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Virtual Teacher Talk: Blogging With and By Pre-Service Teachers

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With and By Pre-Service Teachers

by

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Dr. Owen van den Berg, Dissertation Chair	5/11/10 Date
Dr. Deb Ayres, Committee Member	5/11/10 Date
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Declaration of Originality

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based solely upon my own scholarly work here at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree here or elsewhere.

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Abstract

This action research study investigated the use of a blog in a pre-service teacher orientation foundational course in a mid-western college. The purpose of using the blog was to integrate face-to-face instruction and virtual interactive technology throughout the course, in particular while the students were away from class for five weeks to participate in a practicum. The face-to-face and virtual interactions were designed to provide mutual support.

This study was conducted in a course entitled *Orientation to Education*, a foundational course required of all undergraduate pre-service education students. Of the 34 students, 24 were freshmen or sophomores. The median age was 19. To provide as rich a description and as complete a picture as possible of the way the blog functioned in my course, I employed several data sources including personal reflective field notes, student questionnaires, reports of student focus groups, student blog reflections, student written comments regarding class sessions, and observations from an outside observer.

The study demonstrated that the blog was an effective tool that enhanced the students' learning and allowed them an opportunity to communicate with their classmates and instructor in a virtual community that supported their classroom and practicum experience. The blog did not, however, succeed in engaging all the students in such meaningful discourse. The findings can legitimately be extrapolated to the broader dynamic virtual communication context as educators attempt to utilize current technology. As Facebook, Twitter, and other virtual communication tools gain in

popularity, teachers will not be able to avoid the issues of the appropriate use of such platforms in their classrooms.

By utilizing an action research approach in the classroom, I was able both to indicate the value of such a research paradigm to the improvement of practice, and to demonstrate its value to the pre-service students who were the members of the class being studied.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Many people think computer technology is transforming the way individuals make sense of their world. Not only is technology impacting the way we communicate, but it is influencing the way students learn and the way teachers teach. We are the immigrants in the world of technology, and our students are the natives, to use terminology used by Prensky (2001a). The generation gap between many teachers and their students is not only years apart, but the divide is as wide as the Grand Canyon when it comes to our varied comfort levels and applications of technology in our world. Some educators are using digital technologies to open up unimagined environments for students; however, according to MacBride and Luehmann (2008), "The challenge many teachers face is how to incorporate new technology into their classrooms that strengthens classroom learning" (p.1). This dissertation reports on an action research project to explore how an instructor attempted to integrate classroom blogging centrally into the work of her pre-service class. The study was conducted at a four-year liberal arts university, Lindenwood University, located just west of the Missouri River in St. Charles, Missouri.

Background of the Study

I became interested in the topic of electronic communication for educational purposes in the summer of 2008 while I was a student in my first doctoral course at Lindenwood. Prior to enrolling in the course *Instructional Program Improvement Strategies*, taught by Dr. Lynda Leavitt, I had limited experience as a teacher or student working with WebCT, a web-course management tool that facilitated electronic communication between students and instructor along with many other course management functions. Even though I was also working as a part-time instructor at Lindenwood, at that time I was not utilizing WebCT for electronic communication purposes, I was simply using it as an electronic filing cabinet for document retrieval. When I became a student in the doctoral course, I was introduced to and expected to participate in a weblog which involved an asynchronous dialogue with my classmates about teacher-posted topics that pertained to in-class activities, discussions, and assigned readings.

West, Wright, Gabbitas and Graham (2006) noted that “Blog is the common word to describe a weblog, or a website where people post thoughts and information about news or topics of interest” (p. 54). I found this technological tool to be meaningful and effective in helping me to reflect upon my past and present teaching experiences. My positive blogging experience motivated me to try to include a class blog into my future courses as an instructor. I, therefore, implemented the blog into my course plans for the fall semester of 2008, and continued using the blog in the spring semester of 2009 with few changes.

Prior to that course, I had been very comfortable using technology in a university classroom, having previously used tools such as YouTube, graphing calculators, motion detectors, internet educational resources, and online grading tools in my teaching. However, having never used a blog, I was apprehensive yet excited about learning how to use this new technology. I had previously been eager to try new technologies, especially for instructional purposes; however, participating in a blog was completely foreign to me. The word “blog” even sounded strange to me. I knew blogs were used by journalists, but I was unaware of their educational uses. I was unfamiliar with the logistical procedures of posting one's thoughts onto a blog and was hesitant to learn this new technological tool, not because I was nervous about the content of the blog or how the students would respond, but because I assumed it would be a time-consuming and possibly laborious effort. My apprehension quickly dissipated in the summer semester of 2008 as I recognized how easy and more importantly, how valuable this tool was in allowing me the opportunity to reflect and share my transformative knowledge with my classmates and teacher. Even though reading my classmates' thoughts was helpful as I learned how others in the class were processing the same information, the greatest benefit I received from participating in the class blog was the opportunity to process my thoughts and share them at my own leisure.

Prior to joining the faculty of the School of Education at Lindenwood University, I had taught middle school and high school mathematics for eight years in a variety of public school settings from urban to rural. In 2007, I was invited by the Lindenwood administration to begin adjunct teaching for the university. I was honored by the request and looked forward to working with undergraduate students as I felt that my knowledge and classroom experience could benefit and inspire pre-service teachers. During my first semester at Lindenwood, I taught two sections of *Elementary/Middle School Mathematics Methods*. The following semester I continued teaching two sections of *Elementary/Middle School Mathematics Methods* and was invited to also teach two sections of *Orientation to Education.* I taught *Math Methods* three semesters prior to implementing a class blog, while I taught *Orientation to Education* two semesters prior to implementing a blog.

Orientation to Education, as described in the Lindenwood course catalog (2009), is a course offered as a "general introduction to the area of education and schooling. All students planning to teach are required to take this course before or in conjunction with their first education course(s)" (p. 85). This foundational course is required by the state for certification purposes of all students seeking a teaching certificate, regardless of grade level or content certification. As a requirement of the state, the students are expected to complete a 30 hour practicum during which he/she observes a practicing teacher in the classroom. All pre-service teachers seeking a wide variety of certifications are all in this same class together, it does not just consist of students seeking certification in a certain grade level or content area. In contrast, the *Mathematics Methods* course contained students who were all pursuing elementary or middle school certification. According to the Lindenwood University Undergraduate Catalog (2009), *Elementary/Middle School Mathematics Methods* is a course that provides a "survey of approaches in the teaching of mathematics for the student preparing to teach in elementary and/or middle schools" (p. 86).

In the fall semester of 2008, I decided to implement a class blog in both of these courses to support the face-to-face in-class interaction. During this fall semester I was teaching three sections of *Orientation to Education* and two sections of *Mathematics Methods*. During my first semester of blog implementation, I used the template from my doctoral class, *Instructional Leadership*, for my *Orientation to Education* class blogs. I chose a similar layout, design, and format for my class blog even though my course was designed for freshmen and I was utilizing some elements from a doctoral level class blog, some of the course content was similar. An in-depth description of the doctoral course is provided in Chapter Four. I also felt that although my students would be younger than the doctoral students, they would be able to understand the technology and utilize the platform to reflect upon the various lessons learned in class. At the same time, I created a different *Mathematics Methods* class blog, utilizing the platform as an opportunity for out-of-class discourse and using the tools provided to link the students to YouTube videos of teachers presenting various mathematics lessons.

