

Christina Saidy and Mark Hannah explore how the student practice of blogging can be used to meet the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in this chapter from *The Next Digital Scholar*.

They discuss a ninth-grade curricular unit that arose from a secondary school/university partnership and include sample assignments for use by teachers and librarians. Saidy and Hannah argue that such public writing positions students as “advocates in ... schools, communities, and workplaces.”

## **Blogging as Public Writing**

### **Meeting the Common Core State Standards Through Community-Centered Writing**

Christina Saidy and Mark A. Hannah

So I kinda saw why blogs help. For once I felt proud of what I do. I was happy to put effort in my work. —  
Claudia, Age 15

In this quote, Claudia, a participant in the research we describe in this chapter, reflects on her experiences with a blogging curriculum in her high school class. Although Claudia’s experience with blogging is recent, teachers have been creating their own blogs for a number of years. Some teachers have made the move toward integrating blogging into the writing curriculum via student blog projects. Although blogging itself has become fairly mainstream, there is still often an

underlying assumption in schools that blogs, and other Web 2.0 technologies, are for “techie” teachers, those with specialized technological skills. However, with the introduction of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) specifically focused on using technology to produce and publish student writing, even less “techie” teachers have opportunities to integrate Web 2.0 technologies into their teaching in meaningful ways. For teachers, Web 2.0 technologies, specifically blogging, create opportunities for innovative teaching. For students like Claudia, the integration of blogs provide the potential both to meet the CCSS and find pride and value in their work.

In this chapter, we specifically focus on the ways that blogging can be used to help meet the following standard in the CCSS that calls for students to:

Use technology, including the internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology’s capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically. (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO] and National Governors Association [NGA] 2010, W.9–10.6)

We acknowledge that in order for students to meet this particular standard they must also meet other writing standards. However, we believe this particular standard, because of its focus on the use of technology for producing, publishing, and updating writing, provides a new and unique challenge for classroom teachers as they adopt the CCSS. Not only are teachers tasked with covering the writing standards, but they also must meet these standards using technology that invites students to make their writing digital and take it beyond the classroom.

Specifically in this chapter, we provide findings from a study of a ninth-grade blogging unit developed in an established university–secondary school partnership, wherein students blogged about public and community issues of importance to them. We frame our discussion of this blogging unit within what is often referred to as a

“public writing” pedagogy, or community-focused writing that moves it beyond the teacher and the classroom into communities both local and global. We argue that the standard focusing on producing, publishing, and updating writing provides a unique opportunity for teachers and students to incorporate technology, in our case blogging, in meaningful ways to meet the CCSS, while at the same time offering opportunities for students to develop writing that engages other students and their communities. In this chapter we will review literature regarding blogging in the classroom to illustrate the need for a public writing curriculum that employs blogging. We will then discuss our specific work and research in a secondary–university partnership in which a blogging curriculum was used in a ninth-grade class and make specific connections between this blogging curriculum and the CCSS. Finally, we will offer tips and strategies for teachers and librarians interested in integrating blogging into the English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum to meet and exceed the CCSS.

### **Blogging in the Classroom**

In one regard, the early appeal of blogs in the classroom was simply tied to the emergence of the technology. As Greg Weiler (2003) notes, blogs provide fairly simple platforms for instant web publishing. In essence, blogs respond to the call from earlier writing scholars and teachers (Elbow 1968; Murray 1972) who assert that students write more intentionally and value their writing more when it is published, in some form, and read by real audiences. Blogs, as Weiler notes, provide the “ability to publish instantly to a wide audience” (2003, 74). The ability to publish instantaneously and for a *real* audience is what commonly attracts teachers to blogging for classroom purposes and what keeps students interested in blogging, even despite its fairly simplistic architecture in the increasingly complex digital landscape that is home to the next digital scholar.

One particular way that blogs both extend classroom learning and help make classrooms more student-centered is by inviting a multiliteracies approach. The multiliteracies approach is not new; the New

London Group coined the term about 20 years prior to publication of this volume (New London Group 1996). However, this approach provides a pedagogical lens that many teachers and scholars continue to find useful in discussing the role of blogging in the classroom because of its student-centered nature. Though not specifically discussing blogging, Carlin Borsheim, Kelly Merritt, and Dawn Reed (2008) argue that “teachers who use a variety of media and technologies in their teaching do more than familiarize students with specific technologies or motivate them with the latest cool tool: They prepare students with multiliteracies for the twenty-first century.” The authors argue that “sophisticated engagement” with technology equips students with the full range of literacies they need in their lives (88).

