even the best of students often lack engagement with their reading, independent comprehension skills, and the steady pacing of interaction necessary to complete a successful individual learning experience. For students in communities of low socio-economic status where enrichment opportunities may be lacking, Mraz & Rasinski (2007) have noted how students who do not read in the summer may fall behind three months on their reading. To find remedies for the problem of learning loss in summer, few or no studies have focused on high school students and the possibilities blogging presents for constructive student learning during summer vacation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my study was to examine a high school's summer reading blog responses to see what happened when students blogged about their summer reading under the supervision of a teacher. A pre-project survey, post-project survey, and interviews provided complementary data to inform my analysis. Several particular aspects of the experience were part of the research focus:

- Did blogging provide the students with a worthwhile educational experience that would make them want to continue blogging in the future?
- Did blogging help to engage students in a steady reading pace so learning would continue through the summer?

- Did blogging help students in their constructs of meaning through peer learning?

As few or no studies on this topic exist, blogging about summer reading under an educator's guidance and facilitation may be a seldom-practiced learning venue. This study shows why blogging may serve as an effective strategy to use during summer vacation to help students learn while at a physical distance from their school and teacher.

Background of the Study

Peer learning. Research supports the importance of socializing in the life of adolescents (Dewey, 1916; 1944; Piaget, 1964; Vygotsky, 1978). Specifically, literature on peer learning reports the benefits of students working with peers to construct meaning (Cooper, 2002; Johnsons & Johnson, 1999, Slavin 1993), while educational theorists emphasize the importance of humanism in schools to form a caring society (Freire, 2005; Kozol, 1991; Noddings, 1988, 1993). Encouraging collaboration among peers on an educational blog may promote humanism as well as learning. Using an Internet setting as a safe and caring communicative environment to help adolescents acquire respect and tolerance for others is a frontier that needs exploration.

Social interaction and social construction. Constructivists including Piaget (1999, 2002) describe the force of social interaction as circulating between what the teacher presents, the student's prior knowledge, and the input from other students in the class, resulting in self-discovery both for the individual and the group. Through social interaction and the multiple perspectives of others, students may raise their own

questions and construct their own models.

Vygotsky (1978) described the various ways children learn through the zone of proximal development by explaining that constructive learning is possible among peers when at least one of the peers has achieved the learning and the others are ready for the learning. By checking the understanding of students within the peer-group, the teacher can facilitate self-discovery if the zone of proximal development exists. Educational blogs offer opportunities for teachers to view and oversee the shared thoughts of the participants, and offer feedback and to provide corrective measures when students require support. Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) theory of teachers supporting students but gradually removing that support earned the term "scaffolding" (Brown, 1992) which elicits the image of staging set-up beside a tall building under construction. Once the building is finished and can stand alone, the scaffolding is removed, an apt metaphor for the process of constructing knowledge.

Brown (1992) wrote that effective teachers function as mediators who continually try to get their students to take over. She wrote students should gradually adopt ownership of problem-solving activities and their own regulation as the teachers slowly withdraw from the process of this mediation.

Justification for and Significance of the Study

This study topic stemmed from my goal to provide a method that offered students access and opportunity for learning during summer vacation, thereby, increasing their chances for literate lives year-round. As mentioned earlier, Mraz & Rasinski (2007) noted a regression in literacy skills during summer vacation. Many agree that weblogs offer interactive instructional venues that may effectively promote

peer learning from a distance (Penrod, 2007; Richardson, 2003, 2009). Apparently no studies have specifically examined the advantages or disadvantages of blogging in the case of high school summer reading. Literature supporting further examination of these merits can be found in connected theoretical constructs in Chapter 2. My study examining the effects that my educational blog had on learning engagement during summer produced information useful and possibly inspirational for future studies on this topic.

Benefits of blogs. When searching for inroads to learning, educators must not overlook the adolescent's propensity toward online socializing. The high school student's widespread use of social interaction technology invites the use of blogs for a summer reading enrichment activity. Blogs are a form of social interaction technology that may be utilized within safe educational domains inaccessible to the general public. To be certain the blogging community was a safe environment for all the participants in my study, I chose the closed educational blog site, *21 Classes™*. Outsiders were barred from entering the site or seeing the participants' entries.

In the parent and student consent form given to participants prior to conducting my research, I clearly stated my intention of removing any blog comments deemed to be of a disrespectful or sensitive nature. Although it is desirable for a teacher to withdraw her presence from discussion, it is also important to protect students from harm. Since blogs keep a running record of the dialogue occurring on the website, the researcher may easily track the visible thought processes and the authors of the responses, as the user's name links to each comment. Also, unlike audio recordings, which require transcriptions, the discourse is already in written form.

In blogs, discussion entries are displayed in reverse-chronological order so participants may respond immediately to the most recent posting or choose to research the response history beforehand. Comments are usually viewed asynchronously, that is, past the time the comment was posted, although at times, bloggers may find themselves posting comments in the same time frame (synchronously). Unlike spontaneous conversation that does not allow for planning and reflection, students may use these features of the blog to review their peers' comments and plan what to say in response.

Chapter 1 Summary

Vacation time can lead to a regression of reading skills on the part of students who lack learning stimulus in summer. An educational blog can provide an incentive for engaging in summer reading, as well as a peer learning environment that may foster constructivist learning and critical thinking. This study applied a mixed-methods model to analyze data gathered through pre-survey, post-survey, post-interviews, and blog discussion entries created when high school students participated in a teacher-created blog during vacation for discussion of their summer reading. In Chapter 2, I review the literature that discusses the implications of the Internet's role in the future of literacy and education in general. In Chapter 3, I present the details of my methodology. In Chapters 4, and 5, I review the findings from the data generated by my study. Finally, in Chapter 6, I present my conclusions and analysis of this study's implications. Chapter 6 ends with a discussion of the need for future studies in this field.

Definition of Terms

Asynchronous communication. Messages that are shared online at different times, but available for an extended period so others may respond.

Blogging. The act of posting discussion initiations or responses on a weblog.

Connecting. A sign of critical thinking in which a learner find relationships between information in a text and aspects found either in other texts, the learner's own experiences, or in the world.

Constructivism. Piaget's (1999) description of learning that grows from student interaction.

Critical thinking. Thought that is analytical, interpretive, creative, and/or manipulative of an idea. Paradigms provided by Harvey & Goudvis (2000), Potts (1994), and Webb (2002) were followed in my study (explained in Chapter 3).

Digital Divide. The gap existing between those using digital technology and those not using this technology.

Digital Natives. A term coined by Prensky (2009) to describe today's students who grew up in a world using computer technology.

Digital Immigrants. A term coined by Prensky (2009) to describe those who did not grow up using computer technology, but who have joined the digital world later in life.

Engagement. A learner's sustained interest and motivation to make inquiry and share responses on a topic.

Net generation. Today's generation of students who are the first **Digital Natives**.

Peer learning. Students working together either as partners or in groups to construct meaning.

Social interaction. The term “social interaction” in this literature review will be used to describe peer interaction facilitated by a blog designed for the sake of learning. This literature will not, however, include an examination of social networking.

Social networking. The term “social networking,” a form of online social interaction, references situations in which the user is actively seeking to make new connections and/or to strengthen the bonds of old connections through online scrapbook albums displaying public or private profiles such as through *Facebook*TM or *MySpace*TM sites.

Student-directed talk. Student-to-student initiated discussion not under the direction of the teacher.

Synchronous communication. Messages shared online at the same time through instant messaging, message boards, blogs, or e-mail.

Weblog. [Blog]. A website that allows authors to post thoughts which may be viewed synchronously or asynchronously. All visitors to the site (bloggers) may engage in the discussion. The last posts of information show first.

CHAPTER 2

BENEFITS OF BLOGGING IN EDUCATION

Bridging a Social Divide: Access and Opportunity

Every day of the school year, teachers battle for their students' attention and engagement in learning. Yair's (2000) study revealed that twelfth grade students are engaged in schoolwork only 49% of the time in the classroom. Once released from school, particularly for summer vacation, very few students work on academics. Exceptions are more prevalent in communities where parents choose and can afford to send their children to summer camps, music lessons, or other enrichment programs. Data has shown that these fortunate students usually stay on track with their reading skills during summer (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2000; Allington, 2009a; Allington, 2009b; McGill-Franzen & Educational Resources Information Center, 2000; Mraz & Rasinski, 2007).

In disadvantaged communities, where the greatest loss of learning occurs, many families cannot afford such luxuries. This lack of summer learning and enrichment has serious consequences. Studies show that economically disadvantaged children lose an alarming one and one-half years of reading progress from grade one to grade six because they are set back three months each year from the lack of summer learning (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2000; Allington, 2009a; Allington, 2009b; McGill-Franzen & Educational Resources Information Center, 2000; Mraz & Rasinski, 2007).

Fortunately, for these students and their families, computer technology recently has become more available and more families and communities may participate in

online educational programs. Although families living below the poverty line may not have home computers and access to the Internet, many public libraries provide these tools for the community. Studies finding success with online education programs emphasize the necessity for providing digital tools to those who do not have access. In November 2011, the FCC announced the program, “Connect to Compete” which was designed to make Internet connectivity more affordable to families with limited income (Greeley, 2011). Those families qualifying for the federal free lunch program in schools receive basic Internet access from their local cable company for the low fee of \$10 per month, along with free installation and modems. In addition, this program provides refurbished computers to these families for \$150. The relative ease of access to computers with online connectivity supports blogging as an economically feasible method for providing students with summer learning opportunities.

Social Status

Many theorists (Freire , 2005; Kozol ,1991; Noddings, 1993; and Stiglitz, 1973) have criticized the various ways in which education is inequitable in our country and how a damaging social hierarchy is often self-perpetuated in our schools. Wiener, Harris, & Shirer (1990) examined how class social status as perceived by students affects their achievement. Today’s students often judge one another by their physical attributes, clothing, and accessories, and avoid those students they deem to be different. Such prejudices impede peer learning which relies on respect, tolerance and acceptance in order for valuable social interactions to occur between multiple perspectives, according to Dewey (1916, 1944) and Vygotsky (1978).

However, when Internet connectivity and the tools for digital social communication are provided to all students, weblogs (blogs) can provide a different social context by helping to remove the visual status markers of social hierarchies. Physical appearances lose importance when words detached from the presence of the writer appear across the screen. Students who perhaps would never talk together in the real world may suddenly find themselves eagerly communicating in the virtual world. Larson (2009) discovered that, unlike in a classroom where talk is immediate, her study's asynchronous online message board helped the "shy, struggling as readers, or linguistically diverse" participants improve their communication with others, since this method allowed them more time to formulate their responses before posting (p. 647).

Peers "Speaking Up" in Writing

Coiro (2003) stressed the importance for teachers to create new contexts for social learning to encompass new literacies. Peer learning strategies provide students with far wider possibilities for engagement than when the teacher takes the traditional stance as the classroom center of attention. Seeking to support social constructivism, using blogs, a teacher may arrange for students to work together having discussions, asking questions, giving their own evaluation and feedback to each other, and sharing the many thoughts that may arise when they feel free to express themselves together. Writing on blogs also offers a therapeutic tool giving students opportunities to share their thoughts with peers (Lewis & Fabos, 2005).

Students may assume different identities through online discourses. In electronic communication, Mehan (in Cazden, 2001; cited in Macbeth, 2003)

predicted an IRE (Initiation/Response/Evaluation) classroom sequence would be changed to something he termed an “oral/written hybrid.” In blogs he predicted, students might create a blended style between formal and narrative writing. The resulting oral/written hybrid discourse used in social interactive technology might include abbreviations such as “cuz” for “because” and emoticons (smiley faces, frowning faces, etc.) or other aspects frequently found in text messages.

Gee (2005) applied the phrase “socially situated identities” in reference to the “different ways of participating in different sorts of social groups, cultures, and institutions” (p.1). Yet, Gee predicted students’ writing would still have elements of formal writing, as well. Recently, West (2008) presented evidence of a hybrid style of discourse, with students taking the situated meanings and identities of “serious literature students” participating in her AP Grade 11 English class blogs. Her study showed that students may “talk” on blogs, but that talk can have a serious side.

Gillies and Boyle (2005) emphasized the importance of teacher discourse in supporting students in peer learning activities. They found that children modeled the teacher’s talk in their peer learning experiences, revealing ways students can acquire useful discursive strategies with the teacher’s guidance. Cazden (2001) stressed the importance of building scaffolds to support students as they learn interaction expectations, citing Bakhtin’s (1986) description of the various means by which students make academic language their own. In the prompts and in my comments in my study’s blog, I applied an academic narrative voice taking the stance, or situated identity, of a literature expert. This factor may have been an important influence for the academic voices taken by my study’s participants.

To aid in her understanding of their situated identities, West (2008) explored the blog entries of three of her students whom she knew had contrasting personalities. She concluded that each student adopted a separate identity using particular words and phrases with a “situated meaning” which they applied in their language. Such usage, Gee (2005) explains, helps build the writer’s identity. For example, students may situate themselves on the blog with typical, savvy, “texting” talk, such as using the shortened form of “u” for “you.” Also, the situated meaning of the student’s identity may be found in the tone of the writing. One of West’s student’s entries was filled with the humor commonly associated with that student, and another’s entries focused on the serious drama common to his personality. Yet, West explained, for all three students, “none sacrificed the situated identity of the ‘serious literature student’” that

... integrated the social language of formal literary analysis with their enactments of digital social language. All three students use strategies that English teachers in our school model and expect from their students in terms of literary response in these entries” (p. 596).

My own analysis of students’ responses posted on my blog revealed the participants easily mimicked and utilized my academic language, taking the situated identities of “serious literature students” described by West (2008), but lacking a hybrid style, which would have included elements of “texting” discourse. The situated identities adopted by the participants in my study were never those of the “web-literate communicators” of West’s (2008) study or the “informal and playful” communicators in the message board postings of a grade 5 class described by Larson (2009). The online discussion entries West and Larson studied showed their participants used

“digital language,” the shortened word forms and emoticons a part of their hybrid discourse. To further understand the influences of situated identities, I discuss my participants’ academic writing style in Chapter 5.

Blogs Foster Critical Thinking

Penrod (2007) pointed to the narrative nature of blogs, with the use of “I,” writing in the first person, causing students to feel they must take a stand and support it. Having to support positions, she argued, leads to deeper critical thought. The author wrote, “student writers need to be certain of their facts and data to support the ideas they hope to present in a public forum” (p. 23) which, in turn, builds their persuasive and argumentative skills. In contrast, Fahy (2005) determined that online communities of adult college students were characterized by politeness and a reluctance to engage in conflict.

The critical thinking element in blogging is one in which researchers have observed a give and take as meaning is constructed, but possibly with an avoidance of differences when offering interpretations. Perhaps making increased efforts to help students in high school adopt respectful techniques in writing for argument will eventually diminish inhibitions affecting argumentation in college online discussions. Blog discussions under the guidance of a teacher may be one way to help students improve their skills. My study examined the participants’ discussion characteristics and their methods of argument in comparison to Penrod’s (2007) and Fahy’s (2005) findings. The results showed the participants never directly contradicted a particular student, yet they did sequentially post contrasting ideas. My analysis of these findings is discussed in Chapter 5.

Eide's *Neurolearning Blog* (2005) found aspects of critical thinking such as "active exchange and critique" in conversations, interactions, and feedback in blogs. Many researchers (DeVoss, Cushman, & Grabill, 2005; Duncum, 2004; Eide, 2005; Penrod, 2007; Richardson, 2009) praised the abilities of some blogs to make links to websites (hyperlinks), and post links to other web materials, such as primary sources and articles that agree or disagree with the community. The blending of the students' ideas with sources of support can be sophisticated and highly creative, which becomes another argument for utilizing online education.

Criticisms of Internet Educational Practices

In spite of the numerous proponents who encourage blogging and other Internet social interaction instructional opportunities, many critics have attacked these pedagogical strategies and called for schools to adhere to the teaching of print-literacy instead. The researchers in *Adolescents and Literacies in a Digital World* (Alvermann, 2005) contend that the strongest opposition to Internet instruction stems from high-stakes testing pressures, traditional educational systems, and literacy educators who have training in using only printed text. These opponents of web-based instruction, among them traditionalists who have led recent national assessments movements, emphasize teaching students to master "print literacy" before they are encouraged to read the communications found on the Internet. The opponents fail to see the relevance of digital literacy in our daily lives and how it engages our youth.

The word "print" in the phrase "print literacy" distinguishes that text from other forms accessible in the genres of "multi-literacy," "new literacy," or "digital literacy" as described by researchers (in Alvermann, 2005) who argued that high-

stakes pencil and paper tests do not assess the multimodalities students might encounter and use on the web. They criticized the educational system for taking so long to get caught up with new technology, a problem usually resulting from inadequate funding for technology. Struggling schools, usually found in low socio-economic communities, have become particularly entrenched in the cycle of “teaching to the test” with pencils on paper, rather than using online modalities to enrich instruction. They might also lack the access to resources of more affluent communities.

This is a paradox, complained Luke (2005) when considering the “semiotic dexterity” demanded by post-industrial economies and world governments. Semiotic dexterity refers to the various communicative symbols that can be created by the technological culture. Luke forecast a different set of skills required for the workforce than print literacy can provide. He wrote, “...the problem may indeed sit within a complex generational and intellectual disjunction between policy construction and the new economy” (p. 189). These skills include Internet navigation techniques for research, media publishing, and marketing. Luke, Knobel & Lankshear (2005) made a case for educators to accept new literacy skills as equal to, if not more important, than print literacy in education. Recently, the International Reading Association released a position statement (Adolescent literacy: A position statement, 2012) claiming “In the 21st century, adolescent literacy is understood as the ability to read, write, understand and interpret, and discuss multiple texts across multiple contexts” (p.2).