The implementation of the blog in both courses was successful in my eyes and, according to the end-of-course evaluations completed by the students, many of them had also enjoyed my class. As there were over 35 students in each of my three *Orientation to Education* sections during the fall semester of 2008 and most of them completed the evaluations, I was able to learn much about the students' perceptions from the 107 evaluations.

Specifically, eight of 107 *Orientation to Education* students commented about the blog when asked to discuss the strengths of the course. Although eight seemed like a small number compared to 107, I took into account that the evaluation instrument made no specific reference to the blog. The eight who noted the blog as a strength of the course replied accordingly without a specific prompt or mention of the blog. I received comments such as: "A great learning opportunity – we blogged and it was a great way to get to see the opinions of my classmates" and "The blogs allowed us to reflect our thoughts and ideas as well as connect with others" (student, End-of-Course Evaluations, December 8, 2008). When asked to provide any weaknesses of the course, besides one student writing of the blog, "It was unpleasant" (student, End-of-Course Evaluations, December 8, 2008) the only other weakness that was noted repeatedly was that the class did not meet often enough.

Interestingly, not one student in the *Mathematics Methods* course commented positively or negatively about the blog on the end-of-course evaluations (again, possibly as a result of the instrument); however, there were many positive comments about the course in general, such as, “She was an amazing teacher! Very helpful! Gave us so many things that we can use for our classroom. Never had a teacher like her go out of her way in the ways she did to help us for our future,” and another student wrote, “I liked the way Mrs. Bishop teaches; I feel like she really gets through to her students” (student, End-of-Course Evaluations, December 8, 2008). Without conducting formal research, I assumed from those evaluations that the blog implementation was successful and that most students had enjoyed it, just as I had in the doctoral class the previous summer.

For the spring semester of 2009, I was told that I would be the lead teacher of *Orientation to Education* and would no longer be teaching *Mathematics Methods*. I continued using the blog in the spring 2009 semester in the *Orientation* classes and made no changes, keeping the topics and the requirements the same as the previous semester. I truly enjoyed reading the students’ comments on the blog and participating in the virtual dialogue; however, I wondered if the blog was helping the students reflect as much as it had helped me reflect when I had been a student participant in a class blog. During both the semesters I had implemented a blog in the *Orientation* course, I had allowed the students a “break” from the blog while they were given five weeks off from attending class so that they could complete their field placement during which they were to observe a teacher for 30 hours. During those five weeks, I had not posted a new topic on the blog.

They were not required to visit the blog during this class break. I wondered if this had been a good instructional practice. About halfway through the break as I was feeling quite disconnected from my students; I began wondering that maybe I could and should utilize the blog during this time to help the students reflect upon their observation experience. I also wondered if utilizing the blog during our class break would help us feel more connected to each other.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

My willingness to discover best teaching practices and my desire to implement effective technology tools into my classroom inspired me to conduct this research study investigating my use of the blog in the context of *Orientation to Education* in the fall semester of 2009. If I could learn the consequences of using the blog in this course and determine if it helped the students reflect upon their practicum experience, then I could revise and improve my teaching practices involving the blog in the course and generalize the effectiveness of using a blog for educational purposes for others in a similar setting.

I was a participant in the action research study as the course instructor. I examined my own involvement in the course preparation, weekly classroom methods and strategies, and blog participation. According to Somekh (1995), "Action research methodology bridges the divide between research and practice … and it makes a difference in terms of bringing about actual improvements in practice" (¶ 6). I investigated my general and specific pedagogical practices used with the students inside the classroom and on the class blog. *Research Questions*

Over the period of my doctoral work, my research questions evolved. In October of 2008 when I first began thinking about my study, I had not determined the methodology; however, I knew I was interested in studying the use of blogs for instructional purposes. My first ideas for research questions, as written in my personal notes, were: "1) How do students feel about classroom blogs?; 2) Do classroom blogs improve students' views or attitudes of EDU110 *Orientation to Education*?; 3) Do classroom blogs improve attendance?; and 4) What is the relationship between blog usage and student satisfaction?" (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, October 19, 2008). However, those initial questions did not remain the main research questions once I began reading some literature regarding blogs. As I gathered and read more literature regarding the topic of blogs, I felt that some of my questions were too broad and that the questions would not provide an appropriate backbone for a coherent study.

In May of 2009, while attending an oral dissertation defense, I met a new member of the doctoral staff, Dr. Owen van den Berg. After learning that Dr. van den Berg had an extensive background in action research, I e-mailed him on May 6th asking for his assistance,

> Owen, I will be conducting action research in my own classroom in the fall. At this point, the study focuses on the following research questions: 1. What are the views of pre-service teachers regarding blogs in the classroom? 2. What are the views of pre-service teachers regarding the ability to communicate with peers and the instructor outside of the classroom? 3. What are the views of the pre-service teachers regarding the likelihood that they will incorporate blogs into their own classrooms in the future? I would appreciate your input…. (M. Bishop, personal communication, May 6, 2009)

Owen sent the following e-mail later that day, providing me with critical direction as I was missing the intent of action research:

> Melanie, I would be delighted to meet with you…. And my first question to you would be, where is the action research in your study (i.e. the focus on you) when the three questions all seem to look at others' opinions of what they do? A good starting point for a discussion, maybe! (O. van den Berg, personal communication, May 6, 2009)

From this point on, my research questions were to change. Over the next six weeks, Owen and I met weekly to discuss the study. With much guidance and research, I began to gain a better grasp of the true meaning of action research as I determined the research questions I would use for the study.

The questions that emerged were the following:

1. What are the consequences of using a blog in a pre-service teacher orientation course?
2. Will the students' ability to reflect upon their practicum experience, and more specifically upon teaching, be enhanced if I implement a weekly blog in the course?
3. How could my implementation of the class blog and my reflections on the process help others who are in a similar setting?
4. In the context of a teacher education program, if I were to use a class blog again, what would I change?

Significance of the Study

Though much has been written about various forms of electronic communication, little of what is published has dealt with pre-service teacher orientation courses and the impact of weblogs in this setting. It is essential to reflect on the implementation matters and impact of classroom blogging as well as the consequences that are appropriate to such a setting. The findings of this study may be significant for at least four of the following reasons: improvement of my practices, improvement of the education programs at this university, benefit of other university education instructors of pre-service teachers in orientation courses, and addition to the ongoing public dialogue about uses of technology in the classroom.

