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Toward authentic audiences : blogging in a high school English classroom

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University of Iowa

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TOWARD AUTHENTIC AUDIENCES:
BLOGGING IN A HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH CLASSROOM

by

Michael Patrick Ayers

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Teaching and Learning (Language, Literacy, and Culture) in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

December 2011

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Carolyn Colvin

ABSTRACT

Though researchers have discussed adolescents' uses of social media and Web 2.0 texts outside school, little research has analyzed how such texts are used in classrooms. This study examines various perspectives on a group of high school students engaged in blogging as part of two language arts courses over an eight-month period. Research questions focused on how students conceived of and interacted with their readers, how they used structural features of the blogging platform to connect their blogs to one another, and how discourses of freedom of speech online led a few students to transgress school norms. To answer these questions, I studied examples of eighty classroom blogs from my own high school students, conducted interviews with eight students, and maintained researcher field notes. I analyzed this data using a combination of discourse analysis, multimodal analysis, while applying social network analysis to understand how the blogs were connected through the key feature known as Following. My findings suggest that the connectivity offered by Web 2.0 enabled students to reach and communicate with authentic audiences who could recognize and validate their identity performances. Further, I argue that though certain features of Web 2.0 media are incongruous with many conventional classroom norms, teachers should work to bridge those gaps.

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Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

PH.D. THESIS

This is to certify that the Ph. D. thesis of

Michael Patrick Ayers

has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Doctor of
Philosophy degree in Teaching and Learning
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To My Parents

This is the world, which is fuller
and more difficult to learn than I have said.
You are right to smudge it this way
with the red and then
the orange: the world burns.

Margaret Atwood
“You Begin”

Write for readers.

Annie Dillard

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: AUDIENCES, POSSIBILITIES, QUESTIONS

Context and Purpose

On the final day of class, I asked my students to share with me some of what surprised them about an assignment we had been trying out. For the last few months of the school year, my students had put away the notebooks they'd been writing in all year long and had replaced them with blogs. Maddie raised her hand.

“Well, I wrote about a novel I was reading, and then the author commented on my post,” she said. I was stunned. She'd said nothing to me about this, and although I'd done my best to read their posts, I wasn't bothering to read the comments readers had left them. “That's amazing,” I remarked.

Tyler went next. “Somebody commented on my blog and told me my taste in music sucked,” he said, glumly. Again, this was news to me. I tried to reassure Tyler not to worry about what one rude nut on the Internet said.

We went around the class like that for a while. Some students had comments, mostly from friends. Others had linked to their friends, creating little clusters of connected blogs. Still others complained that they'd only received comments from me. One suspected the only person who read her blog was her mother. I realized that although I had thought a great deal about what they had written on their blogs, this was not on their minds. Very little of what they said had to do with what they had actually written; it had everything to do with who was reading, and how those readers responded.

This scene, from my high school AP Language and Composition class, taking place the spring before the present research began, opened up a series of questions for

me. As I will describe later, I moved students' daily writing from notebooks to blogs with the expectation that this would make it easier for students to read one another's writing. But the possibilities were wider than I had realized. I had neither dreamed of authors spontaneously responding to my students' writing, nor thought to caution students that they might draw less favorable responses. There was much more to consider here than I had known. The research project contained in these pages represents my attempts to understand what social media makes available to teachers and students.

Engaging an Elusive Demographic

During the U. S. presidential election campaign that culminated in the election of Barack Obama in the fall of 2008, the attention of the media turned to young voters. Despite a common "narrative of despair or decline about young citizens" (Bennett, 2008, p. 4), stories of young voters engaged in the political process were plentiful. While much of the credit in these stories went to the candidate himself, his campaign was credited with mobilizing this particular block of voters using "21st Century technology." *TIME* magazine noted the ease with which social network sites like Facebook made it easy for young people to share their political enthusiasm with one another (Von Drehle, 2008b); indeed, Obama had hired one of Facebook's co-founders to help run this effort for the campaign (Sullivan, 2008a). Owing in part to the candidate's presence on social network sites, the Obama campaign's use of the Internet was being hailed as transformative in the vein of Franklin D. Roosevelt's use of the radio and John F. Kennedy's use of television (Ambinder, 2008, Carr 2008). Though skeptics questioned whether this block of voters would show up at the polls early in the election cycle, the under-25 vote doubled the turnout from 2004 in the Iowa Democratic caucus (Von Drehle, 2008a), and youth

turnout in caucuses and primaries was up dramatically over the 2004 elections.¹

Educators have been looking for a similar moment, when the literacies that students use in their out-of-school lives could be harnessed to provide a means to motivate those students who have not been affiliated with school. This has led to a great deal of interest and research in those out-of-school literacies, especially online and digital literacies. However, the development of pedagogical applications, and the theorization of how the inclusion of these practices in schools alters power relations and performances of identity within the classroom, is just beginning (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006; West, 2008).

It is in this context that I present the research that follows, which examines my high school students' use of web logs (hereafter "blogs"). This research responds to several calls made within in the literacy research community. Kathleen Blake Yancey recently argued that research on writing that emphasizes both verbal and visual elements, "which is basically a new model of composing in its attention to the visual and to audience—is needed" (2009, p. 4). Tara McPherson has written that we need to develop ways of "closing the loop between what students do for 'fun' and how and what they learn in school" (2008, p. 15). Donna Alvermann has called for researchers to listen to young people's voices regarding whether and how "their online literacies should be embraced in the regular classroom" (2008, p. 18). Finally, Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear have called for specific uses of online literacies in the classroom, those which allow for students to engage with affinities for authentic audiences and purposes (2006).

This research takes up all these conversations. The project emerges from a

¹ It bears noting that although youth voter registration was at record levels nationally for the 2008 elections than ever before (Owen, 2008/2009), this appears to have had more of an impact during primaries and caucuses than in the general election, where the youth vote was up only 2% over 2004 (Kirby & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2009).

conviction that many school-based literacies are often isolated from students' out-of-school lives, and do little to prepare students for the civic, economic, social and personal futures awaiting them. Equally important is a belief that nothing is more important in schools than understanding how students can be motivated to buy in to school, and how online literacies can be a part of that solution.

Successfully encouraging participation by those youth who are not currently engaged in participatory culture requires more than just access to technology. Teachers and researchers need to better understand what drives people to engage in participatory culture, and how recent tools for online composition and distribution, especially those associated with Web 2.0, affect student engagement and motivation. This research addresses several gaps in our understanding of what happens when digital practices, whose most familiar purposes are primarily social, are brought into the classroom in a way that deliberately attempts to capitalize on the affinities—subjects of intrinsic interest—that drive adolescents to participate in them out of school.

A New Paradigm

Web 2.0

It is easy to forget now that for users who lacked knowledge of markup languages such as HTML, the Internet was a mostly passive experience. The term “Web 2.0,” and the resulting technologies popularly known as “social media” and “participatory media,” have come to represent certain ways of interacting online that reflect changes in how Internet use has changed, which dovetail with longer-established trends of participatory culture. The “Web 2.0 ethos” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008, p. 5) assumes “extensive collaboration, participation, distribution of expertise and “intelligence”, emphasis on

performance, far-flung access to human, informational and other kinds of resources pertinent to learning” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008, p. 5). Indeed, when Tim O’Reilly coined the phrase Web 2.0, he labeled it “an architecture of participation” (Rettenberg, 2005) that would allow users to more easily produce and share their own work online.

It is now almost impossible to talk about participatory culture without mentioning Web 2.0. Like participatory culture itself, Web 2.0 emphasizes community and interactivity, and the possibility of using writing, images, video, and other means to connect to groups who share interests and affinities. In the early years of the Web, it was assumed that most people would have no need to put their own material online, that they would be consumers of material (Friedman, 2005). In recent years, however, services have become available to make it easy for people to upload, share, and sometimes create content online. These services include media sharing services (YouTube, Flickr, Napster); blogging services (Blogger, WordPress); and social network sites (Facebook, MySpace).

Participatory Culture

The 2008 presidential campaign was not only notable for how the Internet was used for mobilizing large numbers of youth through online social networks, but also for other ways in which digital media was being used for what are popularly known as “mashups.” That is, images, sound, and video from speeches, interviews, and campaign appearances were decontextualized, manipulated, and circulated for a variety of purposes. As Henry Jenkins noted, “campaigns got used to the fact that anything that they put out there could be pirated, remixed, mashed-up and recirculated” (Jenkins, 2008). While some “viral” videos were the work of high-profile musicians such as will.i.am, of the hip-

hop group The Black Eyed Peas, many were the work of relatively anonymous individuals. Participatory culture had come to the political stage.

The term “participatory culture” can be used in two ways, both of which are related to this research, and which are neither exclusive nor contradictory. The first use (Jenkins, et. al, 2006) is analogous to “subcultures,” suggesting groups of people—groups in which membership is tenuous and uncertain, perhaps, but groups nonetheless—with conventions of behavior that denote membership. In this usage, participatory cultures are not unlike Gee’s term “affinity groups,” a term I discuss in chapter two.

The second use of participatory culture (Jenkins, 1992) is in a similar sense to popular culture: a type of culture that is out there in the world, ready to be engaged with. However, while the term pop culture often refers to a texts or products meant to be consumed: purchased, read, viewed, or listened to, participatory culture “blurs the boundaries between producers and consumers, spectators and participants, the commercial and the homecrafted,” and “transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts, indeed of a new culture and a new community” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 44). It is in this latter vein that I will use the term.

This blurring of boundaries is not new to the Internet age. Fan fiction, for example, has been traced back to the 1970s, when fans of television programs like *Star Trek* began writing and exchanging stories of their own using characters from those programs, often in ways that subverted the original texts (Jenkins, 1992). Earlier still, underground comics often included parodies of popular comics and cartoon characters such as Superman and Mickey Mouse (Sabin, 1996).

These earlier forms of participatory composition were limited in popularity,

however, in part because distributing one's work was difficult; authors depended on photocopied "zines" exchanged either in person or through the mail (Jenkins, 1992). The means for an individual consumer to make changes to media and share the changed version with an audience has been accelerated through online tools that allow users to upload their own compositions (Friedman, 2005). These online tools have also made available a much wider audience for authors of fan fiction (Trainor, 2004), mashups (Ito et al., 2009), remixes (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008), and have made it possible for many more people to create and connect to online communities organized around interests, affinities, and identities in ways they could not have done a decade ago.

New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman (2005) describes these changes in online communication as part of a "flattening" of the world, when tools allowing people to read and produce media are easier to use and more widely available, and that "the playing field is being leveled, and that people who understand this transformation can wield more power than ever" (p. 47). While the loftier claims about the distribution of power remain to be seen, these online tools do allow users additional avenues to participation in social networks, and to have their voices heard, by audiences that have not previously been available to most individuals. At the very least, in participatory culture, "members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created)" (Jenkins et al., 2006, p. 3).

Assimilating and Accommodating New Media

Schools have not yet adapted to these new compositional avenues. While researchers have seen the convergence of literacy instruction and online technologies as

“inevitable” (Leu & Kinzer, 2000), a number of obstacles have made schools slow to adapt. Concerns about commercialism (Fabos, 2004), a lack of understanding what new media make available (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003), beliefs that such practices are recreational in nature and therefore not educationally significant (Sefton-Green, 2004), problems providing equipment and support (Levine, 2008), and moral panics about access to violence and pornography online (Potter & Potter, 2001) have all played their parts. Even in those examples where blogs are being used, they are frequently used for the same kind of compulsory writing found elsewhere in school, rather than capitalizing on how they might capture students’ interests (Knobel and Lankshear, 2006).

Reinking, Labbo, and McKenna (2000) have suggested, borrowing from Piaget, that we are currently in a transitional phase between *assimilating* digital technologies into instruction and *accommodating* them. The former, they argue, is when schools incorporate technology in the service of literacy as it is conventionally understood, “in ways that conform to existing curriculum, pedagogical goals, and instructional activities that are comfortable and familiar” (p. 112). (Accommodation, however, suggests shifting content, goals, and activities to match the possibilities for transformation that these technologies offer, and challenges the status quo.)

As practices associated with participatory culture become embedded in our everyday lives (Carrington, 2009), and as those practices become part of wider, public conversations about the economy and the workplace (Friedman, 2005), scholars of education and technology have more room for talking about those transformative possibilities. The argument then moves to new ground: what should be the new goals and new activities? Recent reports from the New Media Consortium (2005), the MacArthur

Foundation (Jenkins et al., 2006), and NCTE (Yancey, 2009) lean toward accommodation, making calls for transforming curriculum under the banner of “21st Century” literacy, and putting more and more emphasis on the social aspects of online literacies. Jenkins and his co-authors are succinct in their recommendations for schools: “Our goals should be to encourage youth to develop the skills, knowledge, ethical frameworks, and self-confidence needed to be full participants in contemporary culture” (2006, p. 8).

Children and adolescents with access to online media are not waiting for schools to catch up. Already in the process of developing the skills for creating a wide array of media compositions and sharing them with audiences online, they find themselves unable to use these skills at school. Simultaneously, those without access at home are not given the chance to develop those skills at school, potentially further *widening* the digital divide (Gee, 2004; Jenkins et al., 2006).

Relevant Theory: A Brief Overview

Up to now, I have discussed how participatory culture and Web 2.0 encourage users to draw on the texts around them, to create their own work (whether writing, video, images or other media), and to distribute that work, often online, for the purpose of sharing it with a community of like-minded others who will appreciate their contributions. But this emphasis on community and interactivity raises a series of questions and concerns about motivation, audience, identity, and literacy. I provide a brief overview of these ideas here, with a more detailed discussion in chapter two.

Motivation and Audience

When writers compose pieces of writing, they do it because they have an actual

message that is of some importance to them, and for actual audiences with whom they wish to communicate. Replicating these circumstances for classroom teaching has been a persistent and complex problem (Ong, 1975; Ede & Lunsford, 1984).

Web 2.0 media allow teachers and researchers to reconsider the role audience can play in classroom composition. While teachers have long understood the importance of audience, it has been hard to replicate real-world audiences for classroom assignments, reducing the audience to a series of simulations. This is ultimately unsatisfying, even when young writers are given choices of what to write about; they are writing for audiences who are unlikely to have what Bakhtin calls “an active and engaged understanding” (1981, p. 280) of their writing. Even motivated writers can become discouraged when they expect to be heard, and find they are being misunderstood or ignored by audiences who do not have such an understanding. However, when classroom writers are connected to readers who do have such an understanding, motivation might be maintained.

Purpose, Discourses, and Affinities

To better understand the reason people write for those audiences, I rely on Gee’s notion “big D” Discourses (Gee, 1990/2008; Gee, 2005). Discourses are made up of complicated combinations of texts, actions, values and beliefs that allow people to take up identities that will be recognized in a given social context: a father, a teacher, a boyfriend, a graduate student, a knowledgeable consumer of popular culture.

Further, the world of work has been shifting to more “fast capitalist” workplaces (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996; New London Group, 1996; Gee, 2004b), brought on by increased global competition, more demands by better-informed consumers, and changes

in production and distribution systems (Friedman, 2005). Where once workers might have expected to rely on the same sets of skills throughout a professional career, these workplaces require individuals to develop identity “portfolios” (Gee, 2004a), allowing one to shift flexibly among many possible roles and Discourses, rather than relying on a single identity throughout an entire professional life. Gee argues that the skills necessary to develop these portfolios are best learned through affinity groups (Gee, 2003), groups that form around interests or practices, and which are associated with certain identities. These skills help shape “which youth will succeed and which will be left behind as they enter school and the workplace” (Jenkins et al., 2006, p. 5). If we are to have a curriculum that allows students to more fully participate in society—civic, social, educational, and economic participation—then we must provide compositional experiences that allow students to practice writing for audiences who share their interests and can provide motivated response.

New Literacies Studies

The attention to both audiences and purposes in context are consistent with the “social turn” (Gee, 2000, p. 180) that literacy research took during the last two decades of the twentieth century. This research, which emphasized an understanding of literacies always being situated in social practice, came to be known as the New Literacy Studies, or NLS (Gee, 1990/2008; Street, 2001; Street, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). New Literacy Studies researchers turned away from understanding literacy as something that an individual knows and does, toward understanding literacy as something that only makes sense when considering social, historical, cultural, and economic contexts. The consequences of this turning away are profound, and I will discuss them in more detail in

the next chapter.

Literacy researchers who worked under the assumptions of NLS turned their attention to those contexts where literacy practices were happening within social situations and within Discourses, free of institutional mandates (Hull & Schultz, 2002; Mahiri, 2004; Hull & Katz, 2006). They argued that school literacy was not the only kind of literacy, and that these other practices that occurred in out-of-school settings ought also be recognized as additional forms of literacies (Street, 2001; Schultz & Hull, 2002).

New Literacies Studies is relevant to this research project in two ways. First, the view of literacy as a socially situated practice related to Discourses is critical to an understanding of blogging, where social connections, motives, and networks are often easily visible, and traceable through hyperlinks. Second, the question of how schools should approach the literacy practices which matter most to students is one that New Literacies researchers have struggled with (Gee, 2004a; Hull & Katz, 2006).

Research Questions

The purpose of this research, ultimately, is to better understand what opportunities Web 2.0 might be available to teachers and students. To that end, I address three central questions in this research; each of the three invites several sub-questions.

1) In what ways are students influenced by their perceptions of audience when blogging for a school assignment?

- Who do students perceive to be their audiences? To what degree do they believe that they even have audiences?
- To what extent do students' beliefs about the existence, size, and composition of

their audiences change their blogging practices?

- What do students think audience members do on their blogs?
- What models do students use when designing their blogs?
- To what extent do students expect to answer one another, or to be answered—by me, by others in the class, or by those beyond the class?
- To what extent does connectivity make Discourse recognition and validation available in school assignments?

2) In what ways do structural features of Web 2.0 sites—especially those that allow for direct student interaction—shape students’ blogging practices?

- Which students report reading other students’ blogs? How do they make decisions about what to read and what to ignore?
- How do students associate their blogs with other online texts, through links, embedded media, and quotes? For what purposes?
- Which students link to other students’ blogs? What is that process like? How do students know when it’s “okay” to do so?
- Which students Follow other blogs? How do students talk about why they Follow certain blogs? How do they talk about their own blogs being Followed?
- What motivates students to learn and use new skills associated with blogging (linking, embedding media, Following)?
- To what extent does connectivity create a sense of an imposed system of winners and losers? To what extent is “success” in such a model tied to the quantity of responses (links, quotes, comments, Followers), and to what extent is it tied to the quality of those responses?

- To what degree does the introduction of a parallel reward system undermine institutional reward systems such as letter grades? When students have evidence that they have audiences beyond the teacher, how central is the teacher's role thereafter?

3) In what ways can students use blogs to transgress against school norms and boundaries?

- To what extent do students fit blogging into the context of other school assignments, based on experience, and to what extent do they fit it into other genres that they know because of experiences in virtual contexts?
- In what ways do students use the blogs to transgress against schooled notions of “appropriateness” in ways that they wouldn't in person, in the classroom?
- What identities do students choose to perform when they are asked to compose texts for public audiences? How do they talk about their “blogger identities” as similar to or distinct from identities they perform in other contexts?
- To what extent does participatory media necessitate a shift in power relations between and among teachers and students?
- To what extent are teachers transgressing against these norms and boundaries by introducing participatory media into the classroom?
- What considerations are involved in expanding or limiting students' freedoms to express themselves in ways not typically consistent with school conventions?

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Audience and Identity

When I began this research, it seemed there were two obvious changes Web 2.0 made to the ongoing, weekly writing assignments in my AP Language and Composition class. The first was that students' writing would be published openly, and was therefore no longer limited to just me as their readership. This meant students could consider who they wanted their audiences to be. The second was that students had to make choices about what they were going to write about, and what approach they would take to writing about it, which meant students could consider who they wanted to be on the screen. Therefore, as the reader can see from the list of questions at the end of chapter one, audience and identity became driving forces behind this research.

In this chapter, I discuss theory and research related to the way students perceive the audiences for their blogs, and the identities they are attempting to project through those blogs, in order to provide context for the three data chapters in this dissertation. However, supplementary theory or background that is related directly to a particular chapter will appear in that chapter.

Two central principles guide this research study:

- What people say when they communicate, and the ways in which they say it, are tied up with the ways in which they see themselves, who they think they are, and who they would like to be, and how they would like to be seen by others.
- People communicate with the intention of being heard and understood in particular ways by their audiences, and it is discouraging to go unheard or

be misunderstood by those audiences.

In this research, I argue that these two principles are inseparable. If a person speaks, intending to convey particular identity performances, and their audience validates those performances and appears to hear them in the way they wanted to be heard, that audience may be of more value to the speaker than audiences who fail to recognize their performances or to hear or understand them as intended.

In schools, however, we fail to recognize either of these principles. In many schools, we create an environment where students rarely have the opportunity to come up with their own messages they want to communicate, and almost never have the opportunity to choose the audience they wish to communicate with. Much curriculum makes the implicit assumption that communication primarily has to do with the speaker or writer, that any audience is equally valid, and that it is not a problem that the teacher is the student's only audience most of the time.

Web 2.0 platforms, however, represent a venue for writing that actually makes something of value available to students: the potential for authentic audiences, both real and imagined. I also argue that the availability of these audiences have additional effects related to conventional power relations between teachers and students. In order to make that case, I begin this chapter with a discussion of relevant theory of audience and identity.

Audiences and "Being Understood"

One of the differences between texts that students compose outside the school walls and those composed within is intended audience. Every word, Bakhtin wrote, "is directed toward an *answer* and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering

word that it anticipates” (1981, p. 280). Indeed, the response, he argued, could be more important than the speaker’s original intention.

To some extent, primacy belongs to the response, as the activating principle: it creates the ground for understanding, it prepares the ground for an active and engaged understanding. Understanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other. (1981, p. 282)

Beyond the importance of having a response was the kind of response an utterance might receive. To Bakhtin’s way of thinking, it was not enough to simply have an audience. If each utterance is split evenly between speaker and listener, then it matters a great deal that the listener is capable of “an active and engaged understanding” (1981, p. 281). A passive understanding is “no meaning at all,” Bakhtin says (1981, p. 281), because the listener, even if well-intentioned, cannot contribute any meaning to the utterance.

In addition, when we are writing, we are never just conveying ideas about the subject at hand. Our purposes involve not only our topics and our audiences, but also our ideas of who we think we are. This brings us to identities, and our performances thereof.

Identity and Discourse

Identity is not a cut-and-dried issue of empirically “being” or “not being.” Our identities are social constructions, and we are always in the process of maintaining, reaffirming, and reframing them, through popular discourses², as well as the artifacts through which those discourses are inscribed (Foucault, 1977; Foucault, 1980; Holland et al., 1998; Ferguson, 2000). As Carmen Luke puts it, “[d]iscourses create the subject, and discourses delimit the subject” (1990, p. 21). All discourses are constantly renegotiated

² When writing the word discourse with a lowercase ‘d,’ I refer to the collections of talk that provides us with understandings of ourselves and the world around us, and shape our beliefs, assumptions and values. Examples might include gender discourses, scientific discourses, discourses of human nature, religious discourses, discourses of fatherhood, and so on.

and redefined, partially through institutional mechanisms (Foucault, 1977), but also through “local knowledges” (Foucault, 1997, p. 10) and through our everyday interactions (Foucault, 1972). Furthermore, each of us is subject to not one but multiple discourses (Luke, 1990), making each person a site of discursive struggle (Luke, 1990; Holland et al., 1998).

This is an important theoretical concept in this study, for several reasons. For one thing, it removes the notion of the natural subject, replacing it with the subject that exists only as it has been constructed through discourse. It means that the talk in students’ lives is never neutral, whether from teachers, parents, students, a novel, an office disciplinary referral, or a blog post. A speaker is always either reaffirming or in struggle with dominant discourses. It also means that when students are assigned to write in school for their own purposes, we must recognize that there is frequently an unspoken expectation that the student will reconstruct his or her self according to institutional norms.

Discourses, Performance, and Recognition

Rather than being a natural or empirical fact, then, each person’s understanding of who s/he is depends on a complex series of negotiations, and one’s ability to deliver certain performances (Gee, 1990/2008; Holland et al., 1998). These performances consist of speech, dress, gesture, and so on (Butler, 1990; Gee, 1990/2008; boyd, 2008), and consumption (Duncan & Leander, 2006; Willett, 2008). Gee calls these performances “Discourses, ” with a capital “D”:

composed of distinctive ways of speaking/listening and often, too, writing/reading *coupled* with distinctive ways of acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, dressing, thinking, believing, with other people and with various objects, tools, and technologies, so as to enact specific socially recognizable identities engaged in specific socially recognizable activities (Gee, 1990/2008, p. 155)

Identity is best understood as “something that one becomes or is in the ‘doing’ of it, that is, in the performance” (Gee, p. 159), and we are becoming, doing, or performing multiple identities at the same time, rather than a single, unified identity. We engage in various Discourses, and conceive of ourselves as multifaceted. Hall (1996) argues that our conceptions of self are, “in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured” (p. 17). This fracturing is frequently discussed as a feature of identity in digital contexts (Turkle, 1995; Weber & Mitchell, 2008), as our lives on the screen have made this multiplicity or hybridity more visible. Everything we do or say—or in the case of my blogging students, write—is “simultaneously a social dynamic, social work, a set of identifications and negations, an orchestration or arrangement of voices. And our sense of self comes from the history of our arrangements” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 211).

People then speak, act, and behave in ways that will allow them to “make claims about who we are relative to one another and the nature of our relationships” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 26). These performances—and their associated discourses—may be tied to gender (Butler, 1990; Thorne, 1999), race or ethnicity (Ferguson, 2000), socioeconomic status (Willis, 1977; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999), subcultural affiliation (Hebdige, 1979; Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995; Skelton & Valentine, 1998; Lutz, 2006), or affinities for particular texts or activities (Gee, 2004a).

It is also necessary to continue these performances, or versions of them, for as long as we want to align ourselves with a particular Discourse or identity. There is no “final becoming” that stabilizes our identities. We continually make and re-make these claims about who we are. A critical point in this study, therefore, is that when students

are writing in class, they are never only constructing stories or arguments through the manipulation of words and sentences; they are simultaneously constructing their identities through discourses.

We do not construct our identities in a vacuum, however; we do so in the hopes of being recognized “as a given kind of person at a specific time and place” (Gee, 1990/2008, p. 155). All social roles require the acquisition of Discourses to be recognized by others in those roles, whether the role is teacher, student, parent, reader, basketball player, or video gamer; while multiple subject positions might be taken up within a Discourse, it must be within the shifting boundaries that allow one to be recognized by others as a member of that Discourse.

A central problem for educators is a clash of Discourses: those the teacher wants students to participate in, and those that individual students value. The former are often middle-class Discourses that teachers believe will assist students in higher school achievement, college and career success, and economic and social success more generally. But some students may reject those values, behaviors, and beliefs, seeing them as either not essential for becoming the people they wish to become, or as actively oppositional to the people they are (Heath, 1983; Lareau, 2003).

Among other difficulties, there are significant challenges when asking students to write to an audience of one—the teacher—who cannot recognize the Discourses they wish to practice. Students may be trying to be recognized as participating in Discourses emphasizing gender and/or race performance (Lam, 2006; Ferguson, 2000; Finders, 1997), popular and/or consumer culture (Mahiri, 2004; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994; Dyson, 1997), or subcultural affiliation (Skelton & Valentine, 1998; Lutz,

2006). It is unreasonable to expect teachers to recognize performances from such a wide range of Discourses; even skilled teachers cannot be an knowledgeable audience for all people. Even if they could do so, inevitably some students will value Discourses that a given teacher finds distasteful, whether they revolve around feminine beauty, hip-hop culture, violent video games, or simply being a rebellious teen.

In the context of school writing, this leaves us with an uncomfortable situation. Even if we allow students to choose their own topics, it is likely that many students' interests and value are tied to Discourses that the teacher is unfamiliar with or potentially hostile to (see for example, Ferguson, 2000), which makes it impossible for that teacher to understand in the Bakhtinian sense discussed earlier in this chapter. It is important to reiterate that this is not the result of some character flaw on the part of teachers. It would be impossible for any person to have “an active and engaged understanding”—again, in the Bakhtinian sense—for every possible Discourse that students might want to perform. Therefore, if students are to write in ways that allow them space for these performances, they need other audiences in addition to their teachers. Notably, they already have those audiences outside of school, as I discuss in the next section.

Affinity Spaces and Participatory Culture

The inability of teachers to recognize students' performances related to valued Discourses is rarely expressed as an explicit problem: the job of the teacher has traditionally been understood as trying to shape the child into an acceptable young adult, and adolescents who don't fit the middle-class mold tend not to expect teachers to understand them (Heath, 1983; Lareau, 2003). Further, schooling has not been a space where students are encouraged to explore who they are or what they value.

More recently, researchers have argued that it is a problem when adolescents see other spaces as being much more relevant to the Discourses they value, and see little reward in school (Gee, 2004a), and that teachers and researchers should therefore attempt to at least understand adolescents' out-of-school literacy practices, and possibly incorporate elements of them into school curricula, as a means of engaging students (Mahiri, 2004; Hull & Schultz, 2002).

Discussions of affinity spaces (Gee, 2003; Gee, 2004a; Gee, 2004b) and participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, et. al., 2006) of especially useful in this regard. Participatory cultures allow users to produce, distribute, and consume a wide variety of media content, including print, images, video, music, and various combinations of all these. In participatory culture, "members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created)" (Jenkins et al., 2006, p. 3).

This belief is closely tied to the expectations of being "understood" (Bakhtin, 1981) and being "recognized," as discussed earlier. Gee (2005) sees this as related in important ways to why students would be less and less engaged in what schools offer. He uses the term "affinity spaces" to describe spaces (physical, geographic, or virtual) in which people "relate to each other primarily in terms of common interests, endeavors, goals, or practices," and those in the space are able to participate, gain knowledge and status, and interact in a variety of different ways.

Contemporary students have many opportunities to compare and contrast traditional classrooms with affinity spaces, a comparison in which the classroom fares poorly (Gee, 2004a). Students in traditional classrooms have fewer means of interacting

and gaining status, may have little affinity for the subject matter, and are rewarded for a narrower set of performances demonstrating knowledge and mastery (Gee, 2004a). When writing for school, what hope does a student have of being “recognized” as a member of Discourses that s/he wants to be a part of? What can be done to make the work students do in school relevant to the identities—present or future—that they want to claim for themselves?

Another important focus of this research, then, is how student conceptions of possible audiences plays a role in general concerns such as engagement and motivation, and more specific features of student compositions (e.g., topic choices, design decisions). In keeping with the view of literacy as a social practice, it is not a question of what the writing notebook (or any similarly traditional “schooled” practice) does, or what the blog does; nor is it a question of what the student does in either case. It is a question of what the teacher can do as a recipient of the student’s utterance, in comparison with what the other available audience members can do.

Authentic Purposes, Authentic Audiences

Throughout this document, I will refer to “authentic” purposes and audiences. This is a potentially problematic term; in common usage, the word implies a certain objective verifiability. This is not the sense I wish to convey. On the contrary, the sort of authenticity I mean to capture in this term is very subjective, depending on the view of the speaker or writer. It returns to Bakhtin’s notion of a speaker’s understanding of what he or she means to convey, and the speaker’s perception of whether the listener has an “active and engaged understanding” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 280).

Stern (2008) has argued that young people are frequently concerned with authenticity on their personal sites “because, ultimately, they seek social validation from their audience. Thus, they indicate, if their self-presentations are inauthentic, feedback from site visitors is irrelevant, if not meaningless” (p. 108). In the terms I have been using in this chapter, I would recast this as a desire on the part of adolescents to genuinely attempt to participate in a given Discourse. The self-presentation Stern refers to is a performance; the ideal feedback would be recognition and validation of such a performance. The ideal site visitor is what I mean by an authentic audience.

An authentic audience is an audience capable of recognizing a particular speaker (or writer, artist, performer, etc.) as enacting a particular Discourse. These audiences are not simply genuine in the sense that Lensmire (1994) describes as part of traditional writing workshop curriculum: willing, patient, open to the speaker. They also possess the knowledge of the particular Discourse, an “active and engaged understanding” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 280), capable of recognizing the writer, and have the standing themselves to be qualified recognizers.

As mentioned earlier, it is not reasonable to expect that teachers can be authentic audiences for students. Even if they could be expected to have encyclopedic and ever-growing knowledge of possible adolescent Discourses, the subject-position of classroom teacher would disqualify them from being acceptable recognizers. (If a student attempts to participate in a “rebellious teen” Discourse through behavior, dress, and speech, and a teacher responds with an attempt at validation, that student may well infer that he is doing it wrong.) Just because a teacher cannot serve as the universal authentic audience,

however, does not mean that students would not find value in such audiences. Our response, then, should be to find ways to make classrooms more dialogic.

The Dialogic Classroom

Just the possibility that a student's writing could actually be read by other readers, for the sake of the ideas rather than professional obligation, has the potential to change the dynamics of the classroom. In Bakhtinian terms, it emphasizes dialogism rather than monologism. The authoritative voice of the teacher (again, real or imagined) does not disappear, but the possibility of responses from other readers make that voice one among many, rather than the one by which the writing will ultimately be judged. If the classroom were structured in such a way to include these voices, "[i]f allowed in, if validated, if permitted to count in some way of importance, these voices create opportunities for a range of perspectives to share space" (Fecho and Botzakis, 2007, p. 553).

In theory, the dialogic classroom could begin to address the problems described earlier in this chapter. Those identity performances associated with Discourses valued by students but of little interest or value to teachers can be recognized by other students. The ability to participate, contribute, and be a resource of knowledge, is similar to the affinity spaces and participatory cultures that adolescents are used to having outside school.

Sociocultural Theory and Literacy

As was mentioned in chapter one, this work relies on sociocultural understandings of literacy. This is in contrast to what Street calls the "autonomous" view of literacy (1984): that it is a series of skills and techniques that could be learned and applied, with minimal attention to context. In the 1980s and 1990s, researchers made a case for a redefinition of literacy that would take the importance of social context, identity, and

power into account (e.g., Heath, 1983). According to Collins and Blot (2003), the work of sociocultural theorists questioned assumptions of literacy's primacy over orality. This then made room for a wider study of practices under the purview of "literacy."

This shift motivated a great deal of research in literate practices outside of school. Some such research provides evidence that those youth who are seen by school institutions as having poor literacy skills actually are capable of complicated planning, composing, or problem solving, when those are needed for performances connected to Discourses they want to enter into (Hull & Katz, 2006; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Mahiri, 2004). Much of this research has been under the banner of "New Literacy Studies."

Seeking to better understand the appeal of out-of-school literacy practices has been the goal of New Literacies Studies (NLS) research for nearly two decades (Gee, 1990/2008; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Mahiri, 2004).³ Research associated with NLS often intersects with adolescents' multimodal composition (Alvermann, 2002; Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Hull & Katz, 2006) and popular culture (Mahiri, 1998; Marsh & Millard, 2008), staking out territory quite distant from what we understand to be conventional schooling. These studies have added much to our understanding of the literacy practices themselves, and why participants find them appealing.

It is inherently difficult to translate the research from New Literacy Studies into the classroom without compromising its foundational beliefs that engagements with texts are always situated in socio-cultural contexts, and are contingent on desires to participate

³ Despite having coined the term himself, Gee critiqued the use of the word "new" to describe this work, as nothing stays new for long. However, as he points out, a more accurate title would be "something like 'integrated social-cultural-political-historical literacy studies'" (Gee, 1990/2008, p. 150), which is too cumbersome to manage.

in Discourses. For example, a student who text messages constantly for non-school purposes would be unlikely to have the same motivation to practice that particular type of literacy in school if the in-school texting yielded less satisfying social outcomes.

One purpose of this research project was to discover whether an open-ended engagement with online spaces, currently much more connected to teens' out-of-school Discourses than in-school Discourses, can result in satisfying outcomes for a wide variety of students. This requires a clear understanding of why young people engage in the online practices they do, and for whom.