The new writing for digital literacies includes non-print text: digital photographs, videos, animated text, audio pod-casts and other possibilities which,

once created, their proponents explained (O'Brien & Bauer, 2005; Penrod, 2007; Richardson, 2003, 2009), can serve as evidence of the critical thinking and writing that went into them.

Both Jewitt (2008) and Kress (2000) contend that the social implications for the relevance of teaching the various genres of literacy are clear. Bruce (2005), in defending his view that literacy must be examined as a socio-historical circumstance wrote, "My position cannot be separated from my history, including all the circumstances of gender, race, and class that permit me to lead the life I do" (p.13). Based on this theory, the question arises: If schools continue to deny the economically disenfranchised entrance into the digital world, how will they live in the digital world of the future?

Fernandez (2001) quoted former literacy teacher Stuckey's perspective, "Literacy education equals violence because the correlations between illiteracy and race, income, gender and language and cultural diversity are frighteningly consistent" (p.55). Gee's chapter (2005) in Alvermann (2005) concurred with the views that current political stances on literacy oppress the poor, explaining that today's accountability systems keep the poor at a low level of basic education, while wealthier students enjoy a mosaic of offerings (p. 66). To find success in the workplace, Gee (2005) argued, students must be adept with the new literacies that these technologies have unveiled. He wrote,

Literacy always comes with a perspective that is ultimately political. . . A text is a loaded weapon. The person, the educator, who hands over the gun, hands over the bullets (the perspective), and must own up to the consequences. There

is no way out of having an opinion, an ideology, and a strong one. Literacy education is not for the timid (p. 51).

Why Blogs Enhance Literacy

Penrod (2007) and Richardson (2003; 2009) discuss the benefits of using blogs and other online tools for literacy instruction. They explain that the multimedia and the web applied in education invite students to publish their work online. Internet and computer technologies have added new concepts to the genres of writing. Richardson (2009) referred to the work the students encounter on the Internet as the “Read/Write/Web,” arguing that students must be good readers, writers, and editors as they utilize the Internet for publication. He said they are using “much more complex and flexible digital information by and large without any instruction on how it differs from the paper world” (p.5). The possibilities seem to be endless, and many of our students already utilize these possibilities. Although “texting” practices have often led to the adoption of hybridized grammar conventions (West, 2008), online publication actually stimulates the revision process. Knowing others will be reading one’s work encourages students to revise and edit before posting it for public consumption.

Reasons to Research Technology in Education

The Internet and all of its modalities have brought new paradigms and concerns to society and to education. Although blogs may be kept in a private community, Subramanyam and Greenfield (2008) reported the dangers of participants copying, pasting, and possibly modifying to share information with others who were not part of the original community, thereby trespassing this confidentiality. Generally, however, it is indicated that private online educational venues keep adolescents safe.

These authors report that a 2005 Youth Internet Safety Survey showed 4% of youth who complained of victimization also had engaged in risky online behaviors (p. 134). If more students and their parents were educated on the dangers of such behaviors, perhaps that figure would be diminished.

Because computer mediated interaction seems so popular among teens, Subramanyam and Greenfield (2008) wonder if today's adolescents prefer electronic social interaction to face-to-face interaction. They question the implications for adolescent psychological health. In addition, they point out that "traditional off-line issues have moved online" (p. 128) with practices such as bullying. Cyberbullying and outside predators are serious threats parents and schools must monitor when adolescents interact online. Nevertheless, PEW Internet studies show that adolescents, with greater freedoms and abilities than younger students, are using these diverse semiotic modalities whether politicians, educators, or other stakeholders are ready or not (Jones & Fox, 2009).

It is time for educators to accept the reality of the current technological modes of communication and to begin the thorough examination of the opportunities and drawbacks this reality incurs. The fact is many students have acquired the technology and the know-how (Richardson, 2009) for taking their learning beyond the walls of their schools (Fletcher, Tobias, & Wisher, 2007). Students are engaging in these activities regardless of the educators' agenda. Teachers calling for students to make uninspiring and pale-by-comparison construction-paper posters (Duncum, 2004) are finding these projects morphed into video productions accessible to countless others on *You-tube*TM.

The act of students publishing their work on *You-tube*TM and other places in the virtual world of the Internet presents strong implications for the teacher. A widespread audience can infer what is going on in a particular class. Parents and taxpayers, and other interested members of the public may now access the school community online. The public's presence in the cyber-classroom might lead to new interpretations of Cuban's (1992) "hidden curriculum" which he said went on behind the closed doors of the classroom. It is ironic that those who demand accountability in education are blocking their own access to online evaluation opportunities. Student publications on the web may unlock doors that have in the past been able to hide pedagogy's "taught curriculum" (Cuban, 1992).

Importance and Significance to the Student

The analysis and data from my study on a summer reading blog provides useful evidence for future research on online instruction. My study yields information that may lead to educational and social benefits of significant value for teens. Personally, I gained insights into the ways social interaction technology supported or disrupted peer learning and would like to share these findings to help others discover methods to provide learning opportunities for all seasons.

Chapter 2 Summary

In Chapter 2, I review the literature supporting my belief that the Internet must play an important role for education. Many researchers support blogging in education as a method to promote literacy and critical thinking. Socio-political considerations show the disadvantaged are often victims of traditional literacy policies, and theorists argue for students to be taught the new literacies offered by digital technology.

Although there are some concerns about the safety of adolescents online, they use the Internet anyway so monitoring our students online is an important protective measure.

My study examining the effects of an interactive blog on summer reading provides useful information for future research on online instruction. In Chapter 3, I will describe the methodology and procedures for my research.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

Since the use of blogs for educational activities offer a new usage for discourse it made sense to analyze how students' written messages might have been shaped by the context of a blog, as well as to examine how students' blog interactions might have influenced their constructs of knowledge. The meaning or "inner dynamics" Erickson, quoted in Bogdan & Biklen (1992) of what occurs within the class blogging community required detailed, qualitative descriptions and analysis from the diverse perspectives of the community of students.

I planned a "quan →QUAL" mixed-methods study by sequentially gathering data from a small sample of students in the course of one summer blogging term. Pre-project and post-project surveys and interviews complemented the important data gleaned from the blog. These surveys immediately preceded and followed the blogging activities. Since the sample size was fewer than ten students, simple numerical measures, not percentages, were taken from the surveys. Interviews were conducted with only two participants for the purpose of finding ancillary information that might add clarity to the study.

A Constructivist-Interpretist Paradigm

The qualitative analysis was conducted according to the constructivist-interpretist paradigm described by Denzin and Lincoln (2008). These authors explain this paradigm for interpretive case study narratives taken from the subjectivist epistemology that the knower and respondents make meaning together. This paradigm

fit well with my interests in social constructivism and my stance as a prompter and facilitator in the study. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2008), constructivist research must meet the criteria of trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, and confirmability.

Trustworthiness. Trustworthiness, sometimes viewed as a parallel of internal validity for quantitative studies, builds from a researcher's assurances of continuing methodological engagement with the study to try to ascertain the achievement of clear determinations by looking at the data from multiple sides and checking and re-checking with the respondents in an interview or with the data. Another aspect lending a constructivist-interpretivist's study credibility is triangulation, for which Denzin and Lincoln (2008) prefer "crystallization," and is achieved from multiple methods of data collection. Although the principal data in this study was found in the blog discussion entries, the data from the surveys and interviews provided auxiliary information for a closer examination of the participants than the blog discussion entries provided. My resolve and self-discipline to manage and process the data through a pre-determined and well-designed methodology build credibility and trustworthiness for the findings.

Transferability. Transferability, which answers the expectations of external validity in quantitative studies, (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) relies upon thick description of the study, a provision of elaboration and details on the context and the culture presented. These aspects, along with aspects of setting, such as location and time possibly might influence whether the results may be generalizable to other situations.

Confirmability. Confirmability is seen as the qualitative answer to objectivity. This is where the researcher must be certain to read and interpret the data from what is there and not from what is in the researcher's imagination. Logic used in the interpretation is carefully explained so readers can see how the data can be traced to its source, and how the conclusions were reached. Notes, discussion entries, and the survey and interview responses supported conclusions drawn in the study.

I hoped to capture as many of the realities as possible from the data that the study generated for a deep and methodical qualitative analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The discussion entries provided data of the students' responses and interactions with the teacher and classmates, but several other forms of data also informed the meaning. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) refer to "triangulation" as "crystallization," because they feel it is the "simultaneous display of multi-refracted realities" (p.8).

The Focus of the Study

The qualitative researcher should avoid entering into a qualitative study with preconceptions. However, research theorists (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; and Lincoln & Guba, 1985) caution that a study should begin with a focus. The focus question for this study sought to examine what implications could be found from studying the blog discussion entries of students from one high school who spent time blogging with a teacher and fellow students about their summer reading. The pre- and post-project surveys and short interviews gave insight into the cross-section of the participants' perceptions toward the activities. My specific focus questions for this study were:

- Did blogging provide the students with a worthwhile educational experience that would make them want to continue blogging?

- Did blogging help to engage students in a steady reading pace so learning would continue through the summer?
- Did blogging help students in their constructs of meaning through peer learning?

Qualitative researchers do not pose a hypothesis or conduct an experiment using variables. Instead, my objective was to construct understanding from the patterns and trends observed through my analysis of the data.

A Qualitative Approach

The general research approach was a qualitative case study and textual analysis of students' comments generated on the blog and downloaded from the blog's website. Since the purpose of the blog was to examine the social interactional processes of the subjects, it made sense to use their discourse to examine what occurred. Vygotsky (1986) explains how thought and language connect. Showing how language enhances thinking and leads to social construction, the students' discourse on the blog provided examples of social construction, peer learning, critical thinking, and the attributes of engagement this proposal discussed in Chapter 1.

Pinker (2008), Sternberg (1990), and Vygotsky (1978; 1986) present theories on how thought and language connect and lay the groundwork for applying discourse analysis to determine critical thinking. Gee and Green (1998) review the theoretical framework for discourse analysis in their study of peer learning: they examine "the concept of social languages and show how members of a social group, through oral and written texts, construct local or situated meanings, identities, and worlds that vary

across situations or events” (p. 121). However, the authors caution that these models change and evolve as new opportunities are presented, which must be considered when analyzing the data. Almasi (1995) found more “utterances” and richer dialogues in peer discussions. The findings of these studies show the importance of analyzing students’ peer discussions for the number of utterances and the richness of dialogue. The number of utterances are clearly evident in blog discussion entries.

Bogden and Biklen (1992) explain that in qualitative studies, the researcher becomes an interpreter for what is happening. Researchers study the perspectives of their subjects to try to come to deep understandings of those subjects. It is the purpose of qualitative research to develop interpretations that are rich and relevant. In this case, the researcher constructing the interpretation was a teacher at their school, but not the students’ teacher. My knowledge of the school’s practices, goals and culture enhanced the interpretation along with knowledge gained from prior research on constructivism, peer learning, critical thinking and engagement as these concepts related to the study’s participants.

Fairclough (1995) supported using discourse analysis for text. According to his theory, intertextuality allows “analysis of texts from the perspective of discourse” and creates a “bridge between the ‘text’ and ‘discourse practice’ dimensions in the critical discourse analysis framework” (p.75). Fairclough argues that discourse practice “informs the process of text production” or “text consumption” (p. 62). Fairclough’s (2003) work on textual analysis influenced my analysis of the blog texts. He describes some steps important for textual analysis including:

- framing the event in the social practice, in my case, educational blogging

- noting the genre that characterizes the text and
- noting the intertextuality in the text, such as significant other texts and voices “included” or “excluded” (p.192).

Data Collection and Procedures

Surveys and Interviews

Further data collection and analysis beyond the blog discussion entries added more dependability and trustworthiness for the study. Participants were asked to complete pre- and post- project surveys on using the Internet for academic and social interaction experiences, technology availability, and attitudes toward summer reading before and after the blogging project. Post-interviews with two participants were conducted. The two students interviewed were purposefully selected to represent opposing levels of student engagement detected from the analysis of the blog discussion entries.

Protections for Participants

No harm had come to any student as a result of prior blogging activities in the school. Students’ identities were clearly linked to their blogs, in keeping with school policy, so any offending comments or remarks could be traced back to the source. I, as a teacher in the school, but not the teacher of the students in the study, set clear expectations from the outset for blogging etiquette and respectful behavior. At no time would disrespectful comments of a harmful nature be tolerated. The parent/student assent letter (Appendix A) stated I might remove from the weblog any comments I deemed to be of a harmful nature. Also, any offending student might be excluded from future participation in the blog.

A quantitative analysis of a blog could never yield the complexity of meaning an analysis of the words of the students produced. Discourse reveals a great deal about a speaker. According to Cameron (2001), discourse analysis provides numerous facets of information including social norms and knowledge about human communication and organization. She writes, “It is both about language and about life” (p. 17). The analysis of the blog entries provided a wealth of information regarding the students’ language and their thinking. Consequently, to protect their identities, the names of the students were changed immediately upon downloading the discussion entries.

A Secondary Study

Blogging about reading was not a new activity to the school. Teachers in the school had previously used the blogging technology of the school’s Internet service. I had used a blog for discussion of summer reading in the past, making this a secondary study with the purpose of qualitatively analyzing the students’ responses on the blog for evidence of peer learning and constructivism. For the students, the aim of this educational blogging assignment was to benefit them by helping them conduct meaningful reading discussions during the summer. The purpose of the research study was to examine the effectiveness of the blog for fostering peer learning from a distance.

Four Phases of Teacher Support on the Blog

Due to the approximately 8-week length of summer vacation available to conduct the study, I applied constructivist theories by planning prompts for four

phases. Each phase lasted for two weeks, giving the students time to think about the prompt, to read each other's comments and possibly post a response more than once per phase. The students were encouraged to make multiple visits to the blog to see how the knowledge was being shared and to add to the thinking whenever possible. The students chose to read classic literature, either *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde or *Dracula* by Bram Stoker and the students could join the same discussion, regardless of the book. In the course of reading the novels, in the four separate phases of blogging the students were asked to discuss and develop their beliefs about the characters and the themes of evil as depicted in the novels. The four phases allowed for the gradual transference of ownership of the discussion from the teacher to the students according to the following plan:

1. In Phase 1, I provided clear expectations for the blogging comments. I commented along with students on a simple question about character.
2. In Phase 2, I mediated and reinforced meaningful responses given by the participants by asking questions or giving feedback aimed at supporting the students' critical thinking.
3. In Phase 3, I began to gradually withdraw my mediation and reinforcement from the blog, applying these interactions in very small doses.
4. In Phase 4, I completely withdrew my interaction on the blog, except to oversee that no comments were made of a sensitive or disturbing nature, which I had done in all phases.

The qualitative study of the blog discussion entries generated during all four phases aimed to provide an examination of the influence the phases had on the students' development as peer learners. My analysis yielded important findings on the regularity of blog visits on the part of students in summer.

To help prepare them to make meaningful comments on the blog or in their journals, the students' teachers provided and reviewed a district rubric, the Response to Literature Prose Generic Rubric 2008-2009 (Rhode Island Skills Commission, 2007), which contained expectations for responses to literature. Most likely, the students saw and used the rubric for assignments prior to the study. As proposed, I released the discussion responsibility to the students after scaffolding support (Bliss, Askew, & Macrae, 1996) by modeling and positively reinforcing appropriate responses through the first blog activities. The students did not receive judgmental grades for their efforts on the study, but rather received a credit or no credit score based on evidence they had blogged, along with a short essay they turned into their teachers in the fall. The students could replace the blog activity with journaling at any point in the study.

Engagement

A major assumption for my study was acceptance of the concept of "engagement" as a factor in learning and its subsequent importance for supporting literacy. Examining the blog texts for evidence of student engagement provided insights into the levels of collaboration and peer learning the students achieved while constructing knowledge. Moreover, many high school teachers in the various disciplines are familiar with Harvey and Goudvis' *Strategies that Work* (2000), a

teacher's guide providing methods for engaging students in academic reading. For the purposes of my study, I employed several of the descriptors from Harvey and Goudvis to help define "engagement" on the blog: connecting, critical thinking, and student-directed talk.

1. Connecting. These were responses in which the students made and shared connections from the reading to themselves, other texts, or the world. For example, in some instances, the students created analogies from something they read to something they have experienced. These and other examples of connecting are discussed in my findings.

2. Critical thinking. Harvey and Goudvis (2000) characterize responses containing cooperative analytical and interpretive discourse for understanding reading as markers of critical thinking. For example, when students asked questions, disagreed, agreed, or even worked together in some unpredictable way to help each other construct meaning, they were employing critical analysis.

To supplement my analysis of the presence of critical thinking, an abstraction that required strict paradigms to ensure consistency, I added to the paradigms of Harvey and Goudvis (2000) the descriptors from the rubric for literary response, which had been supplied to the students. This rubric has as one of its expectations, "Demonstrates Critical Thinking." Descriptors chosen for the district's rubrics are grounded on Webb's (2002) DOK –Depth of Knowledge attributes. On the rubric, the attributes for meeting standard when one demonstrates "critical thinking" are listed as follows:

- Selects and analyzes accurate information, connecting the text to prior knowledge, to oneself or to the broader world of ideas in order to advance relevant ideas or themes.
- Makes inferences and draws a credible conclusion that synthesizes and interprets information, based on the text.
- Maintains focus.