Beyond simply considering skills or literacies students need for engagement in school and their communities, Kathleen C. West (2008) in her discussion of blogs in her classroom describes how students enjoyed learning through their blogging unit. West reports “[e]njoyment was paramount in these class periods” (588). West argues that blogs provided her students with freedom and novelty. She reports that her students felt freer in expressing their beliefs and in engaging with texts on the class blog than in other learning forums and venues. Will Richardson (2003) reports on the use of blogs in his teaching of *Secret Life of Bees* in which the novel’s author, Sue Monk Kidd, read the student blogs from Richardson’s class. He argues that blogs are interesting to students because they provide opportunities for connections between readers and writers and because blogs provide a potential forum for building community. Finally, Richardson notes that all of his students, even his typically reticent students, engage each other via blogs.

Students often are willing to engage in blogs since this genre builds on student expertise and offers students choices in their writing. Richard Beach and David O’Brien (2005) argue that forms of multimedia, including blogging, are successful because they acknowledge “the importance of literacy practices the kids are already good at in the mediasphere, the multimediating world they live in, and most of these practices are more complex than ‘print-centric’ practices” (48).

Similarly, Alex Reid (2011) claims that blogs are “an excellent opportunity for exploring and developing intrinsic motivations for writing” because in blogging, students “control the subject matter, the length, the format, the timing of [their] posts, and all the other characteristics of [their] writing” (303). Reid as well as Beach and O’Brien illustrate the ways that multimedia composing shifts the focus of the classroom to a more student-centered approach to composing because of the focus on student expertise and choice. This expertise may be technological, as students may have more experience with blogging and other multimodal technologies than their teachers, or it may simply be that multimodal assignments motivate students since students have more control over their writing. Ultimately, since blogs build on student expertise and choice, even students unfamiliar with blogging can participate meaningfully in a blogging curriculum.

Seeing students as technology experts in the classroom exposes one particular challenge of classroom blogging—teacher preparation. Aaron Doering, Beach, and O’Brien (2007) call for in-service and pre-service teachers to expand their repertoire of technological skills to accommodate the technological skills of their students. The authors specifically call for exposing teachers to Web 2.0 tools in their teacher preparation programs. While teacher expertise may be a challenge (see Chapters 15, 16, and 17 in this volume), we argue that the benefits of blogging, especially in regard to meeting the demands of the CCSS, outweigh the discomfort of teachers learning alongside their students. Furthermore, teachers who invite themselves to be learners in front of their students may actually provide effective models of learning for their students. This is especially true for public writing where students and teachers must be attuned to the needs of the community in order for meaningful writing to occur.

### **Public Writing, Blogging, and the CCSS**

Working off the premise that student writers are at their best when they are genuinely interested in the types of writing they do, we argue that a blogging curriculum should provide opportunities for students

to identify and work on topics of public concern relevant to their daily lives. This move to public writing was influenced by the “public turn” in writing studies (Flower 2008; Weisser 2002; Wells 1996) that emphasized students working with real audiences to effect change in local communities. The challenge for adapting the public turn to secondary writing contexts centers on rearticulating the theoretical and pedagogical aims of public writing to meet the CCSS. In particular, we need to be attentive to how a blogging curriculum creates opportunities for students not only to produce texts, but also to publish and update their writing in response to the rhetorical demands placed on their writing by public audience(s).

Generally, public writing positions students as advocates in a variety of public spaces, including schools, communities, and workplaces. The primary difference between public writing and traditional academic writing is the former’s insistence on students producing writing that has the potential to be actionable and move beyond the classroom space. The emphasis on positioning their writing to move beyond the classroom invests students differently in their work in that it encourages them to be active writers who bring about change with their writing through the production, publication, and updating of their texts. More specifically, it prompts students to see the writing process as dynamic and recursive, as requiring attention to how their writing both potentially links with other information and spurs the circulation of ideas to address issues with which they are concerned. Ultimately, in positioning student writing in this manner, public writing demands that students be attentive to practices of *publishing* and *updating* that extend the initial *production* of their writing, three essential practices outlined in the CCSS for the “Production and Distribution of Writing” (CCSSO and NGA 2010, W9–10.6).

### **Learning as Partners**

To investigate meaningful public writing in secondary schools, we established a secondary–university partnership. The study and the connected partnership occurred in a large metropolitan city in the

Southwest at an urban high school we refer to as Center City High School. The name of the school, teachers, and students are all pseudonyms. The ethnic composition of the school population for the 2013–2014 school year was 94.8 percent Latino, 1.9 percent White, and 1.6 percent Black; the remaining 1.7 percent identify as multiracial or Native American. The state does not report specific numbers/percentages for racial groups with less than 10 students reporting (Arizona Department of Education 2014). The school’s “Facts and Figures” sheet reports that 86.1 percent of students receive free and reduced lunch and that the school’s 4-year graduation rate is 88.2 percent, which is measurably higher than the state average (Center City High School 2012).