Limitations of the Study

Although the deep understanding regarding the thoughts and conversations of pre-service teachers could be relevant for teachers in other settings with similar populations, one might think this research could be limited due to the fact that it was conducted at one site, within one course, with one class of students. However, I believe that, due to the nature of this study in this particular setting, it will illuminate the work of others working on similar projects in other settings. According to McKernan (1991), human behavior is "highly influenced by the surroundings in which it occurs…. Participants are aware of these norms and role expectations in the culture of the school. External researchers affect behavior and interfere with the research setting" (p.7). Therefore, in order to gain a rich and authentic understanding of the students in such a context, the behaviors must be studied in the appropriate field or setting by the practitioner (McKernan, 1991). According to Greenwood and Levin (1998), "insiders and outsiders join in a mutual learning process…. The action research process thus creates a language shared between insiders and outsiders that identifies the meaning constructed through the inquiry process" (p. 80).

Although an outside observer was used as a data source, my role as participant-observer provided an insider's viewpoint; this can be seen as both a strength and a weakness. I tried to provide a safe place in the class and on the blog where students felt free to share their reflections openly, but my position of power as the teacher and the fact that I assign grades could have created a limitation to the study. However, according to

McKernan (1991), the practitioner's involvement is necessary as he/she is not classified as the expert but as an "inquirer and co-learner treating his or her practice as provisional and improvable" (p. 34). According to Greenwood and Levin (1998) "Action research rules out conventional positions that imagine the inquirer taking on a neutral and objective stance to the question under study" (p. 79).

Another limitation of the study is that the validity of its findings was dependent, in part, on students' honesty when providing input on the questionnaires and in the focus groups. As student feedback was anonymous, the data on the course came from many different sources, hopefully providing some safeguard against narrow interpretation.

Definition of Terms

For purposes of this investigation, the following definition of terms is used:

- CBASE: College Basic Academic Subjects Examination.
- Foliotek: Electronic portfolio management system
- In-service Teachers: Certified teaching professionals currently teaching in a school
- *Orientation to Education*: This course offers a general introduction to the area of education and schooling. All students at Lindenwood University planning to teach are required to take this course before or in conjunction with their first education course(s). Thirty hours of classroom observation is a requirement of this course.
- Pedagogy : The art or profession of teaching
- Praxis II Test: An assessment that measures general and subject-specific knowledge and teaching skills

- Pre-service Teachers: University students who are working toward teacher certification
- Reflective Practice: An exercise in which a teacher inspects his/her own teaching strategies, recognizes problems, and proposes solutions
- Thread: The themed focus of the online dialogue
- Weblog or Blog: West et al., (2006) defined weblog as "website where people post thoughts and information about news or topics of interest" (p.54).
- YouTube: An online, video file sharing website

Organization of Study

Following this introduction, Chapter Two will provide a literature review about technology and weblog usage in the classroom. In Chapter Three, I discuss the methodology used in this study. In order to answer my research questions and provide specific explanations, I analyzed the data in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven of this dissertation. Chapter Four addresses the background and setting of the project. Chapters Five and Six consist of accounts of the implementation of the action plan. Chapter Seven provides a discussion of the results, implications of the analysis and attempts to answer the following questions: So what and what next?

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this chapter I begin with a summary of the Internet's history followed by a discussion of its impact on the current generation of students and teachers. In light of these findings, educators must begin discussing the differences between today's learner and today's teacher. Research indicates that there are tools that schools can implement to aid teachers and students in bridging the technological gap. Online learning and virtual communication have evolved over the last few decades through various platforms such as electronic mail, student/teacher/parent portals, websites, text messaging, listservs, course management tools (WebCT and Blackboard), Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter. According to Robb-Singer and Zeni (2004), "The online venue appears to provide a place for writing to learn, writing to construct the self…." (p. 35). Through their online dialogues, students are allowed to "stretch and flex as reflective practitioners" (Robb-Singer & Zeni, 2004, p. 41).

A variety of options are available to teachers as they explore how to utilize virtual communities for learning purposes. One of these tools that teachers can use is a weblog, also called a blog. Although blogs are a relatively new use of technology, I will provide a brief history here followed by a description of how blogs are used in many areas of society, including education. Two of the many claims for the educational benefits of blog usage are their ability to provide students opportunities for discourse and reflection. This chapter concludes with a synopsis of how blogs are currently being used in education and the effects they have in a pre-service teacher education program.

Historical Overview of the Internet

Many people's lives have been changed by the World Wide Web, as they are now consumed with e-mails, search engines, video sharing websites, and social networks. According to Greene, Brown, and Robinson (2008),

> Long ago when we first heard of a mysterious thing called the World Wide Web, we were fascinated with the concept when we read about it. We were in awe of it when we finally saw a demonstration of what it could do. We were addicted to it once we actually had the opportunity to personally use it. Even though that all now seems far off, in reality it wasn't that long ago. (p. 2)

Richardson (2006) referred to 1989 as the date of origin of the World Wide Web. Tim Berners-Lee, creator of the World Wide Web, wanted to design a collaborative meeting place in which everyone could gather, read, and write (Richardson). Another title for the World Wide Web began emerging, which is the title most commonly used today – the Internet.

In the early 1990s, the Internet consisted of a small network of computers utilized by government officials and researchers to share facts and figures. However, Berners-Lee wanted more for the Internet, because he envisioned a network on which people from all over the world could "share not just data but personal talents and experiences in new and powerful ways" (Richardson, 2006, p. 1). In addition to the increase of computer memory capacity, when the first web browser, Mosaic, was created in 1993, the Internet began to be transformed from a text-sharing platform to a world that included colorful graphics full of information that everyone could use (Richardson).

Exploring the Internet, otherwise known as "surfing," became more popular as Internet costs went down and technology became more available. Millions of people were fascinated by this new digital environment. Although the content was limited at first, more Web designers came onto the scene as the twentieth century came to a close, and the Internet exploded as a vital communication and networking tool (Richardson, 2006). According to Mooney (2007), the one-billionth Internet user logged on in 2005. Digital technology (particularly web-based technology) has come very far in the last few decades taking the world by storm. There are many definitions of technology, but for the purposes of this study, I will use the term "technology" as a broad label placed upon electronic or digital products, specifically computer-based products. As Internet technology becomes an integral part of everyday life, educators must consider how this is affecting this generation of students.

Digital Natives and Immigrants

Educators today are faced with a genuine dilemma as they attempt to teach, reach, and connect with the current generation of students that some call *digital natives*, due to the fact that most of these students grew up with technology – they cannot remember life without it. On the other hand, the current generation of teachers is mostly made up of adults who had limited or no experience of Internet technology in their upbringing, which is why most teachers could be considered immigrants of the digital age. Just as natives of a certain land understand the terrain and navigate easily within their region because they understand the dialect, so do digital natives as they naturally understand the terrain of the Internet and navigate easily within the Internet community.

As the digital natives are captivated by this technology, many of them are experiencing neurological effects that could have an impact on the way they learn (Richardson, 2006). "We now know that brains that undergo different developmental experiences develop differently, and that people who undergo different inputs from the culture that surrounds them think differently" (Prensky, 2001b, p. 3). Schools and universities need to be willing to face the challenge of learning more about how digital natives learn and adjusting the way instructors deliver content to close the gap between the digital natives and the immigrants in the classroom.