Finally, I considered information on critical thinking given by Potts (1994), who also defines skills related to the ability to think critically:

- Finding analogies and other kinds of relationships between pieces of information.
- Determining the relevance and validity of information that could be used for structuring and solving problems
- Finding solutions or alternative ways of treating problems

3. Student-directed talk. Harvey and Goudvis (2000) further explain that students independently discussing reading points not directed by the teacher are examples of student-directed talk and of engagement. Although this level of engagement was my goal by Phase 4, independent discussion of the reading by the participants at any time served as a marker of engagement.

Responses not fitting the criteria set by Harvey and Goudvis (2000) were important factors indicating engagement, I felt. A complementary indicator for

engagement in the blog was evident in the number of times a student posted responses or comments on the blog. These instances provided markers of each student's voluntary presence in the online community. Other quantitative information of importance was interpreted from the word counts of the students' posts. Although analysis was necessary for examining the qualitative nature of each post, knowing the quantities of words posted by students helped me measure the students' efforts and interest in blogging. I also predicted I would try to determine the impact of "idle chat," short or seemingly unrelated comments that did not seem to go deeper into the topic, which might have proved to be valuable. However, the participants in my blog never applied idle chat, a finding I will discuss in Chapter 5.

Steady reading pace. Another indicator of engagement was to check for evidence of a steady reading pace during the course of the blog. I predicted the blog might serve as a constant reminder to the participants to keep up with their reading assignment. Possibly the students or I might reference events in the book some participants had not yet reached, thus encouraging those students to catch up. I hoped to see if the blog encouraged reading across the vacation period, a practice preferable for maintaining literacy levels (Mraz & Rasinski, 2007).

Limitations of the Methodology

All methodologies have limitations; indeed, there are several specific to qualitative research. Commonly, qualitative studies are conducted in what are termed "natural settings," but Cameron (2001) identifies problems of achieving naturalness in research settings, citing Labov's "Observer's Paradox." This stems from the dual role of the researcher being part of the situation (in this case, teacher in the school, but not

of the students) while gathering data for analysis. The paradoxical question is whether the study's setting may be considered a natural one under such circumstances. However, Cameron (2001) expresses confidence that discourse in a researcher's context is worth examining, regardless of the naturalness of the setting.

One aspect of using the Internet for a study is the lack of face-to-face and synchronous communication between the researcher and the subjects. A possible lack of perception of my presence, especially once I withdrew my support, may have helped the students feel more natural and relaxed as they communicated from a distance. It is always the duty of the researcher-participant to arrange for ways to remain as unobtrusive in the setting as possible. Furthermore, a researcher should not participate if that researcher's qualifications and background are not a good fit for the setting and if the role assumed is artificial. An outsider would become an imposter, but an insider who is part of the natural setting, in this case a teacher in the school, may easily facilitate a study. Furthermore, the fact that the research focused on blogs as an educator's tool, calling for the distant-presence of a teacher as part of the situational context, diminished this effect, as the goal was to assess peer learning within an educational context. A teacher *was required* to play a role in this study.

A greater limitation is that of researcher reliability. Many researchers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993) try to downplay the role of teachers doing research with their own classes, characterizing it as unreliable. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) caution that "a lack of sophistication" related to staying "neutral" when interpreting the data might taint the findings. A strong defense for the choice to accept the "limitations" of qualitative research comes from a closer examination of my position

and preparation for this study. Four successful years in a doctoral program offered jointly by two solid institutions, coupled with twenty-five years of teaching experience, provided for a relationship with teaching and researching which was strongly established.

Furthermore, the term “reliability” suggests the findings must be replicable which is important in experimental studies, but not a goal of qualitative studies. The purpose of qualitative research is to create a holistic understanding of all the complexities of school, according to Stringer (2008). Kincheloe (2003) harshly criticizes positivist thought as a reinforcement of anachronistic empirical expectations. His work on teacher research and its merits is reassuring. He calls the act of a teacher performing qualitative research in education “empowering” (p.89).

The Study Population

This study encompassed volunteers from two grade 11 honors classes of coed students enrolled in a comprehensive public high school. In the 2009-10 school year, of the 1227 students enrolled at the high school, 89.6 % of the students were Caucasians, 5% were Hispanic, and less than 3% were Black and Asian. Less than one percent of the students were Native American. The poverty line for the school district’s student body fell below the range of the 15% child poverty line used to define the “KIDS COUNT” core cities targeted for special improvement programs. However, 28% of the students qualified for free or reduced lunches. In 2007-08, the graduation rate was 91%, higher than the state average of 89.2%. Seventy-eight percent of the students reported living in two-parent households, with 15% of these including step-parents. Nineteen percent lived in one-parent families and 3% with

other legal guardians. Thirteen percent of the school's students' mothers and 16% of the fathers were reported as having less than a high school education, while 29% of mothers and 24% of fathers were reported as having a college degree (Rhode Island Department of Education, 2010).

Instruments and Tools

1. Survey tools: Likert Scale – This commonly used scale was designed in 1932 by a doctoral student, Likert (Murphy et al., 1938; Likert & Hayes, 1957) and it has been considered a reliable model for gathering subjects' evaluations of topics ever since.

2. *21 Classes*TM Cooperative Learning educational blog site offering privacy and a closed blogging community.

The Likert scale surveys were administered and the responses analyzed to evaluate changes in the participants' perceptions toward summer reading once the blogging activity was completed. Qualitative analysis of the blog discussion entries and researcher's journals were conducted according to a constructivist-interpretist paradigm. The criteria constructivist of research are those of trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, and confirmability.

Data Collection Schedule, 2010

Mid-June: Administer and collect pre-survey

Early July: Phase 1, Blogging prompt #1

Mid-July: Phase 2, Blogging prompt #2

Early August: Phase 3, Blogging prompt #3

Mid-August: Phase 4, Blogging prompt #4

Early September: Post-Survey

Mid-September: Interviews with purposefully selected volunteer students

Sampling Design and Procedures

Students of one public high school's grade 11 co-ed honors classes who were assigned summer reading and volunteered to participate in the study (Parent-Student Assent form, Appendix A), were given a pre-project survey (Appendix B) asking their views on summer reading and their usual methods for completing the reading, as I wished to establish the students' prior views and attitudes toward blogging, the Internet, summer reading, and peer learning before beginning the project. It provided a relevant base for conducting analysis on whether the activity had significantly changed any prior attitudes. Next, I presented an introduction on my expectations of blogging about summer reading and gave directions on how to join in the blogging during the summer.

The students were given a district rubric, "Response to Literature Prose Generic Rubric," that contained indicators for proficient responses to literature. This was to help the students conceptualize characteristics of literary discussion. As successful students of the school, they were expected to be familiar with this rubric. In the summer, the four phases of the blogging activities outlined earlier in this proposal began. Phase 1 aimed to help establish expectations for the blogging.

For the next two bi-weekly blogging prompts, I posted reminders for the students to respond and interact with their peers. As explained before, the reading was divided into four phases of prompts. At this point, I withdrew interaction with the blog

responses, but I praised the students' direct interactions and responses in order to build the students' knowledge of expectations and self-confidence in their work. By the fourth and last blogging phase, I had gradually released the responsibility to the students and did not post any comments which provided feedback or evaluation to new responses.

For either book, the students were invited to respond to four prompts during the course of the summer vacation. I kept records of all blogging discussion entries, along with a journal in which I recorded insights and relevant information such as technical problems, feedback from the students and/or parents, and personal reflections on the blogging activity.

In the fall, the students completed a post-project survey (Appendix C) asking their views on the summer reading and blogging activity. Comparisons of the pre- and post- project surveys provided evidence of the students' perceptions, feelings of engagement, and attitudes toward summer reading assignments before and after the blogging assignments. In addition, the interviews added more triangulation or "crystallization" to the findings. Although these provided complementary data, the most important information came from the texts of the blog. My analysis of the discourse measured the degrees of peer interaction, engagement, and critical thinking of the students in the blog.

The Study's Settings and Timeline

The study's setting was initially in the classroom, when the teachers presented an introduction to the summer blogging activity and asked for volunteers.

Parent/student assent letters were sent to the two honors classes inviting student

participation (Appendix A). Once assent was received, I sent each participant the Likert scale style pre-project survey (Murphy, Likert, & Columbia University, 1938; Likert & Hayes, 1957) to gather data on the students' attitudes toward summer reading before they began the summer blogging.

The setting then moved to the Internet, a private educational site, *21Classes*TM Cooperative Learning site (Appendix D), which offered a private community inaccessible to the public. Upon return to school in the fall, the students completed a post-Likert scale survey to express their feelings toward the blogging exercise, which was mailed to their homes and returned to me anonymously by mail. The post-survey's purpose was to help gauge the students' perceptions of the blogging activity. Their feelings toward blogging might influence the success or failure of future blogging for summer enrichment programs. Two ten-minute post-project interviews conducted in an otherwise empty classroom in the school, with one student at a time, gave details on the students' views of the blogging activity after it ended. Although focus questions for the interview were included in the proposal's appendix, (Appendix E) several questions emerged from the interview, which were not predicted prior to the study.

Data Processing, Procedures and Analysis

Lincoln and Guba (1985) apply the term "dependability" in qualitative research in answer to the attributes of "reliability" in quantitative analysis. In this study's planned qualitative analyses of the blog entries, my journals, and post-interviews with two volunteer-participants, I applied rigorous attention to detail. As shown in the proposal, the data collection and analysis for this study was procedural

and sequential to support credibility and trustworthiness. Dependability could be assured through accepted procedures. At all times, I worked to ensure that meticulous detail was applied to every aspect of the data-collection and analysis.

Surveys were administered both before and after the blogging project and analyzed to evaluate changes in the participants' perceptions toward summer reading once the blogging activity was completed. To ensure the surveys' validity, the statements were carefully focused and categorized to gather particular information of relevance. The statements were strategically categorized under descriptive subheadings that closely correlated to the study's objectives. They were judged by colleagues to include carefully worded and clear directions, with the avoidance of questions or statements of a personal and sensitive nature.

The anonymous pre-project survey was given prior to the study to gather background information on the group, including age, gender, prior experience, and attitudes toward peer learning that might have some bearing on the student's blogging characteristics. For example, a blogging community of mostly males could set a different tone in the blog than one of mostly females, or a group of students without much prior experience with blogging might have required more detailed instruction and personal help getting started than a more experienced class. A group that indicated it generally avoided peer interaction in the pre-survey might have resisted sharing their thoughts in the blog. The age of the students might have helped to explain their level of expertise on blogging, too. These factors when triangulated with other data in the study would offer essential details for complete analysis.

Information gleaned from transcript analysis came from the words of the students, not statistics, except for the count of interactions and/or utterances of the participants. Alternative study methods on blogs have yielded statistical results, but as Cameron (2001) noted, “discourse analysis is non-quantitative” (p.13). Only the simplest of statistics were applied in this study to examine the actual number of entries and the length of the blog entries as an auxiliary method to examine the extent of a student’s engagement in the study. In addition to conducting the pre-project survey analysis as the study began, I kept a journal to record occurrences or events relating to the study. Soon, I began to relate my observations of the blog transactions. Gradually, the journal was integrated into longer analytical pieces that helped sort the overall patterns of the data.

As soon as the students began their comments, my coding of the blog entries commenced. Reading and re-reading the data repeatedly, I highlighted and labeled information into categories that seemed to emerge—classifications and categorization that helped in later sorting for emergent theories. Charts and diagrams were used to help with my sorting and visualization of the categories of thoughts that evolved. The post-project survey and interview transcripts also required the same diligent effort and detail-work. I knew I was done only when new concepts ceased to emerge and I kept repeating myself.

Required Resources

Resources included computers and the Internet both for the students and this teacher. The district’s public library system had one main facility and several neighborhood branches all offering computers and Internet sessions to the public. An

educational website, *21 Classes*TM Cooperative Learning site, (Appendix D) for providing blogging services was another necessary resource, and this was available to educators even in summer. As explained in the literature, it was important for the students to be able to look at theirs and others' prior responses to aid their knowledge construction. Transcripts of the blogs were downloadable and printable to use for my discourse analysis. The student-subjects came from my high school's grade 11 honors students.

Chapter 3 Summary

In Chapter 3, I described my study's design, its rationale, and the procedures I applied. My role was as a constructivist-interpretist using ancillary data to help inform my qualitative analysis of the blog discussion entries. I applied criteria set by Potts (1994), Webb (2002), and Harvey and Goudvis (2000) to measure critical thinking.

In Chapter 4, I will begin a two-chapter discussion of my findings. I first discuss my complementary data results and findings generated by the pre-project survey, post-project survey, and interviews. This information helped to clarify aspects for my textual analysis of the blog entries, which I then discuss in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 4

STUDY RESULTS

Findings in the Complementary Data

The purpose of this study was to assess what happened when high school students blogged about summer reading on a teacher-monitored website during vacation. The blog was created on the Web 2.0 portal, *21 Classes*. The study took place in a suburban comprehensive public high school in New England. Grade 11 honors English students were invited to participate in the study by joining a blog about summer reading. I will focus on two branches of data in my analysis of this study's findings, which I will divide between Chapters 4 and 5.

I refer to the first branch of data, presented in this chapter, as *complementary data*, as it contributed to my knowledge of the participants. Taken with the data presented in the blog discussion entries, the complementary data provided a clearer view of the participants in my study. The research focus questions addressed by the complementary data are:

- Did blogging provide the students with a worthwhile educational experience that would make them want to continue blogging in the future?
- Did blogging help to engage students in a steady reading pace so learning would continue through the summer?

The complementary data are comprised of information gathered through direct questions to the students. These questions were given in the pre-project and post-project surveys that I composed. I was granted permission from the Institutional

Review Board to administer these surveys to all the study's volunteers. Copies of the surveys are located in the Appendices.

Additionally, as explained in the review of my methodology in Chapter 3, I conducted short post-project interviews with two of the blog participants soon after the blogging was completed for an opportunity to hear the impressions the blog had made on a sample of the participant population. All of the complementary data informed me of the participants' feelings toward blogging about summer reading and allowed me to characterize their views on peer interaction. Although the number of subjects completing my study was very small (N=7), the results suggest the participants felt the experience enhanced their learning and that, if invited, they would be likely to participate in another summer reading blog. The positive reaction of the participants invites future studies on this topic.

Pre-Project Survey Analysis

Initially, nine participants (N=9) volunteered to participate in the study, anonymously answering 24 pre-survey questions targeted to characterize elements that might influence their participation in the blog. The survey questions were divided into four categories: 1) independent reading pace, 2) Internet use and availability, 3) non-teacher directed peer-learning behaviors, and 4) attitudes toward using the Internet for peer learning while doing summer reading.

Overall, the pre-survey characterized a group of honors students in the age range of fifteen-to-sixteen years old. They completed their summer reading independently in the past. Three males and six females responded. When gender appears to be an influencing factor in the data, it is included in this report.

A Likert scale with a rank of 1 equated to “Strongly Disagree” and a rank of 5 equated to “Strongly Agree” was applied. In my discussion of the survey results, I will refer to these descriptors in lower case letters. Students were given the opportunity to write any personal comments at the end of the survey. No participants added personal comments to the survey, which was taken at home and returned by mail in a self-addressed stamped envelope to the researcher.

Independent reading pace. I designed items 1-5 in the pre-project survey to give me a view of the students’ independent reading paces prior to my study. More than half the participants, five of the nine, either agreed or strongly agreed with statement 1, “I always enjoy reading, so summer reading is not a problem for me.” However, it is interesting that in a group of all honors students, not everyone felt summer reading was not a problem for them. Despite possible problems, however, all nine participants indicated they always have completed their summer reading on time. Four students expressed agreement and two more neither agreed nor disagreed with item 3 stating they “procrastinate on getting to my summer reading and rush at the last minute.” From these results, I was eager to see if the post-survey would show the blog helped to keep the students from procrastinating on their reading.

Only two of the participants agreed or strongly agreed with item 4, “Whether or not I get my reading done on time depends on the book because I really have to like it.” Five students, including two of the three males, disagreed that liking the book would be a factor for getting through the reading, while two students neither agreed nor disagreed. These results indicate that my participants practiced typical behaviors

of honors students, as the majority of the students showed they would do what it takes to achieve success in school.

Internet use and availability. All the pre-project survey participants in the pre-project survey reported they had Internet access within their homes. Only two of the pre-project survey participants characterized their home Internet connections as “unreliable” while one other neither agreed nor disagreed with that statement. Seven of the nine participants agreed with item 9 that they use the Internet almost daily “to help me complete schoolwork during the school year.”

Non-teacher directed peer-learning behaviors. So I might assess the students’ pre-dispositions to using the Internet for peer contact, I used pre-project survey items 8-17 to inquire on the participants’ social networking behaviors. Table 1 summarizes the results. More than half the participants agreed or strongly agreed with item 8, they “usually use the Internet for social purposes” while only two participants disagreed, and six of the participants agreed or strongly agreed with item 10, “I enjoy logging onto my Facebook™ or another online profile at least five times per week.

Texting was an important social networking activity for more than half the participants. While four respondents, two males and two females, agreed with item 11 saying they “never text,” another four members of the group, all females, agreed or strongly agreed with the item 12, “I text 1-50 times per day.” Two participants, both female, agreed with statement 15, “Without the Internet I would not have as many friends” while everyone else disagreed or strongly disagreed. Four, all but one of the frequent texters, agreed or strongly agreed with item 16, “Texting is very important to keeping friends in the adolescent’s world.” Although the Internet obviously provided a

social connection for many of these students, all of the participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with statement 17, “Texting friends is more fun than being with them” showing digital connectivity served as a convenience for extending friendships, but texting had not replaced their enjoyment of physically spending time with their friends.