In addition, bridging these out-of-school practices with classroom pedagogies means challenging the status quo, taking on powerful discourses about teaching “the basics,” and with them, continued understandings of literacy as mastery of skills unrelated to content or context (de Castell & Luke, 1983; Luke, 1998; Street, 2003). Far from expanding the definition of literacy, in this decade school districts have narrowed definitions further (Bomer, 2008), under pressure in a high-stakes testing environment best symbolized by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002.

21st Century Literacies

While claims that we live in “new times” that demand new curricula are not themselves new (Street, 1983; New London Group, 1996; Luke, 1998), the calendar's turn to another millennium has proved a useful rhetorical device for such arguments. As we near the close of this century's first decade, “21st Century” can still connote both “present” and “future.” Accordingly, efforts to promote change in school curricula in a time of economic uncertainty around the globe have attached themselves to the new century, three of which I will note here.

In 2005, the New Media Consortium released a report from “the 21st Century Literacy Summit,” which sought to define what literacy would mean in the new century, and how the new needs it represented should be addressed. Consistent with the expanding definitions that the New Literacy Studies advocated, the report emphasized that 21st century literacy was “multimodal,” “lends itself to interactive communication,” and “implies the ability to use media to evoke emotional responses” (New Media Consortium, 2005, p. 3).

In 2006, The MacArthur Foundation released a report that built on the New Media Consortium’s definition. The authors hoped to “shift the focus of the conversation about the digital divide from questions of technological access to those of opportunities to participate and to develop the cultural competencies and social skills needed for full involvement” (Jenkins et al., 2006, p. 4). Jenkins and his colleagues emphasize “skills,” but in a way that is consistent with New Literacy Studies work. A quick look at the list of skills reveals a focus on the social as much as or more than the individual: play, performance, simulation, appropriation, multitasking, distributed cognition, judgment, transmedia navigation, networking, and negotiation (p. 4).

Similarly, in 2009, The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) released a report focusing on changes in writing, claiming a break between writing in the 20th and 21st centuries, and declaring, “in the 21st century, people write as never before” (Yancey, 2009, p. 1). Yancey calls for three tasks to be taken up: “developing new models of composing, designing a new curriculum supporting those models, and creating new pedagogies enacting that curriculum” (p. 8).

Web 2.0 Texts

Having made the case for attending to students' affinities, as well as calls for greater incorporation of technology into schools, in this section I will discuss the particular media at the crux of this research. As explained in chapter one, Web 2.0 refers to a series of gradual changes on the Internet that made it easier for users to create, interact, and collaborate online, without an understanding of markup languages such as HTML. Technologies that make use of this interactivity are frequently referred to as social media, and include blogs and social network sites, the specific examples of social media that are of interest in this research.

Blogs

A blog (sometimes more formally known as “weblog”) is a regularly updated website whose entries appear in reverse-chronological order (Blood, 2000; Walker, 2005; Stern, 2008). They can be quickly created on a growing number of blog-hosting websites such as Blogger, WordPress, and LiveJournal, among others. To the reader, they appear as any other website, but the ease with which they can be started has made them tremendously popular. In 2005, the Perseus Development Corporation estimated that there would be 53.6 million blogs by the end of that calendar year (Mortensen, 2008).

Explaining the practice of blogging grows more difficult as more people become engaged in it. Some serve primarily as filters for certain kinds of news or current events, which consist almost entirely of links and images, providing little commentary on the material being linked to. Blood (2000) identified this as the “original style” of blogs, noting that the format, which offered “only a very short space in which to write an entry, encourage pithiness on the part of the writer; longer commentary is often given its own

space as a separate essay” (par. 6). This, however, was in the late 1990s when blogs began. At that time, simple blogging software was not available, so bloggers had to know how to create and publish websites using HTML. As discussed earlier, Web 2.0 applications opened up this form to those who did not have such expertise.

The ease with which blogs could then be composed was a “quantum simplification of web publishing” (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006), and the widespread availability of the software seemed to promise “that everyone could publish, that a thousand voices could flourish, communicate, connect” (Blood, 2000, par. 25). The style of blogs shifted to include those more similar to diaries and journals, and short-form commentary. In more recent years, blogs have expanded to include a range of post lengths and frequencies. A blogger might post only a couple times a week or over forty times in a day; the length of an average post on a given blog might run from a single sentence to hundreds of words.

In order to understand the appeal of blogs, it’s helpful to understand what they are being held in comparison to. Many who have written about blogs and the practice of blogging are implicitly contrasting blogs to traditional, print-based texts. In this light, the features often cited are “immediacy, memory, and community” (Mortensen, 2008, p. 450). Similarly, Andrew Sullivan, a journalist and essayist for the Atlantic who has been blogging since early 2000, cites the “spontaneous expression of instant thought—impermanent beyond even the ephemera of daily journalism” (2008, p. 106).

Knobel and Lankshear consider key characteristics of “effective weblogs” to include a strong purpose, quality of presentation, and “a recognisable and well-informed point of view” (2006, p. 86). While there are many genres of blogs, and therefore all three

of these characteristics require some flexibility of definition, these are especially applicable to journal- or commentary-style blogs, which are the genres more relevant to this study. These blogs tend to rely on a strong personal point of view, and focus a few topics that the author (or “blogger”) writes about on a regular basis. The blogs that the students in this study composed were most like this sort of blog, so even while I may quibble with aspects of the language (a “well-informed” point of view seems especially in the eye of the beholder), these characteristics are foregrounded in this research.

Social Network Sites

Social network sites have received a great deal of media attention since the middle of this decade, when high school students turned to MySpace in large numbers, leading eventually to its purchase by News Corporation (boyd & Ellison, 2008). The distinctions between blogs and social network sites are blurry to many, and for good reasons. Both are strongly associated with Web 2.0, and allow users to create and upload content without downloading and installing software. Both blur the lines between consumers and producers.

According to boyd and Ellison, social network sites “allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (2008, p. 211). The emphasis is much more on the group—the network—rather than the individual. By contrast, the main subject of the blog is the blogger(s); readers, fans, and commenters are important, but are more peripheral than central.

There is a great deal of overlap between the two types of services, and that

overlap has increased as each has grown in popularity. MySpace, for example, one of the best known social network sites, allows users to create blogs as one of their services; Blogger, Google's blogging service, has borrowed the term "Followers,"⁴ which has been used by social network sites to denote "one-directional ties" between users (boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 213). Because these lines have been blurred, and because many of my students had experience with social network sites before they began blogging for my classes, the uses and conventions of social network sites is useful for this research. It would not surprise me to find out, through the blogs themselves, and/or through interviews, that students are informing their decisions to comment on others' blogs, or to become "Followers" of one another's blogs, with their experiences with social networks.

Web 2.0 @ School

While a few researchers have already begun to study how blogs might work in classrooms (West, 2008), those studies have not produced writing that resembles what Knobel and Lankshear (2006) have called "effective and powerful" writing. They have observed that the incorporation of blogs into classrooms often results in student writing that looks much like a lot of student writing generally looks: uninspired, perfunctory, with "little evidence of ideas development" (p. 89).

I will explore this critique in more detail later on; for now, it is enough to say that when I made the decision to I ask my students to use blogs, my primary concern was that they had the opportunity to pursue topics which held their attention and interest, topics which they, rather than I, would choose. My secondary concern was that they conceive of

⁴ In order to differentiate between the common use of the word "following," and the online-specific term involving individual blogs and RSS readers, I use Following and Followers (capital F) to refer to the online terms.

their audiences as extending beyond me, that they were potentially writing for others, real or imagined. That the products look like something “schoolish” was a very distant concern, if it was a concern at all. My concern, rather, was that my students had the opportunity to write about their affinities, for audiences who shared them, in the hopes that their writing might matter more to them.

Power and School Hierarchies

Introducing additional audiences into classroom contexts, especially audiences whose understanding could be considered a better measure of the student’s success than the teacher can provide, necessarily challenges and disrupts common discourses in education about power relations between and among teachers and students. Poststructural notions of power, especially those explored by Foucault (1977, 1980), posit that power is not possessed by some at the expense of others, but rather dispersed, and enacted by people through micro-level relations in their daily lives.

However, this does not mean groups and individuals cannot dominate others; such domination occurs primarily through artifacts (Moje & Lewis, 2007). In education, discourses about power in school reflect a hierarchy where teachers and administrators wield power and authority, and exert that authority through documentation such as grade reports, discipline reports, and other institutional mechanisms (Ferguson, 2000). According to this traditional hierarchy, the teacher is the arbiter of “quality,” determining the relative success or failure of student work. In the writing classroom, this model also produces a relationship between author and reader that is unlikely to produce the active and engaged understanding discussed above.

Lensmire (1994) has written on the use of writing workshop pedagogy, which encourages “transformed teacher-student relations” (p. 378), altering traditional hierarchies through providing students with more choices for writing topics and additional audiences for their writing in the form of other students. Using Bakhtin’s discussion of *carnivale* (1984), Lensmire outlines some benefits of shifting emphasis away from the teacher as audience, while also shedding light on some unintended consequences of disrupting that traditional hierarchy.

Shirky (2003) argues that because large numbers of readers are available for work that is published online, Web 2.0 texts hold some promise for allowing students to engage in “powerful writing” about topics, ideas, and identities that are of interest to them, for audiences who are engaged and knowledgeable about them, offering a sense of agency to the author. Indeed, it appears that many adolescents are already using them for these purposes. However, Knobel and Lankshear (2006) have noted that blogs created for school recreate the dynamics of school assignments, resulting not in “powerful writing” but in the same kind of uninspired writing that is typical of much writing done only for the teacher’s eyes.

One reason for this may be teachers’ fears of loosening their grips on what students are allowed to do online. To put it plainly, the more control students have over their topics and audiences, the more traditional hierarchies are disrupted, and the importance of the teacher as audience is further diminished. Therefore, in this research, I will also consider questions of how the classroom use of blogs, and the associated addition of other audiences in and beyond the school, influences power dynamics in the classroom.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

My research study is intended to contribute to what we know about how social media can be incorporated into classrooms. As I have argued in the previous chapters, and will continue to argue throughout this research, social media—of which Web 2.0 texts are an integral part—is being woven tighter and tighter into the fabric of economic, intellectual, and personal life in the United States. I contend that it is therefore not a question of whether we will weave it into educational life as well, but rather how we will do it, what social media makes available for teachers and students, and what collateral effects we can expect as a result.

The focus of my research is unlikely to address conclusions about the ways in which blogs can be applied to the generic classroom, to the extent that such a thing exists. In this study, my goal was not to generalize the blog experience to all secondary language arts classroom. Instead, I describe a specific set of student blogs, providing a detailed account of blogging with students framed by the growing body of research on using digital media in schools. I explore several facets of what blogs make available to students in the classroom, the possibilities made available to teachers of writing and their students by the availability of wider online audiences, and the challenges these online audiences introduce.

The Teacher as Researcher

Some teacher research has been criticized as being too focused on teacher narratives, straying too far from the rigors of theory and systematic data collection and analysis (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). Teacher research has been criticized for failing to

generate knowledge that is “generalizable across contexts” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 20), and as being “insufficiently systematic, too local, and too little connected to broader academic and social issues” (Fishman & McCarthy, 2000, p. 6). Though I am not interested in generalizability in this study, I agree that the burden is on the teacher researcher to demonstrate “the importance of theory, analysis, and rigour that are nonetheless appropriately conceived and balanced to serve practitioner needs and interests rather than to bolster academic regimes of truth” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004, p. 17). In this research, I attempted to address these critiques without abandoning the first-hand knowledge available to the researcher who is deeply embedded in the research context. To that end, I employ triangulated data collection, approaching the student blogs from multiple angles.

Most importantly, in both the design and execution of this study, I carefully considered relevant theory and previous research. I discussed the theoretical perspectives most central to my work in chapter two, but provide additional relevant theory in chapters four, five, and six. In this chapter, I begin by discussing the research context in some detail, including discussing both courses in which students were creating blogs. I continue with a discussion of my methods for data collection and analysis. Finally, I close the chapter by examining my own position within this research, both as a teacher in the school, and as a researcher, but also as a blogger.

Research Context

The Research Site

My research study site is Abraham Lincoln High School, in Elm Grove, a Midwestern city of approximately 125,000 people with a wider Metro area population of

approximately 245,000. The research takes place over the course of my eighth year of teaching at Lincoln High School. Located in a suburban neighborhood, Lincoln's enrollment is the largest of the three traditional high schools in Elm City with over 1800 students in 2007-08, and has the lowest percentage of students on free and reduced lunch (11% in 2007-08)⁵. Relevant to my study on blogging, in a survey of Lincoln students taken near the end of the 2006-07 school year, 92.3% of students reported having a computer at home, while 90.7% reported using a computer "to surf the web."

At the time of this research, Lincoln High School was enjoying a period of positive public recognition. For several years, the school has been featured on the sort of lists administrators love: *U. S. News and World Report* named it one of the best high schools in the country; *Newsweek* listed it as one of the top 1,000 high schools for three years in a row; and the school made ACT's list of the top 52 schools in preparing students for rigorous math and science work. When the state's largest newspaper ran a long essay contrasting the educational opportunities of a rural school to an urban/suburban counterpart, as part of a series on "world-class schools," the editorial staff chose Lincoln as an example of a world-class urban school. The author of the piece wrote that, "It's a high school that prizes all things academic, and staff and students alike seem to feel privileged to be there" (citation removed for purposes of anonymity).

Lincoln's Language Arts department is made up of seventeen full- and part-time teachers. Lincoln's students are required to take four years of Language Arts courses in high school, and students can choose from among several year-long courses during either of their final two years of high school. Two of these courses are AP Language and

⁵ All statistics about Lincoln High School are taken from the school's "Data Handbook 2007-2008," which provides such statistics about the school.

Composition and Perspectives in Literature, the two courses I taught during the year of my data collection.

The Language Arts Courses

The student participants in this study were enrolled in one of two classes: Advanced Placement Language and Composition, and Perspectives in Literature and Composition. (For the sake of readability, the two will be referred to colloquially in data chapters as AP Lang and Perspectives.) Both courses were offered to all juniors and seniors.

Lincoln High School has cultivated what is considered by the administration to be a strong Advanced Placement program, in which students are actively encouraged to enter into the challenge of AP courses regardless of what they might score on AP tests. This decade has seen growing emphasis on Advanced Placement curriculum and tests at Lincoln. In 2001, AP classes had 357 student AP enrollments⁶, a total of 73 AP tests taken in May of that school year. By 2008, AP courses had grown to 968 enrollments, with 716 AP tests taken in the spring.

Advanced Placement Language and Composition is, at Lincoln, intended to be similar to a Rhetoric course that a college freshman might be expected to take. In its tenth year of being offered at Lincoln, AP Language (which my students and I frequently contract to “AP Lang”) focuses primarily on the nonfiction essay. Students are expected to write on a near-daily basis, which made the logistics of integrating student blogs easy to envision.

The other course I taught was Perspectives in Literature and Composition, a

⁶ By “student AP enrollments,” I mean one student taking one AP course. Thus, if one student took three AP courses, s/he would count for three student AP enrollments.

course about Post-World War II literature, culture, and media. Perspectives, as it is popularly known, attracts a wide range of students, because it is one of three courses intended for anyone— from the junior taking his/her first mainstreamed course outside of special education curriculum to the senior who took AP Language the year before.

When first implemented, what most distinguished Perspectives from other courses was the availability of digital video cameras and iMacs, intended to help teachers engage students in creative, multimedia projects. But while these resources allowed for more regular use of media than other courses, they also helped give the course a reputation as “the movie class” among students, as well as some teachers, counselors, and administrators. The course became an easy target for criticism because of its perceived lack of rigor, despite the inclusion of respected authors such as Tobias Wolff, Alice Walker, Sherman Alexie, and Kurt Vonnegut. At one point rumors circulated among the language arts staff that Perspectives might be eliminated and replaced with something more traditionally understood as rigorous. This threat never materialized, but a cloud hung over the course for several years.

Background for Study

During the 2008-2009 school year, I was in my seventh year of teaching AP Language and Composition, teaching two of four available sections of the course. The other teacher of AP Language and I shared the same general organization for the course, consisting of five components: short, timed essays meant to simulate the AP test for the course; longer essays which students revised with the help of writing workshop groups; regular large-group discussions of assigned readings; a portfolio of students’ best work every trimester; and ongoing, regular, unrevised writing.

On this last assignment, my colleague and I diverged. We both had used writing notebooks for this daily writing in the past. However, during the previous school year, I had grown frustrated with what I saw as a longstanding pattern of unengaged, unmotivated writing in students' notebooks. I had been thinking about experimenting with blogs as a replacement or supplement for the notebooks, but had been too busy to figure out how it would work. Then, the year before this study, a student wrote me an e-mail, saying he just couldn't ever figure out what to write, and asking if I would be willing to look at the blog he had been keeping, and count some of that writing toward his notebook requirement. When I looked at his blog, and saw prolific writing from the same student who reported being stuck on the notebook writing assignment, I decided it was time to get the blog project started.

Making regular, unstructured writing a part of the weekly curriculum was more of a break from convention in Perspectives than in AP Language. However, exploring online writing seemed appropriate for the language arts course that was about contemporary literature and culture. Further, because blogging provided students opportunities to combine multiple modes of expression—writing, images, audio, and video—it seemed perfectly consistent with the course as a whole. From a researcher's perspective, I expected that observing how responses were similar and different across the two classes would be interesting, which further cemented my decision to ask students to blog. As I will explain further in chapter four, students who choose to enroll in AP courses at Lincoln High School frequently appear to be more motivated to please the teacher than students in non-AP classes. They are more likely to have a high class rank, and to care about that status. They seem more willing to play the academic games

required of them. They are generally students who have been celebrated for their academic performances, whether measured by grade point average, standardized test scores, or number of AP courses and tests taken.

At the end of the year, however, few of my Perspectives students agreed to be interviewed. Perhaps this was the product of some of the same factors described in the preceding paragraphs. Students who are more motivated to please the teacher, or who see themselves as successful students, are probably more likely to be interviewed to talk about a part of their schoolwork.

In any case, though a detailed discussion of some Perspectives blogs would have made for lively, interesting examples in this dissertation, I chose not to include them in this discussion when I was able to interview most of the AP Lang bloggers whose blogs are discussed in detail. The Perspectives blogs have therefore been included in the data associated with Following that appears in chapter five, as they were part of the same network of blogs as those in AP Lang. None of the blogs selected for detailed discussion in chapters four or six, however, were Perspectives students alone.

The Blogging Assignment

Though I asked students in both classes to create blogs during the data collection period, I had different rationales for doing so. In AP Lang, I wanted to find a more effective way of connecting students with audiences that would suit their interests and purposes, and better engage them in a specific, ongoing assignment. In Perspectives, I wanted to engage students in contemporary writing practices, which seemed to fit within the purview of the course.

The assignment ended up looking similar in both courses: at least three posts per

week, at least a certain number of words written (1200 in AP Lang, 750 in Perspectives). Weekly posts would be due at the beginning of the day on Mondays. Each class would have one day per week in the computer lab, where students could write, read one another's blogs, find new material for their own posts, and talk to me about ideas and challenges. Different word counts were assigned to the two courses because of my perceptions of the relative writing competence of the two groups of students.

Though my data collection period officially begins at the beginning of the school year, in August of 2008, students did not begin blogging immediately. AP Lang students blogged for eight months, from October through nearly the end of May, with periodic breaks depending on the school calendar (students were not required to blog during their winter break, nor spring break), and because of other assignments they were completing for me (I gave time away from the blog requirements when we were finalizing revised essays and end-of-term portfolios). Perspectives students began blogging in mid-December, continued through mid-May, and had similar breaks based on the school calendar and additional assignments. In each class, I asked students to blog under a pseudonym unless they had their parents' permission to use their real names (which I confirmed by e-mail). I encouraged them to experiment with different templates that were available to them, and to change the designs of their blogs as they saw fit.

I checked the student blogs twice per twelve-week term, and blog checks were unannounced. A blog check consisted of reading student posts and determining whether they met both minimum requirements for the assignment. If the student had the minimum number of posts, and met or exceeded the required word count for each week, that student received 100% on the blog assignment. This was similar to the way I had graded

writing notebooks in the past two years. By assessing only whether they had met the requirements for quantity, rather than assigning a grade that assessed quality, I intended for students to be freed from worrying about what I wanted, and to write more for their own purposes. I also kept track of who was using additional features such as links, images, or video; however, students were not required to use these features, and it did not affect their grades for the assignment.

The Student Blog Network

As discussed above, the most important research site in this study is not the physical space of the school or classroom, but the network of websites that make up students' blogs. The organization of the student blog network will be explained in greater detail in chapter five, but the most important details are these: every student had his or her own blog, and each of these blogs was linked bi-directionally with a "hub" blog that tied all the blogs together. The hub blog had a link to every student's blog, and every student's blog had a link to the hub blog.

With the exception of the hub blog, which was hosted by WordPress (<<http://www.wordpress.com>>), all other blogs discussed in this study were hosted by Blogger, made available through Google (<<http://www.google.com>>). I chose Blogger partially for idiosyncratic reasons (it was the one I happened to choose when trying out blogging for myself), and partially for logistical ones (students are largely already familiar with Google, its interface was easier to use than some others I'd seen, and it was free). The fact that neither service requires software to be loaded onto hard drives, nor downloaded from the Internet, meant that the students and I use Blogger from school computers without having to get help from the district. We could do it on our own.

Students were asked to keep the blogs password protected for a couple of weeks, to provide them time to get a sense of what they wanted to write about without worrying about the fact that their sites were public. I required them to “invite” me through my school e-mail address, so I would still be able to access the blogs and see their progress. After the first two weeks, I asked these students to open the blogs up for others to read, though I did tell them that if they wanted to keep their blogs private, they could. Nearly all AP Language blogs were opened and remained open to all readers after that point.

In mid-December I gave the assignment to Perspectives students, and described minimum requirements similar to those I’d given AP Language, with a smaller minimum word count (750 words). Although a few students left their blogs open to all readers from the beginning, most Perspectives students’ blogs were password-protected until the beginning of the third trimester, in the second week of March, 2009.

Institutional Review Board Approval

The year prior to beginning this study, I conducted a pilot study of students’ blogs. The University of Iowa’s Office of Human Subject designated Institutional Review Board approval of my study by declaring it exempt, with the understanding that I would only look at those blogs which were open to the public. As I anticipated the current study, I modified the earlier IRB project proposal to include student blogs I described above from the AP Language and Perspectives classes. As with the first IRB blog proposal, I was approved to use data from those blogs that were publicly available. With IRB approval, I could reference the presence of password protected blogs, but I was unable to comment on the content of those blogs. A second request for IRB approval allowed me to conduct up to thirty student interviews. I was also required to devise a study procedure

where I was not informed of students who agreed to be interviewed until after final grades had been assigned, thus protecting any students who opted not to participate in interviews. I have additional comments regarding these procedures later in the chapter.

A Brief Timeline of Data Collection and Analysis Processes

There were three components to my data set: those student blogs which were not password protected, and therefore available for anyone to read; interviews with focal students, conducted after the school year ended; written and audio-recorded teaching field notes, which I wrote and recorded over the course of the study. I viewed each of these as pieces of a complicated puzzle, none of them superseding the others as giving a “truer” picture of what was happening when students were blogging.

For example, suppose a student said in the post-year interview that while he was writing, he thought nobody was reading his blog. Suppose further that I find he referred to his three readers in a November blog post, and that I commented in a field note from December that other students had told him “nice post the other day” when he came into class. By triangulating data from the blogs, the student interviews, and my field notes, I arrived at a more complete understanding of the student’s perceptions of his audience. This is not to say that the triangulation of these three pieces of data give me a true account of what happened, or that I would conclude that the student’s comment in the interview was simply disproven by the comments from his blog and my field notes.

My role as a teacher did not allow for waiting until all data had been collected to begin some kind of analysis, which necessarily led to a recursive process throughout this study. I would read what students were writing on their blogs, observe how they were (or weren’t) using images, video, and hyperlinks, and reassess the assumptions I had been

making at the beginning of the study. For these reasons, rather than detailing neat and linear procedures for data collection and analysis, I give a brief account of the process. I follow with a more detailed explanation of each component.

1. I read through all the blog posts that had been posted from October through May, making researcher field notes about events that might speak to the themes within my research questions. I was trying to cast a wide net, not knowing who would make themselves available for interviews once the study ended. Meanwhile, I kept track of data related to who was using hyperlinks on their blogs, who was Following, and so on.
2. I arranged for students to be given consent forms so they could agree to be interviewed; 22 students turned in signed forms. Based on who agreed to be interviewed, I went back to the data and again read through those blogs written by students who had agreed to be interviewed. I looked for interesting patterns and incidents that might speak to my research questions, then used those patterns and incidents to decide which students I wanted to interview.
3. (a) Of the 22 students who had agreed to be interviewed, I selected eight students. I conducted 30- to 60-minute, semi-structured interviews with those eight students. Those interviews took place following the end of school in June through the last week of July. (See Appendix A for interview questions.)

(b) Meanwhile, I also was compiling data about Following from the end of the year, and using Visone, a software program, to create a visual map of the student blog network at the year's conclusion. I provide a detailed description of this map in chapter five.

4. I coded the interviews, using my research questions as a guide. Based on what students said in their interviews, and what I felt I was coming to understand about the blogs, I went back through the data on another pass. Themes were beginning to emerge, particularly about audience, about the importance of comments vs. Followers, and about the freedom to say what they wanted on the blogs. Using the themes evident in my coding, I organized my data chapters around key themes, as informed by my research questions.
5. I selected a very small number of what looked to me like illustrative examples, related to those themes. I chose them based on their connections to these themes, and according to whether the participants involved had been interviewed. I selected methods of analysis appropriate for each theme, which I describe in an upcoming section of this chapter.

Data Collection Methods

While research in digital environments can no longer be characterized as “new,” it is not yet old enough that the available methodological options are obvious. The methods for conducting research in such environments sensibly rely on methodologies that have been tested over time in “real-life settings” (Gillham, 2000, p. vi). This is desirable; such methodologies have had their merits and drawbacks debated and articulated by research scholars, and there is much that researchers can borrow for virtual settings. These methodologies cannot be taken up altogether, however. The shift to these virtual settings necessarily changes them. In order to assist the reader in understanding exactly what aspects of which methodologies guided my data collection, in this section I explain how I adapted elements of ethnographic research methods and case study research methods to

understand what would count as data in this research, and how I would collect it.

Ethnographic Research Methods

If the interactions discussed in this study had happened in the physical space of my classroom, it would be more clearly appropriate to discuss the applications of ethnographic research methods. Applying those methods online, however, is complicated. Spradley (1980) names ‘place,’ ‘actors,’ and ‘activities’ as the three aspects of a ‘social situation.’ Leander and McKim (2003) have discussed the difficulties of dealing with place in online ethnographies, suggesting a shift “to fields of relations rather than bounded physical sites” (p. 214). Markham (2005) has similarly called for a reconsideration of ethnographic methods for online spaces, since “Online, the first step toward existence is the production of discourse, whether in the form of words, graphic images, or sounds” (p. 794).

This requires the researcher using ethnographic methods online to consider how the digital environment is being defined through the discourse of the people using it, with special attention to understandings of the environment as public or private (Cavanaugh, 1999), an issue I address in more detail in chapter six. Markham (2005) cautions that small decisions researchers make about representation have significant consequences:

All ethnographically informed research, particularly in computer-mediated environments, includes decisions about how to draw boundaries around groups, what to leave in as meaningful data and what to dismiss as unimportant, and how to explain what we think to our audiences” (Markham, 2005, p. 815).

With these concerns in mind, I relied heavily on ethnographic methods for this research, the most significant concept of which was the notion of “participant observation,” widely understood to be both the most valuable element of ethnographic research (Hymes, 1962; Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). I was, of course, participating in the

entire process of my students' blogs, having created and assigned the project, as well as being responsible for reading, monitoring, and assessing them. Sometimes this meant I was 'present' only in a digital sense, visiting a student's blog without any sense of whether he or she was also online at the same moment or not, reading and viewing what had already been composed on it. At other times—generally once per week for each class, in a computer lab—I was literally in the room while they were composing, engaging them in conversations about what they were doing, troubleshooting technical problems, and attempting to help and guide them through blogging. (These conversations were reflected in my researcher field notes.)

Though participant observation provides opportunities for the researcher to see participants' interactions up close and in great detail, it also requires the researcher to carefully consider his or her position among those participants (Lewis, 2001; Dyson, 2003). Because my research was largely about how students would interact among themselves, and with other readers of their blogs, I followed my inclination to rarely comment on the blogs themselves. This coincided with a fear that my role as the teacher would jeopardize my attempts to position the blogs as primarily a space for interacting with other audiences beyond myself. Still, there were times when these considerations came into conflict with teacherly guilt that I was not commenting enough on what students were doing. I continued to wrestle with these dilemmas throughout the research, and I talk about them further in chapters four and six.

Case Study Research Methods

The purpose of this research is thus to examine the “local particulars of some abstract social phenomenon” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 3), for which case studies are

most appropriate. Merriam defines the case study as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit” (1988, p. 16). There were several legitimate ways to define “entity,” “phenomenon,” and “social unit” in this study. Each blog could be seen as an individual case. Small networks of blogs could each be a separate case, each of those blogs connected through linking and Following one another. I could have looked at the entire system of over a hundred blogs as a single case. One key, as Barone (2004) explains, is boundedness, which determines what is included and what is excluded from study.

This notion of boundedness helped me to determine what constituted the network of blogs—which blogs counted and which didn’t. In this research, I was simultaneously interested in how the network of blogs operated as a system, and how individual students constructed their blogs separately. As the reader will see, however, there is really no such thing as a blog that is separated from the rest. Collective case study methodology allows for boundaries of the research to be drawn according to a number of possible criteria, including “a phenomenon, group, condition, or event” (Barone, 2004, p. 9). This flexibility was especially useful in trying to determine the boundaries around the data analyzed in chapter four, which draws from blog posts and comments written by multiple student and non-student bloggers, on three blogs, across five days.

Types of Data

The primary source of data in this study is writing collected from student blogs. As I described earlier in this chapter, I had, depending on the time of year, between 50 and 110 students writing between 750 and 1200 words per week. While all of my students’ blogs were online, not all of them were open to all readers. A handful of the

blogs were restricted to only those readers who had been “invited” to view the blog. The blogger invites specific readers by e-mail, who are then required to sign in with a password. This was a setting used by those students who, for one reason or another, elected not to allow the general public to read their blogs.

Though I encouraged students to leave their blogs open to a public audience, which I considered one of the main benefits of blogging, I offered no argument when a student or parent said they were not comfortable with this arrangement. In these cases, I required only that they invite me, since I had to grade the project. As mentioned earlier, blogs that were password protected at the data collection period were not available for use in this research.

When determining which blogs spoke to the themes of my research questions, I considered the following questions: To what degree does the blog appear to be working for the student? How engaged is the student in the work he or she is doing on the blog? What kind of writing is the student doing on his/her blog? How much writing? What reference does the student make to the readers s/he expects are reading the blog? To what extent is the student interacting with others on his or her blog? How much evidence is there that the student’s blog is being read by others (through comments, Followers, etc.)?

Guided by these questions, I kept notes in my researcher field notes, and made decisions about which students would be the most informative to interview. My goal was not to select only positive examples of student blogs. Instead, I wanted to document a range of student work.

Focal student interviews

In order to conduct interviews with students, they (and their parents, for students

seventeen or younger) had to sign consent forms agreeing to participate in the study. Three weeks before the end of the school year, a University of Iowa colleague came to my classroom to introduce my research study to students, and provided a written description of the study and participation forms. Following IRB protocol, she left an envelope in the classroom, promising to return in two weeks to retrieve it, and she told students that I would not see the forms until a week after school was out. I was not present for her explanation of the study, and did not discuss the project with students. On a few occasions, a student brought a signed form in but had forgotten what to do with it, and I directed the student to the envelopes. Twenty-two students would ultimately turn in signed consent forms.

Once the school year was over, and I had identified the blogging interactions I wished to focus on for closer analysis, I sat down with those students who had agreed to be interviewed. I conducted individual, hour-long, semi-structured interviews. For a copy of my interview questions, see Appendix A. I conducted a total of eight interviews, all of them conducted in a computer lab at Lincoln High School. During each interview, both the student and I had the student's blog up on a separate computer so that we could look at the blogs as we talked.

In these interviews, I asked questions about the following topics: the content of their blogs; the audiences of their blogs, both real and imagined; whether they read any other blogs by students in the class, and which were their favorites; how blogging compared to other online writing they have done, if any; and how they made use of modes beyond writing, especially images and video. I recorded the interviews with "iTalk," an app allowing an iPhone to be used as a digital audio recorder, and transcribed

the interviews using Microsoft Word. These transcribed interviews were coded for emerging themes.

Teacher field notes

Over the course of the year, there were many occasions when I recorded what I was thinking as a teacher: moments when students had raised interesting questions, or when previously-ignored aspects of the blogs suddenly seemed important; moments of excitement for—or frustration with—what seemed to be happening. I had three purposes for collecting teacher field notes.

First and foremost, I used these notes to reconstruct the chronology of events in the classroom. This included when the blog assignment was introduced; when and how I went about whole-class instruction regarding elements of blogging, such as linking or embedding; individual conversations with students about their blogs; and personal observations about individual blogs or shifts in student blogging patterns.

Second, I used them to reconstruct my reactions, once student blogging was underway. My recorded thoughts were useful for exploring the challenges that a teacher faces when implementing pedagogy that incorporates technologies that give students access to tools that are primarily regarded as social and recreational rather than academic and professional, and those which give student work a wide online audience.

Finally, I used the field notes to rethink my own assumptions during the process of teaching my students how to use blogs. As is often the case when teaching, I made predictions and assumptions about what would happen when students began composing on the blogs. The field notes helped me review those in light of the actual products students produced.

Data Analysis Procedures

Because blogs comprised the majority of my data, it was necessary to create flexible data analysis methods and procedures that would allow me to (1) closely examine the socially situated identities students used on their blogs, and the Discourses they used when discussing their experiences with blogs (Gee, 2005); (2) closely examine combinations of print, images, visual design (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001); and (3) closely examine the structural connections between and among students' blogs (Rettberg, 2008). These methods were, respectively, Discourse Analysis, Multimodal Analysis, and Social Network Analysis. I describe each in greater detail below.

Discourse Analysis

In analyzing students' uses of language in both written data (blog posts and comments) as well as spoken (interviews), I was interested in their particular social uses of language (Rogers, 2004). As Rogers (2004) puts it, Critical Discourse Analysis provides "a critical theory of the social world, the relationship of language and discourse in the construction and representation of this social world, and a methodology that allows [researchers] to describe, interpret, and explain such relationships (p. 3).

Given my interest in students' blogs as related to their identities and social relationships, Gee's model of Discourse Analysis was most appropriate for analyzing these data (Gee, 2005). Gee's seven "building tasks" offer a set of considerations for the researcher, ranging from the situated meanings in the text to the activities those meanings are embedded within, to the identities, Discourses, relationships and politics that form the broader context around the literacy event, discourse event, or situation network (Gee, 2005, p. 110).

The process of coding and analyzing using discourse analysis, which helped me generate themes from the data, was necessarily recursive. It generally happened in three stages: multiple passes through large amounts of data, followed by a detailed analysis of relevant posts and comments. During this first pass through the data, I read every post on every blog written by the students who had agreed to be interviewed. Each of these blogs included between 50 and 140 posts. I was looking for examples that spoke to the themes in my research questions: examples of students considering the possibility of other audiences (real or imagined) reading their blogs; students interacting with other students on their blogs; examples of students transgressing conventional boundaries of school behavior. This stage led me to the key events or moments that would best speak to the themes of the relevant research question. Concurrently, during this stage I combed my interview transcripts and field notes for occasions when they addressed—directly or indirectly—the same or related themes.