The partnership with Center City High School was formed out of the authors’ interest in the ways in which the curriculum may change in response to the CCSS. Specifically, the authors were interested in working with a teacher or small group of teachers and exploring new pedagogical approaches in response to the career and college ready writing emphasis in the CCSS. Karen, a veteran teacher with 16 years of teaching experience, expressed an interest in working with us. To forge the work of the research study and of the partnership, we began by observing Karen’s classes, surveying her students, and interviewing Karen and her co-teacher, Laura, a teacher double certified in ELA and Special Education. In the observation year, Karen and Laura taught inclusion classes with students ranging from special education to honors. In the study year, Karen and Laura’s inclusion classes included only special education and general education students. Karen and Laura did much of their classroom planning together. However, Karen was the lead teacher in the classroom. Throughout the study year, we collected data in the form of field notes, pre and post surveys, student interviews, teacher interviews, sample student work, and videotaped lessons.

Along with Karen and Laura, we articulated a partnership in which we collaboratively designed and implemented curriculum, and the authors studied the effects of this implementation. While the authors entered Karen and Laura’s classroom with specific interests, we followed Karen’s lead in the direction of the curriculum. To this end,

Karen expressed interest in establishing class blogs that would be used throughout the year, but she felt that she lacked the technological knowledge to infuse blogging into the curriculum. The authors, interested in career- and college-ready writing, as well as public writing, worked with Karen to develop a blogging curriculum. The next section details some of the highlights of this blogging curriculum, particularly focusing on ways that students met the requirements of the CCSS: producing, publishing, and updating their blogs.

### **The Blogging Curriculum**

The blogging curriculum in Karen's class was intended both to introduce the students to blogging as a writing genre and to transition them into a larger community-focused research writing unit. Therefore, the blogs in Karen's class were an integrated and integral part of learning for students. The blog was neither an afterthought, nor was it just for fun. The blog was an embodiment of all the learning the students were doing. For the blogs to function in this way, Karen and her students had to rethink some of their conceptions about learning to research and learning to write. This was primarily the case because a blogging curriculum is often nonlinear, while the teaching of writing and researching is typically presented in a linear fashion. That is, production, publishing, and updating were processes in which the students engaged repeatedly, and not in order, as we moved through the blogging unit. Interestingly, the students never questioned this nonlinear writing process. It was more challenging from an instructional planning standpoint than it seemed to be for the students. This appears to confirm Beach and O'Brien's (2005) claim that multimedia learning builds on existing student practices and experiences. Students seemed unfazed by a nonlinear curriculum because we were asking them to think and work in ways that they often worked.

In the sections that follow, we describe how producing, publishing, and updating—the specific elements of the CCSS (CCSSO and NGA 2010, W.9–10.6)—are part of this blogging for public writing curriculum. However, since producing, publishing, and updating are



nonlinear processes, the discussion about these elements overlaps in ways that are productive for students in their learning. Finally, we offer the students' own words as illustrations of how the work of producing, publishing, and updating functions in the ELA classroom.

### ***Producing***

Due to its mere web presence, a blog has the inherent ability to reach broad and diverse audiences. This fact alone is what draws many writing teachers to use blogs in their curricula, as blogging offers students the opportunity to produce writing for an audience other than their teachers. Admittedly, our blogging curriculum was motivated by this same impulse, but we wanted to be intentional with the students about specifically understanding and articulating who made up the broad and diverse audiences of their blogs. That is, we worked with students to target the production of their texts to named, identified audiences. How we accomplished the goal of targeted writing was by focusing on the principle tenet of public writing—that it be actionable. We asked students to produce meaningful writing for audiences who had the capacity to act in response to the issues they were examining, and by capacity we mean not simply a base understanding of public issues, but an ability to intervene in the local community and affect change regarding such issues. To help students determine audiences' capacity to intervene, we drew from the CCCS for argumentative writing that calls for students to: "Develop claims and counter claims fairly, supplying evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both in a manner that anticipates the audience's knowledge level and concerns" (CCSSO and NGA 2010, W9–10.1b). In particular, we focused on the students' attention to the knowledge level of the audience.

An early challenge we faced in reorienting the students' view of producing texts away from a teacher-centric view to a community- or audience-centric view was in helping students understand what it means for a text to be "actionable." Early student responses to questions about what it meant to be actionable revealed their general belief that an audience must care about or be emotionally connected to the

issue under discussion, and that the issue mattered to the audience in some way. We acknowledged this initial recognition of caring and emotion as essential to effective community-based writing, as caring is what motivates citizens to act, but we pushed the students to think about “actionable” beyond emotion, to identify new pathways of understanding the act of producing writing that compels action in a local community. To motivate the students to extend their thinking, we devised, with Karen, a classroom activity based on illegal immigration enforcement, a hotly contested issue in the students’ community, which prompted the students to think about the different ways that issue impacted lives in their community.