Today's students are far more computer literate than most of their teachers. Prensky (2001a) refers to the widespread use of digital technology as students today embody the "first generations to grow up with this new technology. They have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age" (p. 1). The students would rather retrieve information digitally because it is faster, easier to access, and more current (Richardson, 2006). However, retrieving information digitally is not necessarily more trustworthy. The internet is a vast and shallow sea of knowledge. Educators need to teach students how to critically evaluate information found digitally because, "The Web is, for the most part, a public space. No governing body restricts or approves of the information made available via the Web…. There are no restrictions on what one may make available on the Web" (Green et al., 2008, p. 31).

The Speak Up National Research Project "collected and shared the views of more than 1.5 million K-12 students, teachers, parents and administrators on education and technology" (Speak Up Project, 2009, p. 1) and concluded that American students are guiding the way for how to successfully use surfacing technologies in education. Through the analysis of their data, the Speak Up Project determined that students today are "early adopters and adapters of new technologies, creating new uses for a myriad of technology products to meet their sophisticated needs. They serve as technology trend setters for their peers and, increasingly, for their parents and educators" (p. 1).

However, most teachers in schools today did not grow up using technology. As digital immigrants, some of today's educators are learning to adapt to this new environment; however, Prensky (2001a) commented that as immigrants adapt to their new environment, they still hang on to an accent from their native tongue. An example of such an accent, according to Prensky is when people print out their emails. The degree of the accent varies depending on their age when they immigrated to the new land and their willingness to learn and use the new language if, in fact, there is a new language to learn. Prensky states, "A language learned later in life, scientists tell us, goes into a different part of the brain" (p. 2). Prensky described his belief that the "single biggest problem facing education today is that our digital immigrant instructors, who speak an outdated language (that of the pre-digital age), are struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language" (p. 2). Richardson (2006) commented that the United States educational system is "out of touch with the way its students learn" (p. 7) and interact.

Digital immigrant teachers do not understand how their students could possibly learn while listening to music or watching TV. The reason for this is because rarely can the immigrant teachers learn while listening to music or watching TV. This, according to Prensky (2001a), is because digital immigrant teachers did not "practice this skill constantly for all of their formative years" (p. 2). Some digital immigrant teachers do not think learning can be or should be fun because they did not spend their childhood days learning with television shows like *Sesame Street* (Prensky). However, digital natives are accustomed to the instant gratification of remote controls, text messaging, cell phones, and laptops. Prensky commented that their constant ability to be networked with others explains why they have little patience for lecture-style instruction that is not interactive. Digital immigrant teachers can no longer assume that students learn the same way as previous generations. The same methods may well not work for today's learners, for today's learners are different (Prensky). Although some even argue that methods used in previous generations did not work well with those previous generations, which leads educators to look for new methods.

So what should educators do with this information about the students in classrooms today? Should the digital immigrant teachers be forced to learn the new ways, should the digital native students be required to learn using the old methods, or both (Prensky, 2001a)? There is a clear divide between the digital native student and the digital immigrant teachers. Just as educators have begun focusing on a very important achievement gap between minority and non-minority students, schools must also begin focusing on closing the gap between the digital learner and the immigrant teacher. Just as minority students deserve teachers to meet their academic needs, this newest generation of digital learners deserves teachers to meet their academic needs from a methodology standpoint. Prensky noted that teachers must begin communicating in the students' language and style. He stressed that teachers do not need to de-emphasize quality thinking skills but suggested that educators must be willing to move faster, with fewer steps, "more in parallel, with more random access, among other things" (p. 4).

Richardson (2006) offered encouragement and hope to digital immigrant educators that there are many tools available to help them close the gap between the learner and the teacher. Many of these tools are now free and "will most likely stay that way as open-source software alternatives continue to grow. That doesn't mean that it won't be work for the immigrant educators to lose those accents" (Richardson, p. 7). Richardson was optimistic and confident that once these new technologies are used more frequently in schools, "students and teachers will be launched on a path of discovery and learning like they have never experienced before" (p. 7).

Although most of today's students are digital natives, we must not forget about those students who do not have computer self-efficacy. Computer anxiety is a real phenomenon that causes many students to fear any and all technology. According to Mooney (2007), as technology usage in higher education increases, it brings about computer anxiety for some students. For several years, students could merely avoid courses that required technology usage, but now it has become increasingly more difficult for students to evade courses that require technology. Instructors are not simply using technology for word processing purposes. Technology has become integral in many courses, as some require a laptop or assignment submission and distribution via the Internet and web-based course management systems, such as WebCT. Although "technology can save time, resources, and in some cases enhance instruction…there are a large number of computer anxious students on today's college campuses," (p. 16). These students should not be ignored by teachers who desire to implement technology into the classroom. However, it is vital that educators continue moving forward with technology in the classroom to teach the majority of the learners in the twenty-first century.

According to Prensky (2009), teachers often use the excuse that it would not be fair to assign computer homework if there is one student out of thirty who does not have access to a computer at home. However, Prensky suggested that teachers think about being fair to the other 29 students and do whatever is possible to get a computer into the hands of the one, as quickly and as often as possible. Schools should understand and accept some inequality with regards to students' varying levels of ownership of digital technology. Although this could be politically controversial, Prensky noted that the "best solution may not be providing the same technology to every student, but rather finding accommodations for those who don't have their own" (p. 2). Prensky suggested the following four ideas to bridge the technological divide between the students who have regular access to technology to those who do not, without spending more money:

1. Use all the technology available and make sure the students are using it. For example, students should be using electronic whiteboards, their own laptops, or cell phones.
2. Group students together to share technological devices. For example, a teacher can put students into groups structured around a lesson that involves use of a computer or cell phone.
3. Increase amount of time students have access to technology. For example, open libraries and computer labs as late as possible.
4. Get technology for those who do not have it. For example, locate individuals or foundations willing to donate used computers and/or cell phones.

Although some of the ideas suggested above could be viewed as problematic, they can possibly bridge the digital gap between those students who do not have regular access to technology to those students who do have access and should be able to learn using the technology. However, people must recognize that there are many other factors contributing to the differences in technology access among students that the above list cannot fix. Nonetheless, this information can help encourage teachers to begin a proactive stance in the necessary integration of technology into today's classrooms. An understated reason for the divide between the digital natives and the digital immigrants is that some educators are afraid of the technology, perhaps unwilling to learn something new, and are not trying very hard to have all their students use technology as frequently as possible (Prensky, 2009).

Richardson (2006) stated that "these students have been born into a gadgets and online community" (p. 6). Technology is an essential part of how many students today participate in their world. They use the Internet to "communicate, organize their life, collaborate and create content and context for their own learning" (Speak Up Project, 2009, ¶ 4). The Speak Up Project found that students' lives today, both in and out of school, revolve around the following themes: communication, collaboration, creation and contribution. Technology has allowed students the opportunities to participate in their own learning as many students now view the process of "content development as a key part of the new learning process – for many students the process of developing that content is as valuable, or more valuable, than the end result" (¶ 8).