Next, I made a second pass of the data, re-reading the blogs of the students related to these key events or moments. In the case of chapter four, this meant re-reading the entire blogs of the three students who took part in a particular interaction, and selected posts that spoke to the themes in my research questions in order to give the reader a portrait of each student. For the data presented in chapter six, it meant re-reading all blog posts by one particular student, and any comments that student had written on other students' blogs. Again, I concurrently returned to the transcripts of student interviews, combing them for utterances which illuminated the key events or moments. At the same time, I revisited my field notes, looking for occasions when I had commented on a student or interaction I was concentrating on.

Finally, I made a third pass of this selected number of posts and comments. In chapter four, I coded each blog post and comment that made up the interaction, which included two posts and four comments. For data analysis in chapter six, I coded thirteen posts from the same student's blog. For both chapters, I used Gee's seven building tasks (2005), devoting particular attention to varied tasks depending on the relevant themes in the chapter. These methods are discussed further in chapters four and six.

It bears repeating that this was a recursive process. If, during analysis, I was perplexed by why a student would have made a particular comment in an interview, or done something on the blog that seemed at odds with my current hypotheses, I typically returned to the interview or blog to read through it again. On more than one occasion, this led to me re-reading the entire year's worth of posts.

Multimodal Analysis

Analysis of blogs occasionally extended beyond written text, including uses of still images (photos; drawings; "clip art"), moving images (videos embedded from YouTube; animated images), graphic design (background color; font choices; spatial arrangement), and sound (music; sound effects). The analysis of other modes and embedded media has been explored by others interested in multimodal texts (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2007), and is a critical component of any discussion of blogs.

As discussed above regarding Discourse Analysis, I was interested in students' blogs as related to their identities and social relationships. I simultaneously looked to the visual, aural, and multimodal elements of students' blogs for evidence of how they were conveying these same things. Discourses Analysis and Multimodal Analysis were

therefore frequently used in tandem. Often, when images or video are being used on blogs, they were either being referenced by the written text, or meant to influence the reader's/viewer's interpretation of the written text.

My application of multimodality was necessarily a modification of the researchers cited above, as the images, videos, and designs that students use on their blogs were almost never original creations. When I documented visual elements, those elements fell into two categories. First, I examined the stylistic choices selected from among the options within Blogger's series of templates. Students used a variety of color schemes, fonts, and layouts on their blogs, but unless they had a sophisticated understanding of HTML, they were forced to select those from a narrow list of options.

The second type of visual element I discuss in this study are images and videos recontextualized from other online sources. As described earlier, the latter are often made available on sites such as YouTube for the purpose of being recontextualized. Even when they are not, recontextualization from sites such as Google Images is made simple by the blogging software. My analysis of these images and videos was therefore less focused on visual composition, and more on their associated meanings, and values, with an eye toward understanding how the student used them as part of their overall composition.

Though occasionally important, this aspect of my analysis was not as central as I expected it to be when I began my study. I had not anticipated the frequency with which students would change their templates, and because I did not know which of my 100+ students' blogs I would be analyzing later, I did not have the means to capture visual data of a given student's blog at the beginning of the year as compared to the changes over time. That said, at times multimodal analysis provided important understandings. For

example, in chapter six I discuss a particular student blogger, Grant, who employed images alongside his text in order to use discourses about insanity to position himself as a teller of truths that others wouldn't tell. Grant also specifically chose the color scheme of his blog to confound conventional aesthetics and discourage readership.

Social network analysis

Because the connections between student blogs were not only a matter of discursive positioning by participants, but also a matter of structural features inherent in Web 2.0 media, I also employed social network analysis (Garton, Haythornthwaite, and Wellman, 1999; Rettberg, 2008). Social network analyses, commonly used to look at the structural properties of individuals' interactions within a network, allowed me to identify particular types of ties between blogs, and to represent the entire group of blogs as a network. The purpose of this approach—discussed primarily in chapter five, but relevant to the entire study—was to visually represent ties between the focal students' blogs and other blogs from the class, as demonstrated on their blogs through commenting, Following, and linking. To illustrate this connectivity, I used the kind of node-based illustration that has long been popular in research seeking to visualize social networks (Freeman, 2000), and has now become a common tool for doing the same with online social network sites (see for example, Heer & boyd, 2005).

My research plan was, originally, to look at two or three small networks, defined through the blogs' links and comments. My research goal was to address questions about how students within those networks were influenced by one another, to understand how those networks formed, and to get a sense of how students interacted within their networks. I expected these networks to be limited to around five or six students, based on

the pilot study I had conducted the previous spring. However, as I will discuss in detail in chapter five, the Following feature, which imitated the appearance of “Friends” on Facebook, both made it easier to create those permanent links between blogs, and made it more obvious that a blogger would want to do so.

Although I knew at the beginning that I would want to represent this connectivity between blogs, I did not know that Following would be the best measure of understanding connectivity. As I explain further in chapter five, when I had conducted the pilot study during the previous spring, the Following feature had not yet been added to Blogger. This meant that a student who wanted to create a permanent link leading from her own blog to a friend’s blog had to go to a couple of steps to do so.

This new feature had an important effect on my data collection where connectivity is concerned. Regrettably, because I did not initially know that Following would be significant in the study, I was not recording the number of Followers for each blog for the first four months of data collection. Instead, I was keeping track of what kind of links students were adding to their blogs as permanent sidebar links, which had previously been the method students would use for this purpose. Once it became clear that students were using Following rather than sidebar links as their method for connecting their blogs to one another, I began documenting the number of Followers listed for each blog. With more complete data from the first half of the data collection period, more could have been said about which students were early adopters of the feature, and how the feature spread to the rest of the network.

Even so, there was still plenty to say about the profound changes that Following made to the structure of the network of student blogs from the beginning of the data

collection period to the end. Social network analysis was a useful tool for tracing the connectivity students were building through this feature, and, importantly, helped to show how the structure of the network of student blogs changed substantially over the course of the year.

In order to create the main visual diagram illustrating connectivity between and among blogs on the student blog network, I used the Visone software developed at the University of Konstanz in Konstanz, Germany. Visone allowed me to create a separate node for each student blog, making the size relative to the number of Followers the student had at the conclusion of the school year. It also allowed me to represent the directionality of Following; that is, when two blogs were connected through Following, it allowed me to indicate which blogger was Following the other, or if Following was mutual (though, regrettably, this is much clearer in color than black and white).

Positioning the Researcher

The fact that I chose to conduct research in a space that I was deeply embedded within raises questions about how my relationship with my subjects, my research site, and the activity being studied might influence the way I saw what was happening during my research. At the beginning of this chapter, I addressed the significance of conducting research as it pertains to wider discussions and critiques of teacher research.

In this section, I acknowledge certain subjectivities, and specifically address my position in relation to the research site, to my research subjects, and to blogging itself. An awareness of those subjectivities allowed me to be more thoughtful in moments when the needs of teacher were at odds with the needs of the researcher. More often than not, this awareness caused me to side with the researcher.

The Researcher as a Teacher

The roles of *teacher* and *researcher* are neither unitary nor separable. As I conducted this research, I was not thinking as teacher at some times and as the researcher at other times. Though one or the other may have come into the foreground in certain moments, or faded into the background in others, I was always both teacher and researcher, all of the time. My own biases and desires as a teacher are therefore pertinent in this context. These include my feelings about the school I work in. Over the time I have worked at Lincoln High School, I feel I have a position where my opinions on matters of policy are considered, when I decide to offer them. I believe the administration I work for has been supportive of my goals, even when those goals have diverted some of my energy from the work of high school teaching toward the work of University life. I have tried to be mindful that this, coupled with my continued employment in that school, could compromise my ability to be critical about the environment I'm teaching in.

It is also relevant to consider what subjectivities I bring with me about the courses I was teaching. I had, at the time that I began data collection for this study, invested a great deal of time and energy into the development of Perspectives in Literature and Composition. This includes a desire to position myself as a teacher who is adept at incorporating technology into the classroom. I have attempted to keep in mind that this investment could make me want to portray the course—and my teaching of it—in the most favorable light possible. I believe this critical awareness has actually enabled me to be more acutely aware of limitations with my approach to teaching with blogs, which can most clearly be demonstrated in chapter six.

In my relationships with students, I prefer to reduce this distance between myself

and my students, rather than extend that distance. I believe that taking the stance that adolescents are fundamentally similar to adults, and to communicate with them much like I would do with peers, has given me more credibility when trying to persuade students to cooperate with my curricular goals. In moments of uncertainty, when I was teaching during the data collection period, it is possible that this desire to maintain a relatively close distance with students caused me to let students continue to work, even if I wasn't sure I approved of what they were producing. This is especially visible in chapter six, where I discuss allowing students to transgress against school norms.

The Researcher as a Blog Reader

In addition to my professional interest in the integration of digital media into my practices as a high school English teacher, the pedagogical move to ask my students to blog reflected my personal interest in reading blogs. Since 1999, I have moved on a trajectory from being an occasional reader of blogs to being an avid reader. I began by reading Harry Knowles' "Ain't It Cool News" (<<http://www.aintitcool.com>>), a site dedicated to news and reviews of films, televisions, comic books, and other aspects of what might be termed "geek media culture." In 2004, I started reading Andrew Sullivan's "Daily Dish" (<<http://www.andrewsullivan.com>>) after becoming aware of his writing for TIME Magazine. I found his political perspective interesting; upon reading his blog, I was drawn in by a more personal, casual voice than his professional writing allowed, as well as a wider array of topics: popular culture, religion, and other issues that struck him as worth commenting on. He had strong opinions, and I didn't always agree with him, but I was usually interested in what he had to say, so I kept coming back.

Over the years, I tried reading other blogs. Sometimes I would browse the

“blogroll” (a conventional list of links often found on the sidebar of a blog); sometimes I would type the names of authors, journalists, or filmmakers into a search engine to see if they kept a blog. My bookmarks list kept growing, as I was drawn to various bloggers’ attitudes, voices, and senses of humor. The inclusion of blogs in my classroom was not, however, simply a case of asking students to engage in a practice I enjoyed.

The Researcher as a Blogger

During my first several years of reading blogs, I saw no connection between these online writing practices and my own classroom. I had never tried blogging, and I suspected it would require an understanding of HTML or other programming, which was beyond my range of expertise. Surely, I thought, this would be too complicated for a high school language arts class. So when a student asked if he could use what he was already doing online as a replacement for some of the writing I was asking him to do for my class, I was initially resistant.

Once I visited his blog, however, I began to consider the possible advantages of my students having additional audiences available, and started to wonder whether it was as complicated as I thought. I decided to give blogging a try, hoping to find applications I could use in my teaching. I started a blog of my own, entitled Panoptiblog (<<http://panoptiblog.blogspot.com>>). My intention was to stay flexible and write about all kinds of different topics, but I soon found myself writing primarily about politics, popular culture, and education. I had to make difficult decisions about what my “blogger voice” was going to be like. I wanted to use a relaxed, conversational tone, but did I care if my students found it? What about my students’ parents, or future employers? Knowing that anyone might read it was paralyzing for a while. Finally, I decided that I would try to

find a balance I was comfortable with, somewhere between writing whatever I wanted, while remaining aware of the multiple audiences who might be present, and the respective identities with which I was associated. Most important for me was developing an impression of who I thought—or hoped—that my audience was. I had imagined an audience that was like me, interested in the same things, with a similar sense of humor. In truth, I didn't know if anyone was reading at all. But I found that when I didn't write, I felt guilty. When I discovered that someone I didn't know had commented on the blog, or linked to it, I was excited. Later, when a student showed me how to install a “hit counter” on my blog, which would tell me how many people were visiting the blog each day, I had what felt like proof of an audience, and was indeed more motivated to blog regularly.

It is impossible to separate where the questions about my own blog audience ended and where the questions about my students' concerns about audience began. The confluence of these subjectivities helped to shape the research questions I began this study with. I struggled with these questions—as a teacher, as a reader, as a writer, and as a researcher. I close this chapter with those questions again, before attempting to address them over the next three chapters.

- In what ways are students influenced by their perceptions of audience when blogging for a school assignment?
- In what ways do structural features of Web 2.0 sites—especially those that allow for direct student interaction—shape student blogging practices?
- In what ways can blogs be used to transgress against school norms and boundaries?

CHAPTER IV

“YOU INSPIRED A POST OF MINE”:

DIALOGIC POSSIBILITIES OF WEB 2.0

My students had been writing on and off for about ten weeks when I asked them to reflect on their blogs: what they were about, what had gone well and poorly so far, and so on. Courtney, who had been struggling to write a blog about movies and books, began her reflection with the following:

You asked us to explain what our blogs were about. However, I don't really know what mine is about. I started off wanting to talk about stuff that matter, stuff that I think about and how I think and how it helps me explain life, helps me live. My first posts show that. But I was worried that I would not be able to spill out 1200 words a week, at least not ones that were good enough. I now see that the fear didn't really matter because my blog is pretty much pointless anyway. It lacks substance and frankly, who cares what I think. I wouldn't care what people think about movies and books and other forms of media. My writing is giberish [sic] and unimportant. I think this is mainly because it is an assignment, and you have forced me to write as such. My writing has no sincerity, and writing without complete sincerity will always be complete crap. (“My Blog,” December 21, 2008)

As I demonstrate later in this chapter, Courtney was neither a poor student nor a struggling writer. She carried herself at school as a confident young woman who knew her mind. And yet, when assigned to write on a public blog three times per week on a subject of her choice, she felt her writing lacked “substance” and “sincerity,” and assessed it as “complete crap.” Why?

In this chapter, I return to my second research question: In what ways do students' perceptions of their audiences shape their writing on their blogs? In what ways will students' writing evolve when offered choices of what to write about, and for whom? I argue three claims. First, that when we give students opportunities to write about topics of their choice, to discuss things they care about deeply, it is critically important that we

give them audiences who they feel genuinely can hear them in the way they want to be heard, audiences who have what Bakhtin described as “an active and engaged understanding” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 280). I will refer to these as “authentic audiences.”

Second, I argue that teachers alone cannot become these audiences, for reasons relating to teacher enactments of power, and to students’ need to be recognized as engaging in practices associated with desired Discourses. I will explore how students’ conceptions of their own identities require us to expand the available meaningful audiences to which they have access.

Third, I argue that Web 2.0 sites make these audiences more available than they have ever been for teachers and students, and that blogs are a uniquely useful tool for enabling this kind of writing in secondary English/language arts classrooms. I draw on Bakhtin’s principles of dialogism to discuss the possibilities for allowing more voices into the conversations students are engaging in through their classroom writing. As I’ll describe in chapter six, Web 2.0 offers challenges to teachers who want to explore its possibilities as well: when students are communicating with audiences they value, for their own purposes, it may weaken the teacher’s ability to leverage students to observe rules and behaviors that the teacher values.

To illustrate some of the ways blogs might change what audiences are available to students, I discuss three of my students who kept blogs at Lincoln High School. These focal students negotiated the opportunities and challenges presented by the availability of more audiences in interesting and unexpected ways, ultimately writing in ways that were aimed more at like-minded peers than at me. My “teacher voice” quickly became one among many voices, including those belonging to students in my classes, students’ other

friends, and other readers who had no connection to Lincoln High School.

Audiences for and Responses to Classroom Writing

Most research on responses to student writing has focused on the best way to get students to follow particular forms, or to observe certain genre conventions (Beach & Friedrich, 2006). Research on classroom writing has thus taken up various questions about the effects of teachers' comments on students' drafts (see, for example, Beason, 1993; Herrington, 1992a; Herrington, 1992b; Michaels, 1987; Ziv, 1984), the effects of student peer response on revision (Simmons, 2003; Berg, 1999; Straub, 1997; Zhang, 1995; Nelson & Murphy, 1993), and how best to encourage students to revise, rather than simply edit (Sommers, 1982; Beach, 1972). The assumption that the teacher is the arbiter of what constitutes "success" on the part of the student author is deeply embedded within these perspectives. Even when the conversation turns to student inquiry or peer revision, the teacher is ultimately assumed to be best positioned to judge student writing, and best practices are conceived according to these principles (Perin, 2007).

The emphasis on formalistic qualities of writing are not surprising given the shift toward standardization (Sheehy, 2003), but these assumptions so foreground the teacher's evaluation of student writing that it is difficult to envision an alternative. The dominant research paradigm has therefore deemphasized the importance of actually having something to say, and having an audience one wants to address.

This inattention to authentic audiences is reflected not only in the research, but in classrooms. When students are asked to create texts in school, the teacher is frequently asking students to write "as if": as if they were really writing to a particular audience, or with a particular purpose, often assigned by the teacher. Write as if they had an opinion

about the topic, often chosen by the teacher. Students tend not to be asked to write with purposes that are genuinely theirs, to audiences that can be depended on to understand those purposes and intentions.

Meanwhile, when not under the watchful eyes of teachers, students are engaged in a wide array of composition (e.g., writing, drawing, recording music, creating videos) with authentic audiences and purposes in mind (Finders, 1997; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Mahiri, 2004; Ito, 2009). They are constructing and reinforcing socially situated identities through these texts (Gee, 2004a), constructed to attract validation and approbation from audiences they value (Stern, 2008).

But they are rarely doing this for the benefit of their teachers, or even with their teachers' knowledge. If it happens at school at all, it is not as a part of "official" curriculum (Finders, 1997). There is a divide in many adolescents' compositional lives, between the texts made for specified audiences and simulated purposes at school, and those made for genuine audiences and purposes. For those students not already persuaded of the importance of school, this split threatens to make school appear irrelevant, entirely apart from the people and things of value to them (Hull & Schultz, 2002; Mahiri, 2004).

If we present adolescents with a choice between what we define as academic and professional culture on one hand, and what they see as the cultures they (and their families and friends) have belonged to all their lives on the other, we cannot be surprised when they eschew what schools offer them (Heath, 1983; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Mahiri, 2004; Knobel & Lankshear, 2006). While teachers are right to want their students to construct identities that are compatible with both the kind of academic and professional identities that we want them to build, we need to be sure they are also compatible with

the identities they have constructed, the ones their friends and family validate every day. If teens are to create these hybrid identities, they need opportunities to perform them for audiences who can recognize them as successfully enacting the socially situated identities they are attempting to perform. Teachers cannot always be those audiences. Students need to write for other audiences, while teachers maintain a presence.

The Problem of Authenticity and Audiences

My argument in this chapter is not simply that my students used blogs to do “identity work.” They could hardly have done otherwise; everything we do, all the time, we do as part of a performance of who and what we are (Holland et al., 1998; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). Rather, my argument is that students are more likely to see these performances as authentic, because they have a say in selecting the audiences—both real and imagined—to which they are writing, as well as the subjects and purposes for their writing.

As Lensmire (1994) has discussed, an important aspect of writing workshop pedagogy is a significant shift in relations between the teacher and his or her students. Rather than positioning the teacher as the ultimate arbiter of the proper methods of writing, and the correctness of student writing, advocates of writing workshop believe that the teacher’s role should include being a “genuine audience” (p. 378), which includes helping students to

realize their own intentions in text. The teacher, once the sole initiator and audience/evaluator of student writing, now follows the child (Graves, 1983, p. 103), watching carefully for ways to encourage, support, model, and coach, at appropriate times, through oral and written response. Calkins (1986) would have a teacher draw close to students and become a genuine audience for them, an audience that is interested in what young writers have to say. (Lensmire, 1994, p. 378)

Lensmire (1994) aptly demonstrates that advocates encouraged teachers to “avoid falling into a typical classroom discourse that affirms the traditional social hierarchy between teachers and student, and silences students” (p. 378). Billing writing workshop as a free space for expression, these advocates called for reading students’ work “to enjoy, to care, and to respond [...] cry, laugh, nod, and sigh” (Calkins, 1986, p. 119). But as Lensmire notes, these same advocates ultimately recommended telling students to knock it off when writing about subjects that the teachers found inappropriate for class. Invoking Bakhtin, Lensmire calls the resulting limited resistance to existing hierarchies “a carnival without bite” (1994, p. 379).

As suggested by the quote from Calkins (1986) above, the traditional writing workshop approach assumes that being a genuine audience is under the control of the reader, and that a teacher can simply will themselves into being this kind of audience. But when the communication between writer and reader is mediated by a classroom assignment, it is necessarily a conversation between the teacher and the student. Whatever the nature of that conversation, whether the student sees the teacher as having desired knowledge or experience, or the assignment becomes a struggle between teacher and student (Herrington, 1992b; Prior, 1995), it is unavoidably about what the teacher wants.

Even if the teacher has every intention of allowing students to determine their own purposes, as Welch (1993/1998) observes, “students usually bring to the class an understanding of teacher response as *always* and *only* authoritative, as linked to institutions and political powers that must be obeyed” (p. 222). Even if the teacher says, “Write whatever you want! You have complete freedom!”, this is still a demand for a

certain performance (Lensmire, 1994; Finders, 1997). Both student and teacher know that the latter might at any time reassert his or her institutional authority.

There is a problem, however, beyond even the difficulties that teachers may have with completely ignoring their own desires and institutional norms related to power and authority. Even if teachers were able to resist imposing their own desires on students' purposes in school writing, there are even more compelling reasons that they frequently cannot fill the role of an authentic audience. As I'll demonstrate in this chapter, students want to be recognized as taking up Discourses of value to them. Teachers are rarely equipped to fulfill this role, but other online audiences make this recognition much more available.

Audiences and Being Recognized

At this point, I must return to Gee's term "recognition," discussed in chapter two, and explain its importance in performances of identity. When we ask students to write about subjects that interest and engage them, we are necessarily asking them to take up Discourses, all of which have their particular ways of being and doing. This is a complex act in which the speaker needs to be recognized, in Gee's words, "as a particular type of *who* (identity) engaged in a particular type of *what* (activity)" (1999, p. 18, italics in original). It also requires being recognized as being that *who*, and doing that *what*, in ways that are deemed appropriate by other insiders to that Discourse. Specifically, an authentic audience is better able to recognize the speaker as properly being and doing whatever Discourse the speaker is attempting to participate in.

The dilemma in the classroom is this: Does the teacher have the standing in the relevant Discourse to recognize the student, and will the student accept this recognition as

legitimate? Even if the student is given an audience of other students within the classroom, thereby increasing the odds of having an authentic audience, these interactions are complicated by other social relationships and hierarchies within the classroom. Blogging and other Web 2.0 texts, however, may offer the writer potential access to widely dispersed audiences, and the possibility of actual authentic audiences reading and commenting on a given student's writing. Perhaps more importantly, even in the absence of those actual authentic audiences, this potential allows for the possibility of *imagined* authentic audiences (Holland et al., 1998).

Anderson (1983/1991) uses the term "imagined communities" to understand nationalism, and points to novels and newspapers as making representations of the "imagined community that is the nation" (p. 25) available to Europeans in the eighteenth century. While Anderson focuses on the written text in its value to readers in the creation of imagined communities, boyd (2008) adapts Anderson's notion to explain the "imagined audiences" (p. 131) teens conceive of when participating in online social networks.

Building on Bakhtin, Gee, Anderson and boyd, we can see that imagined authentic audiences are in many ways more plausibly effective for motivating student writing than teachers with little or no knowledge of Discourses that are appealing to students. If a student writes to an imagined audience who can recognize his or her participation in a Discourse, he has increased the potential to write for purposes that he deems authentic, rather than purposes being simulated purely for the teacher's benefit. Online, a writer may or may not have an actual authentic audience, but he has at least the potential of an imagined authentic audience.

To summarize: an authentic audience is an audience capable of recognizing a particular speaker (or writer, artist, performer, etc.) as enacting a particular Discourse. These audiences are not simply genuine in the sense that Lensmire mentioned in the quote above: willing, patient, open to the speaker. They also possess the knowledge of the particular Discourse, an “active and engaged understanding” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 280), capable of recognizing the writer, and have the standing themselves to be qualified recognizers.

Writing workshop pedagogy has shifted the role of teachers in ways that make it not only a possibility, but an obligation, to be authentic audiences for students, without taking into consideration the complex relationships that requires. By writing online, students can write for authentic audiences—both real and imagined—who can recognize them enacting the Discourses that are important to them. In my study, I explored the potential of using blogs as a way to allow students to reach these real and imagined authentic audiences, and examined what students did with the opportunity to write for them.

Connective Events and Connective Moments

The fact that my students’ work was online may have made imagined audiences available for their performances of particular Discourses, but it provided little validation for those performances. That is, it gave students more opportunities to be recognized, but did not in itself provide recognition. For that, students needed real readers, and in many cases they became these audiences for one another. When students used the affordances of Web 2.0 to shift a particular blog from being a monologic space for the blogger to a dialogic space between the blogger and his or her readers, students were actually creating

connections between their blogs. I will refer to this particular kind of intertextuality as connectivity.

Fairclough (2010/1995) refers to connectivity in individual texts as “relations, contradictions, and tensions between elements” (p. 336); that is, Fairclough’s connectivity is internal. Mine is an intertextual connectivity, referring to relations, contradictions, and tensions among blogs, bloggers, and blog readers. I will explore the nature of connectivity in Web 2.0 texts in greater detail in the next chapter, including what it is, how it is used, and what it suggests for teachers. For this chapter, however, two terms related to connectivity are relevant.

I use the term *connective moments* to mean a particular act of composition that foregrounds intertextuality, using the affordances of online writing to connect one blog to another (e.g., leaving a comment, or making a hyperlink from one of my posts to one of yours). Borrowing from the literacy studies term *literacy events*, which Heath describes as “occasions in which written language is integral to the nature of participants’ interactions and their interpretive processes and strategies” (1982, p. 33), I also use the term *connective event*. A connective event is a series of connective moments, tied together by participants’ signals that their written utterances are part of an ongoing conversation involving others beyond themselves.

Connectivity is the mechanism in Web 2.0 texts that allows for the kind of dialogism discussed in chapter two. In a connective event, students have multiple avenues of response, and the avenue they choose helps to position themselves, and their particular contributions within the conversation. Connectivity creates the opportunities for response and recognition that distinguish this site of composition from more conventional school

sites, such as a handwritten journal, a typed paper, or even a static website. Most simply put, connectivity is the “2.0” in “Web 2.0.”

In the central text of this chapter, Johnny writes a post, Michelle writes a comment on Johnny’s post, Courtney writes a comment on Johnny’s post, and Courtney later writes a post on her own blog that includes a link to Johnny’s original post. This series of writings is a single connective event, a conversation of sorts on the same topic. The event includes three connective moments: Michelle’s comment, Courtney’s comment, and Courtney’s post. Because connectivity offers the most direct window into students responding to one another’s writing, data described in this chapter allow me to address my first research question: In what ways are students influenced by their perceptions of audience when blogging for a school assignment?

Connectivity tells us only part of the story. There were other opportunities for students to share reactions with one another that are not accounted for when looking exclusively at connectivity: reading one another’s computer monitors while drafting was underway in the computer lab; talking to one another about their writing during or between classes, at lunch, or after school; discussing their writings through other means of online communication, such as Instant Messaging, or on social network sites like Facebook. For the purposes of this chapter, I focus solely on those responses that took place on blogs connected within our student network.

Focal Subjects: Three Student Bloggers

In this chapter, I draw attention to three student bloggers, all from my AP Language and Composition classes. Based on student interviews, I later confirmed that the three were not close friends, but that each was acquainted with the others before the

beginning of the year, and traveled in similar social circles. Each was seen by peers as competent students in the classroom, and each held peers' esteem as cool, somewhat popular kids. Each had experience participating in online social networks such as Facebook and/or MySpace, as well as the blogging platform Xanga, which they had used in middle school. Each engaged in a combination of distinct, though sometimes overlapping, performances on their blogs. The data in this chapter consists of (1) writing from the three students' blogs, and, in one instance, from a blog outside our class; (2) interviews with Michelle and Courtney, conducted after the school year had been completed; and (3) research field notes kept over the course of the school year.

Data analysis, as discussed in chapter three, consisted of two passes through large amounts of data, and a detailed analysis of the posts and comments that constitute the connective event. On my first pass through the data, I read every post on every blog written by the students who had agreed to be interviewed. Each of these blogs included between 50 and 140 posts (a number dependent on how often each student responded to the weekly blog assignment). I was looking for exemplars of connective events, when multiple bloggers—including, but not limited to, students from my class—interacted on a student's blog. I selected the connective event analyzed later in this chapter because it included three students and one outside blogger, providing multiple examples of connectivity in the same event.

On the second pass, I re-read the blogs of the three students who took part in the connective event—Michelle, Johnny, and Courtney—and selected posts for analysis. I paid particular attention to those posts that suggested affiliation with a particular Discourse, or a certain set of interests or topics, and to those posts that offered insight

into the student's sense of either intended or actual audience. Finally, I coded each of the six components of the connective event, which included two posts and four comments. I used two of Gee's seven building tasks, attending to the ways students were building identities and building connections (2005).

The following sections are profiles of the three students who interact in the connective event analyzed later in this chapter. The excerpts included in each profile were selected from dozens of posts from each blog, written over the eight months from October to May. They provide readers with an understanding of each student, their enacted socially situated identities, and the ways they aligned Discourses on their blogs.

Based on my analyses of the connective event offered later in this chapter, I argue that the degree to which these three students were able to use the blogs to find their own purposes for writing for audiences who could recognize them in the process of participating in desired Discourses depended on the presence of authentic audiences reading their blogs. I present profiles of three students in order of their relative struggles to find these audiences: Michelle appeared to have an easy time finding an imagined authentic audience; Johnny, though he did not have a clearly defined topic or voice, seemed very comfortable writing to his audience, buffeted by regular comments from his readers; and Courtney reported the most frustration, which eventually burst forth in the post that opened this chapter, but found an approach that she was comfortable with on her own, eventually leading to validation from her readers.

Michelle: Critic MC

Fifteen students from my AP Language and Composition and Perspectives in Literature classes started off their blogs with the intention of writing about popular

media, including music, film, television, video games, and popular novels. Some made popular media one of several regular topics, while others made it the centerpiece of their blogs. Several used their blogs as a way of recording their thoughts on recently-consumed movies, music, or novels. Others sought to celebrate authors or works they were especially fond of: Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series inspired three; another focused on the television series *Lost*, while yet another was dedicated to discussion of golden-age film stars. Based on my analysis, many of these blog postings consisted of simple summary or declarations of fandom, and students struggled to achieve much complexity or sophistication. One student summarized the problem of sustaining her *Twilight* blog thusly: "mostly girls just sit around and say 'hey, Edward's really cute'" (Field Note, March 12).

Michelle, however, makes the cultivation of a distinct blogger identity and voice a focus from the beginning. She writes under the name "Mixmaster," and she demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the genre that stands in contrast to other students who are just trying to figure out what genres are available for writing about popular culture.

Michelle is a quiet girl with light brown hair that fell past her shoulders and big, green eyes. She can usually be depended on to share an insightful comment when discussing class readings, and enjoys sometimes lively conversations with the other students who sit at her table. Through the various seating charts I make over the course of the year, I discover that Michelle can make at least casual friendships with whomever she finds herself next to, but she has several close friends in the class.

Michelle has been writing for the school newspaper since she was a freshman at Lincoln High School. From time to time as a sophomore, she wrote a column that

focused on music, so she has some experience expressing her opinions about the medium for a public audience. In our post-year interview, I ask if she had already been reading music blogs before we began the project in AP Language. She hadn't, she says, but she draws inspiration from Rob Sheffield, a columnist she reads who writes for *Rolling Stone* magazine:

And if you read [Sheffield's column], it's so immature, but it's so entertaining. And there was one column he wrote about reality TV that, I was in tears laughing by the end of it. And that's what I like to read, so that's what I'm going to write. (Michelle interview)

The combination of having experience writing for a general audience in a specific genre, and having an imagined audience of those who enjoy Sheffield's writing as she does, pays off from the first days of her blog. One month into the new school year, Michelle writes her first post: a review of a newly-released CD by the alternative rock band Kings of Leon. The post establishes her as a fan of the group, offers a brief history of previous albums, and provides a "track by track" review, before finally rendering a verdict:

And the most disappointing track? Ambient closer "Cold Desert", not bringing the album to a dramatic close but causing it to deflate. *Night* does have its better moments, like "Manhattan", which combines the Kings' traditional southern sound with a jazzy lilt. ("Reviewed: The Rise and Fall of the Kings of Leon," October 1, 2008)

Here we can see Michelle establishing herself as having the expertise and authority of the critic. She distances herself from the standpoint of the fan, who might seek to protect the band against criticism, or reject the band for 'selling out' for mainstream popularity. Instead, she positions her judgment as based on the artistic merits of the music.

Elsewhere on her blog, Michelle uses the Discourse of hip-hop in a way that

seems neither straightforwardly sincere nor entirely ironic. The URL she chooses for the blog is initially “thisblogismadlegit.blogspot.com.” Midway through the year, she retitles the “About Me” sidebar as, “mixmaster, what you on the mike for?”, a reference to a Beastie Boys lyric asking, essentially, “what are you here to say?” She answers her own question with this:

Welcome to my blog, where you will find lots of (ir)relevant shit. Most of this will be music ‘n’ pop culture-related, but some of it won’t be. I hope you still stick around. If you don’t want to read my blog, you don’t have to. I understand. (“Reviewed: The Rise and Fall of the Kings of Leon,” October 1, 2008)

Michelle is remarkably disciplined in sticking to her topic. Though she occasionally strays into other territory—like many other students in a Presidential election year, she writes about politics now and then—she usually finds ways to connect those topics back to music in some way. In her fourth month of the blog project, on January 14, she writes a post titled, “Playlist: Your Bush Kickout Party,” conveying her opinions about the Bush administration—on its way out with the impending Obama inauguration—through the selection of songs, quoted lyrics, and very brief commentaries in italics:

Nirvana, “All Apologies”

“I’ll take all the blame, aqua seafoam shame/sunburn, freezerburn, choking on the ashes of (his) enemy.”

Because he really does owe us all an apology. (“Playlist: Your Bush Kickout Party,” January 14, 2009)

Michelle takes some of the biggest risks of any student blogger: she begins developing an identity tied to a subculture she is interested in, one where the music’s lyrics are outside the bounds of propriety for most classroom. She uses language that is perfectly appropriate for an amateur blog catering to that subculture, but not for school (e.g., “shit”). Her philosophy is, as she puts it in our interview, “Go big or go home.” All

of this includes what she later describes as a social risk among peers by presenting herself with the boldness and confidence consistent with hip-hop subculture:

Michelle: I was almost thinking it sounded like... narcissistic at first. Just because... I was making myself sound like a big deal, and my blog like a big deal. But I couldn't just do the, "Here's my school blog, I'm going to write about my... cafeteria lunch every night." (Interview)

Eventually she gains confidence from positive feedback from readers, but in her early posts she doesn't receive many comments, either in person or on her blog. Instead, she relies on the confidence of having a firm imagined audience:

Michelle: I don't know, I just kind of *assumed* I had a lot of people reading it, like I *pretended* that I had a lot of people reading it. And... just, what would I write, so people could read it and be interested in it. So that was kind of the way I thought.

MA: Do you know when you became aware that people were actually reading it?

Michelle: As I started to get more comments, and I *did* get more Followers, then, [the responses] indicated that more people were reading it. Then people started talking to me about it outside of class, just making comments. And so I was like, "Oh, okay, people are actually reading this. Cool." (Michelle interview)

Even after she begins receiving comments from actual readers, however, she still claims they were less important than the imagined, like-minded readership she's had in mind from the beginning:

MA: So were you hoping for comments?

Michelle: Well, not... necessarily. I mean, I like to read them when they're constructive and thoughtful. But they're always interesting to read. But I... didn't care, really. I was just kind of... [blogging] for myself. And I was in the mindset that people were reading it, but I didn't really care if I didn't have feedback. (Michelle interview)

Though she does not explicitly tie her journalism experience to her blog, it's notable that her blog holds numerous similarities between the genre of music journalism, which she has previously practiced in columns for the school newspaper. This may allow her to

worry less about the authoritative audience—me—and to have more confidence that her imagined audience of like-minded music fans are actually out there reading. I discuss this further later in this chapter.