Using the local and controversial county sheriff, whose anti-immigration views and policies had been widely publicized, as the focus of the activity, we asked students to compose a written response to the statement: “The sheriff is an excellent sheriff who has served our county well, and he deserves to be re-elected in November.” Admittedly, we knew this was a loaded question. In conversations with Karen, we discovered that the students held a general animosity toward the sheriff (a sentiment that is shared widely in the county, we might add) due to the threat his enforcement policies posed to their friends and families. Yet, despite the loaded nature of the question, we saw value in using it for its ability to make clear the difference between producing texts for individual expression and producing texts to prompt action. We recognize that these two types of production are not mutually exclusive, but we wanted to emphasize that despite their overall validity, the students’ personal feelings about the sheriff were not enough to affect community change; the students needed to link their concerns and arguments with other voices in the community to affect such change.

When asked to share their written responses with the class, the students unsurprisingly responded very strongly to our prompt and across the board emphatically denied that the sheriff had served his constituents well; he had failed them and needed to be removed from office. Examples of their writing include statements such as “he is racist,” “he hates Mexicans,” “his morals are wrong,” and “he has destroyed families!”

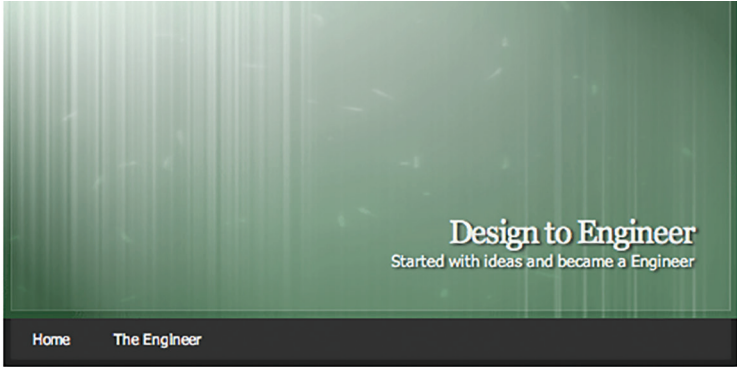
A number of the students even took to the visual to express their disagreement through drawing devil horns and a forked tongue on the picture of the sheriff that we affixed on the writing prompt. Overall, the texts these students produced merely affirmed their prior distaste for the sheriff and did not position them to alter their viewpoint in any way or motivate them to design a plan for achieving what they wanted: a county police force free of the sheriff's influence.

The sheriff activity became interesting when we asked students how their response to the prompt would change if they wrote it on a blog. The previous week, we had introduced students to the "anatomy of blog writing," so they were familiar with the general design and style of blogs. As part of the anatomy lesson, we paid special attention to the linking mechanics of a blog, or how a blog connected to other texts on the web. Examples of these mechanics included the blog roll, use of hypertext links, use of social media profiles, blog archives, and the blog comment box. For the most part, feelings of general dislike for the sheriff persisted in the hypothetical blog response we asked them to think about; however, there were a number of instances where we saw students emphasize how they would use the blog to get the "facts out there about the sheriff."

While most of these examples ended with a simple, general assertion of the desire to get the truth out, a small number of students in each class referenced specific facts about the sheriff. For example, some students noted the millions of dollars the county has wasted defending the sheriff in lawsuits. Other students commented on the sheriff's makeshift open-air jail in the desert known for its excessively high temperatures in the summer, and yet another group discussed how they would link to articles, videos, and other information that demonstrate what the sheriff has done. What we saw in these latter examples was recognition by the students of the need to make adjustments to the "opinion" statements they initially wrote in the activity. They needed something specific to support their claims, and the resources for such support came from linking to other texts. Granted, the need to establish claims and present claims and counterarguments fairly is part of

most ELA curricula and part of the CCSS (CCSSO and NGA 2010, W.9–10.1, W.9–10.1a, W.9–10.1b). However, what is unique about blogs is the ease of linking and the ability to link to a variety of sources. Described another way and using the language from the CCSS section we cited at the opening of this chapter, these students understood they needed to leverage “technology’s capacity to link to other information” when producing text (W.9–10.6). Their text alone was not enough.

What was noteworthy with the sheriff exercise was how it revealed to students the differences between producing text via traditional writing



**Design to Engineer**  
Started with ideas and became a Engineer

[Home](#)   [The Engineer](#)

## Solution

January 26, 2013

My group and I are doing a research about Child Abuse and this is an enormous problem. We came up with a solution to help and put a stop to child abuse by informing those who have little knowledge about this significant topic through a power point during advisory on Fridays. We will give statistics, numbers of reports, resources, and ECT.

We want to help prevent child neglect, sexual abuse, physical abuse, ECT. We want to inform teenagers about this topic of how important it is and how it affects our community and social life. Did you guys know that every ten seconds theirs a report of child abuse? Did you know that every day 3 children/teen die of abuse? This topic might not be IMPORTANT for you because you assume you'll never be abused, but think again anything can happen. We want to aware children's/teens about this terrifying topic and how to reach for help. 1 out of 3 children are abuse can that be you and do you know how to stop it?