Prensky (2001a) wrote about a "result of this ubiquitous environment and the sheer volume of their interaction with it, today's students think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors. These differences go far further and deeper than most educators suspect or realize" (p. 1). One major facet of this omnipresent environment is that it provides students with ongoing opportunities to talk. Many members of the immigrant generation do not understand or appreciate the benefits of online discourse, perhaps because they have never experienced this mode of discourse. However, many digital natives enjoy and expect to communicate with others digitally.

Even though the communication is not face-to-face, students are able to share their thoughts, read other's thoughts, and converse at their convenience. According to Robb-Singer and Zeni (2004) "The very nature of talk provides for social interaction, which, in turn, promotes learning" (pp. 31-32). The immigrants need to understand that the digital natives' acceptance of other forms of communication is part of their culture. As the previously presented literature focused on the differences between the digital immigrants and digital natives, it is important to explore a particular technological application called social networking that is transforming the way many people communicate.

Social Networking

What exactly is networked social media? boyd and Ellison (2007) offer the following definition used for social network sites:

> web-based services that 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. (¶ 4)

The features provided vary from site to site, although the common features consist of profile sharing, commenting capability, and private messaging. A unique element of some sites is the photo and video sharing capability. Many social network sites such as Facebook, Twitter and MySpace allow individuals to meet strangers. However, according to boyd and Ellison , these network sites are primarily used to allow participants to communicate with people who are "already a part of their extended social network" (¶ 6). Collier (2009) described that most young people use social media as another means of communication "almost exclusively" with the people they already know.

Social networks are a relatively new technological phenomenon, because, the first social network site was introduced as recently as the 1990s. boyd and Ellison (2007) noted that SixDegrees.com was the first social network site that combined the ability to create profiles with the ability to list and view friends' profiles. SixDegrees.com merged the ideas provided by dating websites and community sites, such as Match.com and Classmates.com. Since the inception of SixDegrees.com, many social networks have been launched including, but not limited to, LiveJournal, Cyworld, Friendster, LinkedIn, MySpace, Flickr, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. "With more than seven million users, Twitter is growing at an annual rate of 1,382 percent, Facebook boasts over 250 million active members" (Kroski, 2009, p. 1). "Social networking sites are mainstream media for many tweens, teens, and adults. There are even social networking sites that attract kids as young as five years old," stated Ramig (2009, p. 8).

Although many digital immigrants shudder when they hear that young children are being targeted for such networking sites, it is the current reality, "This is the reality of the world we live in, and schools should reflect this reality. We need to help students become effective communicators, offline as well as online" (Ramig, 2009, p. 8). Ramig suggested that in order for teachers to understand how online networks operate, they should become familiar with the social media networks. By involving themselves in one or more of these networks, teachers might find it easier to have conversations with students about blogs, Facebook, and Twitter. Ramig suggested that participation in *all* of the various networks is not necessary; however, she noted that as teachers begin to understand social network tools, then the tools can be used in the classroom as "part of the education process" (p. 10). According to Collier (2009), social networks are not just for socializing; much important informal learning is occurring while the students are participating in these types of technological activities.

The Digital Youth Project consisted of three years of research to determine the informal learning that adolescents experience through social networking, video-sharing and online game websites. The findings of the project established that "The digital world is creating new opportunities for youth to grapple with social norms, explore interests, develop technical skills, and experiment with new forms of self-expression" (Ito, et al., 2008, p. 1) In addition to Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace, much attention has been given to other digital forms of social media such as blogging. Kroski (2009) stated "Aspiring writers have started more than 133 million blogs" (p. 1).

Blogging

Blogs, short for weblogs, are a relatively new technology, created in the 1990s by Tim Berners-Lee, who was also the inventor of the World Wide Web as previously noted (Oatman, 2005). Oatman stated that in 1997 those online diaries were named weblogs and only about twenty of them existed. West et al. (2006) described a blog as the following:

> a website where people post thoughts and information about news or topics of interest. They were designed to provide a simple way for individuals to post ideas to the Internet, providing the opportunity and function for others to read and post comments on the site. (p. 54)

Since their development, blogs have generated much enthusiasm about their potential applications across many disciplines. Blogs have played critical roles in political campaigns and have performed a significant role in journalism in reporting world events. According to Bruns and Jacobs (2006), "CNN, BBC, newspapers, and other mainstream media now regularly turn to the blogosphere to gauge public opinion on controversial issues, and this coverage of *what the bloggers are saying* has begun to replace the traditional interview with the person in the street" (p. 1). As the media increases its value in bloggers' opinions, it is important to determine who is reading and creating blogs.

A 2008 survey by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Smith, 2008) found that 33% of Internet users "say they read blogs, with 11% of Internet users doing so on a typical day" (¶ 2). The survey also indicated that when participants were asked if they had ever read someone else's blog, the numbers were a bit higher with 42% of Internet users answering "yes" to this question. An interesting demographic was noted as men and women almost equally replied that they read blogs (35% for men, 32% for women), yet men were more likely to say they had read other people's blogs (48% for men, 38% for women.) The Pew Internet and American Life Project research team suspected that this could be "due to the male-heavy nature of the initial blog readership population – men are generally heavily represented among the early adopters for most technologies, but women catch up over time" (¶ 4). The previous information reflected upon who is *reading* blogs, yet we must also look at the demographic of who is *creating* the blogs.

Only 12% of Internet users say they ever produce or update their own blog (Smith, 2008). "Adolescents make up a large part of the community of bloggers, often referred to as the blogosphere. Perseus Development Corporation, for instance, found 51.5% of all blogs are being developed and maintained by ages 13-19" (Huffaker, 2005, p. 92). "Around the world, millions of people are creating online communities among people of like interests. And they are doing it with passion so intense that the term *blogomania* has been invented to describe it" (Oatman, 2005, p. 2). Blogging is becoming embedded in our culture. Why have millions of people embarked upon blogging?

According to Oatman , people are flocking to these online journals because blogging is primarily “fun, empowering, inexpensive, and practically effortless” (p. 36).

Creating a own weblog was not easy in the 1990s. A person interested in creating a weblog needed to be articulate in HTML, hyper-text markup language, which is used to create documents on the Internet incorporating text, graphics, sound, video, and hyperlinks (Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary, 2009). “But for the most part, the ability to create content on the Web was nowhere near as easy as consuming it, and even those that could create did so with little means for easy collaboration” (Richardson, 2006, p. 2). The technology has improved and now this is no longer the case. Pyra (currently known as Blogger) was introduced in 1999 as a free and easy-to-use, Web-based software program. The introduction of such user-friendly platforms allowed more people to create their own weblogs. Richardson noted that we can now be creators of large storehouses of information and not simply readers or consumers of information. Although many blog posts are mainly textual, they might display images, photos, web links, or additional media content. Just as YouTube has allowed millions of amateur videographers to share their images with others, blogging has allowed millions of amateur journalists to create their own digital printing presses (Richardson).