Table 1. Social Networking Behaviors of Participants

Pre-Project Survey Statement	Results
8. I usually use the Internet for social purposes	3 Strongly Agree 2 Agree 2 Neither Agree nor Disagree 2 Disagree
10. I enjoy logging onto my Facebook™ or another online profile at least five times per week.”	4 Strongly Agree 2 Agree 2 Disagree 1 Strongly Disagree
11. I never text	3 Strongly Agree 1 Agree 1 Neither Agree nor Disagree 1 Disagree 3 Strongly Disagree
12. “I text 1-50 times per day.”	1 Strongly Agree 3 Agree 1 Disagree 4 Strongly Disagree
16. “Texting is very important to keeping friends in the adolescent’s world.	1 Strongly Agree 3 Agree 2 Neither Agree nor Disagree 1 Disagree 2 Strongly Disagree
17. Texting friends is more fun than being with them”	2 Disagree 7 Strongly Disagree

Although meeting with classmates during summer to discuss reading assignments is not a school requirement, all the students indicated they valued peer learning by agreeing or strongly agreeing with statement 18, “Discussing summer reading with classmates is helpful for understanding a book.” Asked if they “meet

with classmates to work on summer reading,” however, one-third disagreed, indicating they do not ordinarily do this. Given the fact that these same students do value the process of discussing summer reading and find it helpful for understanding a book, the fact they do not meet may indicate a difficulty with organizing such gatherings in summer or just a lack of interest in school purposes during summer vacation. The limitations of my data prevent further knowledge in this regard. Nonetheless, the participants’ optimistic feelings toward peer learning and their propensity for online friendships indicated that, as a whole, the group was receptive about participating in my study on blogging with peers about summer reading.

Attitudes toward using the Internet for peer learning while doing summer reading. The pre-survey directly indicated the majority of the participants had positive views on participating in the blog. While one female agreed with statement 21, “I will be too shy on the blog to say much,” everyone else disagreed, strongly disagreed, or neither agreed nor disagreed with that idea. Table 2 indicates that seven students agreed or strongly agreed with statement 22, “Blogging will be a very convenient way to discuss summer reading” and five students, two males and three females of the pre-project survey respondents, expressed excitement for the blogging project when agreeing with item 23, “I am excited about blogging about this summer’s reading.”

Table 2. Participants' Pre-Project Enthusiasm for the Summer Reading Blog (N=9)

Pre-Project Survey Statements	Results
22. Blogging will be a very convenient way to discuss summer reading.	2 Strongly Agree 5 Agree 2 Neither Agree nor Disagree
23. I am excited about blogging about this summer's reading	2 Strongly Agree 3 Agree 3 Neither Agree nor Disagree 1 Strongly Disagree

The remaining participants neither agreed nor disagreed, except one female, who, although indicating the blog would be convenient, strongly disagreed that she was excited to blog. She indicated in item 24, she “would much rather complete my summer reading independently.” In fact, two pre-survey participants, a male and a female, dropped out of the study before participating in the blog, which might be explained either by shyness or a desire to work independently, feelings that had been expressed by females. However, one male dropped out after completing the pre-survey, and the above reasons were never expressed on the post-project survey by a male. Since the survey was returned to me anonymously, I am unable to connect the problems to individuals. I did not pursue students who dropped out of the study in any way, because the Parent-Student letter I had composed to invite participants for the study assured everyone they could drop out of the study at any time (see Appendix A).

Altogether, the pre-project survey portrayed a group having mostly positive attitudes toward Internet technology, social networking, peer learning, and the blogging project. This was reassuring information for the continuation of my study.

Post-Project Survey Analysis

Once the blogging project was completed, the participants were asked to answer 26 post-project survey questions targeted to yield more information about their participation with and their perceptions of the summer reading blog. The survey questions were divided into six categories: 1) participation in summer reading and the blog, 2) Internet use and availability, 3) overall participation in the blog, 4) reading pace with the summer reading blog, 5) peer learning behaviors while blogging, and 6) attitudes toward using teacher direction and the Internet for peer learning while doing summer reading.

A Likert scale with a rank of 1 equated to Strongly Disagree and a rank of 5 equated to Strongly Agree was applied and participants were given the opportunity to write any personal comments at the end of the survey. One subject did add personal comments to the survey. The post-project surveys were taken at home and returned to me by mail in pre-stamped and addressed envelopes. Appendix C contains a copy of the post-project survey.

Participation in summer reading and the blog. Overall, the post-project survey characterized a group of participants aged fifteen to sixteen who successfully completed the summer reading assignment. Although seven students participated in the blog, only two males and three females completed the post-project survey. All the respondents indicated they had completed the summer reading. One additional respondent had not participated in the blog. This respondent agreed with statement 3, “Because I prefer to work on my own, I wrote in my journal independently rather than blog with my fellow students about the summer reading.” In addition, this student wrote in the comments’ section, “I feel that if this had been better organized, I would

have participated. Not enough information was given ahead of time.” This was surprising, as no other respondents either in the post-survey or in post-interview sessions mentioned a lack of information as being an obstacle for participation in the blog. The consent letter to parents and participants (Appendix A) invited them to seek clarification whenever questions arose, but the student never sought help before dropping out.

Internet use and availability. As shown in Table 3, all the participants in the post-project survey indicated they enjoyed convenient Internet access for the blogging project. However, two of the five post-project survey participants disagreed with statement 7, “The blogging technology operations were smooth and user-friendly.” Furthermore, the responses to post-project survey items 8 and 9 reveal that three participants encountered problems for unknown reasons. For item 8, three respondents blamed the blogging problems on themselves. In item 9, no one directly blamed these problems they encountered on the researcher.

Although the participants did not blame the researcher for their problems using the blog, the fact that some of the students suffered technical difficulties serves as a reminder for educators to always find ways to support students having technical difficulties while using the Internet for learning. This would be particularly important in the summer when the school’s technology and support are not available.

Table 3. Internet Access and Blog's Ease of Use (n=5)

Post-Project Survey Statements	Results
4. I always needed to use a computer in a library or at the home of an acquaintance or relative to do the blogging because I could not go online at home.	2 Disagree 3 Strongly Disagree
7. The blogging technology operations were smooth and user-friendly.	2 Agree 2 Disagree 1 Neither Agree nor Disagree
8. Technical problems sometimes interfered with the blogging on my end.	3 Agree 2 Strongly Disagree
9. Technical problems sometimes interfered with the blogging on the researcher's end.	3 Neither Agree nor Disagree 2 Strongly Disagree
12. I participated in the blog on a regular basis responding to all four prompts.	4 Strongly Agree 1 Agree

Overall participation on the blog. Despite the seemingly minor technology issues, all the post-project survey respondents agreed with the statement 12, “I participated in the blog on a regular basis responding to all four prompts,” indicating the students taking the survey felt they were able to keep pace with the four bi-weekly prompts given on the blog. However, while the students may have perceived themselves as being regular participants on the blog, my analysis of the actual blog’s discussion entries identified two students who only participated for two weeks on the blog.

This contradiction emphasized the importance for utilizing every aspect of my study’s data to inform my conclusions, since perceptions can vary from reality. However, as noted earlier, not all the blog participants completed the post-survey, which might be the reason for the contradiction. It is possible the five respondents to

the post-survey did not include either one or both of the blog participants who waited until the last two weeks of summer to make most of their postings. A limitation of my study was the anonymity of the survey participants.

Reading pace with the summer reading blog. Through three items on the post-survey, I sought to identify the participants’ reading pace and to consider the blog’s influence. Table 4 illustrates the responses. As can be seen in Table 4, three of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with statement 13, “Because I had to blog about parts of the book throughout summer vacation, I began my reading right away.” Three of five respondents also agreed or strongly agreed with statement 14, “Having to start reading the book earlier in the summer in order to blog helped me get all my reading done before going back to school.”

Table 4. Blog’s Influence on Reading Pace (n=5)

Post-Project Survey Statements	Results
<p>13. Because I had to blog about parts of the book throughout the summer vacation, I began my reading right away.</p>	<p>2 Strongly Agree 1 Agree 2 Disagree</p>
<p>14. Having to start reading the book earlier in the summer in order to blog, helped me get all my reading done before going back to school.</p>	<p>1 Strongly Agree 2 Agree 1 Neither Agree nor Disagree 1 Strongly Disagree</p>
<p>15. Usually, I stretch my summer reading over the course of the summer vacation, and blogging about the reading at several intervals during vacation fit well with my usual reading pace.</p>	<p>1 Strongly Agree 1 Agree 1 Neither Agree nor Disagree 1 Disagree 1 Strongly Disagree</p>

Although these answers indicate the blog had a positive value for helping students begin their summer reading, the results of item 15 indicate varied perceptions of the blog's influence on their usual reading paces. I cannot infer from the data how the blog timeline may have actually influenced the reading pace. The two respondents who indicated that the blog timeline did not agree with their usual pace of reading might have been the students who, in the pre-project survey, showed they tend to procrastinate on their reading, or they might have been students who prefer to finish a book quickly at the beginning of summer and then put it aside for the remainder of summer.

Later in this chapter, I show that one interviewee indicated she does usually read a book all at once, but the bi-weekly blog prompts changed her pacing. Still, I wish I had thought of adding a statement to the post-project survey such as "Even though I knew I would be using the blog, I procrastinated on the summer reading" or "The blog interfered with my usual pace of reading a book quickly by spreading questions on the book through the entire vacation" to give more clarity of the blog's influence on reading pace.

Peer learning behaviors while blogging. Table 5 illustrates the participants' perceptions regarding the blog's role in peer learning. It shows items on the post-project survey that were helpful for analyzing the participants' perceptions of how peer learning was accomplished.

Table 5. Perceptions of Peer Learning Experience (n=5)

Post-Project Survey Statements	Results
18. My classmates and I discussed summer reading more thoroughly than we would have if we had not blogged.”	2 Strongly Agree 2 Agree 1 Neither Agree nor Disagree
19. When I did not understand something in my summer reading, I used the blog to ask fellow students for help.	2 Agree 1 Neither Agree nor Disagree 2 Disagree

Originally, I predicted that construction of knowledge for the participants would be accomplished through one-on-one messaging between individual students at the blog site. However, the discussion entries show only two participants ever commented to one another personally. Still, as shown in Table 5, four of the five respondents agreed with statement 18, “My classmates and I discussed summer reading more thoroughly than we would have if we had not blogged.” In spite of this assertion, amongst the same five respondents, for statement 19 only two claimed they used the blog to ask fellow students for help with understanding something. One participant neither agreed nor disagreed, and the two other respondents disagreed they used the blog to ask others for help with understanding the reading. Also, four of the five respondents indicated they did not discuss the book with peers outside of the blog.

Considering these responses, and in looking at the actual blog discussion entries, it seems possible some respondents found the posts on the blog helpful for their own thinking about the reading rather than as a venue for personally sharing information with their peers. As I will show in Chapter 5, many participants did not reach out to another particular student on the blog. The answer choices to item 18 of the post-project survey shows four of the five respondents felt they were in a

discussion on the blog, although only two of them had actually engaged in one-on-one interaction.

Attitudes toward using teacher direction and the Internet for peer learning while doing summer reading. The post-project survey results in Table 6 indicate generally positive attitudes toward participation in the blog while doing summer reading. For unknown reasons, only four of the five respondents to the survey completed this section, which was located on the last page. The four respondents disagreed with item 20 which explored whether they felt shy and uncomfortable on the blog. This item was important for establishing that participants had felt comfortable on the blog.

Table 6 shows two respondents agreed with statement 21, “Blogging was a convenient way to ask classmates questions and share knowledge about summer reading.” Two participants neither agreed nor disagreed with that statement, perhaps showing that half felt ambivalent about the convenience of blogging. Since two students directly interacted with one another on the blog, they may have been the two who confirmed item 21. Again, I have no way of identifying my respondents, a limitation of my study.

Table 6. Enjoyment and/or Appreciation for the Blog (n=4)

Post-Project Survey Statements	Results
21. Blogging was a convenient way to ask classmates questions and share knowledge about the summer reading.	1 Strongly Agree 1 Agree 2 Neither Agree nor Disagree
22. Participating in the blog was enjoyable all or most of the time.	1 Agree 3 Neither Agree nor Disagree
23. Having a researcher give focus topics through the summer reading blog helped me understand the reading.	1 Strongly Agree 1 Agree 1 Neither Agree nor Disagree One Non-Respondent
24. I probably would have learned just as much about the book reading it by myself with no blog discussion with classmates.	2 Disagree 2 Strongly Disagree
25. Contact with my classmates and a researcher by blogging was beneficial for completing my summer reading.	3 Agree 1 Disagree
26. If I had the opportunity, I would choose to blog about summer reading again next summer.”	4 Agree

Three of the four respondents, however, chose “neither agree nor disagree” to answer statement 22, “Participating in the blog was enjoyable all or most of the time,” while only one agreed with that statement. Possibly, because the participants may have perceived the blog as schoolwork, they were reluctant to categorize the experience as “enjoyable.”

Overall, the respondents indicated the blog enhanced their understanding of their reading. However, only three respondents answered item 23, “Having a researcher give focus topics through the summer reading blog helped me understand the reading.” Two agreed with the statement and one neither agreed nor disagreed. Since only two of the participants gave credit to me in item 23 for aid in

understanding, this suggests the respondents may have been more grateful to their peers for helping them understand. This response may also reflect the fact that I gradually withdrew my support on the blog, according to methods explained by Brown (1987) and Vygotsky (1978) in Chapter 1. The students showed they felt they were learning from their peers in the next item on the post-project survey when they disagreed with item 24, “I probably would have learned just as much about the book reading it by myself with no blog discussion with classmates.”

For statement 25, “Contact with my classmates and a researcher by blogging was beneficial for completing my summer reading,” three agreed and one disagreed. The response to this item contributes to the overall picture showing most of the participants held positive views of the summer reading blog. Also of significance was when all four respondents agreed with statement 26, “If I had the opportunity, I would choose to blog about summer reading again next summer.” This answer offers an affirmation that the participants held appreciation for the summer reading blog.

Post-Project Interview Analysis

Following the completion of the blogging and post-project survey activities, I invited two of the project’s participants, both female, to participate in separate ten-minute interviews. I chose Participant #2 and Participant #7 because they volunteered for the interviews and they represented contrasting roles on the blog. In Chapter 5, the data results I present from the blog discussion entries will show that Participant #2 displayed the most blog activity during the study, posting 4,796 words and that Participant #7 displayed a much lower amount of activity with 862 words. From the interviews, I hoped to uncover any unanticipated information that might enhance my

understanding of what happened during the summer reading blog. The list of questions I prepared for the interviews beforehand is located in Appendix E.

Positive feedback for blogging and peer learning. Overall, both participants expressed positive feelings toward the blog and the project. They agreed they would like to participate in a summer reading or other educational blog again. Participant #2 noted: It kind of gave a jump start to your thinking because as you put questions on there, because without that...some of the parts of the book [pause]...like I wouldn't even have thought of digging deeper into a certain chapter, but when you put it on the blog it made me really think about it so it helps with my understanding of the book.

When the participant said "you," she was referring to my placement of prompts on the blog, which at one point included excerpts from literary criticisms.

Later, in my Chapter 5 discussion of the actual texts the students added to the blog, I show that Participant #2 posted the longest and most sophisticated responses to the prompts. When I asked her if the blog influenced her reading pace, she indicated it helped keep her "organized" but reading the book on time was not an issue for her.

When asked if she had any complaints about the blog, Participant #2 replied:

The only thing was, um, sometimes the blogging would take me a long time because I would want to make it a couple paragraphs and make it really in depth, so it would take me a little while. But the only thing was waiting for a response from someone else because some people didn't do it as quickly. So then I'd just have to wait a little while, but everything else was fine.

The above response indicates her conscious efforts to go “in-depth” for the blog, underscoring her efforts to think critically. Also, her response indicates a mild frustration toward others who perhaps did not participate in the blog as steadily as she did. Although some students may wish to see more activity from their classmates during vacation, it will probably be important for educators to allow for students to have a fluctuating presence on the blog depending on their summer commitments. Some classmates simply may have been too busy with other activities to visit the blog as regularly as Participant #2, and an attractive feature of the blog for summer reading is in its asynchronous nature.

When asked to give an example of another student helping her on the blog, Participant #2 mentioned an interaction she had with Participant #1, the text of which I will present in my Chapter 5 analysis of the actual blog discussion entries. Participant #2 gave Participant #1 credit for a co-construction of knowledge:

I think it was [Participant #1] he helped me with, um, one of the like we had to analyze a character and Dorian Gray, the main character, was like a really in-depth character and I didn't understand one of the parts, um, parts of the chapter. And [Participant #1] helped me understand it by saying like what his insight was about it. And I think it had something to do with his influence on him like the evil influence. And I didn't quite understand it, so I asked [Participant #1] specifically and [Participant #1] wrote back to me and I understood it.

Here, Participant #2 described her efforts to seek help from Participant #1 and the way he helped her understand a part of a chapter. Although a formal interview with

Participant #1 was never achieved, I later informally asked Participant #1 about his interactions on the blog. He, too, expressed a positive view toward the opportunity to discuss the novel with Participant #2.

The interview with Participant #2 also gave some insight to the perception of the amount of work associated with blogging as opposed to the journaling assignment, which was the non-participants' alternative to the blog. She said,

I heard that the journal was less, ah, less involved than the blog but the blog helped me understand it more so the journal wouldn't help me as much as the blog did so I probably would do it again. I wasn't sure whether there would be a test when I got back or something so I was able to understand it really deeply. And, the Socratic seminar--when we got back to school, I had these responses to my blog that really helped me so I was able to analyze everything in the book.

From this information, I see Participant #2's perception that the blog offered deeper understanding than keeping a journal would. The non-participants who wrote in journals instead had been expected to respond prompts similar to the four prompts I posted on the blog. When Participant #2 referred to having her "responses to my blog" she was describing how she utilized another convenience presented by a blog—the ability to download the discussion entries for future analysis and use, much like I did for this study.