Johnny: Armchair Philosopher

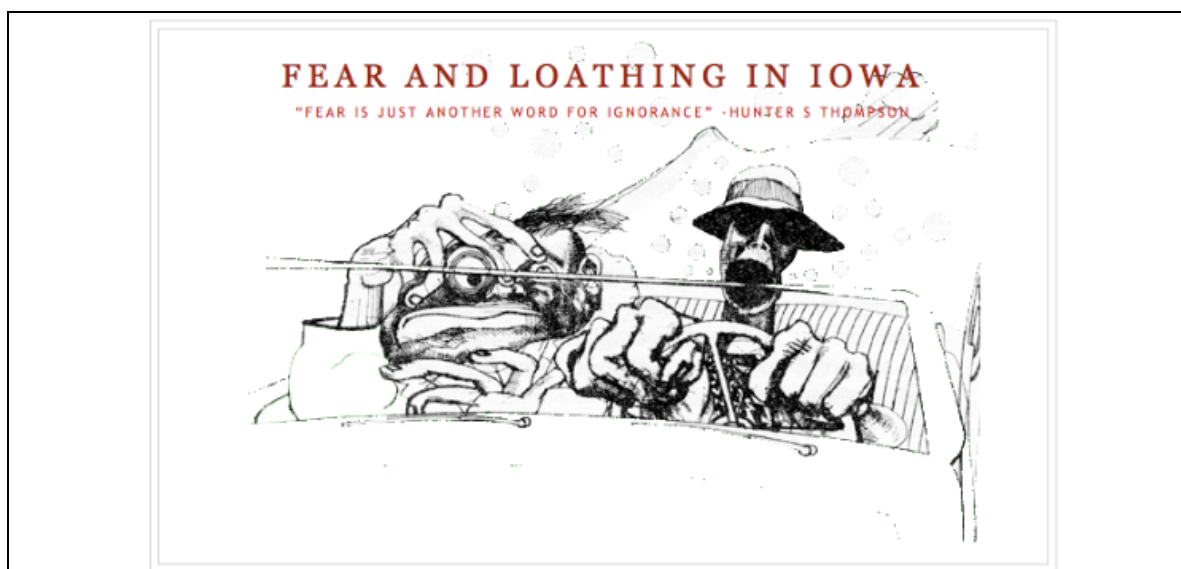
Johnny starts the year with a confident air. He has a distinctive look, with black-edged glasses, curly brown hair and sideburns, and neatly shaven stubble around the edges of his face. Through his classroom interactions with other students I gather that he is a popular kid to whom other kids gravitate, mixing his interest in thoughtful discussions with the ability to crack a successful joke. Over time, I learn that he is involved with show choir, drama, and speech team, all activities with considerable social cachet at Lincoln High School.

Most students spend the first day of the school year reconnecting with friends and trying to get a sense of what is expected of them, but Johnny is ready to discuss deeper things. When I mention in our first class that we will eventually be blogging, he asks whether blogs make it easier for people to selectively engage only with those who agreed with what they already believe. This leads to a brief discussion of the changing role of the Internet in civil discourse and its possible unintended consequences, all pertinent issues in an election year.

Five weeks later, when students create their blogs, Johnny gives his the title “Fear and Loathing in Iowa,” and includes several references to cult author Hunter S. Thompson. On his blog, Johnny’s profile picture is a black-and-white photo of headshot of Thompson, clad in a hat and sunglasses with a cigarette hanging from his lips. His statement under “About Me” is a Thompson quote (“when the going gets weird, the

weird turn pro”). His blog’s URL includes a reference to “gonzo journalism,” the brand of participatory reportage Thompson made famous. Finally, of course, the blog’s title draws from Thompson’s most famous books, including *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, a fictionalized account of Thompson’s drug-fueled adventures in the early 1970’s. The banner image across the top of his blog, which the reader can see in Figure 4.1, is a drawing from the book by Ralph Steadman, depicting Thompson and his friend careening down the highway in a convertible, the images of both men distorted to reflect their hallucinatory perceptions. The combination of these decisions about his blog suggest a student preparing to play the role of—or at least play with the identity of—the unpredictable renegade, unlikely to be restrained by conventional, middle-class boundaries of appropriateness and good taste.

Figure 4.1: Johnny’s Banner Image



These associations, however, turn out not to be representative of Johnny and the

writing on his blog. Writing under the blogger pseudonym “Fred,” Johnny makes no overt references to Thompson or drug culture in his daily writing. Months later, in his January reflection, he acknowledges the disconnect between the blog’s visual style and its content:

The title might suggest to someone that this blog focuses on drug-addled ventures through the mid-west, but that person would be a tad disappointed. I was very hesitant to commit to any certain topic. I was afraid that one certain topic would narrow my range of writing. I knew I wanted to blog about politics and pop-culture, but I knew that I could easily get tired of those topics. I wanted the option to blog about what ever I felt like sharing. So I picked a vague name and started typing. (January 30, 2009, “But what’s it about?”)

Indeed, by the time Johnny writes this reflection the election and inauguration were over, and politics have waned in favor of other topics. From December until the assignment was suspended in May, politics account for only three of the remaining fifty posts. His writing turns increasingly personal, writing about what he calls, in a January post, “deep things, philosophical things.” He addresses this as well in the aforementioned post, recognizing what he calls a “reoccurring theme” (January 30, 2009, “But what’s it about?”) from the first four months of blogging:

Several of my posts are about our connection to our childhood. You can find this idea in some way, shape, or form, in quite a few posts. I kinda wonder why that is and what it says about me... (January 30, 2009, “But what’s it about?”)

In October, at the beginning of the blog project, it is not at all clear what Johnny intends to blog about on Fear and Loathing in Iowa, but the voice he initially uses seems in keeping with Thompson. His voice is thick with ironic exaggeration, and what might be described as parodic narcissism, the first post consists of only two sentences: “This is destined to be a fantastic blog of epic proportions. Stay posted chumps!” He then responds to his own post with a comment: “Amazing! simply amazing!” (“the first post,”

October 1, 2008).

In the first two months, just before and after the U.S. presidential election, politics is the topic in half of his posts. A third are connected in some way to his childhood. By the time Johnny writes the January reflection quoted above, he is in the middle of the most productive two-month span of blogging he will have all year long. From October to December, Johnny writes a total of eighteen posts; from January to May, he writes forty-four. Over the same time, Johnny begins making religion and philosophy the focus of much of his writing. Between October and December, about 17% of his posts include philosophical or spiritual overtones; between January and May, about 45% of them do.

Despite the lightness and irony suggested by his first post, as well as the overall design of the blog and its associations with Hunter S. Thompson, most of Johnny's posts throughout the year are neither light nor ironic. Most of his subjects are taken up with a serious tone, often with an implied intent to share a discovery with his readers, or to discover something through the writing itself. Toward the beginning of the year, the topics themselves are safe enough: books and cartoons remembered fondly from childhood, the commercialization of Christmas, current movies he wishes to praise or criticize.

As the year went on, however, the topics become more personal. He discusses his religious beliefs, fears about dating, and his time taking a prescription medication used to treat ADHD. On several occasions, when I have not asked for any kind of reflection, he writes posts discussing what he has been writing, speculating on what he seems to see as subconscious motives for the new direction of his blog:

As you probably noticed ("you" referring to the 5 or 6 people who might actually read this blog) my last few posts have been very theological. I think part of it is

due to the fact that I've been thinking on a more spiritual level. My life is sort of speeding up right now. Things are changing fast. My involvement in the theater is increasing everyday and school is getting harder. Certain changes have happened recently that has called into question what is really important to me. Through all this, I think I've been subconsciously been looking for a source of stability in my life. This has manifested itself in my writing. I don't know. Maybe all this writing will expose some inner feelings and ideas that will help me stay on track and help me find a balance. (“what’s with this religious kick lately????”, April 13, 2009)

Though willing to take some risks, Johnny seems uncertain about what he wanted his blog to be, and who he wants to be on the blog. Though he begins his blog with irony, and with the distance provided by the specter of Hunter S. Thompson, he becomes at times sentimental, at other times confessional.

Because Johnny chose not to sit for an interview after the year concluded, I have less evidence of how he felt about his blog, and who he thought he was writing to. However, we can infer from some of his more reflective posts that he at least trusted his audience to take him seriously enough that he could take risks revealing personal thoughts and experiences (e.g., “I kinda wonder why that is and what it says about me”; “Certain changes have happened recently that has called into question what is really important to me”).

This trust may have been rooted in consistent feedback; Johnny has at least two comments from readers in every month from November through the end of the blogging assignment in May, and while the comments were frequently brief, they were overwhelmingly positive. On two occasions—one of which will be discussed at length later in this chapter—readers commented that his post had inspired them to write posts of their own on the same topic. Grant, whose blog will be discussed in chapter six, dedicates an entire post entirely to an conversation with Johnny on Instant Messenger sparked by one of Johnny’s blog posts.

Although the outsider may look at Johnny's lack of a single unified voice as a weakness, this may actually reflect a willingness to allow his multiple identities and Discourses to show through at different times. As I discussed in chapter two, we should want students to practice multiple Discourses and be comfortable switching between them as needed. These include middle-class Discourses that we see as consistent with academic and economic success, performances which teachers are well-equipped to recognize. But if we want students to see these middle-class Discourses as compatible with the Discourses they already value, we need to give them opportunities to be recognized performing these as well. In other words, the flexibility that Johnny is demonstrating—and the seeming care he uses to consider his own practices—may represent exactly the kind of hybridity Web 2.0 texts may help us foster in language arts classrooms.

Courtney: Legit Blogger

Of the three students profiled in this chapter, Courtney's blog most directly raises issues concerning identity, authenticity, and the potential benefits of making audiences other than the teacher available. My relationship with Courtney was sometimes icy. She would ask to speak with me about a grade she perceived as unfair; I would ask to speak with her about an attitude I perceived as uncooperative. She sometimes brought a novel to class and read through lessons, if I didn't insist on her complete attention.

A mixed-race girl who identified as African American, Courtney wore her hair straightened and she dressed stylishly. At times she was exceptionally friendly, and at others she seemed to try to create distance from classmates. She was the only African American student in her section of AP Language and Composition, and she sometimes

used this, playfully, to create tension for her own amusement. At least once she evoked race by interjecting “oh, is it because I’m black?” into a side conversation with the friends she had in class.

Courtney does not want to blog. She enjoys writing in the notebook, the format we used before we started blogging, and though she voices no specific objection to writing online she will tell me in a later interview that blogging “didn’t seem like something I would enjoy doing.” This is compounded by early disagreement with me about whether or not she needed to choose a topic. She wants to blog about whatever happens to be important to her at the moment, without coming up with a specific topic or series of topics. When I insist that she focus on between one and three topics, she settles on writing pop culture reviews on her blog, entitled “Don’t Worry.” She knows a few other students are writing reviews, but she finds this frustrating and unsatisfying.

The first three months of blogging (October through December) are marked by frustration. She struggles to reach the minimum number of posts, falling just short in November. In her final post of 2008, an assigned reflection on the status of the blog so far, she describes writing on her blog as “almost hell”:

You asked us to explain what our blogs were about. However, I don’t really know what mine is about. I started off wanting to talk about stuff that matter, stuff that I think about and how I think and how it helps me explain life, helps me live. My first posts show that. But I was worried that I would not be able to spill out 1200 words a week, at least not ones that were good enough. I now see that the fear didn’t really matter because my blog is pretty much pointless anyway. It lacks substance and frankly, who cares what I think. I wouldn’t care what people think about movies and books and other forms of media. My writing is gibberish and unimportant. I think this is mainly because it is an assignment, and you have forced me to write as such. My writing has no sincerity, and writing without complete sincerity will always be complete crap. I much rather have stuck with the writing notebooks because at least in those I could think. It was more natural, and my words flowed more easily. And each post was only like 100 pages so it was much more easier. Seriously though, are these blogs really necessary. After

this class I doubt I will ever open it up again because it is embarrassing and I would like to not have to associate myself with such crap. I guess my blog that I have know [sic] is mainly a media blog I talk about books and movies and that's pretty much it, sometimes TV shows. I watch at least one movie, read at least one book, and watch at least one TV show a week so it's not hard to find material to talk about. But I am not a critic, so I don't really know how to properly bash the items I talk about. I think I will change my topic though. I tire of this one and I hate doing things I hate and on such a regular basis, it's almost hell. (December 21, 2008, "My Blog")

Courtney's problem, as she articulates it here, is closely related to several concerns discussed in chapter two: (1) her writing on the blog lacks sincerity; (2) she lacks the authority and the expertise to write critical reviews "properly"; and (3) she feels boxed in by my insistence on a regular topic.

The first of these, that her blog lacks "sincerity," echoes Stern's (2008) point that adolescents value authenticity in their self-presentations: "if their self-presentations are inauthentic, feedback from site visitors is irrelevant, if not meaningless" (p. 108). The second is that she did not have the expertise to perform the "media critic" Discourse, and feared she would not be recognized as such. The third reflects Knobel and Lankshear's concern (2006) that when students are not writing to someone they want to genuinely communicate with, they tend to write simply to complete the assignment (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006). Though I had not assigned Courtney her topic, my insistence that she decide on a topic when she was not ready to settle on one had the same result: work that the student is not committed to.

After this post, school breaks for Lincoln High's two-week winter vacation. I tell students they are not expected to blog over that time, but that we will pick it up when we return in January. When we reconvene after the new year had begun, Courtney's next post suggests the break allowed her to get some distance from the blog that has frustrated

her so much, and to plot a new course.

When first given the blogging assignment, I wanted to talk about something that meant something to me, and just in general. I know, that sounds weird, writing about stuff that you like. I wanted to write about mainly stuff I thought about during the day, real stuff, deeper than casual talk. I was reluctant to dedicate my blog to chats like this though because I was afraid I wouldn't be able to think of stuff to talk about all the time, and I was fairly sure I wouldn't be able to come up with 400 words about the topics I could come up with.

I thought about this for a while, and I realized that I have wished for the time to write stuff that really matters to me, but I always seemed busy with school work. And when I did write, I wanted to write a lot, but the lack of time prevented me from doing so. Then I thought to myself, "Self, why not kill two birds with one stone and write about this stuff for your blog." It made sense to me. I seemed to come up with one topic a day. at least, so coming up with 3 a week wouldn't be so difficult. And anything was better than the crap I was spilling out writing about movies and books. It is then that I decided to take the risk, and write about real stuff. (January 5, 2009, "New Blog")

After this point, Courtney appears much more committed to her blog. She posts more frequently, first meeting and then exceeding the required number of posts. She writes about personal subjects. Sometimes she strikes a confessional tone, as when commemorating her deceased father, largely absent from her early life, on his birthday; at other times she expresses frustration and resentment, as she does when relating a story of being treated suspiciously while shopping for clothes.

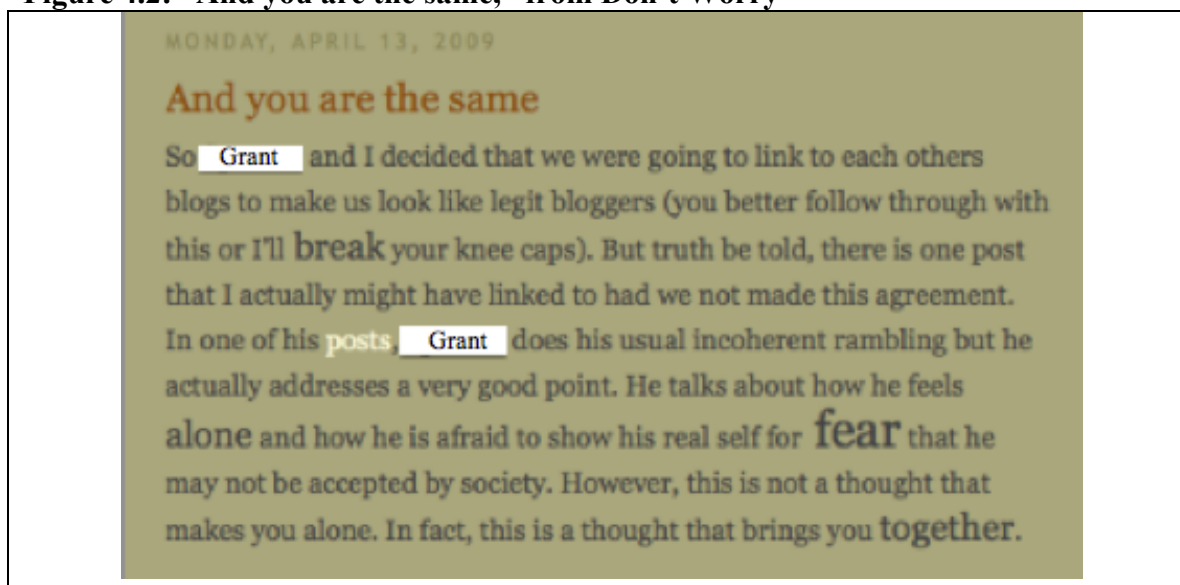
At the same time, she is reading more professional blogs, particularly Ta-Nehisi Coates, a blogger for the *Atlantic Monthly*. I had recommended Coates' blog to Courtney midyear, based on her interest in discussing race; it was a topic Coates discussed frequently, often elegantly. She begins signing off every post, and even some of her comments on others' blogs, with the word "peace," which later becomes an important characteristic of her posts.

By the middle of April, Courtney articulates what sounds like a dramatic change

of heart about blogging, declaring her intention to attempt to make her blog look more like the blogs she’s reading, following particular conventions. On April 13, in a post entitled “And you are the same,” excerpted below and reproduced in Figure 4.2, Courtney articulates how linking was one convention that marked a blogger as “legit”⁷

So Grant and I decided that we were going to link to each others blogs to make us look like legit bloggers (you better follow through with this or I’ll break your knee caps). But truth be told, there is one posts that I actually might have linked to had we not made this agreement. In one of his posts, Grant does his usual incoherent rambling but he actually addresses a very good point. He talks about how he feels alone and how he is afraid to show his real self for fear that he may not be accepted in society. However, this is not a thought that makes you alone. In fact, this is a thought that brings you together. (April 13, 2009, “And you are the same”)

Figure 4.2: “And you are the same,” from Don’t Worry

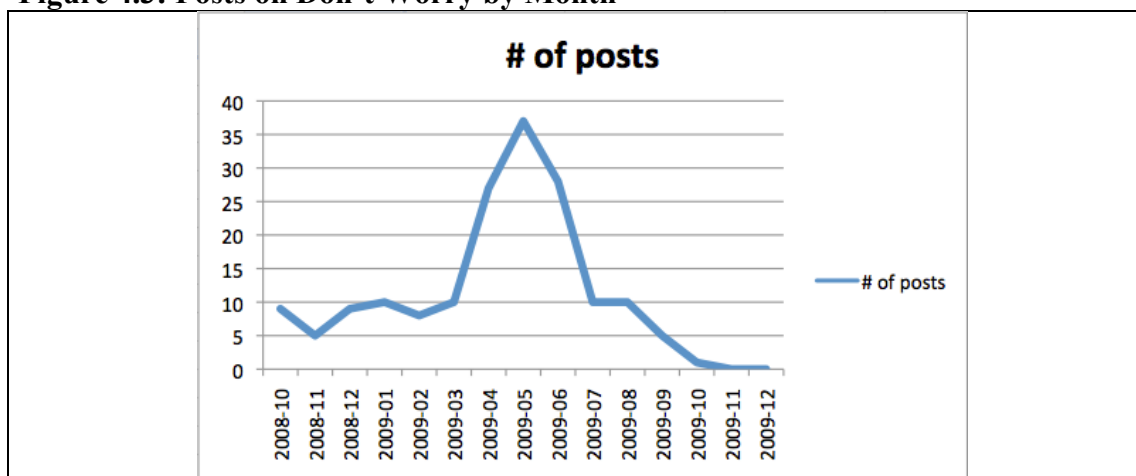


This decision to look like a legit blogger coincides with the beginning of a sharp spike in activity on “Don’t Worry.” Though previously she had never written more than ten posts in a month, she posts 92 times from the beginning of April through the end of

⁷ I have included an image of this excerpt in order to preserve sizes and styles of some text.

June, as illustrated in Figure 4.3. Comments from readers on her blog grew in number as well, from a previous peak of two comments in any month through March, to 44 comments in that same three-month period. I provide two of these comments; the others come from friends, acquaintances from class, and from other online readers she doesn't know in person. Courtney gains sixteen "Followers" by the end of the year, second-most of any student bloggers.⁸

Figure 4.3: Posts on Don't Worry by Month



And these are only online indications of who was reading "Don't Worry." In an interview, Courtney also identifies a moment early in the spring when an offline, person to person peer interaction demonstrated that friends were reading her blog. She describes having a conversation with her friend, Chris, outside her locker at school:

you know those magnets that you can put on lockers and make like sentences with it? Well, we made a funny sentence... and they were laughing about it, and [...] he put "peace" at the end of it. And I was like, Whaaat? And then Jennifer comes by and tells me she's reading my blog, too. (Courtney interview)

⁸ As I briefly discussed in chapter one, "Following" was a mechanism for Blogger users to publicly demonstrate readership of a particular blog. A list of Followers appeared in the sidebar of most blogs using the Blogger service, beginning in the summer of 2008. I discuss Following at great length in chapter five.

Courtney noted that her feelings about her blog changed once she began getting confirmation that she had readers who took her writing seriously.

Well, everyone wants to know that like, the stuff they write's being read, and enjoyed by people, so... There's just like, that sense there, and then, also... I guess I started like... directing my posts more to an audience than like, just to myself. 'Cause before I was writing more just... not to anyone in general, but not to anyone, either. (Courtney interview)

This belief that others were reading her blog, and supported by comments both within the blog and from friends in conversation, increasingly became part of her confidence in blogging as she identified it in her interview:

I'm proud of it. There's a lot of writing on it. I enjoy doing it, and people enjoy reading it, and I think that's pretty successful. (Courtney interview)

Unlike Michelle, who had a consistent sense of audience from the beginning that elided an authoritative audience as much as possible, and unlike Johnny, who seemed to have a difficult time settling on an audience and direction, Courtney was able by the end of the year to address multiple audiences, and invested in doing so. These included known audiences with whom she interacted in physical space (me, other students and friends), and with an imagined audience with similar interests. She was encouraged to write by the responses she received by those she knew, but especially by those responses from people she didn't, whose only motivation was engagement with her ideas.

A Connective Event: Interpretations of Dreams

By the second week of May, the year-long blog assignment was winding down. Preparations for the Advanced Placement examinations for my class and other classes absorbed a lot of students' time, both in and out of class. Seniors' countdown to graduation was measured in days, not weeks, and although the majority of students in my

AP classes were juniors—meaning most of them would still be in school a week into June—the last required post would be assigned for May 21.

Johnny, Michelle, and Courtney were at very different places with their blogs, but each had achieved some measure of success. Michelle's blog was widely recognized among students as a success, and she had started a second blog, a parody of the school newspaper which she co-authored with Eleanor, another AP Language student discussed in chapter five. Johnny, though he had continued to post only sporadically, and without a clear focused topic, had continued to accumulate Followers. Courtney was nearly a month past her declared intention to act as a Legit Blogger, and in the midst of what would be her most prolific month of blogging.

I have chosen this connective event, in which we see students addressing one another through comments, referencing one another's posts, and linking to those posts, not because it was typical, but rather as an exemplar. My rationale for choosing this event rather than others is that I'm analyzing an example of *what can happen* when students have access to additional audiences. Connectivity presents a certain opportunity for students; I chose a moment where students were taking advantage of it to see what it would look like.

In this connective event, we see students discussing vivid nightmares in a way that emphasizes philosophical speculation. The students mix objective and subjective understandings, as well as academic and non-academic ways of expressing these understandings. These behaviors suggest an attempt to practice synthesizing academic ways of thinking and writing, particularly using language that emphasizes analysis, with popular ways of expressing themselves in their everyday identities, rooted in more

subjective understandings, knowledge of popular culture, and use of a casual tone. We then see both students and outsiders appearing to recognize and validate the moves being made by the other students. I go on to explain why the recognition being provided by these authentic audiences would not have been available if I had been the exclusive audience for these students' posts.

Johnny's Dream

On May 10, Johnny writes a post entitled "Fear itself..." about a dream he'd had. In "Fear itself...", Johnny begins with an embedded image of Francisco Goya's painting, *Saturn Devouring His Son*, which the reader can see in Figure 4.4. He follows the image with this story:

The brain is an incredibly powerful thing. It has the power to synthesize experiences and emotions so vivid the line between reality and thought become blurred and skewed. I have had "dreams" so revealing and intense, they make reality seem a little less real. Most of these "dreams" happen in a state between awake and deep sleep, where it feels as though my consciousness is suspended in limbo. I often find myself in this state during midday naps. It was during one of these naps that i experienced the most unsettling feeling of my life. I will do my best to articulate the events and visions I had.

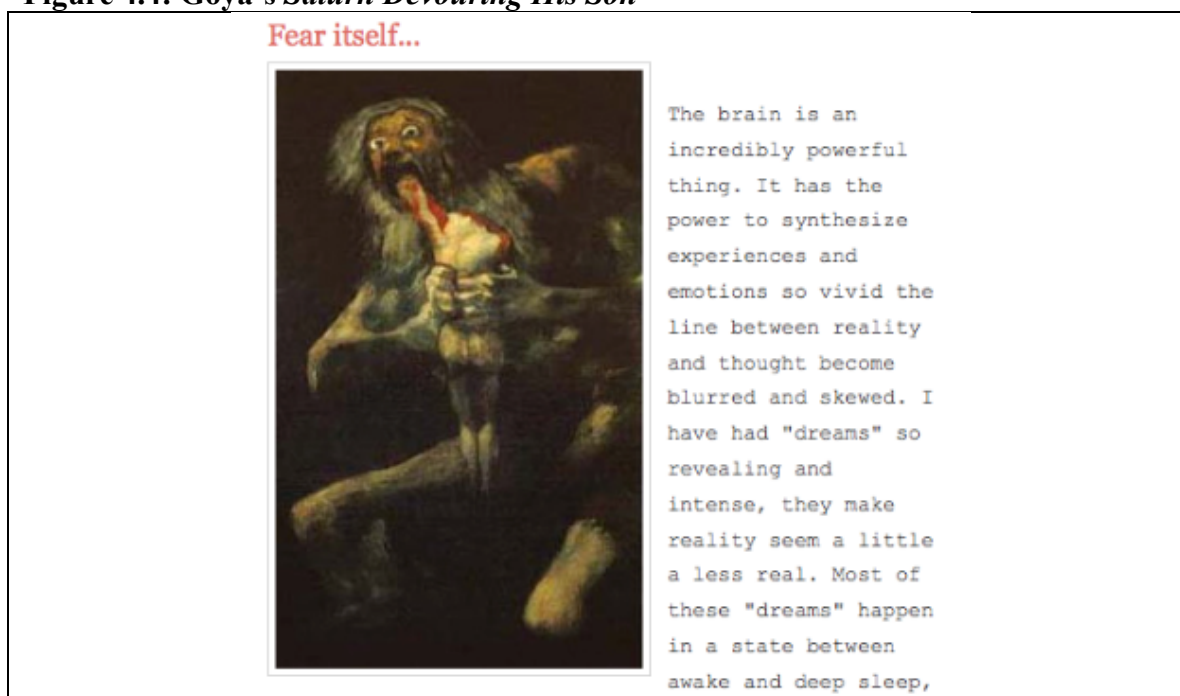
I was taking a nap on my couch in the basement, the TV was at a low volume. Aside from the bright flicker of the television screen, the room was very dark. I was awoken by my mother who urged me to get up and to stop "wasting the day". I said I would get up in 15 minutes, knowing fully that it would probably be more like 45-60 minutes. She gave up and went up stairs. That all really happened, here's where the boundaries between my mind and reality get crossed. As I laid on the couch I kept one eye open lazily watching the screen. A commercial for an upcoming scary movie came on (idk if it was even a real commercial). I heard the typical ominous music.

Now, I'm pretty easily frightened, but I'm not pussy enough to get scared watching a commercial. But for some reason I thought that if I watch this commercial, it would scare. So I shut my eyes tight, but I couldn't help but continue to listen to the scary score. As the commercial went on, I realize there was no talking, just music. This seemed odd to me. I also began to notice that the music just kept going and going. It seemed to be getting louder. As the volume increased, so did my fear.

It's hard to describe but I could see my fear. It took the form of a dark cloud. The more terrified I became, the farther the black cloud crept in my

vision. At a painfully slow pace, the darkness engulfed my head. I could literally feel the cloak of fear tighten around my mind. My head was screaming, "Run away!" but I couldn't. I was paralyzed. I was stuck inside my head. As soon as the black fear completely obscured my vision, the real horror started. ("Fear Itself...", May 10, 2009)

Figure 4.4: Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Son*



The post goes on for about another 500 words, and is reproduced in full in Appendix B. It includes Johnny's speculation that the dream could be "supernatural":

I have no idea what could have spurred this terror. One possible cause actually still frightens me. I don't think this is what happened, but could this experience have been supernatural? I most certainly hope not. But then again, how would I know that this experience was a dream and not just an brief encounter with an other-worldly being. After all, maybe that's what dreams are, connections to other realms, to which only our mind is capable of traveling. ("Fear Itself...", May 10, 2009)

Johnny closes with the phrase "Sweet dreams..." and then the following parenthetical note about the image at the top of his post:

The picture is by Francisco Goya and is entitled "Saturno devorando a su hijo" or Saturn Devouring his Son. It has no relation to my dream. I just thought the picturing embodied an overall sence [sic] of doom and fear ("Fear Itself...", May 10, 2009)

The post elicited comments from both Michelle and Courtney. Michelle's was a substantive response on Johnny's blog:

interesting you posted this because I've had a few dreams in my life that have been so horrific and realistic they almost seem beyond what the human brain could conjure, and seem to take place in almost a dimension outside of conceivable reality. i was really fascinated with them and googled it, apparently you can get these terrible night visions from continuously building stress.

i'm pretty interested in nightmares; check out some interviews with guillermo del toro, who gets his monster movie inspirations from his worst dreams. really cool/creepy stuff

Courtney's response credits Johnny with inspiring a post of her own, and includes a soft invitation:

you inspired a post of mine
read it if you'd like

Her comment did not include a link taking the reader directly to her post, which may or may not have been purposeful (hyperlinks are harder to include in comments than posts in the Blogger program, as they require knowledge of html code). She also fails to mention her blog by name, though the savvy blog reader could have figured out how to get from her comment to her blog in a few clicks. Brief and vague, Courtney gives credit to Johnny for sparking her idea, but unlike Michelle, doesn't give any details about her own story. For that, the reader must come to her blog.

Courtney's Dream

Directing readers to her own blog was consistent with the "Legit Blogger" identity Courtney began cultivating as the year wore on. As discussed earlier, Courtney

was attempting to employ what she understood to be conventions followed by the bloggers she was reading. Consistent with the position of the blogger who has his or her own space to discuss issues of interest, it makes sense that she would choose not to use up her material in the comments section of another blog.

The post Courtney said was inspired by Johnny's is dated May 14, and entitled "the matrix re-reloaded." Like Johnny's, it featured a prominent image: in this case, a shot of green computer code against a black background. Both the title and image are references to the *Matrix* trilogy, three science-fiction action movies in which characters discuss uncertainty as to whether they are in a dream world or the real world at great length.

Consistent with what she had earlier defined as the marks of legit bloggers, Courtney begins by again crediting Johnny (using his real name, rather than his blogger name, breaking the rule I'd set for anonymity) and includes a link to his original post.

So I was looking at a post Johnny had just done and found it very interesting. He talks about a really trippy dream he had and how it may or may not be a supernatural experience. The reason I found this post so intriguing was because I myself have had experiences such as his, but much less terrifying. I too have also wondered why these dreams were so vivid, what they are trying to communicate to me. I am a firm believer in the power of dreams and the subconscious. I think that our bodies manifest these visions to show us issues that our conscious minds are trying to suppress, and by doing so this may give us guidance in how to solve these problems.

But when I have dreams that are so lucid, so real that I can feel the touch, smell the scents, and hear the sounds, I wonder what makes them this way. A while back I thought I might have been going crazy because it seemed that the world, or my life rather, was too much in order. It felt as though I had no control over my actions or my thoughts. It was like living a life of the Truman Show combined with The Matrix, a feeling of being watched and this all being a façade. ("The Matrix Re-reloaded," May 14, 2009)

Courtney's post drew two comments: the first was from a reader identified as

“Coco Pine,” who was not a member of our class, and who maintained a blog of her own that was accessible by clicking on her name. Coco Pine wrote,

that some pretty ‘out-there’ thinking girl, I do believe that our minds are extremely powerful things also, and alot of people (myself included) haven’t tapped into that potential (“The Matrix Re-reloaded,” May 14, 2009)

After reading this comment, Courtney followed the links to Coco Pine’s blog, and commented on a post also dated May 14, 2009, agreeing with an opinion the author had expressed about hair weaves.

i agree with your weave thing. it all goes back to minding your own business which is clearly a task society is incapable of. peace.

Michelle also left a comment on Courtney’s post, continuing a line of thought that Johnny had initiated in his original post:

my theory is that the mind is a cosmic vehicle to other dimensions where physical beings are not able to travel

or, ya know, something like that (“The Matrix Re-reloaded,” May 14, 2009)

From all indications on the four blogs directly connected to the conversation, Michelle’s comment ended the exchange, marking the end of this connective event.

Analysis: Audiences and Dreams

This connective event includes a combination of responses from a variety of sources, including a lack of response where the observer might have reasonably expected one. It therefore offers a window into the variety of audiences made available to student authors using Web 2.0 sites, and sheds light on the opportunities those audiences make possible.

Socially Situated Identities at Play in this Connective Event

As discussed earlier, these three students enacted a series of socially situated

identities throughout the year. Some of these were identities associated with Discourses they already felt a part of, and some they may have been trying out for the first time. For the purposes of this analysis, I identify performances of six socially situated identities: Serious Student, Web-Literate Communicator, Slacker Teen, Pop Culture Expert, Armchair Philosopher, and Legit Blogger (see Table 4.1 for descriptions and examples). I have borrowed and modified three of these from Kathleen West's (2008) study of situated identities in classroom blogs. "Serious Student" is a modification of West's more specific term "Serious Literature Student"; "Web-Literate Communicator" is essentially unchanged; "Pop Culture Expert" is similar to West's "Pop-Cultured Humorist."

It bears repeating that these are neither unified nor static, and that there may be inconsistencies in an individual's multiple socially situated identities. Enacting any one of these situated identities in a way that appears convincing and appropriate to other participants in the relevant Discourse involves performances that shift and change over time. As discussed in chapter two, these performances require an audience who can validate them.