Posted by  
 Filed In Uncategorized | Edit  
 No Comments »

**Figure 9.1** Example of a sheriff activity blog

and producing texts via blogs. More specifically, they came to see the writing they would do on a blog as provisional and tentative; it would require external support via links. It would be research.

This is the case in the blog post shown in Figure 9.1. In this blog post on child abuse, which was completed after the sheriff activity, the student illustrated an understanding of the lessons of the activity. Specifically, the student anticipated the type of information his audience would be looking for in order to be persuaded, so he integrated questions to spur a particular type of response from his readers. Ultimately, what we came to understand through the blogging unit, and the preparatory sheriff activity more specifically, was the importance of helping students transition between traditional forms of production for school writing to forms of production for writing for the blogs.

### ***Publishing***

The act of publishing a text is what prompts the circulation of ideas, which is a necessary component for bringing about change locally. More specifically, publishing creates the nexus point for interaction, where students join public conversations. More importantly, publishing generates opportunities for linking to other information and inviting others to link with their texts, which is a key tenet of the CCSS. While students often have experience sharing writing with their peers via peer response, writing for and responding to blogs requires a different set of skills and perceptions. Students must learn to think of their audiences as dynamic and expansive, rather than the fairly limited audience (teacher and peers) in traditional classroom writing. The publishing step takes this dynamic nature of audience into account.

To transition students into thinking about audience broadly, the students began by posting responses to a teacher blog post. Students were given the following mnemonic for thinking about qualities of effective responses:

True  
Hopeful  
Inspiring

Necessary

Kind

They then responded to the teacher post while the responses were projected on the screen in the classroom. This yielded two important results. First, students were able to see others' responses, which helped students who were less certain about quality responses formulate more thoughtful responses of their own. Second, students came to see the dynamic nature of the blog. While all students responded to the initial post by the teacher, some students also responded to the comments of other students. Many of the students typed with an eye on the screen, watching their—and others'—responses pop up.

In this activity, students experienced the nonlinear nature of research and writing, a stark contrast to how they had been taught to do other academic forms of writing. For example, in this school, all of the students are required to learn how to write a Summary Analysis Paragraph, a fairly formulaic approach to writing in which students move through the paragraph step-by-step. In the blog response activity, by contrast, students produced meaningful written comments for their teachers and peers before ever writing an "official" blog post. That is, they did not have to master a step-by-step process before they could participate and write on a blog.

Furthermore, through this commenting activity, students came to see writing as dynamic and not limited to formal isolated settings. For example, the content of comments changed as additional comments were added, and students learned to appreciate the full range of responses that were possible in blogging. Finally, this particular activity expanded the students' notion of audience tremendously. That is, since all of the students responded to the teacher's post, the audience was quite large. The students were able to see what happens when the audience expands beyond one or two people (the teacher and peer reviewers) to well over 100 readers. Ultimately, writing that is nonlinear and dynamic has the potential to help students meet the "Range of Writing" standards in the CCSS: to "[w]rite routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter

time frames (a single setting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences” (CCSSO and NGA 2010, W.9–10.10).

Early activities, such as the one described here, prepared students to think about the utility of blogs as sites for public writing. As students became more comfortable blogging, they clearly came to see their blogs as resources for their classmates conducting similar community-based inquiry, and they were eager to link to one another’s blogs. For example, a small group of girls in one class asked us how to create a blogroll. A blogroll is a list of links, typically in a sidebar, to blogs that the blog owner either reads or identifies with in some way. A blogroll is an endorsement, of sorts, of the linked blogs. We showed this small group of girls the fairly simple process for creating the blogroll, and by the end of the class period the word had spread. Within a few days, the majority of students in all sections had a blogroll in which they linked to the blogs of friends, group members, and people in other classes. Some students even chose to link to blogs that were not school related. This behavior showed us that students had an interest in making their work public. They saw the blogs as mechanisms for sharing and creating networks of information. Furthermore, this illustrated the students’ interest in and ability to meet the audience requirements that are part of the CCSS for argumentative writing. The overwhelming interest in the blogrolls suggests that students had a broader interest in “anticipat[ing] the audience’s knowledge level and concerns” (W.9–10.1b).

The sharing of texts among students is an important element of the blogging curriculum. More important, however, is the potential for blogs to move beyond the classroom. It is an understanding of this potential that is at the heart of the public writing blogging curriculum. Blanca, a student blogger, reports, “When I would write [the blog entries] I would feel like I was talking to the world.” Blanca’s comment illustrates her understanding of the potential for blogs. It was not simply that she imagined the reach of her words, but that her words did hold the potential for reaching broad audiences. When asked what she was proud of, Blanca commented that she was proud of writing about child abuse in her community and how she “let the world know about

it.” Blanca understands her role in circulating information on a much larger scale than her own class, school, or even immediate community.