Technorati is a group of researchers who conducts studies regarding technology and blogging, in particular. Their annual nation-wide study which is presented at a fall conference, tracks the development and expansion in the world of blogging, also called *Blogosphere*. Included in the 2009 State of the Blogosphere (McLean, 2009) was information about the results of their surveys about blogging. Results indicated that “bloggers are blogging more than ever, and the State of the Blogosphere is strong” (p. 1).

Several trends emerged from the survey: results indicated that the number of professional bloggers continues to grow, that twitter and other social networks are affecting the Blogosphere as bloggers are using such platforms to promote their blogs, and that bloggers are having an increasing influence in the media. The 2009 State of the Blogosphere concluded that "the blogosphere is strong – and only getting stronger" (p. 2). So how does this increase in blog usage affect schools today? Blogging has been utilized in many societal areas, and according to Richardson (2006) "it can't help but change education" (p. 5).

Using Interactive Technology for Instructional Use

Driscoll (2007) asserted that technology is playing a key role in numerous types of communication in classrooms today. In the late 1990s, the Internet provided people with the opportunity to interact via the computer (Finch, 2008). Finch noted that as the Internet became commonplace in many homes, people became proficient in the use of computer technology, especially young adults, which provided a convenient and economical means for social interaction. Computer instant messaging paved the way as cell phone technology and accessibility increased among teens leading to the ever popular method of communication known as "texting." One argument about incessant text messaging is that it is decreasing "real" face-to-face or even voice-to-voice interaction. However, these new methods of communication seem to be here to stay. Nussbaum-Beach (2008) discussed a study she conducted in three different learning projects and environments working with public school elementary and secondary students in America and Canada. One project entitled *ThinWalls Classroom Project* was based on "connectedness, networking, and learning beyond the classroom walls" (p.14).

Nussbaum-Beach suggested that "if we want to remain relevant in the lives of students, then we must use strategies and materials – such as global networking – that fit the learning styles of the digital native" (p. 2). In this regard, Herther (2009) stated,

> From cell phones to iPods, computers to gaming systems, the sales of digital products to young people dwarf the acceptance rates of other market segments…. Every generation is influenced by the events, major personalities, and trends of its time. For these newest generations, it's technology and social networking. The digital age brings with it a multitude of opportunities. Classrooms in the 21st century need to be collaborative spaces where student-centered knowledge development and risk taking are accepted as the norm and where an ecology of learning develops and thrives. (p. 16)

Palfrey and Gasser (2008) described this generation of students as a group of children who interact, write, and study with each other in approaches that are quite different than previous generations. "They're connected to one another by a common culture. Major aspects of their lives-social interactions, friendships, civic activities-are mediated by digital technologies. And they've never known any other way of life" (p. 23). Utilizing blogs is one way educators can allow students opportunities to interact, both with each other and with their teachers, using technological means which they crave, as the literature indicates.

Although blogs originally began as a self-publishing development for professional and aspiring journalists, the instructional use of blogs stretches to include varied age groups and fields of study. While many colleges and universities have discovered the value of using blogs for instructional use, K-12 education professionals have been slow to recognize the worth of using blogs in the classroom to improve teaching practice and student learning (Richardson, 2006). However, according to a meta-analysis and evaluation of 99 independent, online learning studies conducted by the U.S. Department of Education in 2009, although K-12 school systems were slow to utilize online instruction, schools are now adopting e-learning at a growing rate. Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, and Jones (2009), members of the U.S. Education Department's Center for Technology in Learning team, noted that various models of e-learning are supported by various applications of the technology. Utilizing online learning tools, such as e-mail, threaded discussions, and weblogs has become popular because students and teachers appreciate the ability to access the content and teaching at any time convenient for the user.

At the urging of governments, communities, and parents, most school districts are keenly aware of the need to improve student achievement in our nation's schools. Bruns and Jacobs (2006) suggested that "technology might have a holistic impact on the challenges that face schools" (p. 91). More engagement with the Internet, specifically through the use of blogs, could help teachers and learners work together to reach higher levels of connectivity. Oatman (2005) acknowledged that some teachers have found that "technologies like weblogs can be powerful teaching tools." Oatman continued that blogs have allowed teachers to initiate online discourse with their students. Dickey (2004) noted, "The Web has had a resounding impact on education by both augmenting classroom practices and by affording educators new mediums for distance learning" (p. 279). As researchers have found that blogging affects classroom practices, educators must continue determining how it affects student learning.

Harper (2005) conducted a study to determine if blogging actually influenced self-disclosure or learning among a group of juniors and seniors at Christopher Newport University in Virginia. Harper defines self-disclosure as "the exchange of information pertaining to oneself that serves to enhance intimacy" (p. 31). The students were not required to contribute to the blog, they could choose to participate or do an alternative assignment. Half of the students (15 students out of 30) elected to participate in the class blog. After the instructor had blogged for eight weeks posting “weekly reflections of course content and current events” (p. 31), results from a series of focus groups revealed an assortment of helpful clues for successfully using blogs in schools and universities. The students noted that, in fact, the blog *did* present a unique opportunity for self-disclosure. Harper noted the following information from the study groups:

> One student remarked: “I expressed more. … You can even take the comments that people said in class and think about [them] in relation to your own life and then come out with something in the blog. Then, you are kinda [*sic*] revealing a little bit more yourself.” One of the most powerful observations was that students who were typically non-participatory in class revealed extensively in their response posts. The following student commentary gives a clue to the behavior: “I find it a lot easier to express myself through writing then [*sic*] verbally, and a lot of times in class it takes me along [*sic*] time to think of something sensible that I want to say and by that time the conversation has moved on. So I have more time to sit and think when I am writing.” (p. 31)

These student responses show that blogs can be a helpful tool to spawn self-disclosure between classmates and with the teacher. Results also indicated to Harper that even though a “blog may be more advisable with mature learners... it is also an appropriate technique to introduce younger learners to online interaction” (p. 32).

Goldman, Cohen and Sheahan (2008) assessed whether seminar blogs improved student participation and learning in a graduate-level health school class. They found that “seminar blogs offer opportunities for increased student participation, interaction, and learning” (p. 1658). As the major complaint involved time issues, the researchers found that assignments for comments need to allow adequate time for students to respond in order for the blog to be the most efficient and appealing. They summarize that blogging has the capability to improve the classroom events and "is worthy of further development and testing" (p. 1658).

Reflecting upon the consequence of blogs, Dickey (2004) performed action research on the effect of blog utilization in web-based training. Future K-12 teachers were the participants. Findings showed that blog use helped the students socialize, cooperate, and participate in small group discussions. Students requested support and communicated their ideas and feelings via the blogs. It was also determined that feelings of isolation in online distance-learning settings were decreased through blogs. Students also evaluated the management system previously used, Blackboard, with blogs and expressed that they felt that blogs were easier to use and faster than Blackboard.