Because I am concerned here with the availability of authentic audiences, it's important to note for which of these situated identities I could count as part of an authentic audience. I was in a position to validate some of these identities through various responses, including course grades and both spoken and written comments. My role as teacher gave me the room to recognize them (in Gee's sense) as Serious Student and Armchair Philosopher. When students performed other identities among these, however, I lacked either the content knowledge necessary to recognize them (e.g., Pop Culture Expert), or the standing to do so (e.g., Slacker Teen). Further, because my relationship

Table 4.1: Socially Situated Identities in the Connective Event

Soc. Sit. Identity	Characteristics	Student Examples	Teacher Validation
Serious Student	Is conversant in art, literature, and other “schooled” subjects; demonstrates academic and professional goals, including objectivity, sophisticated diction, and citing sources of information	<p><i>Johnny</i> “The brain... has the power to synthesize experiences and emotions so vivid the line between reality and thought become blurred and skewed.”</p> <p><i>Michelle</i> “apparently you can get these terrible night visions from continuously building stress”</p>	Yes; because serious students strive to succeed in school, teacher feedback is legitimate
Web-Literate Communicator	Refers casually to common online practices; routinely ignores punctuation and capitalization, especially in comments	<p><i>Johnny</i> “idk if it was even a real commercial”</p> <p><i>Michelle</i> “i was really fascinated with them and googled it”</p>	No; school discourses encourage conformity to grammatical conventions, and web abbreviations are intended for informal online communication
Slacker Teen	Does not appear to care too much about adult expectations; does not take anything too seriously; maintains some level of ironic distance	<p><i>Johnny</i> “I said I would get up in 15 minutes, knowing fully that it would probably be more like 45-60”</p> <p><i>Michelle</i> “or, ya know, something like that”</p>	No; because the slacker identity is created in opposition to institutional authority, the teacher is necessarily a disapproving figure
Pop Culture Expert	Demonstrates deep knowledge of music, film, television; makes allusions with implied expectation that reader will understand	<p><i>Michelle</i> “check out some interviews with guillermo del toro”</p> <p><i>Courtney</i> “It was like living a life of the Truman Show combined with The Matrix”</p>	No; in this case, I did not have the content knowledge necessary to establish bona fides (i.e., knowledge of references, bands, songs, movies)

Table 4.1 continued

Armchair Philosopher	Discusses issues connected to the nature of knowledge, reality, and existence; speaks off the cuff, without particular regard for referencing specific thinkers	<p><i>Johnny</i> “maybe that’s what dreams are, connections to other realms”</p> <p><i>Courtney</i> “I am a firm believer in the power of dreams and the subconscious”</p> <p><i>Michelle</i> “my theory is that the mind is a cosmic vehicle”</p>	Yes; because philosophy is an intellectual pursuit, it falls within the teacher’s purview
Legit Blogger	Writes in a way consistent with common blogging practices, including referencing and linking to other bloggers’ work	<p><i>Courtney</i> “So I was looking at a post Johnny had just done” (includes link)</p>	In this case, yes; blogging was an assignment, so I was positioned to make judgments on adherence to blogging conventions

with Courtney was at times strained because of disagreements over previous grades and her early dissatisfaction with the parameters of the blogging assignment, I was arguably not in a position to validate her identity performances. Even in the case of Legit Blogger, for which I held both the knowledge and position to provide useful feedback, I was hesitant to comment for fear of a misunderstanding based on interpersonal factors.

My intention here is not to argue that a comment from me, or from another reader who did not recognize the student in some aspect of their identity performance, is illegitimate or non-authentic. But such audiences do not constitute authentic audiences, and therefore cannot be expected to understand the student in the ways he or she would wish to be understood. In the context of a larger pool of available imagined audiences, where authentic audiences exist alongside teachers and other audiences deemed non-

authentic by the student, responses by non-authentic audiences don't limit the student. Each is merely another single response. It is important, too, that recognition, in this sense, is not something that a reader or listener can independently do (Gee, 2005). Recognition requires that the student is likely accepted as one who has an "active and engaged understanding" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 280) of the attempted performance, a listener whose opinion matters. In other words, an authentic audience.

In the following sections, therefore, I provide excerpts from the series of posts and comments about dreams, in order to point out students' performances of different socially situated identities. In these examples, students are sometimes performing for one audience, sometimes for another, sometimes for more than one audience at the same time. Because the blogs are accessible to multiple possible audiences, and some of those audiences are authentic audiences who understand the Discourses they are trying to use. Students were therefore able to be recognized in the act of using these Discourses for which I am unlikely to count as an authentic audience. However, they also keep themselves from straying too far from schooled Discourses, which they are also performing, and for which I count as an authentic audience. I include the accompanying charts in order to illustrate when students are taking up each socially situated identity, for which of these I could count as someone who could recognize the performance for the student, and which would require other readers for recognition.

Recognizing and Being Recognized on the Lincoln Blogs

In publicly engaging with a serious philosophical question about the nature of dreams, these three students carefully walked a line between caring about the quality of their school work, because the writing represented both one measure of school

competence (related to performing Serious Student) and a reflection to be taken seriously in its own right (in keeping with the Armchair Philosopher), but not appear to care too much (to maintain the Slacker Teen role).

Johnny, Enacting Situated Identities

It's hard to say whether Johnny got the response he wanted from writing "Fear Itself..." as he neither directly commented back on his own post nor responded on either Michelle's or Courtney's blog. However, analysis of his post indicates that although he may have considered my presence as a potential reader when he was composing the post, I was not the intended audience. Although certain aspects of Johnny's story are very consistent with school writing (e.g., taking up a subject that has some philosophical heft to it, using language associated with analysis), the content of his story and his style in telling it assume a reader who is sympathetic with a casual-speaking adolescent unconcerned with authority figures, interested in the stream of his own consciousness and exploring his subconscious. Given these characteristics, it seems to be composed much more for his peers than for me. His writing positions him as employing several situated identities that would be impossible for me to validate, including Slacker Teen, Pop Culture Expert, and Web-Literate Communicator" (see Table 4.2). At the same time, one of the most apparent situated identities being performed here is the Armchair Philosopher. He talks about the possible presence of the supernatural, which is not a typical topic for schooled conversation; but he uses sophisticated word choices ("synthesize," "vivid") and a reference to classical art that mark the text as being the work of an educated mind whose ideas should be taken seriously.

Had Johnny written a similar entry in a writing notebook, he would have been

able to relate the same story and discussion of reality, dreams, and the subconscious. However, he would not have had to make the same negotiations between those socially situated identities and Discourses he aligned himself with in the rest of his life, and those he found useful in school. Whether Michelle or Courtney represented precisely the audience that Johnny was looking for, it's clear enough that they qualified as an authentic audience for him, that I could not fulfill this role, and that an authentic audience would

Table 4.2: Johnny's Post, "Fear Itself..."

Johnny's post	Situated Meanings	Social Languages	Soc. Sit. Identities
The brain is an incredibly powerful thing. It has the power to synthesize experiences and emotions so vivid the line between reality and thought become blurred and skewed.	Use of neutral third person and declarative statements about what "The brain is," as well as academic word choices ("synthesize," "vivid") suggest a sophisticated writer at work	Taking an intellectual, pseudo-analytical approach to a topic related to science and philosophy position Johnny as a serious thinker, consistent with two useful situated identities	"Serious student" "Armchair philosopher"
I was awoken by my mother who urged me to get up and to stop "wasting the day". I said I would get up in 15 minutes, knowing fully that it would probably be more like 45-60 minutes.	Johnny's use of quotation marks around "wasting the day" suggest that this is not how he sees his activity, and his expectation that the reader will agree.	Johnny's narrative includes both what he says to his mother and what his real intentions are, again expecting the reader's loyalties lie with him, and his affinity for midday naps	"Slacker teen"
A commercial for an upcoming scary movie came on (idk if it was even a real commercial). I heard the typical ominous music. Now, I'm pretty easily frightened, but I'm not pussy enough to get scared watching a commercial.	Johnny's abbreviation "idk" is frequently used in texting and Instant Messenger, meaning "I don't know." Naming the ominous music as "typical" suggests Johnny knows the hallmarks of a variety of pop culture genres	The self-deprecating claim "I'm pretty easily frightened" positions Johnny as being unconcerned with machismo, but following it with the claim that he's not "pussy enough" positions him as not worrying about using school-inappropriate language	"Web-literate communicator" "Pop culture expert" "Slacker teen"

therefore not have been available in more conventional assignments.

Michelle, Recognizing Johnny

Michelle's blog topic did not leave room for personal stories, nor for metaphysical speculation on the subconscious, and she did not take this as an opportunity to branch off in another direction for one post. As I noted earlier in this chapter, Michelle's topic and tone were remarkably consistent, marking each post with a certain irreverence, which helped establish her authority on popular culture. If another student raised a topic about which she held an opinion, she expressed those opinions through a comment on that student's blog, rather than writing an isolated post on "The Gramophone."

Michelle's role in this conversation is as an engaged reader. In the first case, in Table 4.3, she responds to Johnny's original post by emphasizing her interest in what Johnny had to say, and summarizing her own experiences in terms that closely mirror the phrases that Johnny used ("almost beyond what the human brain could conjure"). This phrase is out of character for her own blog, but it is completely consistent with Johnny's original post.

Through this, she establishes herself as a reader who understands what Johnny is saying, recognizes the Discourses he is employing, and validates his use of them. She then cleverly extends the conversation he began in two ways. First, ostensibly answering Johnny's question about "what could have spurred this terror," she describes her own attempts to answer similar questions, suggesting that stress could be behind his dreams. Second, she offers a possibility of a text that would allow Johnny to continue exploring the topic through popular culture.

I believe this represents Michelle covering her bases, attempting to make sure she's responding in a way that is consistent with Johnny's intentions. If he's serious about understanding the cause of his dream, then she has treated that desire seriously and tried to help. If, instead, his concern is only to explore the dream creatively, through gothic imagery and melodramatic description, then she has responded in a way that encourages him to continue that as well.

Table 4.3: Michelle's Comment in Response to "Fear Itself..."

Michelle's Comment	Situated Meanings	Social Languages	Soc. Sit. Identities
interesting you posted this because I've had a few dreams in my life that have been so horrific and realistic they almost seem beyond what the human brain could conjure, and seem to take place in almost a dimension outside of conceivable reality	Foregrounds intellectual interest: "interesting" Continues hyperbole begun in Johnny's post: "beyond what the human brain could conjure"; "a dimension outside of conceivable reality"	By leading her response to Johnny's post with what she <i>thinks</i> about it, rather than what she <i>feels</i> , Michelle is validating Johnny's distant, considered approach to the subject, despite the fact she is talking about her own "horrific" nightmares	"Serious student" "Armchair philosopher"
i was really fascinated with them and googled it, apparently you can get these terrible night visions from continuously building stress.	Repeats emphasis on intellectual interest by saying she was "fascinated" Uses the name of the popular search engine Google as a verb, does not capitalize ("googled")	Michelle repeats her intellectual interest ("fascinated"), and demonstrates	"Serious student" "Web-savvy communicator"
check out some interviews with guillermo del toro, who gets his monster movie inspirations from his worst dreams. really cool/creepy stuff	Michelle fails to capitalize name of film director Guillermo del Toro or beginnings of sentences	Michelle's citation of an obscure director positions her as possessing a significant body of knowledge she can bring to bear on this topic	"Pop culture expert" "Web-savvy communicator"

Courtney, Recognizing Johnny and Enacting Situated Identities

Courtney’s approach to the topic is similar to both Johnny’s original post and Michelle’s corresponding comment, in that she speculates about how the subconscious might work, with particular focus on the vivid, sensory nature of these dreams. Like Johnny, she focuses on her impressions, and makes no move to supply any evidence for her hypotheses, even from vague sources like Michelle’s “googling” produced.

Of the three focal students involved in this event, we can be most certain about what Courtney got out of the exchange. Knowing her intentions to write in a style

Table 4.4: Courtney’s Post, “The Matrix Re-reloaded”

Courtney’s Post	Situated Meanings	Social Languages	Soc. Sit. Identities
So I was looking at a <u>post</u> Fred had just done and found it very interesting. He talks about a really trippy dream he had and how it may or may not be a supernatural experience. [...] I myself have had experiences such as his, but much less terrifying.	Courtney links to Johnny’s post—using his pseudonym—and summarizes his post She then transitions from talking about Johnny’s post to talking about her own examples	The presence of the link is consistent with what Courtney considered good blogging practices; it also suggests to the reader that the original post is worth reading, and is relevant to what she is about to say. This is also consistent with schooled ways of introducing one’s topic in a piece of writing	“legit blogger” “serious student”
I am a firm believer in the power of dreams and the subconscious. I think that our bodies manifest these visions to show us issues that our conscious minds are trying to suppress, and by doing so this may give us guidance in how to solve these problems.	Like Johnny, Courtney uses sophisticated diction (“manifest,” “visions”) and popular psychological ideas (subconscious suppression)	Courtney stays away from the kind of melodramatic narrative account that is the centerpiece of Johnny’s post, giving her post more objective distance. She proposes a hypothesis of how the mind works, but does not provide evidence, keeping it at the level of informal theorizing rather than more formal, schooled argumentation	“armchair intellectual”

consistent with professional bloggers, this was a successful exchange. She referenced Johnny's post through a link and by naming him as her inspiration for writing; she drew responses that appeared to take her ideas seriously, and validated her as a thinker of deep thoughts.

What made this useful for Courtney was not even necessarily the topic itself, but the opportunity to publicly riff on an available topic for an audience of peers—fellow students and fellow bloggers. What she wrote, and what she wrote about, is less important than the opportunity to practice being a Legit Blogger, a public intellectual who listens to what others are saying, contributes her own ideas, and expects those ideas to be heard. Had I suggested the topic “dreams” for Courtney, it seems unlikely that she would have written it this way, and it's hard to imagine that she could have written what she did for the benefit of peers whose opinion mattered in some way. The comment on Johnny's blog strongly suggests she was not just writing this for the sake of her own reflection, but that she wanted an audience.

Though neither comment is written by Johnny, who provided the inspiration for her post, the comments by Michelle and Coco Pine provide public declarations of readership; Courtney's voice has been heard. The responses she received, from a fellow student and another blogger who had commented on her work, spurred Courtney on in a way that would have been impossible for me to do. Any response I could offer would carry a caveat: it's the teacher's job to read students' work. Indeed, since my relationship with Courtney was occasionally antagonistic, a regular writing assignment with an audience of one might have devolved into a site of power struggle and hostility. Instead, she developed habits that included responding to other students' writing without any

encouragement to do so, and learned to imitate professional bloggers' writing conventions.

Michelle, Recognizing Courtney

Interestingly, Michelle does not reiterate her comment to Johnny that she had looked into possible causes, arriving at stress as a possible trigger. Instead, she moves away from the scientific toward the “cosmic,” speculating that the human mind takes us “to other dimensions where physical beings are not able to travel.” Because this so closely mirrors the approach Courtney is taking in her post, I argue that this represents Michelle’s attempt to recognize Courtney’s attempts at performing Armchair Philosopher, and to validate that performance.

Table 4.5: Michelle’s Comment in Response to “The Matrix Re-reloaded”

Michelle’s Comment	Situated Meanings	Social Languages	Soc. Sit. Identities
my theory is that the mind is a cosmic vehicle to other dimensions where physical beings are not able to travel	Michelle frames her speculation as a “theory”; uses metaphor to explain her metaphysical idea	Michelle talks about the topic in a way consistent with serious discussion, recognizing and validating Courtney’s approach	“Armchair philosopher”
or, ya know, something like that	Colloquialisms (“ya know, something like that”)	Michelle uses irony to distance herself from the view she just expressed, suggesting it, and possibly she, shouldn’t be taken entirely seriously	“Slacker teen”

She cannot do so at the cost of her own performances of situated identities, however, and Michelle has a lot invested in maintaining herself as a Slacker Teen, which keeps her from taking such a subject seriously for long. She adds some space after her

first sentence, reverting to the more ironic voice she consistently used on her blog, and retreating from the semi-serious tone earlier in the comment. By adding “or, ya know, something like that,” Michelle seems to be poking fun at what she has already said, creating ironic distance and leaving the reader to question whether to take her statements seriously.

Summary

By moving students’ daily writing from notebooks to a publicly accessible online venue, most pieces of writing presented the opportunity for interaction with other authors, and the chance to write for different audiences. It did not require reflection on who the student was writing to at every moment, but the awareness of such a wide variety of possible readerships—the teacher, other students in the class, Lincoln High students who weren’t in the class, or readers from elsewhere on the Internet—invited consideration of who the writing was for, and navigation of multiple identities, speaking to different audiences at the same time. They were not writing for hypothetical audiences, knowing that I was the only actual audience; they were writing with independent purposes, and writing for authentic audiences. The availability of other audiences made the classroom more dialogic, rather than monologic, and reduced what would normally have been my authoritative “teacher’s voice” to one among many.

Once those additional audiences have been introduced, the possible identities that can be performed, and the kind of “identity work” (Butler, 1990; Gee, 2004a) that can be done, multiplies in ways that teachers cannot replicate when confining student writing to the conventional relationship between teacher and student. Being recognized and

validated by peers, or by participants in subcultural Discourses, is different from being recognized and validated by your teacher.

It's important to say "different" when contrasting the credibility of peers to that of teachers, rather than "more" or "better." I am not suggesting in this analysis that the teacher's opinion matters much less once the reading eyes and listening ears of fellow students, or those of audiences outside the classroom, have been introduced. Especially for the teens in my AP classes, constant reinforcement that one is performing "serious student" is important. In this event, however, Johnny, Michelle, and Courtney were attempting to enact several identities at the same time. All three students are applying aspects of academic writing (e.g., giving credit to others for their ideas; approaching a topic with intellectual distance), while also maintaining credibility with other situated identities (ironic detachment; references to popular culture; use of online writing conventions). Importantly, this included schooled identities; they did not need my direct participation as a reminder that they needed to approach the writing in an intellectual way. This is the important contribution of additional available audiences: the opportunity to negotiate between those Discourses that represent who students think they are, or would like to be, and those we want to support as they build intellectual and professional selves.

CHAPTER V

BUILDING A BLOG NETWORK: FOLLOWERS, FRIENDS, READERS

“It is not always easy for us to sort out the nature of our objections to behavior that is jarringly different from our own. But when the behavior is typical of younger generations whom we are trying to influence and educate, it is critical that we do so with some precision.” (Damon, 1990, p. 41)

Understanding adolescents’ out-of-school literacy practices can be helpful in several ways, including predicting how they will want to manipulate and use texts in school for their own purposes. Yet when it comes to online literacy practices, this is a quickly moving target. In the 2010 Pew Research Poll, 14% of online teens reported blogging, half of what it had been four years earlier. But those who reported participating in social network sites (SNS) had increased from 55% to 73% over the same period (Pew Research Center, 2010b).

However fleeting particular trends may be, the stakes are high for many adolescents, and one must stay current. In “The Measure of Our Success,” Kylee Beers recalls meeting an adolescent boy named Collin in a high school library. He is in the process of angrily responding to someone on a blog, and she inquires as to whether he has a blog of his own. “Name me anyone in this century who doesn’t,” he tells her dismissively (Beers, 2007). In another recent study, one teen explained that “if you’re not on MySpace, you don’t exist” (Ito, 2009). More recently, Facebook has overtaken MySpace as the most popular social network site (Helft, 2010), a shift boyd (in press) has argued appears to be tied to ethnicity and class.

This chapter explores a series of practices my students took up on their blogs that are best understood in light of analogous practices on social network sites, particularly Facebook. In order to help the reader understand some of the relevant concepts, I spend

some time throughout this chapter providing background knowledge. I review the blogging feature known as “Following,” which, though I didn’t know it at the beginning of my data collection, was a central feature in how students used structural features of Blogger to connect their blogs to one another. I describe how students’ use of Following created a network among students’ blogs that created an impression of relative popularity among classroom blogs, a change that had consequences for students’ understandings of their audiences. Finally, I argue that although Following creates a system with apparent winners and losers, making some teachers uncomfortable, the system may offer potential benefits for teachers who wish to use online writing in their classrooms.

At a glance, Followers appear to represent authentic audiences, the kind students need if they are to engage in writing that means something to them. I intended the blogs to provide just such a network of possible audiences. But was that perception accurate? Or did Followers instead represent only a public affiliation, as happens with Facebook “friends”? Are Followers “there,” on the blog, in the blogger’s mind? Are Followers *readers*, or are they *friends*? What are the consequences either way?

Connectivity, Schools, and Social Network Sites

As discussed in chapter four, connectivity—the potential to create direct connections between one’s blog and another’s—was central to many students’ interaction on the blog assignment. Without connectivity, students’ audiences would have had no comments, and perceptions of audience would likely have been similar to the pencil-and-paper version: I, the teacher, would have been the primary audience. The kind of conversations and performances discussed in chapter four would not have been possible. Connectivity allowed students performances to reach authentic audiences, and

made those conversations and performances public and enduring.

Students began showing up as Followers on other students' blogs. Observing this behavior, I interpreted it as public declarations of readership. I later came to believe that what I was seeing represented adapting certain features of blogging to uses normally associated with online social network sites, such as Facebook and MySpace. These sites were blocked at Lincoln High during the months of my data collection, from August of 2008 until June of 2009. The similarities between my students' blogs and social network sites are relevant to this study in three ways.

First, social network sites are simultaneously public and private in complex ways (boyd, 2008). The more adolescents take discussions of those interests and activities to spaces discursively positioned as "private," the less likely they are to be engaged with more public spaces, and write with a more general audience in mind.

Second, if these social network sites are discursively positioned as being more private than public, than it seems easier for school policies to prevent students from logging on to social network sites during the school day. As noted by boyd and Ellison (2008), these policies have proliferated over the last decade, extending even to proposed legislation in the United States Congress (H.R. 5319, 2006; S. 49, 2007). In 2011, the Missouri State Legislature passed the Amy Hestir Student Protection Act, which, some legal scholars argued would prevent teachers from having a Facebook or Twitter page for classroom purposes. The legislation remained in dispute at the time of this writing (Arcamona, 2011).

Finally, blogging services such as Blogger, WordPress, and Moveable Type have made changes and additions to their platforms, in order to make those services more like

social network sites, especially Facebook (Needleman, 2008). As schools become more hostile to social network sites, blogs begin to imitate certain qualities of social network sites, and students become more likely to bring their experiences from social network sites into classroom blogging assignments. This could affect whether teachers will be allowed to give such assignments at all. Even if students are allowed to create blogs, teachers will need to take social network sites into consideration when forming their expectations of what students are likely to do with those blogs.

A Facebook Story

As I was beginning to draft this chapter of my dissertation, a brief dispute occurred at Lincoln High over Facebook. When students returned to school in the fall of 2009, and our computer labs were full of people again, students and staff learned that Facebook had been unblocked. I later learned that a district nurse had, over the summer, asked the district computer staff to unblock Facebook. When school was back in session, however, all we knew was that students were now free to log on at school.

The consensus among the majority of my colleagues seemed to form quickly: of course this was an inappropriate use of school time and resources. Within a few days, the site was re-blocked, then unblocked, and then blocked again. E-mail messages passed between staff members, some asking for opinions, others encouraging teachers to write the district technology department urging for the site to remain blocked. The school newspaper quoted students, teachers, and librarians who saw “no educational value” in the website. Few were willing to publicly entertain the possibility that social network sites might hold future educational uses. Within a few weeks, we were told that the superintendent had made an executive decision: Facebook would remain blocked.

The Facebook controversy highlighted a viewpoint many teachers share about social network sites at school: by definition, they do not have educational value; they are distractions, and must be kept out of schools. Those who have argued against continued access to online social networks in schools have done so on the grounds of keeping students safe from cyber-bullying, commercial advertising, and sexual language, but the same sources frequently assume that student use of the sites is a waste of time (see for example, Mende, 2009). “The reality is,” said one school district spokesman in April of 2010, “they’re called social networking for a reason” (Tua’one, 2010). This is consistent with traditional school perspectives on youth literacy practices, especially those associated with technology, as captured well by Lewis and Fabos (2005):

leaving new literacies outside the classroom door for fear that they might interfere with preparation for high-stakes tests, or that they are fraught with too many controversies, or simply that young people are doing quite well with these practices on their own time and the job of schools is to focus on more traditional forms of literacy. (p. 476)

The discussion of whether to keep social network sites out of schools assumes that online social networks are a recognizably separate kind of website that can be identified and kept out, but this is not the case. The characteristics that mark a site as “social,” especially the ability of users to easily share with other users, and for users to easily comment on one another’s content, is spreading quickly to other sites. This is potentially a problem for teachers who wish to use blogs and other Web 2.0 sites which, in an attempt to capitalize on the popularity of online social network sites. Part of what motivated me to object during Lincoln High’s Facebook debate was that Blogger, the platform I was using for student writing had developed Following in order to make it more like the websites being banned from my school district. This controversy gave me some reason to fear for the future of using blogs and other Web 2.0 sites.

The Web 1.0 Paradigm

In this section I elaborate on a point I discussed in chapter one: that the features most associated with social network sites are actually part of a larger transition on the web. These are the features which put the “2.0” in Web 2.0. The reactions to social network sites described in the previous section are consistent with a traditional school paradigm, what Lankshear and Knobel (2008) have termed a “Web 1.0 paradigm,” wherein “expertise and intelligence are concentrated and top down” (2008, p. 3). But this is no longer the paradigm that rules the web, as Sheridan and Rowsell (2010) explain:

the goal of web generation is shifting from a model based on the transmission of information (i.e. Web 1.0), where the goal was to get someone’s attention, to a model based on fostering someone’s participation (Web 2.0). (p. 64).

Historically, knowledge in schools has been constructed as what one knows individually, rather than what can be collectively leveraged. Control over the sources of information students are allowed to use, and the ways in which they are allowed to collaborate, are often regulated; this is done narrowly, through specific assignment guidelines, and broadly, through school and district policies. This understanding has consequences for how both products and processes are viewed and controlled (Luke, 1997). Authorized collaboration between students in schools is often organized and monitored by teachers, librarians, and other staff. While students might collaborate while reading a book or completing a project, merit (in the form of course grades) is based on individual achievement, and collaboration on the wrong task, or at the wrong time, is liable to be seen by the institution as academic dishonesty. Works are generally understood to have a single author, and mechanisms for students to communicate and collaborate outside designated class time are more likely viewed as liabilities than assets.

The Internet as an avenue for consuming information has been viewed equally skeptically from this perspective, as teachers and librarians have long been suspicious of whether it provides sources for students that are commercial, untrustworthy, or overwhelmingly numerous (Fabos, 2004). Even teachers who saw potential in the web would not necessarily have welcomed Web 2.0 into schools. In a Web 1.0 world, it makes sense to say, “At school, we want to teach students to communicate with the wider world,” while also saying, “Private communication among family and friends is frivolous and is for free time, not class time.” In a Web 2.0 world, that separation is no longer a reasonable expectation.

“Participation” is the central feature of Web 2.0 texts, from Google Docs, which emphasizes the sharing of and collaboration on word processing documents; to Flickr, which allows users to comment on and sharing other users’ photographs; to Delicious, a “social bookmark” service that allows users to share favorite web pages. These developments make sense, considering the rising popularity of online social networks among teens, whose central feature is entirely about sharing media with other users. Online social networks’ popularity, coupled with the concurrent declining numbers of adolescent bloggers, help account for a change made to the Blogger software in August of 2008 (McCarthy, 2008). That feature was called “Following,” and it was one of several moves that blogging services made to become more like online social networks (Needleman, 2008).

At first, online social network practices and the school prohibition thereof seemed to have little bearing on my students’ blogs. From a Web 1.0 standpoint, all I was asking students to do was create individual texts about topics of interest. Aside from the fact that

they were online, and therefore visible to a wider audience than most other schoolwork, this was a conventional assignment. The students, however, found ways of interacting that challenged my understanding of what the blogs were and what kind of space we were creating together.

Following and Followers

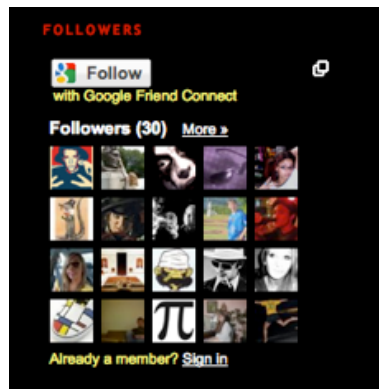
To give a clear idea of what Following is, and how this feature shaped the network of student blogs, in this section I will explain what actually happens when a user begins Following a blog, both from the perspective of a blogger whose blog is being Followed, and from the perspective of the user who is Following. The majority of students fit into both these categories, and nearly all students either had one Follower of their own blog, or was Following at least one other student's blog. The term "Followers" is one of several terms conventional to social network sites, alongside "Friends" (used on Facebook and Bebo), used to denote both the type of connection between two users, and to suggest a type of relationship based on that connection.

When I walked my AP students through setting up their blogs in September of 2008, I didn't immediately understand what this new feature meant. One sidebar feature automatically appeared, entitled "Followers." "This blog has no Followers," the text on the sidebar read; a button just beneath the text read, "Be the First!"

I had no idea what the Following sidebar was about; it hadn't been an option on Blogger the previous spring, when I'd first tried this with students. I told them to ignore it, and walked them through writing a post, giving it a title, and creating a sidebar link back to the Lincoln Blogs site. At the time, I didn't realize that Following would become one of the defining features of the student blog network that we were creating together.

The Following feature allows readers of blogs to have a centrally located list of favorite bloggers' recent posts, and for bloggers using Google's service to see whose lists they've been added to. Following is really a hybrid of two other online features. The first is a technical feature known as an RSS feed, which allow an online reader to have stories from websites they like sent to one centralized place. The other feature is a visual convention, a particular representation of online social connections (Lewis & Fabos, 2005), the "public display of connections" (boyd & Ellison, 2008) through which users of social network sites identify others within the network to whom they are connected in some way.

Figure 5.1: Blogger's Following Sidebar



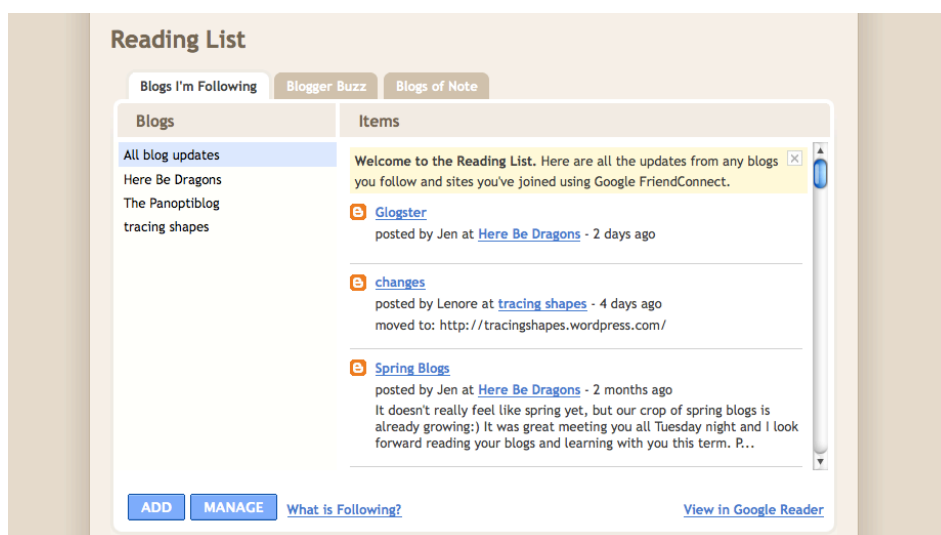
Note: A screenshot of the Followers sidebar from Kyle's blog, "In Depth"; the sidebar displays profile icons of some of the users who have chosen to Follow Kyle's blog. (June 21, 2009)

When readers begin to Follow a blogger, the "Followers" box in the sidebar includes an icon for each Follower, as seen in Figure 5.1. Each icon is drawn from a reader's profile; if a reader has never chosen an image for his or her profile, a gray,

featureless silhouette is used. Users of Facebook would find this feature familiar, as it closely resembles one's list of "friends" on that social network site.

In Facebook's interface, an individual makes a request to be friends with another user, sending a message to that user. If the second user accepts the first user's request, each user's profile picture shows up on the other user's "friend list," and gains access to whatever content he or she allows only friends to see. In other words, on Facebook, there is either a mutual and bidirectional connection, or no connection at all. On Blogger, however, one-directional links were possible, because clicking on the "Follow" button on another student's blog required no confirmation from that blogger. That also meant that students had little control over which users would show up on their page in the list of Followers in the sidebar. When a user begins Following a blog, a list of recent posts on that blog appears on the "Dashboard," when a user first logs in, as seen in Figure 5.2.

Figure 5.2: Blogger's Reading List



Initially, Following appeared to be a way for students to publicly declare friendships and affiliations with others students, and to tether blogs together in small networks within the larger AP blogger network we'd created. Because the icons are highly visible the list appears to be an indicator of how popular the blog is. Look at all the people reading this blog, it seems to say. Or, conversely, look at how *few* people. Whether or not it actually indicated readership is a question I take up later in this chapter.

Connectivity on Lincoln Blogs

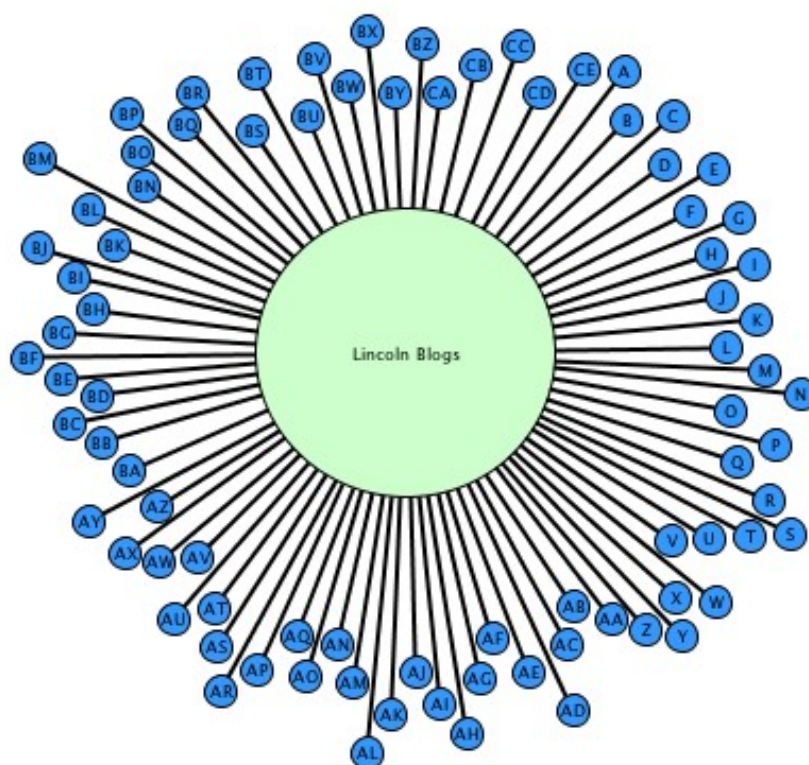
Because my intention was to provide a means for students to serve as authentic audiences for one another, I needed a way for them to find one another's blogs. To this end, I created a blog of my own, entitled "Lincoln Blogs," which would be linked to and from each student's blog. This series of bidirectional links created a classroom blog network. As can be seen in Figure 5.3, before students had begun Following one another, this network was straightforward: all blogs were connected to one central blog and no others. The blogs were technically all connected to one another, but a user could only navigate from one blog to another by passing through the Lincoln Blogs site.

I first used blogs the year before this study. In that initial study, in addition to the link directing viewers to the Lincoln Blogs page, some students created links to other students' blogs. This practice was limited to a small circle of students with shared interests and tastes in music, art, and literature. The links to one another's blogs might well have had a functional aspect; it surely did make it easier to navigate from their own blogs to their friends'. However, they also publicly declared the students' affection for and affiliation with one another. Students' blogs were already connected, through the Lincoln Blogs page; these students had connected their blogs directly, creating a smaller

network of affiliated blogs within the larger network of all student blogs.