As part of the larger research-based writing unit, students were required to reach out to experts in the community for interviews. It was during this interview that Claudia, another student in the class, came to see the value of the blogs. Claudia comments:

At the beginning with the blogs I wondered what was this for. But now she [the interviewee, a social worker] asked me about our blogs and about the situation. And she told us that she wanted to see our blogs. So I thought somehow this is working you know? Other people can see it. And we might be bad at English or whatever you want but the information is out there. You know?

Claudia’s comments show an awareness of what happens when blogs are “out there” and ideas are in circulation. Furthermore, her comments show a progressive process of coming to understand the potential in publishing. At first, Claudia assumed the blogs were, like many of her other school assignments, restricted to the classroom. However, in reaching out to her community, Claudia saw the potential in blogs to move beyond the classroom into the community, and potentially beyond. While Claudia recognizes the limitations of her prose (“We might be bad at English”), she understands that the reach of her blog has the potential to overcome her limitations.

In this particular blogging unit, it seems that students began by thinking of blogs as any other form of schoolwork. They assumed the audience for their writing would be closed and small. However, through a series of mini-lessons and activities tied to the curriculum, many students came to see the value of blog publishing and its potential to circulate information and ideas beyond the classroom.

### ***Updating***

As described in the preceding sections, blog writing positioned the students to see their writing as dynamic, as shifting in its emphasis and



direction based on how the students connected their writing to other texts. Students became aware that the initial display of their ideas was not static and required adaptations that were responsive to the ways in which other texts affected the meaning or intent of what they wrote.

In our observations, we noted examples of student blogs changing over time. The majority of student blogs changed in appearance. When the blogging unit initially began, students relied heavily on the standard themes and options provided by the blogging platform. They demonstrated little initiative in, or knowledge of the skills for, developing their blog's appearance beyond these default choices. However, as the students grew in their blog identity, they adapted their blogs' appearance to reflect that identity. For example, students customized their blogs via color and font choices they deemed appropriate and relevant to the public issue they were addressing. They also learned to integrate relevant images as backgrounds for their blogs.

For example, in Figure 9.2, the author, whose nickname was Kay, originally named her blog *Designing Kay* because of her interest in design and fashion. Initially, she used one of the simple and standard backgrounds for her blog. As the project moved along and Kay's blog focused more on her topic of drug abuse, she continued to alter the appearance of her blog to maintain her design sensibilities. This showed a meshing of her original intent and her passion for her topic. The "Never let go of your DREAMS" graphic represents Kay's personality, complements her blog's appearance, and communicates her passion for ending drug abuse in her local community and family (Kay shared in her interview that her brother had problems with drugs). In addition to customizing the appearance of blogs, we observed students customizing their blog titles to cultivate interest in their blogs and provide more details about the nature and content of their blogs.

The author of the blog *Justice Will Be Served* originally started with a completely different blog title. As he worked in the group focusing on The Dream Act and alternative paths to citizenship, he changed the title of his blog. Concurrently, he chose a chalkboard background to emphasize the education focus of this community issue (Figure 9.3).

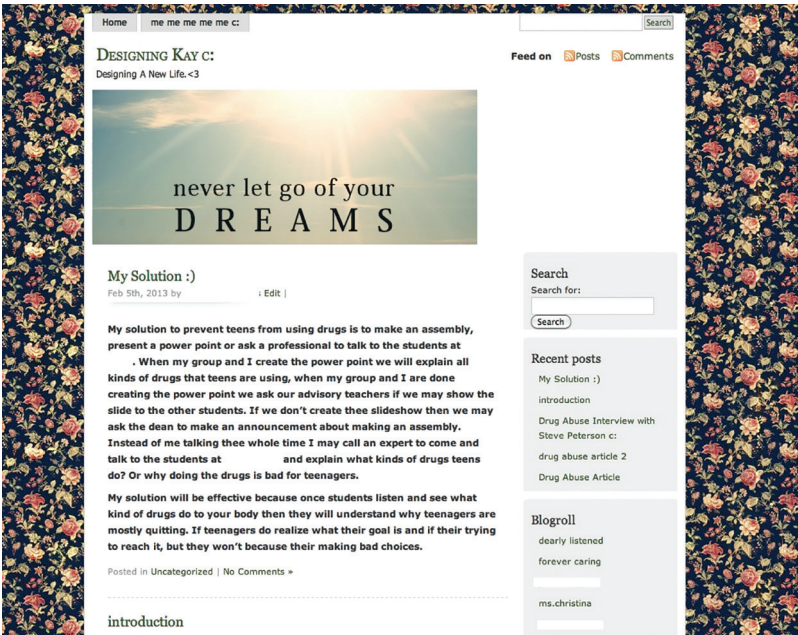


Figure 9.2 *Designing Kay* blog

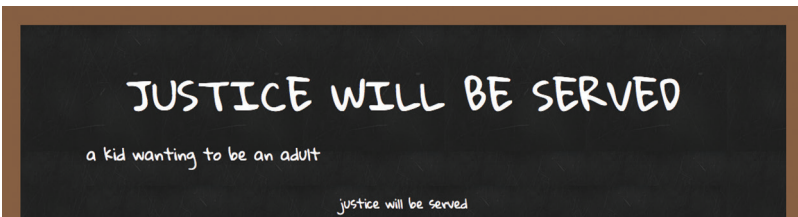


Figure 9.3 *Justice Will Be Served* blog

The students continuously worked to revise the appearance and titles of their blogs to more effectively communicate with each other and their audience while cultivating their own online identities.