Once back in school, Participant #2's independent comparisons between blog discussion entries and other students' journals may have revealed another bonus of the blog. While journaling involved simply writing one's own thoughts, the blog had

given its participants the added benefit of seeing what others had to say to the prompts. Reading others' views may have influenced the thinking of the students who posted on the blog later. This I will discuss further in Chapter 5 when I review the blog transcript data.

A keyboarder's delight. My interview with Participant #7, a student who posted only the four required responses on the blog, revealed she liked the blog. She expressed her preference for typing on the computer versus writing by hand for a journal or in class:

I just prefer typing. I think I write a lot more. Because I think when I have to do, like, writing and stuff for English class and I have to write it in a journal, I end up getting tired or whatever and my hand just cramps and I'm just rushing to finish it. But when I'm like, just typing I can just go back and not cross out and stuff, and I can just fix it.

This preference for keyboarding by many adolescents was noted by Richardson (2009) in my Chapter 2 arguments regarding the benefits of digital technology. In fact, when asked if she could think of any drawbacks to the blog, Participant #7 replied, "Not really."

Next, Participant #7 summarized her practice of viewing the responses of her peers when she said, "I liked how I could see others' responses cause it kind of helped me, um, think of things in a way I wouldn't have before if I hadn't seen what they had written." Her comment correlates to Participant #2's perception that using journals offers less understanding than the blog along with the fact that she said the journals "wouldn't help me as much as the blog."

My interview with Participant #7 gave some important support for my theory that the blog might have an influence on a steady reading pace. I asked her, “Did knowing you were going to blog about the book on a regular basis help keep you reading it?” She responded:

Yeah. A lot of times I’d either do it at the very beginning of the summer or the very end of the summer and cram it all in, but I felt that since you posted them at different times that when you post it, that that’s when I should do it. And it was like within a couple weeks, each one, so I felt like I had time away from it but like then I could focus on it.

Participant #7’s answer indicates she would ordinarily complete a summer reading book quickly at the beginning or the end of summer when she would “cram it all in.” However, the blog changed her pacing to getting “away from it” and then focusing on the reading periodically to go with the bi-weekly prompts.

It is important to note the discussion entries showed Participant #7 never interacted directly with any of her peers. Therefore, the references to the “others’ responses” refers to their posted answers to the teacher’s prompts. This interview response contributed to the evidence that she and other participants apparently saw all the entries on the blog as peer “discussion” whether or not they were commenting to one another directly. Also, her statement, “it kind of helped me, um, think of things in a way I wouldn’t have before if I hadn’t seen what they had written” serves as an example of the blog providing scaffolding for learning.

Chapter 4 Summary

The pre-project survey data described nine high school grade 11 honors students who had been successful in completing summer reading in the past, while six of them indicated they might have procrastinated in doing it. Seven of the students felt the blog would be a very convenient way to discuss summer reading and five expressed excitement toward the blogging project. They all had Internet access in their homes and more than half were using the Internet for social purposes.

Only five of the seven blogging participants responded to the post-project survey. Two respondents experienced some technical difficulties during the blogging process, but all indicated they had successfully posted responses to the four prompts on the blog. Three post-project survey respondents agreed the blog helped them get all their reading done before returning to school, with two indicating that blogging interfered with their usual reading pace. The anonymity of the respondents and a lack of an appropriate statement on the post-project survey prevented me from determining the blog's influence for setting a steady reading pace for the summer reading. However, Participant #7 clearly stated in her interview that her usual pace of reading was disrupted by the blog. As a participant in the blog, she felt she should do the reading when I posted the bi-weekly prompts and not get through her book quickly at the beginning or end of summer when she would "cram it all in."

Despite the fact that only two participants engaged in one-to-one discussion, four of the respondents indicated they discussed summer reading more thoroughly with their classmates than if they had not blogged. I propose their perceptions of "discussion" stems from their ability to read one another's responses to the prompts.

Although only one of the four respondents found participation in the blog to be “enjoyable all or most of the time” three of the respondents found that contact on the blog with their classmates and the teacher was beneficial for completion of the summer reading. All four of the respondents agreed they would blog about summer reading again next summer if given the chance.

The post-project interview with Participant #2, who participated in one-to-one peer discussions on the blog, indicated that a fellow student helped her understand something about a chapter. Participant #2 also indicated that the students not participating in the blog felt the journal assignment was “less involved,” but that journaling would not help her “as much as the blog did.” She credited the blog for helping her to be “able to understand it really deeply.”

The post-project interview with Participant #7 revealed that the ability to type increases the length of her responses, because she knows she rushes when having to write by hand. She also liked being able to fix her errors when typing without having to cross out, as with handwriting. Although she never participated in one-to-one peer interaction, she showed she benefitted from peer interaction in her comments, saying she “liked how I could see others’ responses” and “think of things in a way I wouldn’t have before.”

The complementary data in Chapter 4 yielded insights on the study’s participants both before and after the blogging project was completed. In Chapter 5, I will present the findings from the main branch of the data generated through the students’ writing on the blog.

CHAPTER FIVE

STUDY RESULTS

Blog Transcript Analysis

In this chapter, I will present the results and my analysis of the central data generated in my study through the blog discussion entries. A focus for my study posed in Chapter 1 was the question, “Did blogging help students in their construction of meaning through peer learning?” Chapter 4 partially answered this question because the complementary data revealed the respondents’ generally positive feedback about learning on the blog. However, the complementary data can only represent the perceptions of the participants, so now I will triangulate these findings with what the blog actually demonstrates about the participants’ peer learning.

Engagement in the Blogging Process

In deconstructing the data produced from the blog, my first step was to observe the degree of activity on the blog. I had proposed the blog as a strategy for sustaining learning during summer; therefore, I wanted to measure how often each student interacted on it. I accomplished this by charting the number of weeks the participants posted work during the project’s 8-week term. The data in Table 7 show that this participation ranged between two and five weeks. Although all the participants responded to the four prompts I posted bi-weekly, they did this in various time frames, such as in the space of five visits or only two.

Table 7. Weekly Participation on the Blog (n=7)

	Total weeks	Total Posts per student	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8
#1 Male	5	6	√			√		√ √	√	√
#2 Female	4	9			√		√ √	√ √	√ √ √	
#3 Female	3	4				√			√ √	√
#4 Male	4	4			√	√		√		√
#5 Female	2	5			√ √				√ √ √	
#6 Female	2	4					√			√ √ √
#7 Female	4	4			√	√		√	√	
Total		36	1	0	5	4	3	6	11	6

As can be observed from Table 7, Participant #1 was active longest, for five of the weeks, while two participants, Participants #5 and #6, were only active for two of the weeks. The average length of participation on the blog was 3.4 weeks. The least active time for the blog occurred in the first two weeks of summer with only one student involved Week 1. There was no activity at all in Week 2, but in Week 3 four participants posted on the blog. Altogether, the measure of blog activity shown in Table 7 indicates the participants posted a total of 36 times on the blog.

The asynchronous nature of the blog allowed Participants #5 and #6 to catch up on work after taking several weeks off. As can be seen in Table 7, they each posted three responses in a single session in the last two weeks of summer. In fact, all the participants except one, Participant #4, posted more than one response at a time at least once during the blogging project. This practice most likely interfered with the effect of my four phases of support, but I have no way of measuring the results my gradual withdrawal of support had on students responding to multiple prompts at once.

Participant #2, one of the females I interviewed, posted nine times, which was the greatest number of posts on the blog. Participant #2 also posted the most content on the blog, which I will explain in detail later in this chapter. No student posted less than the four responses to the four prompts given on the blog. As mentioned in Chapter 4, I also selected Participant #7 from my volunteers for a post-project interview since she contrasted with Participant #2 in posting fewer times on the blog.

Although Weeks 3-5 reflected some activity, Table 7 shows that participation on the blog increased during Weeks 6-8. Week 7 was the busiest time with 11 posts created on the blog. The data do not provide insights into the actual reasons for the increased activity during these weeks, but perhaps participants who had procrastinated were trying to complete their prompts before returning to school. The reality may be that the students were simply too busy for blogging prior to the last two weeks of summer. I have no data to support assumptions. Nevertheless, my analysis of the weeks the participants posted on the blog provided me with the valuable insight that the blog offered learning opportunities for no fewer than two of the eight weeks of summer vacation, with for an average of 3.4 weeks.

Evidence of peer learning. Since I predicted a summer reading blog might facilitate constructive learning opportunities for the participants, I next examined peer-learning behaviors as evidenced in the writing on the blog. Based on my research of literature summarized in Chapters 1 and 2, I determined peer interaction could lead to the co-construction of meaning between blog participants. To aid my analysis of evidence of peer interaction, I studied the blog discussion entries to help me count the number of times participants posted, the times I observed the participants directly

commented to a particular peer on the blog, the number of words posted, and the average lengths of the posts. Table 8 is a summary of this analysis.

Table 8. Posts, Direct Peer Interactions, and Word Counts on the Blog

Participant # and Gender	Number of Posts	Direct Peer Interactions	Total No. of Words	Avg. Length of Blog Posts
#1 Male	6	2	1743	291
#2 Female	9	3	4796	533
#3 Female	4	0	525	131
#4 Male	4	0	710	178
#5 Female	4	0	604	151
#6 Female	4	0	866	217
#7 Female	4	0	862	216

All the participants showed similarities in that both genders averaged the same number of entries (five), although the females' average word count was somewhat higher, mostly because Participant #2's total word count of 4,796 was nearly seven times (6.7) that of the total average word count of her female peers at 714 words. Participant #2's average length for a post, at 533 words, was three times (2.994) the average of the entries of the other females' 178 words. Male Participant #4 shared this average word count of 178, as well. However, for the males, Participant #1's average post length of 291 words was 61% greater than those of his solitary male peer.

Table 8 also shows that all the participants responded to the teacher's prompts. However, only two of the seven made direct comments to one another. One male and one female, Participants #1 and #2, interacted directly twice. As I predicted, the students produced a co-construction of knowledge from this exchange. Evidence of the co-construction of knowledge is presented in the following excerpt. When blog

examples from the discussion entries are presented in this chapter, I have placed the symbol ----- where I have deleted the students' names and replaced it with [Participant #'s Name] to indicate the referenced student.

Participant #2 to Participant #1: ----- [Participant #1's Name], I definitely agree with you. Henry wasn't completely evil, but he did have a huge influence on the corruption of Dorian. Even at the beginning of the novel, when Henry went to the studio to see Dorian's portrait, Basil warned Henry that he didn't want him to corrupt Dorian.

In the first part of Participant #2's post, shown above, she agrees with #1 and then seems to be restating his idea, that Henry wasn't completely evil. As Fairclough (1995) suggests in his views on intertextuality, this is normative discourse for a literary discussion. It mimics steps a teacher might take in a classroom.

Next, Participant #2 used textual support to clarify a point she makes about Henry, using the analogy of Dorian being a "guinea pig:"

Throughout the novel, I noticed that Henry ended up doing more of the "talking" instead of "doing". He would instill his ideas into Dorian and kind of use him as his own guinea pig.

Making an analogy to make a point is a critical thinking strategy described by Webb (2008) that I mentioned in Chapter 3 as one of the criteria I would apply for finding examples of critical thinking in the blog entries. Finally, after clearly acknowledging Participant #1's thoughts, and clarifying these by creating her own analogy, Participant #2 asks a question of Participant #1, and politely ends with her appreciation:

You said that Dorian blamed various influences, such as Basil, Henry, and Henry's novel. I didn't really understand what the yellow book was. Oscar Wilde said that it became like a "bible" to Dorian. Do you have any thoughts or ideas about what the yellow book was and how it influenced Dorian?

Thanks!

As seen in the passage below, Participant #1 responds by first affirming Participant #2's views of Henry "doing the talking" and Dorian "the actions." Next, he shares his own interpretation that Dorian is so curious he does not behave like the "rational"

Basil:

Participant #1 to Participant #2: I think you have it right with Henry doing the talking and Dorian doing the actions. I would even go so far as to say Henry didn't want Dorian to do any of the actions that he ends up committing (I don't know how far you have read, so I don't want to spoil it.) Dorian's inner curiosity makes him open to Lord Henry while a rational person like Basil simply ignores his ideals.

Participant #2 earlier had cited Wilde, saying the book was "like a 'bible' to Dorian" and Participant #1 elaborates on that notion by explaining how Dorian kept multiple copies of the book. First, however, Participant #1 politely acknowledges Participant #2's confusion. By admitting that, at first, he also was confused about the book, he created the situated identity (Gee, 2005) of a peer rather than of an expert:

As for the book - I was confused at first until Wilde kept on mentioning them. I think the book was a source for some of Dorian's ideals. He gets multiple copies bound in different colors to fit his mood. No matter what his mood - he

still is reading the same text showing that he is always in the mood for the ideas. Later on in the book he blames Henry for giving him the text but it was his own choice to read it. I think that Dorian himself secretly desires the knowledge and Henry and the book are simply the provider.

As shown in the above selections, Participant #2 directly asked Participant #1 to help explain the yellow book and then Participant #2 responded by sharing his ideas on the meaning of the book. Through these comments, the students shared their views on Dorian, Henry, and other characters, as well, which helped them to understand things about the book not asked in the teacher's prompts. Also, I see Participant #1's comment about not wanting to "spoil it for you," as possibly encouraging his peer to continue the reading.

Since blogging can be considered to be a form of "discourse," then Participant #2 was the most loquacious member of the group. Besides making reciprocal comments to Participant #1 a second time, she commented to the teacher twice and commented to another female peer who never responded to her. Participant #2 was eager to share her thoughts with others, and as mentioned in my discussion of the post-project interview, Participant #2 was somewhat dismayed her fellow students were not as active on the blog as she. In fact, she suggested perhaps making stricter requirements for posting on future blogs. However, setting consequences for not doing schoolwork at required times during summer would necessitate careful consideration, as vacation is often considered to be an important time of freedom from schoolwork.

Despite my repeated online requests that the participants make more of an effort to interact in their comments, directed peer interactions to particular students

were limited. One participant, Participant #3, even ignored a direct comment from Participant #2, who agreed with her on something and sent a direct reference to page 59 in their book:

----- [Participant #3's Name], I completely agree with you. If Lord Henry hadn't insisted on meeting Dorian Gray, there wouldn't be much of a plot to the novel. I found a quote on page 59 that illustrates how Lord Henry felt about his influence on Dorian: "Lord Henry watched him with a subtle sense of pleasure. How different he was now from the shy, frightened boy he had met in Basil Hallward's studio! His nature had developed like a flower, had borne blossoms of scarlet flame. Out of its secret hiding-place had crept his Soul, and Desire had come to meet it on the way."

The comments between Participants #1 and # 2, and Participant # 2's comment to Participant #3 provide examples supporting Almasi's (1995) feeling that more "utterances" and richer dialogues can be found in peer discussions. For a second time, but to this different peer, Participant #2 makes the analogy of Dorian as Lord Henry's "guinea pig" and she adds her impression of how Henry might appear in a movie. Her comments show she is reaching out to her peer using connections students in her age group easily understand:

(If this book were a movie, I could definitely picture Lord Henry sitting there with this really evil laugh). Anyway, it was almost like Lord Henry was using Dorian as his own pet guinea pig in an experiment. In this scene of the novel, Lord Henry realized how much of an influence he had on him, and that his plan of the "new Hedonism" was working.

As shown above, Participant #2's analogies are examples of rich, elaborative techniques that provide her fellow teen visual stimulation and connections. Her own critical thinking skills are at work helping her make references and build analogies to help her peers understand her thoughts.

Although Participant #2 was agreeing with something Participant #3 had posted in her response to the teacher's prompt, and she did not pose a question, one still might expect Participant #3 to make some type of direct reply. However, I have no way of knowing if Participant #3 even read this comment from #2. Even if she did read the comment, in retrospect, perhaps my social expectation that she should reply is based on my pre-biased understanding of face-to-face discussion etiquette. Such etiquette rules might be inappropriate in the case of asynchronous blogging activities. Perhaps Participant #3's lack of response shows she just does not feel any social pressure to affirm Participant #2's comment on the blog.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, according to Cameron (2001) discourse analysis provides many facets of information from social norms to knowledge about human communication and organization. She wrote of discourse analysis, "It is both about language and about life" (p. 17). An implication that stems from this incident for future studies on educational blogs is the importance of examining in more detail the social interaction norms observed by adolescents. Understanding these norms may help with developing best practices to foster peer learning.

Although Participant #2 was particularly adept at personally reaching out to her peers, my continuation of analysis of the blog entries revealed that instances of less overt, but perhaps just as meaningful, peer interactions occurred for *all* the

participants on the blog. My repeated inspection of the blog texts showed other instances in which the participants used analogies and world and personal connections to elaborate their responses in ways accessible to the other participants. Participant #2 provided an example in her above comment to Participant #3, who did not send a reply; however, an example of Participant #3's elaboration techniques can be found in her posted response to my prompt asking about the nature of evil.

I had predicted students would pair themselves with specific peers at times to conduct one-to-one or small group peer discussions on the blog, but apparently many of the participants felt their responses posted on the blog itself comprised direct peer "discussion." Perhaps this is due to the fact the entire group of participants comprised a small number. When analyzing whether peer learning occurred on the blog, important implications from the post-project survey cannot be ignored. Of special interest is the fact that all the respondents agreed with statement 18, "My classmates and I discussed summer reading more thoroughly than we would have if we had not blogged."