This year, I had expected more students to take advantage of this possibility, but Following made such linking unnecessary, even redundant. Though some did end up

Figure 5.3: The Lincoln Blog Network in October



making lists of links down the side of their blogs, the majority relied on Following to create a connection between themselves and the blogs they liked. Like sidebar links the previous year, Following allowed students to bypass the Lincoln Blogs site and go directly to any blog they were Following from the Blogger welcome screen, known as the user's "dashboard." Following, therefore, created links between student bloggers. By tracing the connections from one Followed blog to the next, we end up with a network

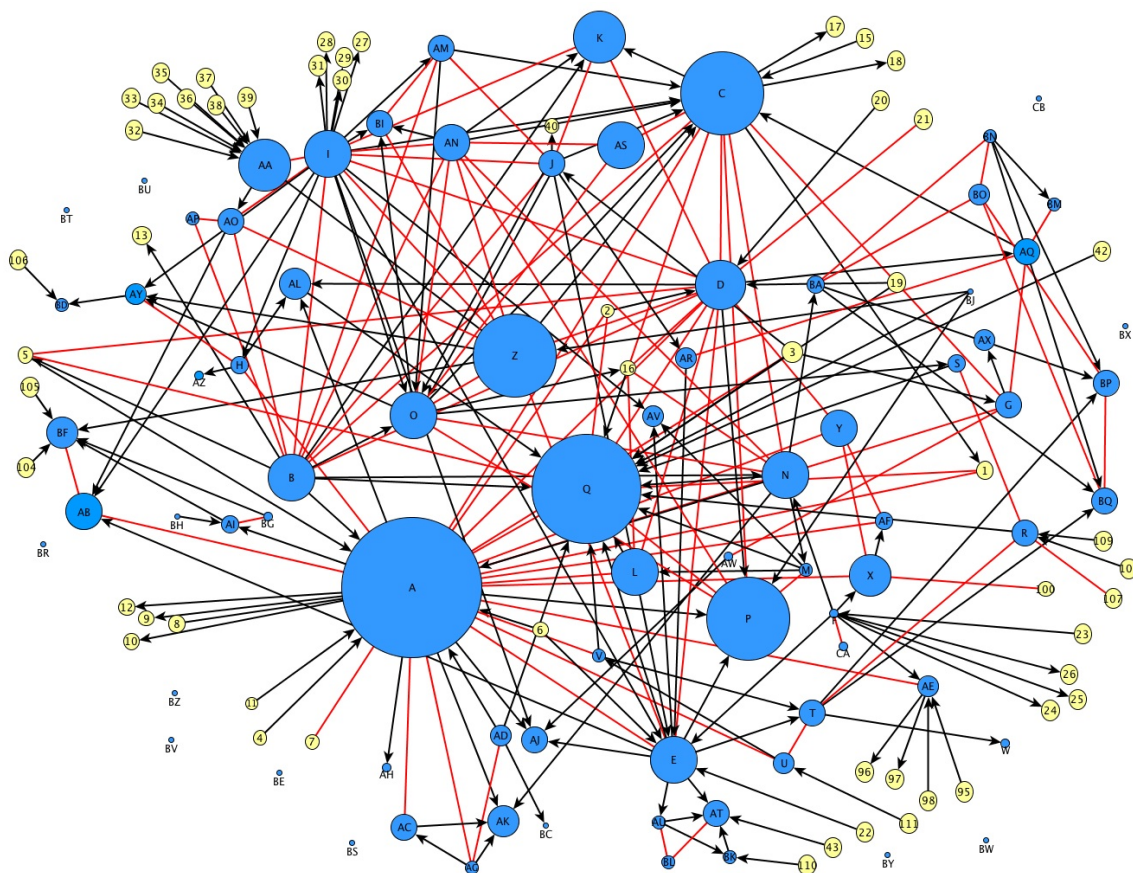
where some blogs are more centrally connected within this network than other blogs. This revised network is constantly changing, as additional Followers enter the network, or as existing users Follow additional blogs. By June, the eighth month of blogging, this was a more complicated network, as illustrated in Figure 5.4. In that Figure, lines with arrowed ends indicate one-directional Following, and lines without arrows indicate bi-directional Following. Circle diameter is approximately proportional to the number of Followers the corresponding blog had. Lettered circles represent student blogs; numbered circles represent readers who were not part of our class, but were Following a student's blog. Although student blogs continued to be connected to the Lincoln Blogs site, that site has been omitted from Figure 5.4, as students were not using Following in order to connect to it. A comparison of Figure 5.3 and Figure 5.4 shows that the majority of students chose to connect to other blogs using Following, which resulted in a more complex network than it had been at the beginning of the data collection period.

As I discussed in chapters one and four, my primary intention entering this study was understanding whether students would have additional authentic audiences available to them through blogging. For that reason, when Following emerged as a common practice among my student bloggers, I believed it suggested that a given blog's Followers had something to do with who was reading, validating, and/or participating in that blog. I will return to the question of whether that turned out to be the case later in this chapter.

Following Over Time on Lincoln Blogs

When I viewed the students' blogs in the first three months of the study, I paid little or no attention to who was using the Following feature. It seemed an unimportant detail; I was more interested in what the students were writing, when they were using the

Figure 5.4: The Lincoln Blog Network in June



various multimodal and intertextual features of the medium: embedding images and video, or linking to other websites. Most students had no Followers, and those that did had only a few. For this reason, I have no data from the beginning of the year about Following at the beginning of the year.

Students began Following one another, as well as Following outside blogs they found on their own, without any prompting from me. While I was still trying to figure out what Following was and why anyone would want to use it, a few students simply explored the feature on their own. Because I wasn't attending to the Following trend at the beginning of the year, I have no record of which students were the earliest adopters of

Following. However, I do have records of how many blogs from my AP Language and Composition class were being Followed at three points in the year: month five, month seven, and month nine (which was after the school year had concluded). At no point does any blogger's number of Followers decline; they all either maintain the same number of Followers, or have more than at the previous check. (My data does not address the question of whether, in any case, a Follower stopped Following a student's blog, though the Blogger platform does make this option available to users.) As can be seen in Figure 5.4 and Table 5.1, the distribution of Followers was uneven by the end of the year: some students had significantly more Followers than others. Although the mean average for the eighty student blogs documented in this research was approximately five Followers (4.79), nearly three-quarters of bloggers (72.5%) had five or fewer Followers. This reflects that a slim majority of Followers (51.4%) were concentrated among only fifteen student bloggers. Kyle had the most Followers, with 28; fourteen bloggers ended the year with no Followers at all.

Table 5.1: Blogs and Followers of Interview Subjects

Student	Blog Title	ID Code	Followers	Following
Kyle	"In Depth"	A	28*	29*
Michelle	"The Gramophone"	D	18*	18*
Courtney	"Don't Worry"	C	16	12
Grant	"Insanity 101"	P	16	10
Amanda	"My Question Mark"	AA	10	17
Eleanor	"The Panacea"	B	9*	16*
Alan	"Video Game Reviews FTW"	E	9	11
Leslie	"Yay a Blog"	BI	5	2

Note: The eight students who were interviewed included five of the top eight bloggers, as ranked by number of Followers. An asterisk () indicates a student Following her/himself. The ID Code was used to identify blogs individually on maps of the blog network, as in Figures 5.3 and 5.4.*

In this section, I have described Following, and how students' use of this feature redistributed the network of student blogs. At the beginning of the blog project, the network structure did not favor any individual student, because all blogs were indirectly connected through the Lincoln Blogs site. Once they began using Following to directly connect their blogs, some blogs became more central within the network, and other blogs became more peripheral.

Though I was not expecting Following to be the type of structural feature that might shape students' blogging practices, as evidenced by my research questions, I believed it might do just that. If the number of Followers was widely understood to reflect the readership or relative popularity of a given blog, it could have important ramifications for all students. In particular, I feared it would shape students' understandings of who was reading their blogs, and how successful their blogs were. Students' understandings of what Following meant was therefore an important issue to address.

What Does Following Mean?

As it became clear to me over the course of the school year that some students were gaining Followers at a faster rate than others, I made three assumptions that I interrogate in the remainder of this chapter. First, I believed that these Followers represented actual readers, and that readers had decided to Follow a given student's blog because he or she enjoyed reading it. Second, I believed that students would interpret these Followers were actual readers, and incorporate those Followers into their conceptions of their imagined authentic audiences. Finally, I believed that blogs which

had more Followers would be perceived as more successful than those blogs which had fewer Followers.

In the subsequent sections, I present data from participant interviews that illustrates three views students held about Followers and their relationship to authentic audiences. The first view is explicit recognition of similarities between Following and analogous features on social network sites. The second view is a skepticism that the number of Followers reflects actual readership. Finally, the third view—somewhat contrary to the second view—is that while Following does not directly reflect readership, it provides an avenue toward gaining authentic audiences.

Following as Friending

For an understanding of how students would decide when it was appropriate to Follow another student's blog, it is helpful to refer again to conventions and practices developed on social network sites. Although social network sites have been around for less than a decade, this has been enough time for students to develop conventional practices around online social connections. As boyd notes, these norms are the result of “ongoing debate and negotiation over what is socially appropriate, combined with Internet companies' efforts to monitor and regulate these practices” (Ito et al., 2009, p. 85). In the case of Following on Blogger, the creators of the platform provided visual cues that helped students understand Following as similar to features on social network sites, especially to the practice of “friending” on the social network site Facebook.

As discussed earlier, Facebook was by far the most successful social network site at the time of this study, and the notion that users of the Blogger platform would import conventions and practices from social network sites is not accidental. The enthusiastic

plea to “Be the first!” of a blog’s Followers is consistent with encouragement from social network sites to connect with new contacts. The presence of thumbnail versions of users’ profile images, and the organization of those images into a grid, is precisely consistent with the way social network sites display affiliated users, such as Friends on Facebook.

Participant interviews from my study support the notion that students were using their experiences on social network sites, especially Facebook, to inform their practices when connecting with one another using Following. Several participants reported that some students attempted to gain Followers by simply asking friends and acquaintances to Follow them. In some cases, an offer was made for a one-to-one exchange: *I’ll Follow you, if you Follow me*. This was, in essence, like a Facebook “friend request” made in physical space. In other words, although the technology made Follower connections one-directional, social norms formed through uses of social network sites demanded that the connections be made mutually, and so connections for these students became bidirectional.

While most participants acknowledged that other students used Following as mutual arrangements between friends and acquaintances, those students who did this too often were seen as simply attempting to grow their Followers list. In separate participant interviews, several participants tended to see this as distasteful.

Kyle: I know... well I know that there’s been sites like this, where the point is to acquire as many Followers as you possibly can, like on Facebook, you friend people you know they’re friends with, I know that’s a big trend, to see who has the most friends. And sometimes people just Follow people just to Follow ‘em, like they don’t even read it, or like it wouldn’t even matter.

Leslie: Well, Cynthia was like obsessed with her blog. She was fascinated by it, and whatever. So she just like, asked me if I would Follow her blog. And I said fine.

Michelle: Followers, that wasn't really a big indicator of who was reading my blog, 'cause that was more deals with friends—"if you Follow me, I'll Follow you" and stuff like that.

The attempt to accumulate a large number of online social connections is a common practice on social network sites. where online social connections are made between users who don't know each other well. Referring to the practice on Facebook, Reiham Salam has called this "promiscuous friending" (Salam, 2007, ¶ 2). Similarly, MySpace users who collect Friends have been derided as "MySpace whores" (Ito et al., 2009, p. 86).

A belief that Followers were similar to Facebook friends does not necessarily mean that those Followers were not authentic audience members. In fact, though I had observed these similarities myself, I was inclined to believe those similarities made it more likely that Followers were actually readers. Practices such as "friend collecting," however, gave credence to a belief that Following was not related to the number of readers a blog had. This was reflected in several separate participant interviews:

Michelle: Followers, that wasn't really a big indicator of who was reading my blog, 'cause that was more deals with friends—"if you Follow me, I'll Follow you" and stuff like that.

Leslie: I don't think they actually read it. I think that they just want their picture there or something.

Alan: I don't take confidence in [the number of Followers] at all. 'Cause basically, a lot of those people I know are just Following to have Followers. Like, "Hey, will you Follow mine? Yeah!"

Grant: And [one classmate], I feel like she's Following me because I'm Following her. Not, I mean, not to like, bash her for Following, the fact that she's Following me, but that's kind of what I feel like, once, like some of these people, I feel like some of these people are Following me because I'm their friend.

Not all students were suspicious of Followers, however. While I was still in the midst of conducting students interviews, just as I was beginning to reimagine what Following might have meant to student, I interviewed Amanda, who took her Followers much more to heart.

Followers as Implied Readers

Amanda was an athlete whose blog, “My Question Mark,” was dedicated to running. Her training regimen and experiences from recent competitions filled most of her posts. Her profile picture was a photograph of her running shoes in the snow, meant to symbolize, she said, “you know, it wasn’t always easy, but I did it anyways.”⁹

Unlike nearly all the rest of my student bloggers, the majority of Amanda’s Followers were not classmates. Though a few were fellow Lincoln High students, others’ stated locations included Ohio, California, and Canada. One wrote on his own blog about marathons; another blogged about his experiences as a paratriathlete. When the first of those three began Following her blog, Amanda reported in her interview,

I was surprised he’d want to Follow my blog. And then... well, I started Following his blog then, ‘cause it was really interesting. And I found another guy through his blog. And his name was Vincent and he’s also from Canada. And he’s probably like my main Follower. And he comments on a lot of my stuff. And I comment on his stuff. (Interview)

While Amanda said she didn’t intend to go out seeking Followers, she was aware that by Following other blogs, she created avenues for new readers to find her blog.

Like, usually I go find somebody’s, and then, maybe like some of their Followers might look at mine. ‘Cause they see that a new person is Following a blog that they enjoy, so they might enjoy mine too. (Interview)

⁹ At least one younger Lincoln High School runner was among Amanda’s readership while. This younger runner was in AP Language the following year and created a similar running blog. Amanda’s influence has been strong in the years since; every year at least one runner has used “My Question Mark” as a model.

Although she admitted that her parents had some reservations about the fact that her blog was being Followed by people she didn't know,

I think they're like okay with it. And they like that I'm finding people to talk about these things with. 'Cause they can't really discuss it with me. (Interview)

When asked to elaborate, she told me that

I don't necessarily mean like, regular cyclists but people who like to watch pro cycling and are interested in it. Mainly people who run, like my Followers do. (Interview)

For Amanda, then, finding additional Followers meant expanding the authentic audience for her blog: those people who had experience with running, cycling, and other similar sports, and wanted a space to discuss them.

Following as a Filter, or a Funnel

Despite the fact that most students regarded Following as a questionable measure of how many people were reading their blogs, many of those same students revealed how it shaped their blog reading habits. When interview participants were asked about which blogs they read, conversations steered back to Following:

Leslie: I think that I'm a Follower of [two other student bloggers]. And when you open it up, you know it's, "They wrote this about this," so I'd just click on that, so... yeah.

Alan: On the front page, it would always say, like, when you logged in, there was a little table that said, "recently added posts." So I'd always scroll through that and see if there was any titles that caught my eye.

Eleanor described how Following allowed her to keep track of the blogs she liked, and rewarded those bloggers who wrote new posts frequently. Here she's talking about Kyle's blog, which she liked and was Following, but didn't read very often.

Eleanor: Not so much regularly. 'Cause he didn't post as much as some people. So like, it wouldn't show up as much, in the Following thing. So I just wouldn't, would kind of forget about it, because I'm Following a lot of blogs.

MA: I see. So the main way that you were seeing other blogs was by looking at this list that Google gave you—

Eleanor: Yeah. Because or else I'd just kind of forget about it. You know what I mean? It's just easier that way.

This is built into the system of Following. A user's Dashboard leads her to the list of blogs she's Following. She's then more likely to read those blogs than other blogs. Viewed positively, the act of Following thus creates a filter, so that the reader can avoid the blogs she doesn't care about, and move on to blogs of interest. Viewed slightly more pessimistically, Following creates a funnel, where readers never get the opportunity to see blog posts that might be of interest, simply because they rarely make it past those blogs they're already Following.

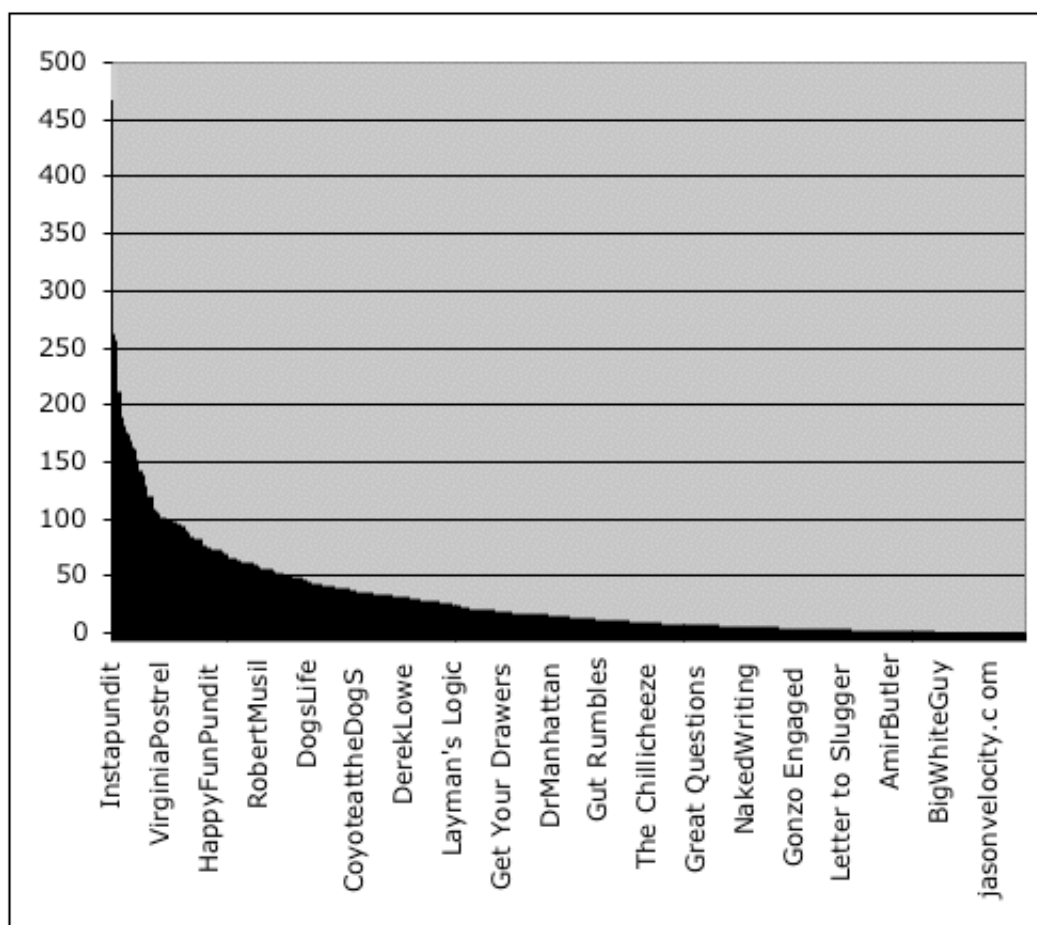
A Popular Hierarchy of Bloggers

My intention was to make authentic audiences available to students through the blog project. Once it became clear that Following would be a highly visible feature of the project that year, I became concerned that students with fewer Followers would feel that their blogs were less successful, and that not all students would have an equal chance at gaining readership. This mirrors concerns in the wider blogging community in the early years of the twenty-first century. In the mid-1990's, blogs were hailed by some as being proof of the democratizing power of the web (Rosenberg, 2009). A person with a message didn't have to have approval from an editor, didn't have to have connections; she could put that message out herself, with no need for permission and no limitations on word count or subject matter. But soon, there were enough blogs that it appeared lesser-known blogs were going to be crowded out. Those who weren't already being linked to by others were unlikely ever to be discovered, it seemed. You could write your message,

sure; but would anyone ever see it?

Shirky's discussion of power law distribution (2003) addresses the unequal distribution of influence among bloggers in the early years of the twenty-first century. The problem, from the point of view of those 1990's bloggers disturbed by the imbalances in blog readership, is illustrated by several graphs, each showing a very sharp drop-off after the first several blogs. I include one of Shirky's graphs in Figure 5.5, showing that the majority of incoming links are concentrated among relatively few blogs.

Figure 5.5: Power Law Distribution



Source: Shirky, C. (2003). *Power laws, weblogs, and inequality*. Retrieved from http://www.shirky.com/writings/powerlaw_weblog.html

Through this and similar figures, Shirky shows that in the online world, regardless of the criteria being used, power law distributions are present, and indeed inevitable, so long as online readers are free to choose their favorite content. Shirky goes on to explain the power law principle (using the hypothetical examples “Alice,” “Bob,” and “Carmen”),

people's choices do affect one another. If we assume that any blog chosen by one user is more likely, by even a fractional amount, to be chosen by another user, the system changes dramatically. Alice, the first user, chooses her blogs unaffected by anyone else, but Bob has a slightly higher chance of liking Alice's blogs than the others. When Bob is done, any blog that both he and Alice like has a higher chance of being picked by Carmen, and so on, with a small number of blogs becoming increasingly likely to be chosen in the future because they were chosen in the past. (Shirky, 2003, ¶11)

A similarly open system existed among the Lincoln Blogs. Though all of them had started out with the same number of Followers—zero—and each had equal access to all other Lincoln High bloggers, it would have been easy to view this as a “flat distribution”—no rise or fall, because each has the same number of Followers, each seemingly with the same chance of being seen or read. As soon as individual users began following one another, however, the distribution inevitably started shifting. I counted every Follower of all eighty student blogs. I then created a graph, ranking blogs by number of Followers—blogs with the most Followers are at the left, blogs with the least are at the right. That graph, presented in Figure 5.6, illustrates that by the end of the school year, the student blogs roughly followed a power law distribution, like those in Shirky’s (2003) analysis.

Any graph of a blog’s statistics, according to Shirky, regardless of which criteria are used—Followers, links, site visits—would reflect a power law distribution. If Shirky is correct, I suggest that any of these criteria, if made transparent, would become a way of

comparing blogs, and invite an interpretation that some blogs are more successful than others. In order to maintain a flat distribution, says Shirky, “neither the quality of the writing nor other people's choices have any effect; there are no shared tastes, no preferred genres, no effects from marketing or recommendations from friends” (2003, par. 10).

But of course these criteria and others *do* have effects. Though students claimed that the number of Followers were nothing more than an indication of agreements made with friends to mutually Follow, the Blogger interface is structured in such a way that students had more opportunities to read blog posts written by students they were Following than those they were not. This has a potentially profound impact on which class blogs that student was likely to read.

If a teacher set up a classroom community of bloggers so that students would have equal access to audiences, in order to exchange ideas with one another, this could be troubling. Any system resulting in winners and losers, influenced by factors beyond the teacher's control, is anathema to contemporary teacher discourses. Such discourses prize fairness and equality. Winners are to be named on the basis of grades, which are presumed to be based on fair and equal criteria; those who struggle (never “losers,” certainly) are to be helped by teacher intervention.

If there are benefits to be had from gaining an online audience, teachers would surely want those benefits to be available to all students, not only those few whose blogs become more popular for whatever reason. Teachers might fear that students at the long tail of this distribution would fail to gain the benefits of having an online audience. Teachers might then intervene in order to prevent such a distribution by grouping students, requiring comments to all blogs rather than letting them occur in the moment, or

perhaps forcing all students to Follow all other students' blogs.

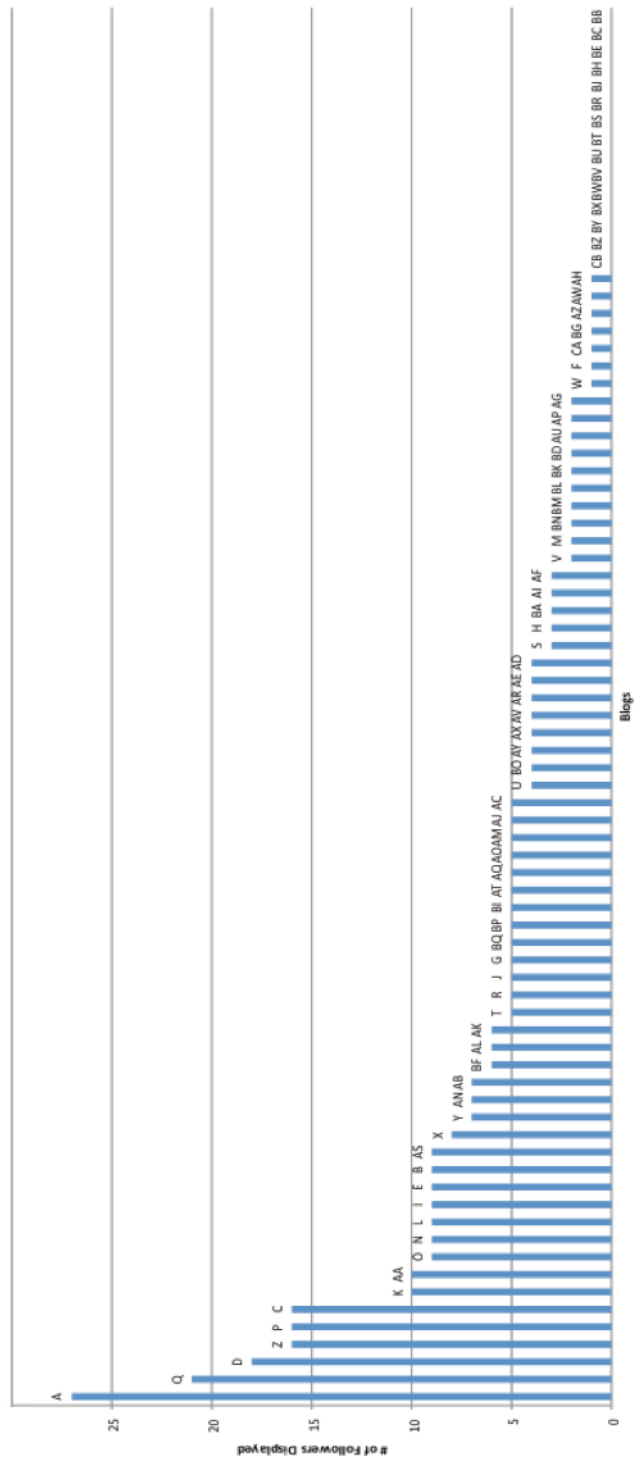
This reaction would mask that this is, indeed, an effect of having authentic audiences. Some authors will have more readers than other authors. To pretend otherwise returns to paths back to traditional classroom practices (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006). Stripped of the freedom to make choices, and to respond as authentic audiences with likes and dislikes, blogs become just another assignment. A Web 2.0 ethos, however, would demand that the teacher use what connectivity makes possible. Next, to address what might be available, I briefly discuss how I contributed to the power law distribution, not by changing the curve, but by nudging some blogs toward the front of it.

Shaping the Distribution

Over the course of the year, I periodically wrote posts on the Lincoln Blogs site featuring a particular student's blog. These posts, entitled "Blog of the Week" (despite their infrequency), variously featured Michelle's, Kyle's, Eleanor's, and Alan's blogs. In each, I linked to several posts by a single blogger, attempting to give a clear idea of what that blogger did on his or her blog overall. By singling these blogs out for students' attention, I intended to put a spotlight on successful student blogs, in the hope that other students would use those students' blogs as models. I also hoped to drive traffic to those blogs I felt were especially successful in some way, to encourage those students.

Eventually I abandoned the "Blog of the Week" model, fearful that students would interpret it as singling out favorite students, rather than pointing to specific features that they could imitate. I replaced it late in the year with a series of posts highlighting specific posts by students, linking to seven or eight student blogs rather than just one.

Figure 5.6: Lincoln Blogs Organized by Followers



The data is insufficient to say whether or not I influenced the number of Followers by writing posts dedicated to praising their work. It is worth noting that when ranked by number of Followers, the four blogs I singled out for special attention all finished the year in the top ten. It's possible that the qualities that attracted so many Followers were the same qualities that led me to praise and link to them. On the other hand, it's possible that fewer students would have been exposed to those blogs without singling them out (it doesn't take much imagination to suggest a teacher's recommendation might motivate some students to avoid a particular blog rather than seek it out). Based on available data, it would be difficult to judge whether any widespread consensus formed among student bloggers based on the number of Followers as a judgment on that blog's relative success, popularity, or quality. In the end, it's impossible to say whether and to what extent my recommendations shaped which students were at the head of the power law distribution curve.

Summary

Despite participants' insistence to the contrary, Following was an especially salient structural feature of the Blogger interface, substantially influencing student blogging practices. It shaped the ways in which students interacted on the blogs, and the ways in which those blogs were connected to one another. Following was central to the connectivity between blogs much more than other types of connections, even those that students said they valued more, such as comments. There were three reasons this was true of Following: availability, visibility, and familiarity to many students.

First, Following was the most available connection; it required only that a user click on a button present on all student blogs unless a blogger manually removed it from

the sidebar. Second, it was the most visible connection, as it meant a student blogger would then have a visual presence on another student's blog, a public declaration of affiliation with that blogger. Third, the visual design of the Following feature made it the most familiar to those students who had participated in online social network sites. That familiarity enabled students to import practices normally employed on sites such as Facebook (e.g., mutual-Following-as-friending, "friend collecting") into the context of our classroom network of blogs.

Though this last point caused skepticism among some students, Following actually helped influence which blogs students read. New posts from Followed blogs arrived in readers' Dashboards, and were therefore visible the moment they logged in on their own blogs, users were more likely to continue reading posts from blogs they were already Following than to seek out new blogs unless they did so for other reasons.

My analysis demonstrates that because the structural features of Blogger allow for public signifiers of public affiliation or readership, a teacher could use this system to encourage some specific practices. Teachers could highlight those blogs whose authors used links in a particularly effective way, or whose topic was especially clever, giving more opportunities to attract Followers. This could, potentially, serve the purpose of a model and a reward. It is certainly a topic to pursue in future research.

Even if the teacher's recommendations could be used to increase traffic to some student blogs, Shirky's analysis is a reminder that the power law distribution model "is absolutely mute as to why one blog might be preferred over another" (2003, par. 13):

Perhaps some writing is simply better than average (a preference for quality), perhaps people want the recommendations of others (a preference for marketing), perhaps there is value in reading the same blogs as your friends (a preference for "solidarity goods", things best enjoyed by a group). It could be all three, or some

other effect entirely, and it could be different for different readers and different writers. What matters is that any tendency towards agreement in diverse and free systems, however small and for whatever reason, can create power law distributions. (Shirky, 2003, par. 13)

But it is also worth remembering that Kyle's blog "In Depth," of all the classroom blogs, was the most popular blog to Follow. Before I featured Kyle's blog on Lincoln Blogs, his blog was mentioned in the school newspaper, which surely gave his blog more opportunities to gain Followers. Two other oft-Followed student bloggers, Michelle and Eleanor, were also staff members on the school newspaper, which may have gained them Followers from associated public recognition. Still other bloggers, including Grant, were engaged in behavior I wanted students to avoid. Yet the practices I found most objectionable were likely part of the reason his also stood among the top tier of most Followed blogs. If Shirky points toward a broader principle, then, it is that if we believe students should be allowed to pursue authentic audiences and purposes, it may upend other aspects of the conventional classroom dynamic. Teachers may need to set aside the notion that they decide what constitutes "quality" or "success." Students who find authentic audiences may become more interested in pleasing those audiences and gaining readership than in pleasing the teacher. For some students, it may not matter whether the teacher's idea of "best blogging practices" are explained and modeled, and that students who follow those practices are rewarded by better grades or more Followers. They might, in fact, be more motivated by transgressing teacher-created norms, especially if their transgressions will have an audience. This is the subject of chapter six.

CHAPTER VI

“I GUESS I USE THIS BLOG AS A VENT”:

FREEDOM, SURVEILLANCE, AND CENSORSHIP

IN THE DIGITAL CLASSROOM

“you can’t make people shut up. they will find a way to say what they want to, if they really need to. that’s what’s wonderful about the internet. they can say it, and you don’t have to read it.”

~ Justin Hall, in 1996, on “Justin’s Links from the Underground,”
as quoted by Scott Rosenberg (2009)

“People are stupid. More specifically, teachers are stupid. That’s right, all followers of this blog gasp in astonishment, i just said teachers are stupid on a blog that is graded for a class. [...] I wrote the part about the teachers because i honestly believe that who i am directing it at won’t read it, and if he does, i don’t care, it is the truth.”

~ Grant, on “Insanity 101”

One consequence of giving students a forum to write where they are more concerned with other audiences than with what the teacher wants took me by surprise, even as it seems obvious in retrospect. If they care less about what the teacher wants, then some will reject certain school norms. Michelle, a participant in chapter four, was a good example of this practice. She swore with some frequency on her blog “The Gramophone.” To her, this was consistent with the voices of the professional music bloggers that she was attempting to imitate. Viewers were welcomed with, “Welcome to my blog, where you will find lots of (ir)relevant shit.” She acknowledged the transgressive nature of her four-letter words in a mid-year reflection, written as a rap:

Which reminds me, I like to swear a little bit
the first amendment gives me freedom to say “shit”
And I don’t just do it for a subversive shock
It’s necessary for expressing my views on rock (Feb. 11, 2009)

When I interviewed Michelle at the end of the year, I asked her how she would have reacted if I'd asked her not to swear on her blog, given that it was a school assignment.

Michelle: I mean, when writing a blog it feels more intimate. Even though you're on the world wide web, but... And nobody's there to say, "this is bad." You know. And nobody can chastise your writing on the Internet. So, yeah.

MA: It's interesting that you say that, because again, this *was* for a class, and I could have—

Michelle: It *was* getting rated. But...

MA: —I could've stepped in and said, like, well, how would that have gone if I had tried to say, you can't say that, because this is for school.

Michelle: Well, I would probably just be like, "And *how* are you going to enforce that? Because..." You can't *censor* this. There's no... It's not *China*. You can't censor things before they're published, or, after they're published, on the Internet. You can't... *do* that. So... You know... I don't know. [pause] That just would seem really weird and unfair. 'Cause, then I'm just like... I don't know.
(Interview)

Though Michelle is right that enforcing standards of conduct could not be direct, as I could not edit their blogs, I certainly could have introduced a rule that swearing would incur a penalty. As Michelle's answer suggests, however, this seemed to her antithetical to the spirit of publishing on the Internet. Even the suggestion leads her quickly to associations with regimes where free speech is not encouraged, and may be punished.

Michelle's answer suggests that even if she found it distasteful, she might well have followed those guidelines: in thirty seconds she shifts from cheerful defiance ("And *how* would you enforce that?") to indignation at the injustice of it (You can't... do that"), to quiet resignation. But what would such resignation have looked like on Michelle's blog, or other students'? Would the resulting blog posts have been worth their time? Would they have been worth mine?

This was a central tension about the blogs for some of my students, and for me. The point of moving daily student writing from notebooks to blogs was that students could focus on their own purposes. Restricting what they could and couldn't say was antithetical to my purposes as well. Yet I felt pressure to make the blogs suitable to the institution I was working within.

In this chapter, I highlight a particular student case, Grant, whose blog fit the conventions of many Web 2.0 genres, but unsettled the power relations between teacher and student. Specifically, by appealing to the notion that the blog was his space for free expression, and that censorship thereof was unreasonable, he subverted the blogging assignment, making his school blog into a space where he could say what he couldn't in more typical classroom contexts.

Freedom and the Internet

Understanding why this appeal to Internet freedom was so available to Grant requires a discussion of why discourses about freedom on the Internet are so persuasive to begin with. It also requires a discussion of the conflict between freedom of speech online and real-world sanctions on that speech, a conflict which remains unsettled.

In the early 1990's, while the wider public was still learning what the Internet was, the early authors on the web were exploring the freedoms that the web appeared to offer. Some of these trailblazers saw themselves as pioneers, forerunners of civilization taming the digital frontiers (Rheingold, 1993). Others were closer to outlaws. If the web was an Information Superhighway, they were Jack Nicholson and Dennis Hopper in *Easy Rider*, hair blowing in the wind as they reveled in their newfound ability to communicate with the masses however they wanted. The next two decades seemed to bear out that a

new era had been ushered in. The ability for even a single individual to get his or her message out was suddenly widely available—if not to all, then at least to millions, with fewer and fewer barriers every new Internet start-up.

I will not argue in this chapter that the Internet actually disrupts power binaries, or that the web is inherently democratic. I take the stance that much web content actually serves to reinscribe existing power relations, but that it does provide opportunities for the subversion of those relations (Gersch, 1998). As Warf and Grimes put it (1997), “[t]he Internet does not necessarily serve either hegemonic or counterhegemonic purposes; it can and does serve both” (p. 270).

Others have gone so far as to compare the Internet to the panopticon, Jeremy Bentham’s prison design wherein prisoners are visible at all times, but don’t know when they are being watched (Foucault, 1977). Some who reject the emancipatory narratives offer the panopticon as a more useful way of understanding the Internet (Poster, 1990; Rheingold, 1993). Nonetheless, the emancipatory narratives thrive, especially those claiming the Internet promotes freedom of expression, and shape the expectations of many who use it. I discuss those narratives at some length in this chapter, in order to illustrate how they shape students’ expectations of online composition.