While revisions to the appearance of the blogs were common, students did not necessarily make substantive revisions to posts during the blogging unit. In part, this was due to the fact that the particular blogging platform we used did not have tools to aid in revision, such as a spelling or grammar checks. Accordingly, the lead teacher encouraged

her classes to compose, revise, and edit their blog posts in a word processing file and then copy and paste it to their blogs. Likely because of this, we did not observe substantive revision to the blog posts, although it may have occurred. Secondly, since the blogging unit was new, there was a learning curve for all involved. Because of this learning curve, we did not spend as much time on some parts of the writing process, namely formal revision. Despite the lack of observable, formal revision in the posts, the revisions to the blog appearance showed us that students generally understood and cared about the value of revision in creating a public blogging identity, which is tied to the CCSS' call for students to "Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience" (CCSSO and NGA 2010, W.9–10.4).

Ultimately, students came to see their blog identity as being just as important as the words they wrote in their postings, and that identity was the primary source of the students' credibility. It was the mechanism that invited engagement from other writers. When asked in an interview what she was most proud of in her blog, Blanca responded, "That it was free. You can write anything you like about your topic and what it's about." Blanca's response showed she understood the blog was topically focused, but she saw the potential in updating and making changes. To her, the blog was a free space that reflected her identity while meeting the assignment. Like the other students, Blanca saw the updating of the blog's appearance, and the freedom that came with that, as powerfully linked to the content and topic. Her updating reflected an understanding of this connection.

In addition to appearance, we observed students engage in a recursive process with their blogs; their blogs served as a springboard for writing in other contexts. For example, we observed students pull text from their blogs and use it in other class projects. What is noteworthy about this process is that students did not rely on simple copy-and-paste moves. Instead, we observed students sitting in groups, looking at blogs, and negotiating what information was relevant to other course work. The students came to see the blogs as part of a larger community-based

writing unit, much in the way we hoped they would. As they pulled from their blogs and consulted other blogs for information, we saw the potential in updating. While blogs are, of course, updated by new blog posts or additions to other posts, they are also updated with use. The blogs themselves became resources for knowledge and information students needed; thus, students created their own research repositories and networks through this blogging unit.

Ultimately, the blogging unit required responses from the students that were not in the vacuum of the classroom environment. More specifically, the unit compelled students to reconsider how they viewed the act of revising texts. Rather than seeing their texts as something to be corrected for grammar and usage, the students saw their texts as constantly in flux. Texts were used to generate ideas and other texts. Additionally, texts were used to construct classroom and community identity, which changed throughout the unit. Ultimately, the act of updating is a continual process of pushing the envelope of change.

## **Where to Begin**

In our informal weekly meetings, Karen often reported being pleased with the quantity and quality of student work on the blogs. In one particular meeting, she shared that the school principal was so pleased with the students' work on the blogs that the principal was considering requiring blogs in all ninth-grade English classes the following year. As we illustrated in the previous "Updating" section, students generally reported being proud of the work they did on the blogs, especially since they saw the work as an extension or reflection of themselves and their commitments to issues in their local communities. However, as with all uses of technology in the classroom, the blogging unit was messy at times while we all navigated the technology learning curve. Throughout the project, we discussed changes to the blogging unit that the teachers would implement the next year. For example, Karen said that she hoped to introduce the blogs at the very beginning of the school year so that students would have more time to develop their personal blogs prior to moving on to school-specific work. As we mentioned,

the researchers also hoped to see more substantive revision to blog posts during the unit. To lessen the learning curve for other teachers, we have provided some information to help teachers interested in classroom blogging implement these technologies in their own classrooms.

### ***Decisions About Use***

In this particular blogging unit, we worked with ninth-grade teachers and their students, so we referenced the ninth- and 10th-grade CCSS. However, a blogging unit such as the one we describe is appropriate for all secondary grade levels. Of course, teachers at other grade levels would need to adjust content and expectations to meet the needs and abilities of their students, and school librarians and media specialists may be able to assist teachers in adjusting the curriculum in this way. Furthermore, since the CCSS scaffold instruction from grade-to-grade, many of the standards we reference in this chapter are also covered, to some extent, at other grade levels.