Of equal importance is the fact that in the post interviews, although Participant #2 lamented a lack of reciprocation, Participant #7, who never posted a direct comment, expressed her appreciation for the interaction with her peers provided by the blogging. As Bogden and Biklen (1992) point out, the researcher becomes the interpreter for what is happening. My analysis of the complementary data, taken with the evidence of what the students wrote on the blog, leads to my conclusion that many instances of peer learning occurred. More examples will be presented in the next

section of this chapter, which examines critical thinking as shown in the writing on the blog.

Critical Thinking in the Blog Discussion Entries

As I explained in Chapter 3, my methodology included an examination for examples of critical thinking in the blog transcripts to support my research focus of determining if peer learning was accomplished through the summer reading blog. Prior to completing my qualitative analysis, I counted the number of blog interactions and total number of words per response to quantify the amount of writing the students produced. I summarize these quantities in Table 10. Obviously, my attempt to quantify the abstract qualities of “critical thinking” is unreliable. As I explained in Chapter 3, critical thinking, although greatly desired, is an elusive concept to describe.

Since Webb (2002) described DOK, depth of knowledge, relative to the critical thinking required to perform tasks, I applied his DOK models, along with Harvey and Goudvis’ (2000) engagement markers to help with my analysis. As I explained in Chapter 3, Webb’s DOK aligns with the rubric used by the school district for literary discussion, “Response to Literature Prose Generic Rubric”(RI Skills Commission, 2007). Additionally, I applied Potts (1994) concepts of skills related to the attributes of critical thinking.

The features of Table 10. In the last three columns of Table 10, I added the aspects of critical thinking I recognized in the patterns that emerged from my close scrutiny of the blog texts. These columns I entitled “Number of Quoted References to the Novel or Other Source,” Making Connections to the World or Self,” and

“Characteristics of Academic Language.” These aspects closely relate to the descriptors found in the response to literature rubric, presented below in Table 9.

Table 9. Blog Descriptors Corresponded to Rubric Descriptors

Table 10 Column Categories, Descriptors for blog entries	Descriptors from “Response to Literature Prose Generic Rubric”(RI Skills Commission, 2007)
Number of Quoted References to the Novel or Other Source”	“Selects and analyzes accurate information, connecting the text to prior knowledge, to oneself or to the broader world of ideas in order to advance relevant ideas or themes.” (Demonstrates Critical Thinking)
Making Connections to the World or Self	“Selects and analyzes accurate information, connecting the text to prior knowledge, to oneself or to the broader world of ideas in order to advance relevant ideas or themes.” (Demonstrates Critical Thinking)
Attributes of Academic Language	“Uses precise and descriptive language that clarifies and supports intent and establishes an authoritative voice.” (Establishes a Context)

In Table 10, I noted instances where the participants used references, because this act requires making a connection directly to the novel or another source of information to give explanations or support to one’s ideas. As explained in Chapter 3, critical thinking is necessary for this strategy, since the student must identify relationships between relevant pieces information to make these connections (Potts, 1994). An act similar to the act of making references occurs when students make connections from what they are reading to an event or situation in their lives, the world, or even history. Again, this requires reflection and critical analysis on the part of the participant.

Table 10. Attributes of Critical Thinking Within the Blog Entries

Participant # and Gender	# Of Posts on Blog	Total # of words used in Blog Prompt Responses	Number of Quoted References to the Novel and/or Other Source	Making Connections to World and/or Self	Attributes of Academic Language
Participant #1 Male	6	1,743 452-longest 229 shortest	1	3	Sophisticated academic words Interpretative discourse Rich elaboration and support No idle chat
Participant #2 Female	9	4,796 886-longest 252-shortest	7	2	Sophisticated academic word choice appropriately applied. Interpretative discourse Rich elaboration and support No idle chat
Participant #3 Female	4	525 173-longest 83-shortest	0	0	Mostly plot summary, but some academic word choice and some elaboration and support. No idle chat.
Participant #4 Male	4	710 251-longest 79-shortest	0	1	Formal voice. Some elaboration and support. No idle chat.
Participant #5 Female	4	604 229- longest 96-shortest	1	2	Formal voice. Some elaboration and support. Some use of analogies for explanations. No idle chat.
Participant #6 Female	4	866 316-longest 123-shortest	1	2	Formal voice. Elaboration and support. Uses rhetorical questioning (unanswered by blog mates) No idle chat.
Participant #7 Female	4	862 378-longest 73-shortest	0	0	Formal voice Elaboration and support. No idle chat.

In Table 10, the final column entitled “Attributes of Academic Language” summarizes the participants’ writing style and types of discourse I detected. The

presence of these attributes reflects aspects of the participants' critical analysis when I am applying the descriptors from the rubric shown in Table 9. I concluded each student provided at least some elaboration and support for their assertions. Five participants made connections to the world or to their personal lives to help explain their thinking, and used analogies or examples from their own lives to elaborate on their ideas. These efforts demonstrate the critical thinking rubric descriptor, "Selects and analyzes accurate information connecting the text to prior knowledge, to oneself or to the broader world of ideas in order to advance relevant ideas or themes." Also, according to Potts and Webb's DOK, finding analogies and relationships are skills related to critical thinking.

Also in this column, I have listed the attributes of each participant's "situated identity or voice" which I described in Chapter 2. According to Gee (2005), the type of language and word choice used by a writer helps establish his or her image or identity. West (2008) described the students discussing literature on her blog as taking the situated identity of the "serious literature student" who applied a normative discourse for literary discussion. For example, giving elaboration and support for assertions, applying analogies for explanation, or questioning rhetorically, as the students did on my blog, conform to the expectations of literary discourse. Similarly, Fairclough's (1995) theory of intertextuality explains how texts may mirror other writing people have experienced or ways other texts may be applied in the process of making connections from one to another. In applying academic language on the blog, the students took a voice of formality, and their writing contained little or no idle chat, as is often present in conversation. They situated themselves with the identities of

serious literature students, possibly as an attempt to mirror my own situated identity, which was one of “serious literature expert.”

Quoted references on the blog. As summarized in Table 10, four of the seven participants included quoted references to support their views, integrating the quoted material into their own explanations. Several examples showing their references and my analysis are presented here:

Participant #2 wrote:

Dorian even says "How long will you like me? Till I have my first wrinkle, I suppose. I know, now, that when one loses one's good looks, whatever they may be, one loses everything" (Wilde 28).

Here, Participant #2 supports her ideas about Dorian’s vanity, which is a key weakness in his character. In her use of parenthetical documentation, the student has correctly applied writing conventions for making references.

Participant #5 used a quoted reference to capture the passionate urgency of Jonathan’s predicament when he realizes he has been trapped in Dracula’s castle. Participant #5 wrote, “Jonathan realizes that there is no way out of the castle, and that the ‘castle is a veritable prison, and I am a prisoner!’ (p.35)” These words express the fright and drama of the situation clearly and concisely. Here, too, the student has applied correct conventions for quoting references. Although the author’s name has been left out, the readers know from the context of the rest of the response, the student was quoting from his summer reading selection, *Dracula*.

In both of these cases, the participants illustrated their engagement with the reading by applying the author’s words intermingled with their own words of

explanation. To accomplish this task correctly, they had to find the specific quotes in their books and follow an academic protocol for formatting them.

Academic language in the writing. Although not requested by the teacher, all the participants in the blog used academic language in their entries, which they must have felt was more fitting for the purpose of an educational blog. I adopted the identity of a serious literature expert, so that may have influenced their situated identities. An example of the first prompt I made on the blog follows:

Time to join in your first blog of the year. The first topic I want you to blog about is your summer reading's main character. You will start your entry by telling us the title of the book you are reading, and then give us the main character's name followed by your own description of him/her. Include a quick description of the conflict: What obstacles have you seen your main character face? Please respond to at least one other student's blogging entry, also!

Although it was surprising the participants never used a personal, chatty style of language that is prevalent in texting by adolescents, I see how I might have set the tone for serious literature talk with my prompt. If I had adopted an informal writing style and informal wording, I might have set an informal tone for the blog. I have no way to find out if this assumption is true, however. Nevertheless, the writing on the blog demonstrates the students' flexibility for changing their voices, commensurate with purpose.

Adopting a particular voice for a purpose is a strategic thinking skill defined by Webb (2002) as it requires the analysis of one's audience—in other words, a consideration for who is reading the work. If I were to run a blog for students in

elementary school, I would not be using all the literary terms I did in the above passage. The concept of voice relates to how we “hear” the person’s identity through that person’s word choice in the writing. Conversely, the writer chooses how he or she wishes to be heard. The students’ rubric indicates writing that meets standard, “Uses precise and descriptive language that clarifies and supports intent and establishes an authoritative voice.” In my writing above, I reflect the “serious literature expert” in choosing words such as “main character,” “obstacles,” “description,” and “conflict.” These words follow the normative discourse rules for literary discussion described by Fairclough (2001).

Elaboration and support for assertions. Table 10 also shows there was a great variance in the length and breadth of the responses. No participant wrote less than 73 words for one post, while participant # 2 wrote 886 words in her longest post. As shown earlier, Participants #1 and #2 supplied especially rich elaboration and support for their answers, such as when Participant #1 wrote:

You can't tempt somebody with a cookie (that's a terrible analogy I know) unless they want the cookie - meaning that throughout the story Dorian is revealing more and more of his true nature while blaming it on various influences such as Basil, Henry and Henry's novel.

Although Participant #1 judged his analogy to be “terrible,” the analogy works because a cookie can be a tempting sweet that is difficult to ignore by those who love such treats. His analogy supports his efforts to explain how Dorian is responsible for succumbing to the temptation for something he wants, although Dorian attempts to blame others for his actions.

Participant #2 chose a similar analogy in her response describing Lord Henry's description of sensual indulgence:

Lord Henry told Dorian that you must savor every moment. In order to seek pleasure or indulgences, you must use all of your senses to create a complete image. For example, if you were to eat an ice cream cone, you wouldn't want to eat it so fast you couldn't even remember what color it was. Instead, you want to enjoy the treat slowly and take in each of the cone's characteristics.

The color, the smell, the texture, the temperature, and the taste all collaborate to make one big bundle of happiness.

By choosing an ice cream cone for her analogy, Participant #2 was able to illustrate the sensory "bundle of happiness" one can enjoy. She listed the sensual characteristics available from eating ice cream: "the color, the smell, the texture, the temperature, and the taste" giving the reader a clear picture of what Lord Henry means by the phrase "savor every moment." Most adolescents enjoy ice cream and they can easily relate to what it means to eat something so fast "you wouldn't even remember what color it was." In both of these instances, Participants #1 and #2 showed audience awareness, and although they applied formal academic language, they seemed to be especially cognizant their peers would be reading their responses when they made analogous connections to food items adolescents enjoy, cookies and ice cream. This is another sign of their critical thinking at work.

Narratives on the Blog

In the following discussion, I present examples of how the students blended academic strategies in their narratives on the blog. For instance, the way in which the

participants elaborated on the theme of evil as found either in *Dracula* or *The Picture of Dorian Gray* included the attributes of academic language while the students made personal connections and used the first person narrative voice, “I.” As Penrod (2007) pointed out, the narrative nature of blogs often leads to taking stances and supporting them. The following responses were linked to the last prompt, in which I asked the students to discuss the nature of evil. By this point, I had withdrawn my support on the blog. I was invisible to them except for my posting of Prompt #4, which was given to me by the students’ honors English teachers. The prompt asked the students to:

Examine the forces of evil. Why do you think there is evil in the world? Are others responsible when one commits an evil act? Can evil ever be eradicated from the world? Is it evil to follow orders that hurt innocents, for example as a soldier in war? Is evil always big, like rape, murder, and assault? Can there be “little evils,” like a cutting remark: Or, is all evil the same? Is it evil to think evil?

When she discussed the concept of evil, Participant #5 applied real world connections as shown in the following excerpt taken from her post on August 26, 2010:

...For example, a person smoking a cigarette knows the harm that they are bringing to themselves, but the real evil is the harm that they are bringing to other people around them. Another example is spreading a rumor that they know isn’t true, but say it anyways. I believe that these littler evils are as evil, or if even more, then [*sic*] evils such as rape, murder, or assault. Bigger

evils have harsher punishments, but many times, little evils go unnoticed, but have consequences.

Participant #5 made connections to the world known to adolescents by presenting the idea of cigarette smoking as an evil act bringing harm to others. False rumors also flourish in the world of adolescents; therefore, it is apparent Participant #5 has chosen to make a connection to a concept of evil her audience can understand. According to Webb (2002), strategic thinkers show they are aware of their audience. Also, by attempting to categorize levels for evil into “littler” and “bigger” and the subsequent consequences, Participant #5 offers a detailed description sharing her analysis of evil.

My next example shows how Participant #4, also using real world connections, talked about evil in terms of the harm a soldier at war must cause to others and contrasted this with the case of a member of a gang causing harm. On August 30, 2010, he wrote, “In the case of a soldier at war, it is fine to follow those orders, as it is war. However, in things like gangs, to follow an order to kill someone is evil because it is not necessary, like in war.” It is evident that Participant #4 feels that the act of killing can be placed in different categories of evil according to the premise for the act. Not only has the student reflected on killing based on his own beliefs, he drew upon his own world experiences, using the gang member to make connections he and his readers can understand. As described by Harvey and Goudvis (2000), this student has applied a concept in other contexts, an important marker of “strategic thinking” as described by Webb (2002).

As can be seen below, Participant #6 used rhetorical questioning to prompt the

thinking of her audience on August 30, 2010:

Many, many things are considered evil. The idea and meaning of evil changes from person to person, meaning that it can never be eradicated [*sic*] because what one person considers to be evil, another may not consider to be evil. Because there is not agreement among people about what evil is, nobody can be sure exactly what is evil and what is not. If there is no agreement on what is evil and what is not, how can it be totally erased from everyones [*sic*] lives?

Participant #6 recognized the many controversies about the nature of evil and wonders how it can be erased if it cannot be defined. This is a philosophical question for her classmates. I searched to see if any classmate posted anything that looked like a response to that question, and I found the following post, which was made by Participant #3, on September 1, 2010:

I think there is evil in the world because everybody has different beliefs, these beliefs contradict with each other so what may be evil to one person isn't evil to someone else. Because there are so many different types of people in the world there are all these different ideas so obviously some are thinking things that are considered bad, and may take them to the extreme and then they become 'evil.'

Participant #3, the same student whom I earlier described as never returning a comment to Participant #2, in the above case seems to be addressing the rhetorical question posted by #6. Taken together, these responses show how the students may have co-constructed meaning on the nature of evil. Participant #3 seems to be extending #6's thinking on "there is not agreement among people about what evil is,"

to her thought that “these beliefs contradict with each other.” Without Participant #6’s thoughts being posted asynchronously for a day, Participant #3 might never have had the opportunity to respond and extend her thinking. However, a limitation of my study is that I cannot support my assumptions that Participant #3 read Participant #6’s rhetorical question and was responding to it.

When examining the above posts collectively, I analyzed the possible interactions occurring among the participants. Participant #6’s explanation that people cannot agree on the definition of evil may have been sparked by #5’s premise that smoking may be considered an evil act, for example. Although I cannot support these assumptions, it is very possible the students were reading one another’s entries and responding to that thinking. The thread on the discussion of evil is an example of discourse that has gone much deeper than the surface talk often heard in the high school classroom. The participants took the time and space necessary to give ample support to their views of evil, and the blog soon seemed to grow into a forum for their discussion of opinions.

Expression of opinions. Although, the review of this study’s discussion entries generally confirm the findings of Fahy (2005) showing participants in higher learning online communities are polite and reluctant to express conflicting opinions, an evidence of varied opinions was shown when participants responded to the prompt asking “Why does evil exist?” A chronological sequence of excerpts taken from the discussion entries revealed the willingness of the participants to disagree with one another, although they never punctuated that fact with statements such as “I disagree.” As can be seen, the participants expressed opinions by posting the following responses

to the teacher's prompts. Dates are given in parentheses by each participant's identifying information to show the sequence of the posts. Participant #5 (8-26-10):

I do not believe that evil can ever be eradicated from the world. Because there are so many different types of evils, it would be like trying to cure an incurable disease. There are different ways to prevent evil, such as imprisonment or punishment, or for the littler evils, a simple apology, but for most evils, it cannot be stopped until after it happens.

Here Participant #5 compares trying to eradicate the "many different types of evils" to "trying to cure an incurable disease." She makes an insightful analogy as "disease" shares a negative connotation with evil, and a disease such as cancer has so many different strains, no one treatment can be designed to eradicate it. A day later,

Participant #7 posted her response to the prompt. Participant #7 (8-27-2010):

No I don't think evil can ever be eradicated from the world because there are so many different types of evil things that occur. Also to stop all types of evil forever you would have to find a way to take all of the evil out of every person because there is a little evil in all of us.

Here, Participant #7 has agreed with the last student to an extent ("so many different types of evil"), however she added her view that "there is a little evil in all of us." Two days later, Participant #4 blames a "cycle" of evil on the fact of exposure to evil. He sees evil as never being eradicable because people will always be exposed to evil acts performed by others. Participant #4 (8-30-2010):

I think that it [evil] exists primarily because the people who commit evil acts have seen examples of it. If they were never exposed to anything bad, they

would not know that it exists and can be done.Also because of this, evil will never leave the world, because it is like a cycle.

The above excerpts show ways the participants politely and academically expressed disagreement on the sources of evil and ways of preventing it. They used the first-person “I” in expressing their opinions, noted as important by Penrod (2007) for showing they are taking a stand and defending it. Perhaps one-on-one interaction sent as a direct comment from just one of these participants to another one of these participants would have made them feel uncomfortable. Being able to post their responses as general responses to no one participant in particular, it is possible the participants felt less threatening to and/or threatened by their peers.