Blackboard is a course-management system that offers a user-friendly location for saving course handouts and other information. It also provides faculty and students with various communication devices, such as class discussion boards, e-mail, online assessments, and digital file location for submitting and returning assignments. Although Blackboard provides useful course management tools, Dickey (2004) indicated that two students in her study preferred the blog over Blackboard for the following reasons: "The blogs are better than Blackboard. It was easier to submit and faster. I had to wait forever for Blackboard" and another student said, "I had a lot of problems with the Blackboard discussion stuff. It was confusing. The blogs were easy to use" (p. 287). According to Rhode (2008), in a study conducted to explore learner preferences of students in a self-paced online learning environment,

> Participants generally reported the activity of blogging as equivalent or superior to asynchronous discussion via the discussion board in Blackboard. Such findings add to the burgeoning body of research supporting the pedagogical possibilities of

> blogging as a flexible asynchronous communication alternative to threaded discussion via a restricted learning management system. (p.289)

Of particular significance in observing the pedagogical effectiveness of appropriate blog usage in the classroom is to determine if they impact the students' social experience, a concept introduced to the field of education almost a century ago.

Near the turn of the twentieth century John Dewey's philosophical ideas on education became known as *progressive education.* In *The School and Society,* Dewey (1915*)* argued that schools should help students learn to live and work cooperatively with others. "In a complex society, ability to understand and sympathize with the operation and lot of others is a condition of common purpose which only education can produce" (Dewey, 1915, p. 27). Although Dewey contributed these theoretical notions decades before the inception of Internet course management tools and online social networks, the pedagogical implications remain the same. According to Bruns and Jacobs (2006), "Dewey's contributions of the importance of social participation, through communication, have influenced generations of theorists and practitioners" (p. 92). There is much to be learned from Dewey's ideas as twenty-first century educators determine ways to enhance our students' ability to communicate with one another and learn the skills of social participation.

Using Interactive Technology as a Learning Tool

As educators learn more about using online tools as an instructional strategy, the overall question they should be asking themselves is: Is this helping my students learn? Those in the education community should not implement a strategy simply because students and teachers appreciate its convenience. There should be evidence to support the usage of online learning tools that demonstrates an increase in student learning.

Langhorst (2007) discussed his experiences teaching American History to eighth grade students in Liberty, Missouri. He wrote,

> My students now read books and blog about them with people who live in different states, interact online with authors and panels of experts, and study for tests where and when they want by listening to information downloaded to their MP3 players. (p. 74)

He continued that these tools can be used not only to assess students' understanding, but also to distribute content to students.

Langhorst (2007) created podcasts in which he recorded himself discussing essential concepts that students were expected to understand for an upcoming assessment. He provided a link on the class website that directed students to the MP3 file, which students could then download to their iPod or other MP3 device. He provided a CD of the "StudyCast" for students who did not have access to the Internet at home. Not only did the students react favorably to the podcasts, but parents appreciated the technology as some noted their approval at parent/teacher conferences.

> Some have mentioned that they listened to the audio reviews with their students, which enabled them to take a more active role in their child's study routine. One parent asked me to show other teachers in the school how to create their own StudyCasts. Students said they listened to test reviews while walking the dog, doing chores around the house, or as they were riding in the car. (p. 74)

In a survey Langhorst conducted near the end of the school year, 85 percent of his students communicated, "the hope that other teachers will start recording their own StudyCasts" (p. 75).

Langhorst (2007) also recognized the capabilities of using a blog for learning purposes. Along with his fellow history teachers, he created a blog in which 300 eighth grade history students could discuss a Civil War historical novel. Not only were the students asked to participate, but the teachers invited the author of the book to participate in the virtual discussion. “We also welcomed an eighth grade language arts class from California, a college professor in Louisana, and an audience of viewers that eventually numbered in the thousands from all over the world” (p. 75). Langhorst believed that the students could have read the book in a traditional way, discussed it in the classroom, and learned; however, “discussing issues in an open forum and receiving immediate feedback from the author made this a more dynamic learning experience” (p. 75).

Langhorst (2007) does not claim that technology will “fix” the United States education system, but he concludes that

> We clearly must begin to use some of the technology that has so dramatically changed our lives outside the classroom. It’s not about the “wow” factor – it’s about effective instruction. Students bring multiple learning styles to school; not everyone is best served through lecture-based content delivery and assessments based on written text. Blogs and podcasts can more flexibly meet the needs of individual students both in and out of school. (p. 77)

Using interactive technologies in the classroom will require a shift in thinking, and possibly a level of discomfort, from much of the educational community. Richardson (2006) noted “Learning is no longer primarily fixed in time and space; it can happen anytime and anywhere that we are connected – in a virtual, asynchronous classroom with self-motivated and self-directed people who want to learn with us” (p. 28). As students’ exposure to online networked communities increases, Richardson found that “we need to acclimate students to hypertext environments early on and foster an ability to synthesize relevant bits of information from many diverse sources” (p. 29). Students should not only be learning how to handle hypertext, but teachers can and should be teaching students how to critically read information. “They must be able to analyze the level of writing, the tenor of the comments, and the authors’ motives, commercial or otherwise, to gauge the veracity and relevance of the information” (p. 29). Educators need to recognize the virtual world in which students live, socialize and will one day be expected to work. "If we sincerely want to prepare students to read, write, and edit their way through complex online networks, we need to make these literacies part of the way we do business as educator/learners" (p. 30).

Using Blogging as a Discourse Tool

Long gone are the days when the only method of communicating with someone when distance separates was by pen and paper. With the invention of the telephone, this quickly became the preferred method of communication when a physical gap separated those needing to converse. However, when computers entered nearly every American home and office, electronic mail (e-mail) soon became the chosen method of sending written communication, but e-mail is rapidly disappearing for young people. As cellular phones became increasingly more popular, the new phenomenon of instant messaging entered the landscape of written technological communication. This generation of digital natives as previously described, is just as interested, if not engrossed, in written communication as prior generations. By participating in their virtual communities, students "talk" to people in writing through the digital device. The internet and cell phones are just "another place to hang out and socialize; the device used matters little" (Collier, 2009, p. 38).

Finch (2008) conducted a qualitative study in which she analyzed data collected from 20 high school graduates between the ages of 18 and 21 who described themselves as heavy users of instant messaging, also know as IM. Among the themes that emerged from the study was information that communicated two concepts related to using technology as a discourse tool. The students indicated that instant messaging was "an enjoyable, convenient, time efficient, cost effective, and easy way to communicate with their friends and classmates" (abstract). Considering how instant messaging relates to school performance, the study found that "although some students reported IM distracted and delayed them from doing homework, many students discovered IM was a useful tool for seeking assistance from one another with schoolwork" (abstract).

Although my study does not specifically look at instant messaging, it is important to catch a glimpse of how instant messaging is affecting this generation of learners because as blogging is being used as a tool there are some similarities to instant messaging. There is a central commonality between instant messaging and blogging in that they are both platforms in which students can communicate with one another outside of class. Oghakpor (2008) conducted a study to investigate factors that influence interactions between undergraduate university students in regard to electronic media supporting conventional modes of interpersonal communication. "The results of this research imply that extensive reliance on electronic media has the potential to revolutionize the interactions among humans. As a result, the use of these technologies could give birth to a new form of community-virtual community in the United States" (p. 81).