What consequences do these discourses have for teachers who would have students participate in online writing, but who are unable or reluctant to allow the wholesale disruption of traditional power relations between teachers and students? If blogging provides an avenue for a student to develop a desired identity, what happens if that identity isn’t consistent with accepted behavior in that school? If a student can use the Internet for classroom assignments to reach additional, more engaged and responsive

readers, why should the student continue to care what the teacher thinks? And if the teacher's answer is simply to reassert the traditional power relations (i.e., "Because I'm grading you"), does "re-schooling" the assignment irreparably damage it in the eyes of the student? And if so, what was the point of doing it in the first place? Why not just assign students to write in a notebook? This remains a dilemma for me; I will discuss this in detail in chapter seven.

Virtual Pamphleteers

Empowering the individual has been a theme of personal computing discourses since the mid-1970s. Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak writes that he, Steve Jobs, and several other early developers of personal computers "envisioned computers as a benefit to humanity—a tool that would lead to social justice" (Wozniak & Smith, 2007, p. 151). Similarly, the Internet has been celebrated since the early 1970's as a venue capable of transforming the average citizen from passive consumer into a contributor (Mungo & Clough, 1992; Rheingold, 1993). This has only become more true in the Web 2.0 era. The Internet offers potential as a means for the production and distribution of users' own content has been made easier and more widely available (Friedman, 2005; Shirky, 2005). "The promise of the web," says Rebecca Blood, "was that everyone could publish, that a thousand voices could flourish, communicate, connect" (2000, ¶ 25). These sometimes breathless declarations tended to focus on an imagined everyman and everywoman, turned into a potential pamphleteer in the tradition of Thomas Paine, such as these commentaries from *Wired* magazine in the mid-1990's:

[Thomas] Paine does have a legacy, a place where his values prosper and are validated millions of times a day: the Internet. There, his ideas about communications, media ethics, the universal connections between people, and

free flow of honest opinion are all relevant again, visible every time one modem shakes hands with another. (Katz, 1995, ¶ 10)

[The Internet] enables average citizens to participate in national discourse, publish a newspaper, distribute an electronic pamphlet to the world, and generally communicate to and with a broader audience than ever before possible. It also enables average citizens to gain access to a vast and literally world-wide range of information, while simultaneously protecting their privacy. (Wired, 1996, p. 84, cited in Warf & Grimes, 1997)

An emphasis on the Internet as a free space does not mean such discourses were relentlessly positive; they also sometimes conveyed a kind of lawlessness. In 1996, Herbert H. Humphrey III, Attorney General of Minnesota, argued that government officials needed to debunk the notion that the Internet was a kind of “Wild West” where lawlessness prevailed (Morriss, 1998; Kindt & Joy, 2007).

The fact that an individual’s message now has the kind of reach once reserved for large media corporations has led to claims that Web 2.0 publishing has disrupted traditional conceptions of power (Rheingold, 1993; Friedman, 2005; Shirky, 2005; Wozniak & Smith, 2006). Frequently the power being disrupted is named in binaries: authors and readers, governments and citizens, corporations and individuals, producers and consumers.

Digital Revolutions

Between 2009 and 2011, a series of attempted or successful revolutions in Asia and the Middle East encouraged discourses celebrating the Internet as a means for free expression and social interaction. Several of these movements manifestly incorporated online social media, allowing protestors to share information and dramatic images with one another and the wider world.

Which of these digital revolutions came first depends on which digital technology one includes in the calculus. Text messaging was cited as a critical technological factor in

the 2004 Orange Revolution in the Ukraine (Goldstein, 2007). Text messaging and the Internet were also cited as playing a significant role in domestic crises in Burma and Kenya (Goldstein & Rotich, 2008). In 2009, demonstrators in Moldova protested what they perceived to be a rigged election result, organizing amongst themselves using Facebook and Twitter (Barry, 2009; Morozov, 2009a).

Post-election protests in Iran, only two months after Moldova, were watershed movements. In June of 2009, Iranian citizens protesting a suspect election result used Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook to coordinate protests (Bray, 2009), share evidence of government abuse (Stelter & Stone, 2009), and in some cases to recruit hackers to attack government websites (Moscaritolo, 2009), leading some to dub it Iran's "Twitter Revolution" (Grossman, 2009; Morozov, 2009b). The availability of online social media, combined with other technological developments such as text messaging, seemed to have "changed the ancient calculus of how much power governments actually have to sequester their nations from the eyes of the world and make it difficult for their own people to gather, dissent and rebel" (Stelter & Stone, 2009, ¶4).

In Egypt's popular uprising in 2011, online social networks were considered so important to protestors that President Hosni Mubarek's government shut down Internet access in the country to prevent online communication. In response, then-White House spokesman Robert Gibbs suggested—via Twitter—that access to online social network sites was necessarily connected to "respect[ing] the rights of [the] Egyptian people" (Sheridan, 2011). President Obama tied this explicitly to freedom:

There are certain core values that we believe as Americans are universal: freedom of speech, freedom of expression, people being able to use social networking and other mechanisms to communicate their concerns; and that is no less true in the Arab world than it is in the United States. (Jerome, 2011)

At this point it may be useful to point out two ways in which these events were, despite the enthusiastic claims about the power of social media to promote freedom around the globe, less remarkable than they appeared. First, it is not unusual that dramatic shifts in communication technology would present strategic opportunities for previously marginalized groups. It was not even the first time such a thing had happened in Iran; in that country's 1979 revolution, the widespread availability of cassette tapes and transistor radios allowed messages from the Ayatollah Khomeini to reach Iranians from thousands of miles away (Morrow, 1979). Second, as Barber (2003) notes, we can point to examples from history where the same technology that led to democratization in one part of the world led to more oppression in other parts. Connecting a particular set of technologies to freedom depends largely on the context in which that technology is implemented, as well as our definitions for terms like "democracy" and "freedom."

Even if the power of the Internet to promote freedom has been overstated, the fact remains that a great deal of public attention has been given to the overstatement. Images of thousands of people protesting against oppressive regimes are emotionally powerful, and the notion that the emerging technology of the moment made those images possible is romantic.

More to the point for this study, giving the power of the press to every individual has another effect, more noticeable when dealing with matters less dramatic than political upheaval. When the individual is both writer and publisher, one need not clear one's statements with an editorial board. Some of my students, also immersed in emancipatory discourses of the Internet, expected more freedom from online writing than might have been expected on paper assignments intended for my eyes only, or in class discussions.

Conventions and Controversies of Blogging Life

The fact that Web 2.0 offers access to such wide audiences with so little oversight, and the accompanying feelings of being free to say what one wants without limitation, has led to several conventions of personal blogging. As cultural norms around this new medium were being negotiated, these freedoms have also led to some of the most significant controversies of online life in the 2000's. Namely, at what point does the freedom of online speech become a risk to one's position within offline institutions?

This became the central concern for one of my student bloggers, Grant, who seemed to be trying to push the boundaries as far as he could. It also represented the central problem for me, as I tried to maintain some continuity between the classroom blog network and the physical classroom, without positioning myself as another authority at the mercy of an online revolt.

Before turning to the specific student's blog that will be the focus of this chapter, I explain two conventions that were central to Grant's blog. I also discuss the ongoing public discussion that was taking place surrounding the question of what is public and what is private online, which helped inform my decisions about whether to respond, and how.

Unvarnished Me

The ability to publish without the filter of an editor was seen by many early bloggers as one of the chief appeals of blogging. That role was part of a hierarchy that put the writer on the bottom. Perceived independence from corporate control was centrally important to authors of the early web (Blood, 2000), and freedom remains, as Rak (2005)

put it, “arguably the single most important aspect about blogging identity” (p. 172). For many bloggers, that freedom has been used to engage large audiences in the personal.

A personal tone has been an important characteristic of blogs from the beginning (Walker Rettberg, 2008; Rosenberg, 2009). Many of the genres that authors draw on when composing on their blogs and personal websites are artifacts for personal reflection, including diaries, high school yearbook entries, and personal letters (Stern, 2008). One of the early examples of sites dedicated to making blogging more accessible was Open Diary. Though this site’s name sounds as though it encouraged personal revelation, the site’s administrators required users to remain anonymous (Walker Rettberg, 2008).

In addition to the tone, discussing the personal has been a common element among bloggers. Using one’s blog as a forum for raw self-revelation is as old as blogs themselves, and older than the term *blog*. Starting in 1994, in one of the earliest websites recognizable as what would later be termed a weblog, Justin Hall used his website, “Justin’s Links from the Underground,” as (among other things) a space to share even very personal details of his life (Rosenberg, 2009). Mortensen and Walker (2002) note that this is a feature of many blogs, as bloggers “disappear deep into the private sphere and reveal far too much information about the writer” (2002, p. 256).

The Rant

Despite the prominence of blog genres that view themselves as revealing the blogger to the world, there has been a simultaneous expectation that various features of the Internet allow one to say whatever one wants in the same way they would do at home, at the tavern, or around the water cooler. Individual blogs have therefore been homes for complaining about life’s frustrations, and a large number of these have focused on work,

the company, or the boss (Lee, 2006; Rosenberg, 2009). Among the most popular is a blog genre known as a “rant.”

Reed (2005) defines the blog rant as “an unstructured outpouring of personal feeling or passing rage” (p. 228). Cavanagh (1999) argues that the aggressive tone is a strategy borne of the simultaneous public and private natures of online space, and that “in online spaces individuals can delineate a private arena into which others transgress at their peril” (Cavanagh, 1999, par. 14). Blogs may be entirely organized around the rant, or a blogger may periodically take up the rant for a single post.

Among the best known is WaiterRant.net, started in 2004. Its author, Steve Dublanica, anonymously detailed the perils of waiting tables in Manhattan for four years before spinning the blog into a successful series of books (Spartos, 2008). Teacher rant blogs have become another popular off-shoot of this genre (Radcliffe, 2007).

This is another way Heather Armstrong’s “Dooce” was a forerunner of later blogs—in this case, an unfortunate one. Armstrong had been venting about her job for a little over a year when she was fired in 2002, after her boss discovered the blog (Rosenberg, 2009). After this, Armstrong coined the term “being dooced” to refer to being fired for something one said online (Ringmar, 2007).

In 2002, before Facebook, Twitter, or Blogger, Armstrong’s firing sounded like an odd, man-bites-dog story. In 2011, when 46% of online adults use social network sites and 14% have blogs, an increasing number of people have been bitten.

The Consequences of Water Cooler 2.0

Wherever people can talk casually with one another, venting about work will be a popular topic of conversation; virtual space is no different from physical space in this regard. Websites such as Tellonu.com, WorkRant.com, Jobitorial.com, and Criticat.com

offer users the chance to express their opinions about the workplace. Purposes of individual posts range from punishing companies with bad publicity, to warning others against taking undesirable jobs, to simply releasing their own personal frustrations. Sites such as these present themselves as intervening in the power imbalance between employers and employees, tipping the scales toward the latter. The Internet is positioned again as potentially disrupting power binaries, similar to those between authors and readers, governments and citizens, producers and consumers, teachers and students.

The kind of venting described here depends on users' ability to remain anonymous, to guard against the possibility of retribution on the part of employers. This is a real possibility, and there have been a series of highly publicized occasions when employees have been disciplined or fired for expressing sentiments criticizing their employers, bosses, customers, or working conditions. Dan Leone, a stadium employee at Lincoln Financial Field was fired after he used his Facebook page to express his frustration over the Eagles' failure to keep a popular player from signing with another team (Gonzalez, 2009). Dawnmarie Souza was fired from American Medical Response, Inc. after trading critical remarks about her supervisor with other employees on Facebook (Hanahel, 2010).

In early 2011, a Philadelphia-area high school English teacher was suspended for comments on her personal blog that were critical of her students, despite identifying neither her last name, nor the name of the school where she worked (Glembocki, 2011). Gloria Gadsden, a sociology professor at East Stroudsburg University, was suspended for making a dark joke on Facebook about hiring "a hitman" for her students (Berrett, 2010a). Though Gadsden was reinstated, she served a month-long suspension was asked to submit to a psychological evaluation before her reinstatement, and had campus police

present for her first class upon her return (Berrett, 2010b).

One refrain on behalf of those who suffer professional punishment as a result of online venting is that the speakers considered their remarks private rather than public. Defending employees' rights to express themselves online, Lafe Soloman, general counsel for the National Labor Relations Board, compared social network sites to talking "at the water cooler" in (Greenhouse, 2010, par. 4). When a Brooklyn teacher was suspended in early 2011 for comments on Facebook, lawyer Marshall Bellovin opined that "There's an expectation that this posting is to be shared with friends, not the general public" (Edelman, 2011, par. 12). The legality of criticizing one's company, colleagues, or superiors online, anonymously or under one's own name, is disputed legal territory (Lee, 2006; Hanahel, 2010).

This is the context in which I situate the data of this chapter. Online social media are widely understood to provide the opportunity to connect with engaged, knowledgeable, sympathetic audiences, and the freedom to say what we want. Simultaneously, there is increased risk of our words being taken up and recontextualized, where they might be misunderstood, or—even worse—understood correctly by an undesired audience.

Public, Private, and Public/Private Talk

This breakdown of the binary between private and public is not the result of online social media. As Goffman observed, there are many examples of private conversation in a public space (1981). Had Heather Armstrong made her remarks to a friend in the grocery store, it would be unlikely to be a firing offense. The same applies to the other online offenders mentioned earlier in this chapter. One understands, in the grocery store, that one might be overheard by others not in on the joke. But by using other cues, one can stay safely within a genre of speech that many would recognize as

“venting.”

Bakhtin explains speech genres as directing one’s utterance toward each of one’s listeners as “an orientation toward a specific conceptual horizon, toward the specific world of the listener” (1981, p. 282). Just as there are certain conventions consistent with genres of literature, Bakhtin theorized that there are conventions of speech. The conventions of a genre or subgenre of literature—say, the hard-boiled detective novel—may include specific modes of expression in the narration, or particular plot devices (the detective falls unconscious at some point). Janet Maybin summarizes Bakhtin:

These situations might include such commonplace events as a brief exchange with a neighbour passing on the street, a conversation with an old friend on the telephone, a business lunch, or a bedtime game with a child. Speech genres are associated with particular kinds of contextual features, and specific kinds of social purposes. (Maybin, 2001, p. 66)

In our day-to-day interactions, we use a number of social cues to signal which of these genres we mean our utterances to be a part of, and many of those cues are unavailable to us in digital media (Baym, 2010). However, Goffman (1981) observes that “without access to bodily orientation and tone of voice, it would be easy to [...] miss the fact that significant shifts in alignment of speaker to hearers were occurring” (p. 127).

Conveying tone online requires different generic conventions and understandings, but the open nature of most websites complicates this, as not all audiences will necessarily know the conventions being used. The Internet itself “does not radically alter the social basis of identity or conventional constraints on social interaction” (Wynn & Katz, 1997, p. 2), but the simultaneous fracturing and multiplying of audiences—intended and unintended—makes it impossible for a speaker to maintain a reasonable idea of who will and won’t receive my message. The question is no longer, *will my audience understand me?*, but *could any conceivable audience misunderstand me?*

The data in this chapter revolve around just such a negotiation on the Lincoln Blogs. A student, Grant, made comments on his blog that would have been perfectly

appropriate for private conversation, and easily understood as typical—perhaps even healthy—venting. But put online, in full public view, his comments necessitated some kind of response. The nature and possible consequences of the student’s writing and my response are the dilemmas that I address in the remainder of this chapter.

Insanity 101

In contrast to those students whose blogs revolved around a clear topic from the beginning, Grant’s revolved around attitude and tone. He wrote under the name “Embroz,” which was, he later told me in an interview, a longtime nickname that he had used in other online forums. This served to elide my insistence on anonymity, at least for those in on the reference. His blog was entitled “Insanity 101.” His avatar—the image that appeared on his blog, and those he Followed—was an image of a torso in a straightjacket, arms folded and strapped in front.

Though I was unaware of it at the beginning of the school year, Grant enjoyed a reputation among some students and teachers for being unpredictable in school, offering contrary interpretations in discussions of literature, and sometimes being combative when those interpretations are not validated. He described himself as someone who was “good at arguments,” but “bad at writing.”

Grant later told me in an interview that another language arts teacher had, two years prior, called him “unteachable” in a letter sent home to his parents. Through conversations with colleagues over the course of the year, I learned it was a common view among his teachers that he was a challenging student to work with.

Grant reported having a lot of previous experience using a variety of social media before we began our assignment. This included Xanga, a blog hosting service similar to

Blogger; AOL Instant Messenger, Facebook; and MySpace. Moreover, he had been an avid online reader since elementary school.

Grant: I love the Internet. I've read... I had read many blogs. I'd done... Do you know what stumbleupon is? It's like it takes you to a random site that you base your interests off of, you're like "I like these things" and then it takes you there. Well, I, I'd get stumbled to blogs. (Interview)

Grant: I'd find a blog written by, you know. A scientist or something working on the quantum physics of invisibility. Didn't *understand* it, but... it did—it, it sufficed. (Interview)

Grant: There's just so many random things, like, short attention span that I have, it can be preoccupied for hours with just random clicking. Wikipedia! Random article. Just keep doing that. That was an hour, if I'm bored at school. (Interview)

Though he said that he previously didn't recognize blogs as different from any other website in his earlier days of reading online, this may help to explain the ease with which Grant applied many conventions of blog writing, ranging from tone and style to choosing topics for posts, to knowing how and when to include links, images, or other media. In certain respects, Grant's background made him a model student for the classroom blog assignment. He had a very small learning curve, and walked in with experience reading and writing in this medium.

In this section, I present key posts from October 7 to May 26, as well as excerpts from an interview with Grant conducted after the school year was complete. These two data sources are intended to demonstrate how Grant used his blog to interact with, and frequently to provoke, various audiences, as well as how "Insanity 101" shifted over the course of the year in content and tone. I created a timeline organized into four sections, in an attempt to delineate those shifts. I have also included some of my own reactions, as documented in my research journal from over the course of the year. My researcher observations assume greater importance in this chapter because of Grant's explicit

attempts to engage me—or, as I frequently thought at the time, provoke me—on his blog.

I end this chapter with a brief analysis of Grant’s use of several motifs on his blog, each relating to the discourse models about freedom, expression, and censorship discussed earlier in this chapter. He positions himself as a teller of impolite truths, and the blog as a release of things that cannot be said in his physical life. Thus, the story of “Insanity 101” in my class is partially the story of negotiating between Grant’s freedom to speak, and my struggle to understand whether, when, and how I could limit or alter his blog without jeopardizing the class blogs as a space where students can express themselves freely.

Beginning: “I may not even exist. Have fun relating to me!”

Over the course of the year, Grant’s blog centered around no particular topic so much as his exploration of freedom and censorship. He did not frame his posts about these topics as reflections, but rather as either offhand sarcastic remarks and rants, venting frustrations about his feeling that he was being unreasonably constrained in his self-expression. This began with his second post, after I’d suggested to students that they write a post introducing the blog to readers.¹⁰

I would like to say hello and introduce myself to all 3 people who will read this. My real name is classified because this is a school project, and they don't wanna be liable if you come to my house and abduct me. Age also classified, the same reasons. I can't tell you what town I live in, or even less specifically, what state or country I am in. I guess what I can tell you is that I exist....nope, teacher just said that was too revealing also. Wow. This non-revealing introduction is not what I was intending...All I can say is that, I may be boy or a girl, I may be 92 or 3 years old, I may live in Somalia or Canada, and I may not even exist. Have fun relating to me!

this is....no one...signing off (October 7, “Hello Children”)

¹⁰ I have been careful to preserve Grant’s posts exactly as they appeared on his blogs. Though I was tempted to correct some spelling and punctuation for the sake of readability, Grant actually noted the lack of editing as a significant quality of his blog, both in blog posts and in his interview.

Here, Grant establishes several arguments for dismissing the blog as a thing of real substance: very few people will read it; he is being assigned to write it; his ability to express himself is so strictly limited that his existence itself is called into question (“this is... no one”). It also establishes the tone of the blog as irreverent and funny, as Grant employs hyperbole and irony. Whatever his intention, I was entertained.

A week later, however, Grant’s irony gave way to what sounded to me like anger.

People are stupid. More specifically, teachers are stupid. Thats right, all followers of this blog gasp in astonishment, i just said teachers are stupid on a blog that is graded for a class. Wanna know why? Because each teacher thinks their class is the most important, most complicated, and deserves teh most time. This isn't true. Here is a message to all teachers. You're all just as unimportant as the next. Give homework, assign projects, but don't do more then one at a time. And if you're going to assign anything don't make me write 3 drafts and THEN tell me i have to highlight all teh changes (I know this is your way of not having to actually haveing to read our work, god forbid, and looking for yourself for the changes, but what ever)

I wrote the part about the teachers because i honestly believe that who i am directing it at won't read it, and if he does, i don't care, it is the truth. (October 13, “I Am Jack’s Complete Lack of Surprise”)

When I read this, I was at a loss for how to deal with it. One intention of having students write on the blogs was the public nature of the forum; Grant had taken that opportunity to irritate me, questioning my professionalism, and then boast about having done it. If that was indeed his intent, he succeeded. Though I was not especially offended by the accusation—he was not the first student to question to value of an assignment—but I was unsure of how either a lack of response, or the wrong response, would be interpreted by the rest of his audience. Would it be seen as declaring open season on other specific teachers? School administrators? Parents? Students? I decided that, for the time being, I would let Grant continue ranting, as long as he didn’t get more specific or personal.

Censored: “The one place i thought i could say what i want to”

In the following weeks, his posts were not relentlessly negative; he reviewed a video game and a film that he liked. But the majority remained rants about personal annoyances: his career options in life; finding negative messages in Disney films; religion; and most frequently, his frustrations with school and teachers. He did not write enough to get full credit on the assignment, but he did write regularly, and embedded links, images, and videos to emphasize a point or add humor. In several respects, Grant’s was a model blog.

In the middle of December, however, Grant became confrontational again, naming me directly in his blog post.

So, my parents caught wind my blog is a bit negative, and i wonder how that happened *cough* Mr.Ayers *cough* (December 18, “Mmmmmm... That’s the Stuff)

Grant goes on to explain that his father talked to him about his attitude in school, and asked specifically about his blog. Later in the same post, Grant frames the story as an explanation “as to why my tone will suddenly change.”

Awesome, super, the one place i thought i could say what i wanted to, i am now being asked to write in a way that is how i am in person normally. The only reason this bothers me is that i am not aloud to be negetive, hateful, angry, opinionated, and just a regular jerk in person and the internet is a place where jerks flourish, assholes breed (Check out eharmony.com), and anger is accepted. I guess i use this blog as a vent. (December 18, “Mmmmmm... That’s the Stuff)

At this point, Grant and I did have a brief conversation, where I asked if everything was all right, and indicated that I was asking because of what he’d written on his blog. His recollection of this talk, in an interview conducted at the end of the year, was that it happened “because I was directing the blogs at you. Remember? I was being—I was *not nice*.”

Grant: I thought you weren't reading it at the beginning of the year. I was like, "there's forty kids in his class, they're all writing twelve hundred words a week, there's no way he's reading it all." And I was like, *pheh*, I'll say what I want. That's what it was. (Interview)

It's important to note what wasn't said in this conversation. Grant didn't say he would change what he was doing on his blog, and I didn't ask him to. On reflection, this may have been because, in keeping with wider discourses about freedom of speech on the Internet, Grant's appeal in his post that "Insanity 101" was "one place i thought i could say what i wanted to" was more persuasive than it would have been in more traditionally school-like assignments simply because it was online.

It did not take long for the notion of censorship to come up again. In a post written over Lincoln High School's winter break—a period when students were not required to write on the blog—Grant returned to the vitriol. In the middle of a long, angry post, wherein he mentioned having to revise his original version of the post at the behest of his parents, he wrote:

I never wanna grow up. Being an adult suck big flopppy donkey dong, Sorry Mr.Ayers, i was censored earlier today and i am not going to let that go, plus i am too tired to care what you think. (December 29: "Caffeine and Hatred")

Here, Grant explicitly acknowledges that I would want him to self-censor ("Sorry Mr. Ayers,") and refuses both on what he seemed to consider principled grounds ("i am not going to let that go"), as well as being unwilling to put forth the effort that would take ("i am too tired to care what you think").

January was a prolific month on "Insanity 101," as Grant wrote twelve posts, significantly more than he had in any previous month (8 in December). Most of these were rants again, several of them multiple posts long: a four-post rant entitled "Why I Do Bad In School," two wide-ranging posts about his depression, and two posts on the

meaningless of life. He continued to punctuate his blog with reflections on popular culture, and short memoir-like pieces recalling stories from his childhood.

At the beginning of February, there was a shift in the way Grant began addressing his audience. He mentioned me less, and stopped writing about censorship altogether.

I was talking to my friend¹¹ today about our blogs, and he said he had read mine. I was surprised. This is the third person to tell me they read it. And almost scariest of all is that they all seemed to liked it. well, i guess the true scariest part for me is that they recognised it as me. granted, i haven't done the best job at concealing my secret identity. But still. I got to thinking about the fact that these people actually read my thoughts. These things that i write without truely thinking about what i am saying. This prompted me to give you, my (hopefully former) readers reasons not to read my blog. (February 2, “Why You Shouldn’t Read This”)

Ten days later, he wrote again about his blog:

My blog is a place i go to write about anything i want. I don't care what you people think about what i write. I write what i write because i want to. I see something funny, or stupid, or something so stupid it is funny, and i want to tell the world about it. That i think about it and realise that there are no people listening. So i get angry. Then i take my anger and throw it on whatever i am writing about at the time. I also translate any anger i feel at the moment against anything else, be it my parents, my teachers, my school, my friends, the news, the evil of the world, whatever it is, and write about it. Anger is an emotion I am not aloud to express in real life. I feel this is a terrible thing...however, that is a different post. (February 12, “Blarging and What it is Alla Boot”)

Notable in this excerpt is his rejection of his audience’s expectations (“I don’t care what you people think”), and his framing of the blog as a way of writing and speaking away from “people listening.”

Of course, there *were* people listening to him on his blog. Grant had been confronted several times with his adult readership—his parents, and me—as well as friends and classmates who commented on his blog and told him in person that they liked it. By the middle of February, “Insanity 101” had eight Followers. And yet he continued

¹¹ Underlined text indicates a hyperlink to another web page.

to position his audience as paradoxically nonexistent and potentially hostile.

Revelations: “I am going to be blunt.”

In the next two posts after his reflection, Grant signaled another approaching shift on his blog:

Dear Reader, My blogs will become less and less angry over the next few weeks. I guess this is due to a lot of things. Firstly, I am getting more and more angry in real life. My blog was a place I expressed anger, an emotion I rarely felt on a day to day basis. Now, I feel it almost constantly. It is sad, I know, and I fear for my future, and for that fact, yours, but unless my circumstances change drastically, I see no end for these feelings in the near future. There is a blog post coming with more details about why, but trust me, it is quite the story, too long for this post. The second reason is I am taking a new medication. It turns out when I jokingly say "I am clinically insane" I wasn't far from the truth. I have ADD. I just read a blog post about it by my friend Fred. A great story, and a great piece of writing. But I am now taking Concerta daily. It is a slow release form of Ritalin. It has some sooper dooper side effects like loss of appetite, nervousness, and, mood swings. (February 15, “Lucy, You Got Some ‘Splaining to Do”)

In his next post, Grant revealed what had led to so much anger in his daily life:

So. I am going to be blunt. My parents are getting a divorce. For those of you who know me and my parents this might be a shock. And if that does shock you, you have no idea how I feel. (February 15, “I Am Super Cereal Guys, Part One”)

Though Grant’s tone is still consistent with his earlier rants, in these two posts he strikes a self-revelatory pose. He goes into great detail in both posts, giving details about his medication, his parents’ deteriorating marriage, and his feelings about both. He was, in the tradition of Justin Hall and Heather Armstrong, “putting everything out there” (Rosenberg, 2009). But for whom, and for what purpose?

I was somewhat surprised after the school year, when I learned that Grant had volunteered to be interviewed about his blog. In that interview, Grant reported that these posts were an effective way of letting his friends know what was going on in his life, and getting support from them, without actually having to have repeated conversations about

it:

Grant: people kind of indicated that they had read it, and... it was a bit, it was a bit like it was a taboo thing to talk about. [...] But they said, if it was brought up, they'd say, "Hey, Grant, that really sucks." And then... move on. Which... honestly, I really think was the best thing they could've done. Fred coming to me and saying, "Grant, need to talk, I'm here." That's good. (Interview)

To the outside observer, however, it looks troubling on several fronts. Did his parents know the extent of what Grant was revealing on his blog? Was anyone talking to him to make sure he was okay? What did it mean that there was no visible response to the post where he talked about his parents' divorce?

Reflection: "I have had fun."

After this point, Grant continued on much in the vein of his earlier posts. He provoked his audience from time to time, frequently on the subject of religion. He also referenced the continuing story of his parents' divorce, generally as a side note, mentioning that his house was up for sale. His blog continued to gain Followers, ending the school year with sixteen, ranking "Insanity 101" among the most-Followed of the Lincoln Blogs.

In May, I asked students to write a post reflecting on having kept a blog all school year long. Grant's was detailed—over 900 words long—and provided links to half a dozen posts from throughout the year. It was also surprisingly positive in tone:

I like this writing Business. I can express myself in a way that lasts but still holds my voice. And this blog is a way I get my thoughts out there for everyone else.

I have had fun. I plan on continuing this Fun. I like writing. I love ranting. I need to let out how I feel, and I don't really trust anyone enough to talk to them. This is my escape. This is my Batcave, my Fortress of Solitude, my Bodhi Tree. Most of All though, it is my ink blot test and my pair of scissors cutting the Straight Jacket. Well, at least loosening it. (May 26, "Reflection: Why I Write... Er... Blog")

One of the more rewarding things we can hear as writing teachers is that the skills

we have taught students to use have helped them to deal with difficult periods of their lives. As Grant's teacher, I was naturally pleased to read that he felt something worthwhile had been accomplished in his time blogging, and that he had ended up using the blog as a means of dealing with things that were going on in his life. By that time in the year, he and I had a better working relationship, and he had obviously become more invested in his blog; how those two facts were related remains an open question.

Nonetheless, even the most celebratory view of "Insanity 101" would have to account for the fact that Grant had repeatedly transgressed the boundaries of acceptable content, sometimes crossing that line. Arguably, by letting him do it, so had I.

Analysis: Grant's Four Motifs

In this section, I take a close look at patterns in Grant's writing over the entire data collection period. Like the data in chapter four, and as described in chapter three, my process for selecting and analyzing the data presented here involved two passes through a large amount of data. First was my initial pass through all student blogs that were not password protected. Second was my pass through all of Grant's posts, examining the discourse in key posts. The third stage of my analyses involved a close rereading of these posts, using Gee's building tasks, leading me to four discursive motifs (Gee, 2005) which, considered together, provide a clearer picture of the purposes of Grant's transgressive approach.

On the first pass, several students stood out as resisting school norms for what appeared to be different purposes, but Grant's blog stood out even within that group. Though I had not yet closely analyzed the blog yet, at this point Gee's building task suggests evidence on the blog of "building relationships," with emphasis on his apparent

attempts to disrupt the power relations between teacher and student in the first three months of the data collection period (October through December).

On the second data pass, I read through all 74 posts written during the entire data collection period (October through June) using four of Gee's seven building tasks for analysis. At this stage I was primarily focused on identifying key posts for detailed analysis. The more I read on this second pass, though, it became clear that my initial reading of Grant's specific relationship with me was not borne out in a closer analyses. By the time I had completed this stage of data analyses, I decided to set aside the frame of "building relationships" as more of a distraction than a useful tool for analyzing this data.

Therefore, for the remainder of this chapter, I focus on three of Gee's seven building tasks (2005). The first is "building significance," attributing "meaning or value" to activities and practices (p. 11). As readers will see in the ensuing analyses, Grant offers a very specific set of meanings to his own writing, his tone, the blog in general, and later attempts to curb that speech. The second building task in use is "building activities," using language "to get recognized as engaging in a certain sort of activity" (p. 11). I show the ways in which Grant uses a series of words and phrases to position himself as participating in certain activities, and not other activities. Finally, I consider "building politics," in which Grant develops a particular "perspective on social goods" (p. 12). This involves conveying ideas about what is "normal," and "how things are."

My analyses reveal that Grant uses discursive motifs (Gee, 2005) to position himself, and his blog, as transgressing school conventions of acceptable discourse. Specifically, Grant utilizes a series of words, phrases, and ideas that fit into these four

discursive motifs: that he is fighting against censorship, that he is a teller of blunt truths, that he has little or no audience on his blog, and that his blog constitutes a therapeutic space for him to safely express himself. In the following sections, I discuss each of these motifs, and use tables to represent relevant quotes from Grant's blog related to each motif. Most of these quotes are taken from posts discussed earlier in this chapter. Reading across these quotes will provide a clearer understanding of the patterns of discourse on "Insanity 101."

Taken together, my analyses show that from the beginning Grant makes the case that he should be allowed to continue to write freely, regardless of how that writing might transgress conventional boundaries of authorized public school talk. Though I make no argument for intentionality here, and do not necessarily believe Grant is doing this with a conscious strategy in mind, the ways in which he takes up these motifs allow him to write posts that would normally not be acceptable in school without a risk of negative consequences. He believes that the blog by its nature will limit the interference from authorities who might be likely to stop him from writing the way he wants to.

He also argues that this freedom allows for a particular kind of expression—venting—that was not otherwise widely available to him in school. My analyses of these motifs invite a more generous reading of Grant's blogging practices than the perspective of classroom teacher allowed me during the school year. If the blog served an important role in Grant's intellectual, social, or emotional life during the school year, it would mean Grant's was actually a model for what I hoped blogs could do for students. But the teacher-student power relations inherent in the classroom had obscured this for me as a teacher, if not rendered it invisible altogether.

Motif 1: Censorship

The first of these motifs is a characterization of himself in the midst of a fight against those who want to censor him, as evidenced by the quotes in table 6.1. As early as his second post, Grant begins focusing on what he is not allowed to say. He usually refers to his censors specifically; most often it's me, either identified as "the teacher" ("teacher just said that was too revealing") or by name ("Sorry Mr. Ayers... i am too tired to care what you think"). He positions himself as uncompromisingly honest, willing to say what others will not (see Motif #2, below), which then positions his parents and teachers as part of an institution that want to unfairly limit his honesty.

As discussed earlier, sympathy for those who have been censored or penalized for expressing their ideas is readily available in certain camps when the expression in question is conducted on the Internet. For some, the Internet is still widely understood to be an untamed space.

When any blogger wants to say something unpopular or controversial, he or she can do so with the warrant that this kind of commentary has been present from the first blogs forward, and if someone doesn't like it, they don't have to read it. Bloggers can rely on the discourses about free speech and the Internet that have been widely accepted for years. When a blogger is censored or punished for a piece of writing, the blogger can position him or herself as a victim of authoritarian oppression of free speech. While not everyone will accept such an interpretation, it has the weight of experience and familiarity behind it.

Who, after all, tries to stop people from speaking their minds online? The boss. The dictator.

Table 6.1: Motif 1 – Censorship

I guess what I can tell you is that I exist....nope, teacher just said that was too revealing also. Wow.	Oct. 7
Thats right, all followers of this blog gasp in astonishment, i just said teachers are stupid on a blog that is graded for a class.	Oct. 13
So, my parents caught wind my blog is a bit negative, and i wonder how that happened *cough* Mr.Ayers *cough*	Dec. 18
the one place i thought i could say what i wanted to, i am now being asked to write in a way that is how i am in person normally.	Dec. 18
So, my original post has been sensed by the parents, because they think it is too personal, so, here goes some deflated hatred	Dec. 29
Sorry Mr.Ayers, i was censored earlier today and i am not going to let that go, plus i am too tired to care what you think.	Dec. 29

By positioning himself as someone who is fighting against censorship, Grant invites sympathy from the reader. He all but dares the authority figures in question—often meaning either me or Grant’s parents—to shut him down entirely in a way that would potentially be a public display.