Altogether, my analysis of the blog discussion entries showed all the participants were engaged in thinking about their reading both academically and critically. A future study of an educational blog may seek to implement methods for instilling greater degrees of interaction by participants. Also, since I had no way of knowing when students were reading others’ responses or not, it might be helpful to arrange for the students to address one another directly if they were responding to another student. I will discuss these and other suggestions for future studies in Chapter 6.

Chapter 5 Summary

Seven students actually participated in the blogging, and all responded on the blog to the four prompts posted. The blog discussion entries revealed only two participants made direct peer interactions via comments to each other; yet, everyone

was free to read one another's responses to the prompts, so it is possible a co-construction or scaffolding for understanding occurred.

In general, the students had a lot to say on the blog. The shortest length for one post was 73 words while the longest post was 886 words. The lowest total number of words, used on the blog by a single participant, was 525, while another participant applied the highest total of 4,796 words.

Active participation in the blogging ranged between two and five weeks, the shortest participation range being two weeks for two participants. In the cases of only two weeks' participation, the first week of activity was separated by two-three weeks of inactivity. Participants used the asynchronous nature of blogging to catch up. One participant, who participated in the blog the most, was active for five of its eight weeks. The average time of participation on the blog was 3.43 weeks.

Analysis of the blog's content yielded evidence of critical thinking in all entries, including the application of academic language, quoted references given by four participants, connections from the text to the world and self by five participants, and elaboration and support for explanations on the part of all participants. The participants expressed their opinions although they did not disagree with specific comments by others.

I will link together the findings of Chapters 4 and 5 when I present my conclusions and implications in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Overview

In Chapter 2, I explained why many researchers feel the Internet offers invaluable opportunities for students to achieve a co-construction of learning. The venue of an educational blog provided a possible benefit for the students participating in my study. Mraz and Rasinski (2007) theorized that summer vacation often delays and/or regresses academic learning and literacy, particularly for students of low socio-economic status. I hoped to show that by blogging with students about their summer reading during vacation, a teacher might foster continued learning beyond the school's walls. Positive implications for blogging in summer would benefit both students and their teachers. Through summer blogs, students might lead literate lives through the summer, and their teachers would benefit in the fall by receiving students who do not need to be re-taught things they learned the previous year.

This small study, applying the methodology of a constructivist-interpretist, provided an initial step toward looking at what can occur within a summer vacation's educational blog. As a teacher having used a summer reading blog for high school juniors in the year prior to my proposal for this study, and witnessing the engagement and enthusiasm of my students, I wondered how I might carefully analyze a summer reading blog's educational implications.

There is little doubt that the possibilities afforded to educators by the Internet are endless. However, few or no educational researchers have explored the opportunities for using the Internet to communicate with and among high school

students during summer vacation. The study I created for adolescents to stay in touch through a blog and discuss their summer reading was largely qualitative in nature; the focus grew from my prior research on constructivism, peer learning, critical thinking, and engagement. The methodology I used called for me to analyze how the students' written messages may have been shaped by the context of the blog, as well as how their interactions might have led to their constructs of knowledge.

I aimed to crystallize my understanding by first giving the students a pre-project survey to help determine their prior experiences with Internet usage, summer reading, and peer learning. Next, I launched the blogging activities, releasing bi-weekly teacher prompts on the reading to which they would post responses. I encouraged the students to make one-to-one comments to each other, and I gradually withdrew my own supporting comments to see how students would interact without my presence on the blog.

To aid my analysis throughout the process, the discussion entries from all the blogging activities were available for downloading. I kept journal notes on my thoughts and any other points that might prove helpful to my thinking. I sorted and categorized the types of comments made by the students. I counted words, analyzed the posting dates, and over and over again, I reviewed the meaning of what had been written. After the blogging activity was completed, to further crystallize, I conducted a post-project survey to help determine the students' experiences and attitudes toward the blogging activities. Finally, I interviewed two students who had displayed contrasting amounts of participation on the blog. In this final chapter, I will synthesize and analyze the data results I presented in Chapters 5 and 6, and I will use the analysis

to develop a rationale for this study's significance and implications for future studies. Below, I will delineate my discussion topics by beginning with each of my research focus questions.

Research Findings

A Worthwhile Experience

Research Focus #1: Did blogging provide the students with a worthwhile educational experience that would make them want to continue blogging in the future?

This study encourages future studies on blogging about summer reading because all the respondents to the post-project survey and the post-project interviews reported they felt they learned more through blogging than they would have when reading their books independently. Also, the respondents indicated, if given the chance, they would join another blog for their summer reading in the future. These conclusions are drawn from the complementary data presented in Chapter 4, which provided foundational underpinnings for my lengthy qualitative analysis discussion of the blog discussion entries in Chapter 5. The discussion entries yielded important findings regarding the learning opportunities offered by the blog.

Influence on Reading Pace

Research Focus #2: Did blogging help to engage students in a steady reading pace so learning would continue through the summer?

The complementary data and blog transcript data yielded unclear conclusions as to the influence the blog held on the participants' reading habits. Although some students indicated the blog interfered with their regular pace of reading, I found that a

limitation of the post-project survey was I had not developed an adequately worded statement to provide a clear answer to my question. The respondents saying the blog interfered with their regular reading habits might simply be rapid readers who did not enjoy having to return to the reading discussion of the same book all summer long. Conversely, those respondents saying the blog interfered with their regular reading paces may have been those who prefer to procrastinate on summer reading and the blog interfered by demanding their thoughts on the reading before they would ordinarily wish to tackle the book.

When the post-project survey data did not provide me with clear answers, I examined the data in the blog to see if that might yield me more understanding. While looking at the weekly participation charts provided in Table 7, I realized that even the student who took longest to join the blog had joined it three weeks prior to school's reopening. Therefore, apparently no students procrastinated on their reading to the very end of summer, and it is very possible the blog had something to do with that.

Participant #7's interview answer indicated the blog caused her to read the book sporadically to go with the blog prompts. Participant #2, the other interview subject, said the blog helped her keep organized but it did not affect her reading pace. However, I have no way of knowing whether the other students adopted a reading pace that coincided with the prompts.

The blog texts revealed that only one student was active on the blog for as long as five weeks; the average length of activity on the blog was 3.4 weeks. If the students were only reading while active on the blog, this period of time would be a disappointment for a teacher hoping to foster literate behavior throughout summer

vacation. However, this might be reading time that could be lost without the blog's influence. I do not have enough data to answer these questions. A researcher in the future may develop a more effective design for the examination of a summer reading blog's influence on reading pace.

Peer Learning

Research Focus #3: Did blogging help students in their constructs of meaning through peer learning?

The results of my study provided evidence the adolescents in my blog interacted both individually and collectively, and my data provided examples of their exchanges of knowledge. The activity on the blog was in varying degrees. Once on the blog, all the participants utilized critical thinking skills, though participation varied widely. Surprisingly, the situated identities the students established on the blog were of "serious literature students" as described by West (2008). The participants' writing was academic and serious in tone. Contrasted by the informal "texting" style of discourse they might have utilized, the academic stance the students chose may have contributed to the serious analysis evidenced in their responses.

Also seen in the discussion entries and confirmed by the post-interview with Participant #2, two students directly aided one another in understanding a chapter in their reading. Prior to this, Participants #1 and #2 had discussed an important character in the book, agreeing on his attributes. Although the interactive nature of the blog raised my expectations for multiple instances of one-to-one peer construction of learning through personal comments as applied by Participants #1 and #2, I found

evidence that the remaining students were possibly learning from reading one another's posted responses to the teacher's prompts.

In Chapter 5, I presented examples when students probably co-constructed knowledge from each other's posts by exchanging ideas and taking personal stances on why evil exists in the world. I proposed that one-on-one disagreement, which would appear as a direct comment from one of these students to another one of these students, had been avoided for the sake of comfort. However, the ability to post their responses as a general statement to no one student in particular possibly made the students feel less threatening to or threatened by others when expressing their opinions. Later in this chapter, I will reiterate implications from this finding for a future study to examine the best ways of helping students express their personal opinions.

In the post-survey, the majority of the respondents showed they perceived they had learned on the blog. Their answers to statement 24 revealed all the respondents expressed confidence they had "learned more than they would have by themselves with no blog activities." Four of five of the participant respondents agreed they had discussed summer reading more thoroughly than they would have if they had not joined the blog, and Participant #7 indicated in her post-interview that she learned by reading other students' entries. Obviously, these participants felt they were engaged in a "discussion" on the blog, although only two of them actually participated in one-on-one interaction. Their responses to the prompts were posted for the entire community to read, and in this context, it is very possible they were sharing their ideas, although I have no way of confirming when the students did or did not read other students' posts.

Evidently, the majority of the students did not feel a pressing need to ask more questions of one another or to interact beyond what they read and posted for the prompt responses. A possible reason might be due to a common practice in classroom discussions, where many students are accustomed to assuming the roles of observers and listeners, rather than participating. On the other hand, requiring students to post responses to prompts on a blog provided a forum for all the students' voices. This type of interaction cannot be achieved for the observers and listeners in a classroom setting, where some students always remain silent. An implication from this conclusion is the exciting finding that students may construct knowledge even from the most basic blog activities. Posting one's own work and reading the work of others on a blog during summer reading fosters peer learning, an important benefit for students and their teachers in summer.

Critical thinking. Paired with my focus on peer learning were questions on critical thinking. My methodology called for me to identify elements that would serve as markers of critical thinking by the students in the blog, in order to identify the degree of learning that occurred. For my analysis of critical thinking, I chose to use Harvey & Goudvis (2000), Potts (1994), and Webb's (2002) descriptive markers, as well as the school district's rubric for literary analysis. These included adopting the academic language for literary analysis, using quoted references, making connections to personal experiences and to the larger world, and providing elaboration and support for assertions.

I suspected the students might use informal language, a "chatty style" on the blog, and I was ready to grapple with understanding their meaning. I thought of blogs

as less formal and more likely to elicit the casual behaviors often observed in social networking, something the pre-project survey showed most had experienced before. Surprisingly, my analysis of the blog texts revealed the participants never adopted an informal style of language. Evidently, they viewed my blog as strictly for educational purposes and inappropriate for personal chatting.

However, even beyond their constant use of serious language, the nature of the students' blog entries was highly academic. The voice of this language reflected a serious tone and stance on the blog, which possibly encouraged deeper thinking than what may have occurred when informally chatting, a reason academic language may signal critical thinking. Later, I will discuss how a future study on the meanings expressed in formal versus informal language on an educational blog would enhance this understanding.

Delving into the authors' actual words, much as I had done for my analysis of the blog, helped the students reflect on and analyze their reading to seek and gain support for their assertions. As reported in Chapter 5, the discussion entries showed four of the seven participants included quoted references to support their views. They supplied page numbers for their peers and wrote the quotes word for word, using quotation marks according to academic writing conventions. Also, five students made connections to the world or their personal lives to help explain their thinking, other elements of critical thinking described in my methodology.

Although Participants #1 and #2 supplied especially rich elaboration and support for their ideas, there was a great variance in the length and breadth of the responses. No student wrote less than 73 words for one post, while Participant #2

wrote 886 words in her longest post. Still, my analysis showed the 73-word response to be quite sufficient for the student's focused expression of her views on the topic, while the 886 words of rich articulation supplied by Participant #2, went far beyond normal expectations.

In spite of the contrasting lengths of the posts, I found myself comparing the deep meaning of what was written in 73 words, to what might typically be heard during classroom discussion. Drawing upon my 26 years of experience as a veteran teacher and, later, as a teacher evaluator, I know few students in a classroom setting would be likely to share 73 words of their thoughts in a discussion. In this context, there is no wonder the participants in the blog felt they learned from each other, if, in fact, they were reading each other's entries. My attempts to compare the words spoken by students in classroom discussion and those expressed on the blog offer another focus for a future study which might make comparisons between blogging discussion and classroom discussion.

Varying Engagement on the Blog

Chapter 4 shows all seven students participating in the study posted responses to all four prompts given by the teacher. However, even by offering eight weeks of blogging opportunities through this study, the longest interaction by any student on the blog amounted to five weeks of presence on the blog. I was disappointed to see that even this student went without the educational blog for three weeks of the 8-week period. In fact, the shortest period of two weeks' engagement on the blog by two of the students could raise some concerns regarding the blog's influence on their summer

learning. After all, they took six weeks off. Yet, it could be argued that two weeks of critical thinking and peer learning in summer are better than none at all.

In a post-project interview, one student suggested removing the bi-weekly prompt from the blog before posting the next one, so students would know they had a deadline for completion. Deadlines are often effective for encouraging the submission of work; however, I feel deadlines would be a detriment to the asynchronous benefit of the blog. A student might be away at summer camp or on a trip, preventing active participation until a later date. The opportunity to jump on and off the blog when convenient is a positive attribute that would be diminished by deadlines. Another method for encouraging more instances of participation on the blog might be to give the students extra points for completing prompts in a timely manner, but again, that might be an unfair consequence for those unable to participate in a “timely manner.” Perhaps it is important not to have the students feel too pressured, as, after all, they are on summer vacation. A future study of blogging in summer might look at various incentives for encouraging continuous involvement with the blog.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations to this study that call for more research to examine blogging about summer reading. Obvious limitations are that the investigation provided for only one small study conducted with one high school’s grade eleven honors students, who are not representative of the larger population. Only seven students actually participated in the blogging, and the time span encompassed only one summer vacation. The study of more cases might produce varied results, as this purposive sampling procedure decreased the generalizability of

my findings. One premise for the study was that blogging might potentially enhance literacy for the disadvantaged students really at-risk for negative academic consequences related to their summers, so future studies focused on that demographic seem very practical.

For the surveys, the self-report method may have produced findings contrary to what the students actually do. Also, since I assumed the role of participant-observer in this study, I conducted the survey and interviews. This could have affected the candor of the students, particularly in the interviews, where they had to interact face-to-face with the researcher. However, the purpose of the interviews was to provide only ancillary information to the major findings from the blog discussion entries. In addition, the blog discussion entries could not capture other forms of communication that may have occurred between the students regarding the summer reading.

Although I had conducted my own educational blog the previous summer, another limitation of my study was that I felt it necessary to work with other teachers' students to remove the perception I might be judging or grading the participant students in any way. This detachment detracted from my ability to form a teacher's relationship with the students that might be an important factor that might affect summer reading blogs offered by teachers to their own students. In several instances, I conjectured how a teacher could use the summer reading blog to foster relationships that would be important for future class interactions once summer ended. Possibly the relationships between the students on the study's blog were hindered by my own anonymity as a researcher, who as a participant-observer, wished to remain as inconspicuous as possible. A future study might use the teacher as a variable,

examining various actions and interactions a teacher may use to help develop a summer blog's effectiveness.

When reporting the results of my study, I have tried to be as candid as possible regarding the limitations of my data. There are times I was tempted to make assumptions that could not be supported by the data I had gathered, such as when I realized I did not include a reliable statement on the survey to help me see if the blog kept students from procrastinating on their reading. Also, my inability to determine for certain if the students on the blog were reading one another's posts or comments did limit my ability to be certain peer learning occurred in several instances. Furthermore, I was unable to assess the influence of my scaffolding and gradual withdrawal of support once I realized the students were postponing their interactions with the assignments and not following my timeline as intended.

Implications for Future Studies

Although having limitations, this study enabled me to develop a rationale for its significance and implications for future studies by providing evidence the blog stimulated academic practice and co-construction of meaning for these adolescents during summer vacation. On the one hand, as mentioned earlier, the requirement of posting responses to the prompts made the blog a forum available to the class community, and there is some evidence showing some students read these entries. This finding led me to conclude that students co-constructed some knowledge through the blog.

On the other hand, since the co-construction of learning is enhanced by the give and take that comes from disagreement, the finding that participants ignored

opportunities to comment personally to one another on their ideas provided another implication for a future study to examine ways to help students become comfortable in their expression of personal opinions. Such a study may determine that adolescents most comfortably express disagreement in the way it was done on this blog, where general comments are made to the entire community, rather than through personal interaction. The general posting of opinion on the blog for the expression of polite disagreement may prove to be another beneficial aspect to educational blogging.

Perhaps the polite stance of the students on the blog was related to the formal voices they took in their communication. Personal comments to one another in agreement or disagreement might have encouraged the adoption of an informal tone. Still, the use of academic language and the situated identities of serious literature students as described by West (2008) supported the students' analysis of their reading. Another study might be designed to investigate the learning that comes from using formal versus informal language in blogs.

Also, in regard to the analysis of formal versus informal language, my interest in comparing the words spoken by students in classroom discussion to those expressed on the blog offers another focus for a future study. A researcher might examine the type of language more likely to be spoken personally in the classroom as opposed to the type of language more likely to be posted on the educational blog. If there tends to be a difference in the language style (informal vs. formal), which voice is more advantageous for learning on a blog?

Other implications developing from the careful examination of peer learning in this study encourage future studies to examine what makes students more likely to

interact personally on a blog. A researcher might focus on students' prior friendships and anonymity as an influence on peer interaction in an educational blog. Perhaps in my study, Participants #1 and #2, the blog's most interactive peers, had known each other and/or been friends for a long time, while other students did not know one another well. My data did not provide for this information. Perhaps a longer term of blogging, more than the eight weeks allowed by summer, would give less acquainted students more time to open up to one another and personally interact. Obviously, the blog discussion entries could not capture other forms of communications that may have occurred between the participants regarding the summer reading. Yet, the respondents indicated in the surveys that they were unlikely to discuss the reading under other circumstances. If they had personal discussions with *friends* on the reading, they may have felt more inclined to disagree and ask questions. Some researchers feel the anonymity afforded by Internet communication may give some students confidence. A future study might look at the inhibitions communication with less-known acquaintances on a classroom blog may cause.