Teachers desiring to implement a blogging curriculum should begin by deciding how blogs will be used in the current curriculum. Karen originally planned to simply use a teacher blog on which students posted comments. However, when she considered the connection between the blogging project and the larger community-based public writing research project, she decided that individual student blogs would be better in facilitating and tracking student learning. Teachers who use blogs in their classrooms will need to make similar decisions as did Karen.

Teacher blogs or class blogs in which the entire class participates on one blog give students experience with blogging technology. On a teacher blog, students typically participate by commenting on posts written by the teacher. These posts may include links to other information on the web or responses to other student comments. Class blogs afford students the opportunity to compose full blog posts. However, this occurs infrequently since the whole class, or multiple classes, participates on one blog. Although extended posts are few and far between, class blogs extend the potential for participation beyond that on a teacher blog.

Individual student blogs, like the ones employed in this curriculum, offer students a greater degree of flexibility and potential for completing more in-depth writing. They also offer an opportunity for personalization, which typically appeals to students. If teachers hope to integrate blogs into the curriculum over a long period of time, individual student blogs are likely the best option. However, individual blogs require more attention on the part of the teacher. If a teacher plans to use individual student blogs, then we suggest the blog work replace other graded writing rather than be added onto existing writing assignments.

Teachers who like the idea of individual blogs but are leery of the time commitment for grading or have other concerns may choose to have students establish group blogs. In these scenarios, groups of four or five students compose blogs on similar topics with students rotating the responsibility for posting. This may be a good option for teachers trying blogs for the first time.

Beyond decisions about the types of blogs (teacher, individual student, student group), teachers will also need to make decisions about blog content. In the ELA classroom, blogs can be used for a variety of purposes, including personal writing, literary response, technological instruction, and research-based writing. In this way, blog-writing is uniquely situated to meet a rather large number of the CCSS for the ELA. Moreover, blogging for research positions teachers to work jointly with librarians and media specialists to create innovative learning experiences in which research is an integrated practice, rather than a series of discrete skills.

### ***Choosing a Blogging Platform***

Once teachers have decided which types of blogs and purposes best meet their needs, it is time to decide on a blog platform. There are a number of free blog platforms available to the general public. Examples of these include Blogger (blogger.com) and WordPress (wordpress.com). These particular platforms also have educational functions that teachers may use, such as an ability to view all student blogs or to create class blogrolls. Additionally, there are blog sites specifically intended for education. Education-focused blog sites

include Edublogs (edublogs.org), SchoolRack (schoolrack.com), and 21st Century School Teacher (21stcenturyschoolteacher.com). Some of these sites allow for individual student blogs while others focus primarily on teacher blogs. Additionally, depending on the types of services, some of the education-focused blog sites require a fee—another consideration for teachers. While many of the blog platforms provide similar services, teachers should consider items such as the platform's ability to meet school and district security requirements and the teacher's ability to access and assess student blogs. Finally, using the blog platform's user manuals and tutorials, teachers will want to explore the technical and creative elements of the blog, including possible backgrounds, layouts, and the amount of storage space that users receive.

In the case of Karen's class, we decided on an education-focused blog platform. Because of her lack of blogging knowledge, Karen wanted to use a platform specifically intended for teachers and students that provided quality support, along with a fairly simple way to view and collect student work. Finally, Karen was interested in the range of security capabilities that the education-focused site provided should the district require tighter security.

### ***Seeing the Students as Experts***

Perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of incorporating blogging into the classroom is knowing that students may have more expertise than the teacher. In the case of Karen and Laura's class, few, if any, of the students had blogged previously. However, because of the multi-modal and technological nature of students' daily lives, the learning curve for students was shallow while the learning curve for the teachers was noticeably steeper. Karen and Laura chose to embrace the students' expertise. In addition, they found that students completed required blog posts thoroughly and on time with greater frequency than regular assignments. More importantly, students enjoyed the blog assignment.

## Conclusion

Toward the end of the first semester, Karen described a discussion she had with her students in which she asked them what they would like to do differently next semester. Some students indicated they wanted to stop doing the blogs. “So you want to go back to the way we did things before?” Karen asked. She said a student loudly responded, “And have nobody read our work? Forget it.” Karen reported that the students then all agreed that they wanted to continue doing the blogs. This example illustrates that many of Karen’s students came to value the public audiences for their work. With public audiences, their writing became actionable.

As the CCSS begin to ask teachers to consider integrating technologies into their writing curriculum in innovative ways, new opportunities emerge for introducing students to complex writing tasks that require advanced critical thinking skills. Rather than limiting students’ scope of inquiry to standard classroom writing genres and limiting audience to their teachers, public writing pedagogies promote a vision of writing that situates it not simply as a mode of personal expression, but instead as a vehicle for preparing citizens for action in the public sphere. Viewing writing in this way increases student access to and involvement in the communities in which they engage.

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