Motif 2: The Truth-Teller

Grant also returns to a series of ideas that I have collected under the heading of “truth telling.” Utterances that fall under this motif include words and phrases suggesting that Grant has principled reasons for ignoring the normal rules of what can and cannot be said in school, as demonstrated by the quotes in Table 6.2. He acknowledges that his writing has a sharp edge to it (“anything i say may sound like i am angry, or trying to be mean”), but characterizes that as a strength, rather than a weakness. In this way, Grant begins to develop a rationale for why some of his opinions—which would broadly be

considered outside the boundaries of appropriate conversation if said aloud during class discussion—should be allowable on his blog.

The point of the truth-telling motif is twofold. First, it puts a noble face on the conflict in Motif #1. Being censored against expressing whatever potentially offensive opinions one has is not inherently objectionable. However, being censored when expressing truths, just because those truths are unappealing to those in authority, allows the writer a position as noble and uncompromising, and perhaps brave in the face of censorship.

Second, under the truth-telling motif, Grant appears to believe that when others take offense in response to his strong opinions, they are unjustified. By writing under the guise of “truth,” he attempts to take the high ground in the argument regardless of how he describes those who disagree with him. His assertions are not meant to be “malicious,” they are simply “blunt” or “realistic.” If readers are offended, he implies, then that is a result of one’s own shortcomings, rather than Grant’s insensitivity or meanness. My analyses indicates that this was an important move to make, because it allowed Grant to take on topics that he knew people could be offended by. These included posts about his personal life, about school, and about religion. For example, the March 19 post entitled “You’re All Going to Hate Me After Reading This” is about the hypocrisy Grant felt in the aftermath of a student’s suicide at a nearby Catholic High School. Grant felt that the Catholic school’s response—to give students time off to attend the funeral—was inconsistent with Catholic doctrine about suicide and hell. Some students at Lincoln High School knew the student, and Grant knew there was a chance that classmates who read it might take offense. By establishing his blog as a place where such impolite truths are

told, he hopes to deflect criticism. As discussed earlier in this chapter, this is a common online strategy for marking off a private space within a public space (Cavanagh, 1999), telling readers to proceed at their own risk.

Table 6.2: Motif 2 – Truth Telling

Thats right, all followers of this blog gasp in astonishment, i just said teachers are stupid on a blog that is graded for a class.	Oct. 13
I wrote the part about the teachers because i honestly believe that who i am directing it at won't read it, and if he does, i don't care, it is the truth.	Oct. 13
i want you to know, anything i say may sound like i am angry, or trying to be mean. I am angry, but it isn't at you, it is at your class.	Jan. 28
Those of you who believe in God, may want to stop reading. Either that, or stop being ignorant and close minded. Alright. Disclaimer enough? Because that is the nicest thing i will say about you in this post. Good. God doesn't exist. To be blunt, that's how it is.	Jan. 31
Third is one that hurts a little bit, but i am being realistic. My writting isn't that good. Even on the posts i actually <i>try</i> , it is pretty pathetic.	Feb. 2
So. I am going to be blunt. My parents are getting a divorce.	Feb. 15

Motif 3: Limited Readership

Grant also used other means to position his blog as a private space that would not be heavily trafficked. The third motif is the claim that very few people are reading his blog. This generally took two forms: most commonly, he regularly addresses a reader directly, but names that reader as one of two or three. As evidence that he had a growing readership accumulated, in the form of Followers, comments, and friends telling him outside the blog that they were reading, he wrote posts explaining why readers should

avoid his blog. In his interview, Grant described how he also used visual design to make the blog unappealing and discourage readership.

Grant: I was not anticipating anyone ever looking at it, reading it... It doesn't even look that pretty. That's the thing. I was counting on my lack of appeal. It was words on top and words all the way down. In clashing colors. ... That's why I wrote this post, so that people wouldn't read it. I was like, "*You shouldn't read this.*"

MA: Did you *actually* not want people to read it?

Grant: [sigh] I wanted to think about reading it before they read it. I wanted them, I wanted to give them reasons *not* to. (Interview)

What Grant called his “negative, hateful, angry, opinionated” content, as quoted in Table 6.4, exemplifies what boyd (2008) calls “limit[ing] access through social conventions” (2008, p. 131). As demonstrated by authors getting into trouble for what they've written on blogs and social network sites, discussed earlier in this chapter, it is difficult to securely limit access to what one writes online, and to be sure that only desired audiences receive one's messages. Teens therefore turn to social conventions in order to limit who will stick around on their blogs, thus freeing them to write as if it were a more private space than it actually is.

To the extent that he can deny that he has actual readers, Grant is also freed from having to worry about actually offending anyone. Note that this should not be confused with truly wanting readers to stay away. My analyses suggest that, more accurately, Grant was seeking sympathetic readership to continue reading. However, he wanted to limit the chances that those who read would truly be offended (“Those of you who believe in God may want to quit reading,” Table 6.2). Consistent with Motif #2, he wants to take up the position of truth-teller, understanding that his perspective on these “truths” would be offensive to some. In some cases, he directly characterizes entire groups of people in

Table 6.3: Motif 3 – Limited Readership

I would like to say hello and introduce myself to all 3 people who will read this.	Oct. 7
I got off on a tangant again, sorry 3 readers	Oct. 13
I wrote the part about the teachers because i honestly believe that who i am directing it at won't read it, and if he does, i don't care, it is the truth.	Oct. 13
my endorsment means nothing to the three people who read this, but i think i am going to any way	Nov. 13
By the way, i appreciate you reading this, and i say that to all 3 of you. And i mean it more sincerely to the 2 of you who aren't paid to do so.	Dec. 20
i am now convinced that everyone is stupid. O yes, even you my cherished readers, all 3 of you. This even applies to myself.	Dec. 29
all 3 readers who frequent this blog expect me to be angry.	Jan. 28
I was talking to my <u>friend</u> today about our blogs, and he said he had read mine. I was suprised.	Feb. 2
I write negetive for a couple of reasons. Becasue it is easy, because i can't be negetive in person, and so that you won't want to read it.	Feb. 2
I guess it made sense to me to put all those mean things on my blog. It was a place that was public, a place to get my ideas out in the open, but safe because, who would read my blog?	May 26
I need to let out how I feel, and I don't really trust anyone enough to talk to them.	May 26
That's the thing, I didn't think anyone would ever read it. [laughs] Whenever I said "Hello, children," or... I—I would—whenever I said, "So, readers," and would have quotes, or in parentheses say "all three of you," it was—I imagined I was writing to myself. All these are conversations <i>to me</i> . It's not... I never wrote them for other people.	Interview

unflattering ways: teachers are “stupid” (see Table 6.1), the religious are “intolerant” (see Table 6.2). However, by claiming that he has no readers, he limits his own responsibility

for choosing his words carefully, and can continue to write in his blunt fashion.

By delineating his blog as a private space through social conventions (Boyd, 2008; Cavanaugh, 1999), and attempting to make his blog unappealing to readers, Grant is also more plausibly able to claim his blog really is for himself alone. This is important for the sake of his fourth motif, which helps explain what Grant thought he gained from writing in such a blunt fashion for what he claimed was such a limited readership.

Motif 4: The Blog as Vent

The fourth motif is the positioning of Insanity 101 as a space that allows Grant to say things that he isn't allowed to say in other parts of his life. This is an extension of Motifs #2 and #3: by making a blunt, aggressive tone one of the centerpieces of the blog, his imagined readers have had fair warning that this is Grant's space. By claiming very limited readership, he makes an implicit claim that no one is harmed by that tone anyway, and that this is simply for himself. The evidence in Motif #4 goes further, and in establishing the blog as beneficial for Grant and, perhaps, his mental or emotional health. This is among the common discourses used by authors of blogs or personal websites (Stern, 2008; Reed, 2005). These discourses echo understandings of the connections between revealing one's emotions and one's mental health, both among mental health professionals and in the wider culture (Wright, 2002).

This means establishing a clear difference between the blog as a space and physical space, which Grant does throughout the data collection period. The blog is "the one place i thought i could say what i wanted to" (Dec. 18). Unlike "in person" (Dec. 18), the blog is "my escape" (May 26), "a place [where] i expressed anger" (Feb. 15). Finally, Grant connects this separateness to security; on the blog he could "get my ideas out in the

Table 6.4: Motif 4 – The Blog as Vent

the one place i thought i could say what i wanted to, i am now being asked to write in a way that is how i am in person normally. [...] i am not aloud to be negative, hateful, angry, opinionated, and just a regular jerk in person	Dec. 18
the internet is a place where jerks flourish, assholes breed (Check out eharmony.com), and anger is accepted. I guess i use this blog as a vent.	Dec. 18
Mr.Ayers, if this isn't what you want, too bad, <u>its my blog and i'll write what i want to</u>	Dec. 29
I write negetive for a couple of reasons. Becasue it is easy, because i can't be negetive in person, and so that you won't want to read it.	Feb. 2
Third is one that hurts a little bit, but i am being realistic. My writting isn't that good. Even on the posts i actually <i>try</i> , it is pretty pathetic.	Feb. 2
My blog was a place i expressed anger	Feb. 15
I guess it made sense to me to put all those mean things on my blog. It was a place that was public, a place to get my ideas out in the open, but safe because, who would read my blog?	May 26
I need to let out how I feel, and I don't really trust anyone enough to talk to them. This is my escape.	May 26

open, but it was safe,” and “an escape” (May 26).

The utility of the space as a means for safe expression offers something that the other three motifs do not: if we accept the notion that venting on his blog has therapeutic value for Grant, then insisting that he limit his writing to more conventionally accepted speech is robbing him of something important. It could even be framed as actually doing harm, especially in the context of the personal turmoil that Grant describes over the course of the data collection period.

Summary

Though Grant and I suffered through some periods of misunderstanding and mistrust, by the end of the school year we were on very good terms. When I interviewed Grant at the end of the year, I proposed the same hypothetical scenario I had given to Michelle, as I described at the beginning of this chapter: suppose I had moved to sharply censor your blog early in the year? What would have happened? Grant voiced no resistance when I raised the possibility of asserting my institutional authority. There was none of Michelle's defiance.

Grant: I wasn't really concerned, 'cause... If you'd asked me to stop, I would've, but... I wasn't going to... I wasn't going to, uh... Like, it didn't concern me. If you were going to ask me to stop, I would've stopped. (Interview)

Even at the end of the year, I struggled with questions related to how I should have reacted to Grant's various deviations. What response did Grant's posts call for? When he started questioning me directly on his blog, should I have simply responded in the comments on his post? To what extent could I have curbed Grant's more aggressive or revealing posts without shutting him down and turning this into just another school assignment? At what point is a teacher ethically obligated to do so regardless of the effect it has on the student's writing?

From my perspective as Grant's teacher, when I first read his writing on *Insanity 101*, I saw it primarily as a confrontation with me. I saw it as, essentially, a classroom management problem to be solved, and therefore missed a great deal about what Grant saw as the purpose of his blog. Even as I came to feel that it might have therapeutic value for Grant, therefore wanting to allow him to continue, this did not eliminate the dilemma presented by a student talking publicly, online, in a way that

transgressed the norms of classroom behavior. There were other potential audiences: students, parents, other teachers, administrators. I worried about what any of them might think of Grant, as well as what consequences his writing might have for him in this rest of his life. I also worried about how it might reflect on me, my class, my teaching methods, and the blog project.

On the other hand, I worried that even one well-publicized case of attempted censorship on my part could have a chilling effect among other student bloggers. I suspected that the entire project could easily have turned into one more assignment where students forget about their own possible audiences and purposes, and try to figure out *What Teacher Wants*. The public nature of the rant, combined with the multiple imagined audiences, required a response that both satisfied an imagined parent or administrator, who might be troubled by permitting belligerence on a classroom assignment, as well as sympathetic students who might have seen Grant's freedom of expression on the blogs as connected to their own.

The situation is made more complicated by the fact that those features that made Grant's resistance challenging are the very features that drew me to assigning blogs in the first place. In a sense, Grant's transgressive behavior is an example of online writing doing what its most utopian proponents might hope for: it took a student who felt oppressed within a series of power relations, and helped give him a means of temporarily unsettling those relations. It was possible for me to let Grant and others transgress conventional boundaries, because I felt I had my principal's support, and could therefore take more risks than I might have had I been teaching in a different school, or under a different administration, or with less experience. That might have resulted in less conflict

during the year, but may also have removed the elements that ultimately made it most engaging.

With that in mind, three significant challenges face teachers who incorporate Web 2.0 texts into their classrooms. First, how can we, as writing teachers, resist the temptation to restrict students' writing as soon as it strikes us as inconsistent with school norms, and what would be the consequences of such restriction? Second, how can we negotiate the benefits of letting students vent while allowing them to shape safe and ethical lives online? Third, how can we let students try out transgressive behavior, to the extent that we are comfortable with it, while still filling the institutional roles that are required of us? In short, how do we know when to let loose on the reins, and when to pull them in?

On *Insanity 101*, Grant had more access to readers who cared about him than if he had been writing in a notebook, including parents, friends, and myself. On multiple occasions, each of those audiences responded to what he wrote on the blog. It also allowed him, in a particular moment, to say to himself that he had *no readers at all*, which may have freed him to say things that he wouldn't have if he'd been in personal conversation with any of those same audiences. He also, along the way, regularly practiced writing in several genres: writing reviews, journaling, and developed skills in conventions of online writing such as linking to another page or document as supporting evidence for an argument.

This is not to say that tone or content like Grant's should necessarily be permitted on a school blog; such guidelines are always contextual, and widespread attempts to establish replicable best practices for student blogging is likely to err on the side of

restriction. Rather, teachers need to prepare for public resistance before assigning online writing where students write to public audiences about subjects of their own concern.

Students who have grown up with genres of online writing that consider freedom to write—or rant—a foundational value will inevitably say things that defy our expectations and confound conventional approaches to classroom discipline. We should be sure those responses serve to allow them more range of motion, not less.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS:

TEACHING DILEMMAS OF THE WEB 2.0 ERA

The first blog in my classroom was not the result of my invitation, but of my acquiescence. The year before I collected my data, a student named Luke was having trouble writing in his notebook. He found it terribly frustrating, and frequently turned it in having written only two or three brief entries for every ten required. In the wee hours one morning he wrote me an e-mail pleading for relief. Would I please look at a blog he wrote on his own, he asked, and consider finding some way that he could get credit for the writing he did there? As I began mentally preparing my denial, I reluctantly followed the link in the e-mail, and found a much richer body of work than anything Luke had produced for my class: commentary on *Phantom of the Opera* and its music, reflections on his religious beliefs. It was much like the writing I had been asking him to put on paper for me, but that he found nearly impossible to produce.

This revelation should be no surprise to those many high school English teachers who have read students' out-of-school writing. Nor should it surprise researchers who have argued for attending to students' lives, interests, and texts away from school (see, for example, Hinchman et al., 2003; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Mahiri, 2004). I should not have thought it would surprise me, having spent considerable time in my still-young teaching career attempting to incorporate popular culture into my classroom for the sake of student engagement.

And yet I *was* surprised. What he did on his blog voluntarily, he could not do in his AP Language notebook even at the threat of failing the assignment. Why? Why could

he not just jot down some of his ideas about musicals and faith in the notebook? What made it so much easier for him to write in a public forum, when I was giving him the protection of only writing for me? What did the blog have that the notebook didn't?

This research has been an inquiry into those early questions. In this chapter, I will review my findings, beginning with a review of the relevant research question. Following this, I will discuss the implications of these findings for teachers and administrators. Finally, mindful that researchers have only begun to capture the use of Web 2.0 platforms in actual classrooms, I will discuss several directions for future research.

Summary of General Findings

Given the increasing penetration of Web 2.0 into students' lives, I believe this study of high school students' language arts blogs holds significant findings for teachers and school administrators at all levels. I have organized these findings into three sections, according to my main research questions, as explained in chapter one. The first involves student perceptions of their audience; the second involves how structural features shaped student blogging practices; the third involves the opportunities for transgression against school norms presented by blogging.

The Promise of Authentic Audiences

In what ways are students influenced by their perceptions of audience when blogging for a school assignment? The students in this study tended not to address the question of who was reading their blogs on the blogs themselves. When they did, they tended to assume that those audiences were either very small, limited to me alone, or entirely non-existent. Many students, regardless of whether or not they believed they had an audience, described themselves as writing primarily for themselves. This was

especially true of those students who characterized their blogs as successful.

A few students were able to begin their blogs with a much clearer idea of what they wanted to do, and how they wanted to do it. These tended to be students who had extensive experience writing for a public audience, either in print (e.g., Michelle and Eleanor) or online (e.g., Alan). These students displayed less frustration, and had an easier time finding a satisfying topic and a consistent voice. Overall, they seemed less confounded by the genre.

Web 2.0 composition that allows for multiple, diverse, and dispersed audiences holds promise for school writing, because it allows for students to engage more authentically with their interests, for a wide variety of audiences—including, importantly, audiences who share those interests. The fact that we were using blogs, rather than writing notebooks or journals, made it more possible for students to respond to one another, and to get responses from like-minded readers, even when those readers were not present in the classroom. The availability of authentic audiences, both real and imagined, let students speak to those who could recognize their performances of situated identities that were desirable to them. Students became less focused on what I wanted them to do, and more focused on the Discourses and socially situated identities that interested them.

Blogging and Connectivity

In what ways do structural features of Web 2.0 sites—especially those enabling direct student interaction—shape students' blogging practices? In general, students were more concerned with having comments than with having Followers, despite the fact that the number of Followers on one's blog was much more readily visible to viewers.

Comments represented a more meaningful attempt to interact with the student's ideas, and therefore were more valued. Comments did not necessarily lead to linear conversations, but rather allowed students to branch off in multiple directions, responding directly, or taking another's topic as a seed for one's own post. Comments functioned as evidence that someone did indeed bring an engaged and informed understanding to what they wrote, allowing them to proceed with more confidence that they were being heard.

Students reported skepticism about whether Followers translated into readers. Those who were interviewed reported that a few students paid great attention to the number of Followers, and attempted to persuade as many students as possible to Follow their blogs. This practice was described with disdain by the students I interviewed, who by and large characterized the number of Followers they had as immaterial.

The perception on students' part that comments were meaningful and Following was superficial does not actually mean that this was the case. Students reported using their own lists of who they Followed as being very indicative of which blogs they themselves read, but did not extend that to their expectations of others' practices. Though students denied a connection between Following and commenting, it appeared that who they chose to Follow shaped their reading practices, and therefore their commenting practices. You only comment on the posts you read, and students appeared more likely to read blogs that they were Following. Students who were interviewed, however, seemed unaware of the possible connection between Following, genuine readership, and commenting.

If we accept that connective moments such as those that occur through comments and Following are valuable, a teacher might be inclined to *assign* comments, rather than

allowing them to happen as naturally occurring expressions of interest. It is my position that this approach devalues whatever social capital they have.

Transgressive Blogging

In what ways can students use blogs to transgress against school norms and boundaries? Most students stayed within the boundaries of typical school writing by using modes of self-expression that were generally accepted at Lincoln High School. They were frequently casual, but generally avoided profanity, insults, and language that suggested out-of-control emotions. For those who were inclined to push the boundaries, however, the possibility of focusing less on what the teacher wanted became problematic. It meant that when students like Grant wrote in ways that made me uncomfortable, I had given away part of my authority to direct him back to school-centered modes of expression. This forced me into difficult personal negotiations regarding how far afield I was willing to let students go, and to what degree I was willing to jeopardize the position of the blogs as a space where students could write as they chose. My approach to Grant's resistance marked by fear of silencing students and uncertainty of what would happen next. When in doubt, my rule of thumb was to let students write what they wanted, as long as it wasn't specifically directed at others.

My intention when introducing blogs was to free students to interact with more authentic audiences, in the hopes of encouraging interaction and ultimately leading to more engaged writing. Despite the prominence of discourses about the web as a means for disrupting existing power relations, my optimistic enthusiasm blinded me to how the power relations in my own classroom might be disrupted. I did not adequately anticipate students who, like Grant, were inclined to use their blogs to vent in ways not typically

sanctioned in school. In light of my research, it seems clear that if teachers present blogging as an opportunity to write for their own purposes, some of those purposes will be at odds with the middle-class Discourses teachers are used to seeing as the only Discourses appropriate for school. Students participating in ostensibly authentic online composition expect less interference from teachers.

Implications for Teachers

In this research, I have sought to arrive not only at an understanding of what it meant to blog in a high school English/language arts classroom, but to develop a series of implications for other classroom teachers who intend to engage their students with digital media.

The Teacher as Audience

Given my focus on students' need for authentic audiences, and the difficulty for teachers to serve in that role, the reader may ask, what roles can the teacher can play beyond getting students started? Indeed, I continue to wrestle with this, and with the associated question of how visible the teacher's presence should be on students' blogs. If the student feels he or she is successfully communicating with authentic audiences without teacher interference, does the teacher risk interrupting that feeling of competence by commenting or Following? If a student feels adrift, is the teacher who doesn't comment or Follow negligent? It seems to me the answer to both these questions is "yes."

Yet, there was clearly some value in the struggles that some of my students went through independently. Courtney found her blogging identity on her own, and might well have rejected it if I had attempted to push her toward it. In the months when she hated her blog, if I had made encouraging comments, she might well have taken that as further

evidence of her own failure. After all, she had no interest in writing for me; I was not an authentic audience.

This answer leaves teachers in the unsatisfying position of having to take each student's case individually, to make sure that students know our help is available to them if they want it, and to create as many opportunities as possible for students to find one another's blogs, in the hopes that they will be authentic audiences for one another.

Ubiquitous Connectivity

Teachers can no longer afford to look at social media as a communications niche that they can ignore at school. To remain sequestered from Web 2.0 is to be unaware of the sea changes occurring in our students' writing lives. Many current high school students have grown up with blogs and social networks. They did not know the Internet in the web 1.0 era. The Web 2.0 paradigm is not a shift for them; it's the only way the Internet has ever been. With so many students writing for authentic audiences, traditional school writing assignments involving simulated purposes for non-authentic audiences must be thin gruel indeed. This is not merely an argument about being aware of the trends of the moment in "teen culture." It is about the relationship between the students we teach and the material we teach them. Both have been changed by social media.

This means preparing for constant change. Over the course of this dissertation, Blogger underwent additional changes, giving bloggers more statistics about who is reading. Google started and shuttered their social network Buzz, and then began Google+, which was greeted with headlines about how it would topple Facebook. There is no such thing as being current.

However else online writing might evolve, it appears likely that networked,

online, in-class student work will need to offer a way for students to participate in one another's texts (commenting, Following, friending, "liking," etc.). This will require a shift in teachers' assumptions about fairness and equality in the classroom, and we must avoid the temptation to always keep our fingers on the scales for the appearance of such. For example: *requiring* comments, friending, and Following make such expressions essentially meaningless. Instead, teachers need to find ways of helping students find their authentic audiences.

At the same time, teachers and researchers must resist the distraction of simple trends: whether more or fewer teens are using this or that social network, whether they are blogging more or less, whether they are accessing the Internet from their homes, their phones, their various personal digital devices. Though it's useful to keep apprised of what students are doing, using the capacities of Web 2.0 technologies is not valuable simply for staying "relevant." They actually allow for different interactions and relationships between writers/creators and readers/viewers than the texts we conventionally use in schools. Those interactions and relationships are likely to become more a part of the texts in our lives, not less. This alone is reason enough for teachers to begin engaging with these technologies, what they mean for our students' lives as communicators, and how we can best adapt to new media environments.

Accommodating Transgression

The need to balance the promise of a strategy that appears to set students free, against the risks or costs presented by that strategy, predates the Internet by decades. Freeing students from the formulaic writing prescribed at the time was a rationale for introducing journal writing, the very assignment I was using blogs to escape. When a

recent technology is part of the equation, rather than a new context for an old use (i.e., using journals in schools in the 1940s), it's easy to mistake new iterations of old problems as entirely new problems.

Some of the challenges and questions facing teachers utilizing blogs in the classroom have long faced teachers who use journal writing. We don't know what students will produce, what responses will be called for, whether we are willing and able to provide those responses, and whether our responses will satisfy other stakeholders such as parents, administrators, or lawyers (Singer, 1990; Anderson, 1992). Moreover, in Singer's formulation, is the question of whether our students will get the responses they desire from us:

Once we have been handed a paper, there is a contract between us and that person. It is not necessarily a contract to change behavior. We must decide what our role is and has been. It may be as facilitator, friend, advice-giver, listener. (Singer, 1990, p. 74)

That said, the availability of authentic audiences makes it more likely that, for some students, writing in ways that will draw approval from those audiences will come into conflict with teachers' expectations. Expectations that students will respect traditional, "school appropriate" genres of interacting with adults, in a medium whose appeal lies largely in confounding traditional hierarchies, are unrealistic. Teachers will need to anticipate shifts in discourses of power between and among teachers and students.

Teachers may be tempted to draw the lesson that the maintenance of tight discipline must therefore be a precondition for online student writing. However, if we decide that the most important thing is the strict control of student speech and the maintenance of hegemonic power in school, we may forfeit the benefits of allowing students access to a writing forum that, outside of school, is expected to be a free space

with very few restrictions. Making the lines of acceptable behavior brighter or more rigid, or the punishments for transgression harsher, will only serve to instill the message that school is school, life is life, and the lessons from the former have little to do with the latter. To whatever degree possible, teachers should treat online writing as a place where students are allowed to test ideas, Discourses, and identities—to make mistakes, to cross lines and then step back.

On its own, however, liberally-defined freedom of student expression on a classroom blog is neither practical nor particularly helpful in guiding students toward a safe and ethical life on the web. As Turkle wrote in *Life on the Screen*, “We must understand the dynamics of virtual experience both to foresee who might be in danger and to put those experiences to best use” (1995, p. 268). For the sake of student interest and motivation it may be important for students to write for other audiences, but it is equally important for teachers to maintain some presence.

In a time when there are real costs to being heard by the wrong audience, where citizens in many walks of life lose their jobs, we cannot give students free rein and hope that everything turns out okay. Students such as Michelle, Courtney, and Grant need to be aware of the possible consequences for writing in online genres that do not easily dovetail with middle-class Discourses consistent with much of professional life. Such a student is unlikely to be concerned that today’s blog rant might jeopardize, say, tomorrow’s law school application. Teachers need ways of making those concerns more apparent, and appeals to the importance of ethics more persuasive.

Students need help developing an understanding of web ethics that goes significantly beyond the “don’t get in a stranger’s car online” basics of web safety. This

includes an understanding not only of code switching, but the nuances of talking to many possible audiences simultaneously, including future audiences. This sort of teaching needs to take care not to ignore students' desired current socially situated identities for the sake of our hopes for their future (mostly middle-class, college-educated) identities.

Directions for Future Research

This study was limited in its scope. I focused on only a few questions regarding what blogs made possible for students and teachers, and what challenges were presented by the integration of Web 2.0 texts into the classroom. A number of other critical issues face teachers who wish to bring their students into online spaces, however, and will need to be addressed if we are to better understand the potential benefits and obstacles to the successful integration of social media into classroom life.

School Blogging and the Digital Divide

The most obvious and persistent question for teachers is related to access. Even the standard we use—whether or not a student's home is equipped with the technology needed to connect online—is problematic as the sole measure for whether that student has “access” at home.

In 2010, the Pew Research Center reported that 76% of families with teens had broadband Internet access in their homes, and an additional 10% were connected with dial-up access (Pew Research Center, 2010a). This was a significant jump from a similar 2005 report, which found that 51% of such families had broadband access (Pew Research Center, 2005). As more homes become connected to the web, teachers may feel more free to assign homework that requires the student to read or write online.

What happens in those households with a single computer, but multiple children

who need it to complete homework, and perhaps parents who need it as well? What obstacles face a high school student in such a household, and how are those obstacles masked by a simplified understanding of “access at home”? What should teachers reasonably expect that such a student can accomplish online, outside of school?

Social Capital, Online and Off

The data I collected for this study did not put me in a position to comment on the relative importance or influence of different students or groups of students. That is, I do not know whether, or to what extent, it mattered *which student* connected to another student’s blog using Following or comments.

Another study might take up some related questions: To what extent is a student’s preexisting prestige, popularity, or other social capital (Bourdieu, 1977) easily transferred to their blogging selves? How easily are students able to parlay capital earned from their blogging selves into social capital in their offline, person-to-person lives? Are students with less social capital also less likely to use connective features (e.g., Following, comments) among classroom blogs? To what extent do groups of Followers reify or complicate preexisting social groups?

Low-Profile Blogs and Motivation

As discussed in chapter five, having a large number of Followers was rare. Of the eighty student blogs studied in this research: Kyle had the most, with 27 Followers; only six blogs had more than ten Followers. Nearly three-quarters of blogs (72%) had five or fewer, while fifteen blogs had no Followers at all.

Very few of the students at the long tail of this power law distribution volunteered to be interviewed for this study, which hindered my ability to speak with any certainty

about what effect the lack of Followers had on student motivation and writing. A better understanding of how students with fewer Followers saw their blogs would be valuable. Did these students remain motivated to write? Did they feel they were reaching authentic audiences? To what extent is there a risk that such students could be caught in a negative feedback loop (i.e., a lack of Followers or comments leading to a belief that nobody is reading, leading to unengaged and/or infrequent writing, further discouraging Followers or comments)? In such a situation, what can teachers do to help?

Coda

As I was in the midst of drafting this conclusion, another controversy broke out at Lincoln High School over social media. This time, Twitter was at the eye of the storm. Someone was anonymously insulting students at school, frequently in graphic sexual terms. For several days, students took to Twitter to follow the drama. Teachers complained about students checking updates on their cell phones and iPods during class. Though the matter was serious enough for the school administration to get the police involved, no one suggested that blocking Twitter, like Facebook, might be part of the solution. It was not treated as a problem of technology, but as harassment whose only novel feature was that it was happening online for a broader audience.

It's hard to know exactly why Twitter was spared the quick hook that pulled Facebook from school computers, but it is noteworthy that teachers had begun using it themselves. A couple of my colleagues and I had started accounts to see how we could incorporate it. The school newspaper had an account. Surely Twitter itself couldn't be the problem; it was already tamed.

Twitter also had, by this time, a prominent place in the constellation of social

media sites my former students were using in their post-high school careers. Kyle was active on Twitter, and Eleanor was regularly tweeting in support of the Obama reelection campaign. Five of the eight students I interviewed had continued blogging, as well, after the year was up, though they had all gone dormant by the time of this writing. More recently, Eleanor had written a post for the official Obama reelection blog. Courtney had just joined a multi-user blog, writing for her university's women's center.

Whether these students were engaged in social media because they had done so in my class is hardly a productive question. While certainly possible, it seems more likely that since the two of them were already using social media before they began that year of AP Language, this was more likely a continuation of their preexisting practices.

Rather, what is more interesting is how I learned about what my former interviewees were doing years after the fact: several of them had friended me on Facebook, and the social network site served as a way for students to remain connected to school identities as well. It is a useful reminder that the more social media becomes integrated into the rest of our lives, the less sense it makes to draw bright lines between in-school and out-of-school literacy practices. If we can blur and smudge those lines, perhaps we can do more than offer authentic audiences to students in school. We can also offer former students continued access to the best of what school has to offer.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR ALL PARTICIPANTS

I conducted semi-structured interviews with my research subjects, using the following questions as a starting point, and returning to them as the interview requires it.

- Before the class started, how familiar were you with blogs?
- At the beginning of the year, what was your reaction when you found out we were going to make blogs?
- What main topics did you first think you were going to discuss on your blog? How did you decide on those topics?
- Describe what it was like coming up with a title for your blog.
- What was your experience like when you first started writing on the blog? What about it felt comfortable? What was challenging?
- When did you first get a sense of who might be reading your blog? How did that affect your writing?
- As we were blogging over the course of the year, were you reading anyone else's blog? Did you "follow" anyone else's blog? If so, which ones?
- Describe a post on your blog that was especially satisfying.
- What factors made it easier, at different times, to write on your blog? What factors made it more difficult?
- Did you have followers on your blog? How did you react to that?
- Who outside of class was aware that you were blogging? Did anyone outside of class read your blog?
- What other media, such as images or video, or music, did you use on your blog? How often did you use it?
- Did you use hyperlinks on your blog? If so, what sort of things did you link to?
- What about the blog has been surprising to you?
- Do you think you'll continue to use your blog now that the class is over? Why or why not?

APPENDIX B

JOHNNY'S BLOG POST: "FEAR ITSELF..."

What follows is a complete transcript of Johnny's post from his blog, Fear and Loathing in Iowa, dated May 10, 2009. I have preserved all spelling and capitalization from the original. The image that accompanies the text of this post appears in chapter four as Figure 4.4.

Fear Itself...

The brain is an incredibly powerful thing. It has the power to synthesize experiences and emotions so vivid the line between reality and thought become blurred and skewed. I have had "dreams" so revealing and intense, they make reality seem a little a less real. Most of these "dreams" happen in a state between awake and deep sleep, where it feels as though my consciousness is suspended in limbo. I often find myself in this state during midday naps. It was during one of these naps that i experienced the most unsettling feeling of my life. I will do my best to articulate the events and visions I had.

I was taking a nap on my couch in the basement, the TV was at a low volume. Aside from the bright flicker of the television screen, the room was very dark. I was awoken by my mother who urged me to get up and to stop "wasting the day". I said I would get up in 15 minutes, knowing fully that it would probably be more like 45-60 minutes. She gave up and went up stairs. That all really happened, here's where the boundaries between my mind and reality get crossed. As I laid on the couch I kept one eye open lazily watching the screen. A commercial for an upcoming scary movie came on (idk if it was even a real commercial). I heard the typical ominous music. Now, I'm pretty easily frightened, but I'm not pussy enough to get scared watching a commercial. But for some reason I thought that if I watch this commercial, it would scare. So I shut my eyes tight, but I couldn't help but continue to listen to the scary score. As the commercial went on, I realize there was no talking, just music. This seemed odd to me. I also began to notice that the music just kept going and going. It seemed to be getting louder. As the volume increased, so did my fear.

It's hard to describe but I could see my fear. It took the form of a dark cloud. The more

terrified I became, the farther the black cloud crept in my vision. At a painfully slow pace, the darkness engulfed my head. I could literally feel the cloak of fear tighten around my mind. My head was screaming, "Run away!" but I couldn't. I was paralyzed. I was stuck inside my head. As soon as the black fear completely obscured my vision, the real horror started. Out of the black flashed an image: it was a little boy, about seven. His eyes were a milky white with tiny black dots for pupils. His pale face wore a haunting expression. I saw the child for an instant and then I was back into the dark. My heart was racing, I could feel my face perspiring. My head pounded with fear and rang with the disembodied music.

There was an ear shattering screech and there was the boy, inches away from my face. I could see his pale blue lips and his black tongue as a twisted smirk slowly cracked across his face. And with that he was gone. I prayed the boy wouldn't return. Who knows where he would reveal himself next. With all my might, I desperately tried to wrench myself up (mind you at this point I didn't know I was dreaming). It was useless. Just then, a tingling sensation danced up my spine, that sensation when you know you're being watched. The next vision was the final and most horrific of the three. I saw it only for a fleeting moment, but it was enough. I saw my own face, the rest of my body was submerged in a black gas-like substance. Out of the black emerged the black shaggy hair of the little boy. He opened his mouth wide before sinking his crooked razor sharp teeth into my face.

This was too much, with all I could conjure, I opened my eyes and was thrown back into the "real" world. When I woke I noticed that the TV had been off. My head was throbbing with pain. I could still feel the anxiety in my chest.

I have no idea what could have spurred this terror. One possible cause actually still frightens me. I don't think this is what happened, but could this experience have been supernatural? I most certainly hope not. But then again, how would I know that this experience was a dream and not just a brief encounter with an other-worldly being. After all, maybe that's what dreams are, connections to other realms, to which only our mind is capable of traveling.

Sweet dreams...

(The picture is by Francisco Goya and is entitled "Saturno devorando a su hijo" or Saturn Devouring his Son. It has no relation to my dream. I just thought the picturing embodied an overall sence of doom and fear)