As mentioned earlier, a future study might use the teacher as a variable in the study, examining various actions and interactions affecting a blog's effectiveness in summer. Because the summer is only approximately eight weeks, perhaps teachers need to *require* students to make personal comments on a blog in order to foster greater peer interaction, and/or teachers should pair students with a partner or partners prior to the blogging, to encourage such interactions. Perhaps a teacher could design games for students to play as "ice breakers" as they do in the classroom the first few days of school. A lack of acquaintances between peers at the start of a new school year

could be a factor a teacher might hope to overcome by using a summer blog. The summer blogging term might help foster friendship and understanding that could prove invaluable for class discussions and peer learning all year long.

Finally, since blogging during summer vacation proved to be beneficial for honors students in my study, it is imperative to conduct a similar study with disadvantaged, struggling readers. It would be especially important to provide for reliable Internet connections through libraries and community centers to be certain students had access to the blog. The blog would be worthless without this connectivity. In fact, using blogs to reach students in summer might eventually become a motivating factor to communities to be sure these connections are offered. Perhaps a grant could be secured to provide funding for the study's resources. A study with struggling readers might assess the students' reading levels just prior to summer vacation and immediately following the summer to see if the blog affected their reading levels in any way. A control group could be used that did not participate in the blog or other summer program.

Future studies might also analyze effective methods for encouraging continuous involvement with an educational blog over summer. It could be hypothesized the students who remain academically engaged on the blog for the longest periods over summer would benefit most. Still, the effects of relaxation and the opportunities for creative mind-wandering cannot be ignored when examining the importance of learning during summer. How education may achieve a healthy balance in the lives of students *and* teachers is a question that will gain increasing importance as the Internet is utilized more and more to offer lessons for learning.

APPENDIX A

PARENT-STUDENT ASSENT FORM

The University of Rhode Island
Department of Ph.D. in Education
708 Chafee Hall
South Kingston, RI 02881

"Blogging About Summer Reading: The Learning Engagement of High School Students Using Interactive Technology"

PARENTAL PERMISSION FORM FOR RESEARCH

Your adolescent has been invited to take part in a research project described below. My name is Janice Place and I am asking for permission to include your son/daughter in this study because we are trying to learn more about students blogging about their summer reading. I am a teacher at Pilgrim High School, but not your adolescent's current teacher.

Description of the project:

The purpose of this project is to examine blogging about summer reading to see if it might be a worthwhile activity for teachers to do with their students during summer vacation.

What will be done:

If you allow your adolescent to participate, here is what will happen: First, he or she will be asked to anonymously complete a 24-question pre-survey about his or her attitudes and experiences with blogging and summer reading prior to this activity. Next, I will review directions and a timeline for blogging about the summer reading. I will provide guidelines for considerate behavior toward classmates on the blog. The student will then will participate in the blog in four two-week phases during the summer vacation, responding to four prompts connected to the reading. The students will be asked to share and discuss your responses with their classmates in the blog. It is expected that they may use a public library's computers and Internet connections for the blogging in the event students do not have this technology in their home.

The blog will be posted on a private educational website that is inaccessible to the general public. Only classmates, the researcher, teachers, and administrators or the blog technicians will be able to see the responses. When the blog transcripts are downloaded for analysis, the students' names will be changed.

Once the students return to school in September, they will be asked to anonymously fill out a 25-question post-survey asking their attitudes and experiences about the blogging activity. In addition, in mid- to late- September, I will ask several participants to volunteer to allow me to record an interview with them for 15 to 20 minutes to hear more details on their attitudes toward the activity.

Blogging about reading is not new in our school. Students have blogged about summer reading in the past. The study aims to examine the ways students discuss reading on the blog and to determine if this activity provides a useful way to learn in summer. The researcher conducting the blog plans to utilize the blog transcripts, with the changed names, the

anonymous surveys, and the anonymous interview transcripts, to analyze the benefits and/or drawbacks to blogging about summer reading.

If a student, however, declines to blog, or is traveling without access to a computer, an alternative for that student will be to independently keep a journal for submission to the student's English teacher in September.

The blogging activity will begin in early July and end in mid-August. Participants will be able to work on the blog at their own convenience. The goal is for them to respond to the four prompts that will be given in two-week periods. If a participant is not able to respond in all four prompt phases, partial participation will be accepted. Also, the participants may respond more than once in each phase, responding to classmates in their discussions about the reading. Their blogging responses will take the place of journal responses in their summer reading assignment.

Risks or discomfort:

No risks or discomforts are expected from this study. However, if your son or daughter finds that participating in either the survey or blogging about summer reading makes him or her feel uncomfortable for any reason, he or she may stop the survey or the blogging and immediately contact the researcher by email to let her know of the problem. Only volunteers will be interviewed. If a student feels uncomfortable in the course of the interview, he or she may ask me to stop. If these concerns are not addressed, the student may withdraw from the study. However, as an alternative, the student's English teacher will expect him or her to keep a journal in the place of the blog. Respectful behavior toward others on the blog will be enforced. If the researcher feels any of the blog responses are of a harmful nature, the response will be removed from the blog and the student's parents will be notified.

Benefits of this study:

A direct benefit of this study for the participant is the opportunity for online discussion with peers about the reading to help with understanding. Another direct benefit may be that the students will have an incentive for staying on track with the reading throughout the summer vacation while keeping up with the blog.

Confidentiality:

Your son/daughter's part in the study will be kept confidential in the case of publication of the study's findings. None of the information will identify you or your son/daughter by name. The surveys will be anonymous and no one will be able to know how your son or daughter responded. The blog itself will bear the students' names in the online community, but the blog will be kept in a private educational domain that is closed to the general public. Once the blog transcripts are downloaded for research analysis, the students' names will be changed to protect their identities. The interviews will be recorded and transcripts produced from the recording, with your permission. Any published results of the study will not reveal the true names of students whose blogging or interview responses are used. All records such as the student assent and parent consent forms, surveys, transcript back-ups and interview transcripts will be stored in a locked file cabinet in Chafee Hall at the University of Rhode Island.

Decision to quit at any time:

Your adolescent will be given the opportunity to decide whether or not to participate in this study. His/her decision to participate will not affect your or his/her present or future relationship with the University of Rhode Island or the researcher. Your adolescent will have

the right to stop participating at any time. You have the right to withdraw your permission for your adolescent to participate at any time.

Rights and Complaints:

If you are not satisfied with the way this study is performed, you may discuss your complaints with Dr. David Byrd, (401) 874-5484, or with Janice Place, (401) 734-3250 EXT 123 or (401) 451-3348, anonymously, if you choose. In addition, if you have questions about your adolescent's rights as a research participant, you may contact the office of the Vice President for Research, 70 Lower College Road, Suite 2, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, Rhode Island, telephone: (401) 874-4328.

You have read this Permission Form. Your questions have been answered. Your signature on this form means that you understand the information and you agree to allow your son/daughter to participate in this study.

Name of son or daughter: _____
Typed/printed Name

Signature of Parent/Guardian

Signature of Researcher

Typed/printed Name

Janice B. Place

Date

June 30, 2010
Date

Additionally, I grant permission to be contacted for interviewing my son/daughter.

Signature of Parent/Guardian

Please sign both consent forms, keeping one for yourself, and returning one to Janice Place.

APPENDIX B
Blogging About Summer Reading
Pre-Project Survey

Instructions: Thank you for participating in the “Blogging About Summer Reading” study. Please take a few minutes to respond to the following questions. Your responses to this pre-project survey will help give an understanding of the background, attitudes, and experiences of the study’s participants. The questionnaire should take approximately 10 minutes to complete. You will remain anonymous.

I. Background Information

1. Please circle your gender: M F
2. Please circle your age: 15 16 17 18
3. Please circle the grade you are entering in the Fall: 11 12

II. Attitudes and Prior Experiences. On the chart below, please circle a number to rate of your feelings toward each statement on a scale of 1-5.

	5 Strongly Agree	4 Agree	3 Neither Agree nor Disagre e	2 Disagre e	1 Strongly Disagre e
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Category 1: Independent reading pace

1. Usually, I complete my summer reading in the first few weeks of summer vacation.	5	4	3	2	1
2. Usually, I stretch my summer reading over the course of the summer vacation	5	4	3	2	1
3. Usually, I wait until some time in the last two weeks of summer vacation to begin my summer reading.	5	4	3	2	1
4. Usually, I complete my summer reading at various speeds depending on what else is going on during vacation.	5	4	3	2	1
5. In the past, I have not completed my summer reading on one or more occasions.	5	4	3	2	1

Category 2: Internet use and availability

6. My home has an Internet connection and a computer available for my use.	5	4	3	2	1
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7. Often, I must use the library or a computer outside of my home for Internet use because we have difficulties at home with either the computer or connecting to the Internet.	5	4	3	2	1
	5 Strongly Agree	4 Agree	3 Neither Agree nor Disagree	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
8. My parents allow me to use the Internet for social and educational purposes	5	4	3	2	1
9. My parents only let me use the Internet for educational purposes.	5	4	3	2	1
10. I maintain a Facebook™ or other personal website.	5	4	3	2	1
11. I have a cell phone that I use for texting my friends.	5	4	3	2	1
12. I use the Internet to meet new people.	5	4	3	2	1
13. I mostly use the Internet to stay in contact with my friends.	5	4	3	2	1
14. I use the Internet often to help me in my schoolwork.	5	4	3	2	1

Category 3: Non-teacher directed peer learning behaviors

15. Discussing summer reading with classmates is helpful for understanding a book.	5	4	3	2	1
16. Generally, during summer vacation, two or more classmates and I will meet to spend one hour or more discussing our summer reading.	5	4	3	2	1
17. If my classmates and I happen to see each other in the summer, we may mention summer reading, but we are unlikely to discuss our reading together.	5	4	3	2	1

18. When I do not understand something in my summer reading, I seek help from my classmates.	5	4	3	2	1
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Category 4: Attitudes toward using teacher direction on the Internet for peer learning while doing summer reading.

	5 Strongly Agree	4 Agree	3 Neither Agree nor Disagree	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
19. Sometimes I will e-mail or text classmates with questions about class reading to help me understand something.	5	4	3	2	1
20. In the past, I have participated in a classroom blog or other social interaction Internet technology (wiki, e-mail listserv) to discuss schoolwork.	5	4	3	2	1
21. Blogging may be convenient for asking classmates questions and sharing responses about summer reading.	5	4	3	2	1
22. I enjoy texting or e-mailing with others so I will probably enjoy blogging about reading.	5	4	3	2	1
23. Contact with my classmates and a teacher by blogging may be beneficial while I'm completing my summer reading.	5	4	3	2	1
24. I would rather complete my summer reading independently.	5	4	3	2	1

Feel free to add your comments on the project here:

APPENDIX C
**Blogging About Summer Reading
 Post-Project Survey**

Instructions: Thank you for participating in the “Blogging About Summer Reading” study. Please take a few minutes to respond to the following questions. Your responses to this post-project survey will help give an understanding of the attitudes, and experiences of the study’s participants after completing the project. The questionnaire should take approximately 10 minutes to complete. You will remain anonymous.

I. Background Information

Please circle your gender: M F
 Please circle your age: 15 16 17 18
 Please circle the grade you have entered this Fall: 11 12

II. On the chart below, please circle a number to rate of your feelings toward each statement on a scale of 1-5.

	5 Strongly Agree	4 Agree	3 Neither Agree nor Disagree	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
--	------------------------	------------	--	---------------	---------------------------

Category 1: Participation in summer reading and the blog

1. I skipped the doing the summer reading.	5	4	3	2	1
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If you did your summer reading, please complete the following questions:

2. Because I did not have computer access, I wrote in my journal independently rather than blog with my fellow students.	5	4	3	2	1
3. Because I prefer to work on my own, I wrote in my journal independently rather than blog with my fellow students about the summer reading.	5	4	3	2	1

If you participated in the Summer Reading project by blogging, please continue:

Category 2: Internet use and availability

4. Participating in the blog was difficult and inconvenient for me.	5	4	3	2	1
5. I always needed to use a computer in a library or at the home of an acquaintance or relative to do the blogging because I could not go online at home.	5	4	3	2	1

	5 Strongly Agree	4 Agree	3 Neither Agree nor Disagree	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
6. Finding access to a computer and the Internet was easy to do.	5	4	3	2	1
7. The blogging technology operations were smooth and user-friendly.	5	4	3	2	1
8. Technical problems sometimes interfered with the blogging on my end.	5	4	3	2	1
9. Technical problems sometimes interfered with the blogging on the researcher's end.	5	4	3	2	1

Category 3: Overall participation in the Blog

10. During the summer vacation, I posted a response to only one prompt.	5	4	3	2	1
11. During the summer vacation I posted a response on the blog to 2-3 prompts.	5	4	3	2	1
12. I participated in the blog on a regular basis, responding to all four prompts.	5	4	3	2	1

Category 4: Reading pace with the Summer Reading Blog

13. Because I had to blog about parts of the book throughout the summer vacation, I began my reading right away.	5	4	3	2	1
	5 Strongly Agree	4 Agree	3 Neither Agree nor Disagree	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree

14. Having to start reading the book earlier in the summer in order to blog, helped me get all my reading done before going back to school.	5	4	3	2	1
15. Usually, I stretch my summer reading over the course of the summer vacation, and blogging about the reading at several intervals during vacation fit well with my usual reading pace.	5	4	3	2	1

Category 5: Peer learning behaviors while blogging

16. If my classmates and I happened to see each other, we may have mentioned the summer reading, but we really did not discuss the book unless we were blogging.	5	4	3	2	1
17. If my classmates and I were together, we continued our discussion that we had been having on the blog.	5	4	3	2	1
18. My classmates and I discussed summer reading more thoroughly than we would have if we had not blogged.	5	4	3	2	1
19. When I did not understand something in my summer reading, I used the blog to ask fellow students for help.	5	4	3	2	1

Category 6: Attitudes toward using teacher direction and the Internet for peer learning while doing summer reading.

	5 Strongly Agree	4 Agree	3 Neither Agree nor Disagree	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
20. I was shy and uncomfortable on the blog.	5	4	3	2	1
21. Blogging was a convenient way to ask classmates questions and share knowledge about the summer reading.	5	4	3	2	1
22. Participating in the blog was enjoyable all or most of the time.	5	4	3	2	1
23. Having a researcher give focus topics through the summer reading blog helped me understand the reading.	5	4	3	2	1
24. I probably would have learned just as much about the book reading it by myself with no blog discussion with classmates.	5	4	3	2	1
25. Contact with my classmates and a researcher by blogging was beneficial for completing my summer reading.	5	4	3	2	1
26. If I had the opportunity, I would choose to blog about summer reading again next summer.	5	4	3	2	1

Feel free to add your comments on the project here and on the back of this paper:

APPENDIX D

21 CLASSES EDUCATIONAL BLOG PORTAL



- [Start](#)
- [Product](#)
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Features

Most important features for teachers/site admins.

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School-wide dedicated server

Did you know that you can host virtually unlimited Classroom BlogPortals for your entire school?

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Independent yet inter-connected accounts for students

Students will obtain a fully featured blog account. Through their user interface they can not only publish text or photos but also create categories or invite classmates as co-authors and much more.

Control of content and students' accounts

As a site admin you can choose from a variety of registration options for your students. If your students do not yet have e-mail addresses you may create their accounts manually and then tell them their login and password.

At any time you can log in into a student's account to help him/her and, of course, you can delete or edit such accounts.

Control of student entries

Also, as a site admin you may choose to moderate every new entry posted by a student before it is being published. In case the entry is in any way inappropriate or you feel that the student should rewrite his/her entry, you may defer publication and inform the student.

Advanced privacy settings and spam protection

With just one click you can set all entries on your BlogPortal to be private, which means that only registered users can see the blog community's content. Also, you can restrict commenting to registered users only. Alternatively, you can allow your students to decide for themselves if an entry should be private or public and if comments may be written by everyone or just registered users. Students may also moderate new comments on their own entries so they can learn how and why to protect themselves on the Internet.

Layout and themes

Site admins can choose from a variety of templates and customize them by uploading an individual header, changing colors and much more. If you are familiar with CSS you can even create your own templates. Also, you can select a number of templates to be available for your students or create new templates for them.

Photos and videos

Students have the ability to upload images with their entries. Uploading images is easy and automatic image resizing prevents images from taking up too much webspace available for free Classroom BlogPortals. Of course you and your students can also insert videos that have been previously uploaded on other video hosting services.

Student collaboration

21Classes has an extended rights management for authoring and reading rights. This means that you and your students will be able to create teamblogs within the blog community to which all registered users can post or you can even create closed reader groups to restrict entry visibility to certain group members.

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APPENDIX E

Summer Reading and Blogging Study

Interview Questions:

1. In general, what is the role of the Internet in your education?
2. Do you use the Internet mainly for educational purposes or mainly for other purposes?
3. What are some other purposes you might use the Internet for?
4. Have you used Web 2.0 interactive technology (i.e. blogs, wikis, email listservs) before in your classes or was this the first time?
5. Is the Internet easily accessible to you during summer vacation?
6. Do you feel there are some specific benefits to blogging about summer reading?
7. Are there specific drawbacks to blogging about summer reading?
8. Do you feel it is important to have discussions about literature with your peers to help you with understanding reading?
9. Can you give an example of something your classmates helped you understand when using the summer reading blog?
10. Would you be likely to have discussions with classmates about summer reading without the blog?
11. Did knowing you were going to blog about the book on a regular basis help keep you reading?
12. In general, how did you feel about the summer reading and blogging project—would you do it again?

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