According to Asselin (2008), "Technology is changing the way people communicate and blogging is a leading example of how modern communications is being affected" (abstract). According to Wrede (2003), blogs afford a "diary-like monologue" (¶ 7), that encourages dialogue and supports a "learner-centered approach" (¶ 46), because it allows students to personally express themselves. In a qualitative study conducted by Dickey (2004), the researcher presented an "interpretive case study of student perceptions of using blogs in a web-based technology integration course for K-12 pre-service teacher education students" (p. 279). The findings of the study indicated that the "use of blogs as a discourse tool for small group learning communities supported the emergence of community by affording students opportunities to socialize, interact and enter into dialogue, seek support and assistance, and express feelings and emotions" (p. 288). As discussion increases regarding the importance of allowing students opportunities for discourse and collaboration, there are some varied views of how social networking can be used in the classroom.

Sturgeon (2008) warned educators using blogs in their classrooms not to confuse blogging with social networking, claiming that a true "educational blog is not about socializing, but about students helping each other get through coursework" (p. 26). However, according to Goldman et al., (2008), students said that what they liked the most about participating in their class blog was having conversations with other students, hearing different viewpoints, experiencing time flexibility in posting comments, seeing others' comments on their posting, giving and receiving coursework assistance, and providing an opportunity to participate without having to talk in class. Another benefit of the blog can be the social interaction that is afforded the blog participants. Goldman et al., concluded the following from their research:

> There are a number of reasons that the seminar blogs may have contributed to student learning. In general, the seminar blogs stimulated student engagement and collaborative learning, which educational research has demonstrated promotes a broad range of students learning outcomes. (p. 1662)

As the research indicates, one of the outcomes provided to students as blogs are used for instructional purposes is an opportunity for students to communicate with each other. As much of the previous discussion focused on using blogs for general educational purposes, for purposes of my study it is significant to determine how blogs have been used in undergraduate programs to prepare pre-service teachers to enter the field of education.

Blogging in a Pre-Service Teaching Setting

Understanding that blogging is possibly an engaging means of communication with young adults, it seems particularly worthwhile to think about the potential of implementing blogs in undergraduate teacher orientation courses (MacBride & Luehmann, 2008). A good deal has been written regarding the capability of blogs to reinforce learning. According to Poling (2005) ,blogs reinforce learning due to their capacity to a) encourage peer support; b) support reflection; c) extend learning outside classroom walls; d) increase quality of work; and e) promote communication with skilled professionals outside of the classroom.

Technology has enabled students in higher institutes of learning to access information rapidly and visually (Smith, 2008). According to Palfrey and Gasser (2008), societal changes due to the digital age can and will be good for society, but in their view, higher education has a massive role to play in this transition. "

> Institutions can take advantage of the opportunities this new era provides by making scholarship freely accessible online in formats today's students understand, teaching students the skills to sort through the torrents of digital information to which they have access and supporting future innovations." (abstract)

West et al., (2006) claimed that their students demonstrated that blogs were useful and helpful in a pre-service Instructional Technology course. The study consisted of individual blogs and blogging buddies. Classes were divided into groups consisting of six students. Due to the fact that the classes were large, each student only needed to read the blogs of his or her "blogging buddies," as well as those of the instructor. The assessment at the end of the semester was an investigation by each teacher of how many times the students commented and how reflective the comments were, according to the opinion of each teacher. The research revealed that most students had to some extent enjoyed participating in the blogs that semester, and thought they were helpful tools for encouraging discussion and reflection. Over two-thirds of them believed that the blog was easy to use.

The blog also produced some challenges. Both teachers and students had difficulty understanding the up-to-date technologies and learning how to utilize them effectively. The instructors believed “that most students neglected their blogs and were not posting regularly or responding to their peers. This decreased the level of the discussion about class topics, and frustrated many students who felt nobody was reading their work” (West et al., 2006, p. 56). Students claimed that blogs were “theoretically” an effective tool for the classroom. The students recognized that the blog could be more helpful, “but that it did not always happen that way in class” (p. 56). The teachers suspected there were several factors that contributed to the deficiency of reflective blogging and discourse. The teachers also expressed that some of the students needed more structure to the activities assigned and some did not catch on to the importance of the tool. Most importantly, the instructors felt “many students struggled to see how blogs were different from discussion boards, static websites or even e-mail” (p.56). They also expressed how challenging it was to monitor and assess the large number of student posts each semester. This study identified the genuine challenges experienced by a group of pre-service students and teachers as blogs were implemented in the Instructional Technology Course (West et al.). The findings of this study can be used to continue a dialogue to determine best practices regarding blog usage in a pre-service teacher education course.

Using Blogs for Reflective Purposes

The reason a blog is often referred to as a journal or diary is that a blog is a reflective method of communication. Although blogs are usually not kept private, as journals are, they provide a platform for users to share their thoughts and reflections. Just as a written journal is stored in the pages of a bound book in a manner to which previous entries can be referred at any time, so is a blog. The difference between the two in these circumstances is that the blog is the journal and the Internet is the bound book in which the blog is stored, and in both cases past entries are easily accessible and often used for future reflection. According to research conducted by Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, and Wright (2004), there is a possibility that blogs promote substantially more comprehensive and expanded writing than does communication via e-mail or through discussion boards though not as much as more formal modes of publication such as a paper or article.

The term *reflective practitioner* has become widely used in the field of education in the last decade. Due to its wide use and many claims that it is essential for effective teachers to be reflective practitioners, it is important to identify and clarify what it means to be a reflective practitioner. Practically all pre-service teacher education programs claim to include reflective components intended to help prepare future teachers in this method of self-examination. Horwitz (2007) noted that “once a teacher educator can clearly define reflection and her purposes for use in her course or program, reflection can be an important tool for growth and evolution in teachers’ identities, thus redefining reflection” (p. 9). According to Schön (1990), “professional education should be centered on enhancing the professional person's ability for 'reflection-in-action,' which is learning by doing and developing the ability for continued learning throughout the professional's career" (abstract).

Atkinson and Claxton (2000) noted that pre-service teacher training programs have different values pertaining to knowledge about teaching and to practice. He determined that two contrasting models, *learning by doing,* and *pedagogical and psychological knowledge*, experienced the same critical issue of students struggling to apply what was learned into teaching a good lesson because it was not just a matter of remembering the good ideas that were taught in the pre-service classroom. According to Atkinson, teacher education programs should be based on a reflective model. He said,

> An attempt is made to construct practice as a learning experience. The student is expected to learn through reflection on practice. … The mere act of reflection in isolation does not ensure any learning since it carries with it neither support nor challenge. It is in the shared reflection of the novice with a peer group or a mentor that these elements will be present and so lead to learning. However, it is very hard to bring teaching skills to consciousness and to give an accurate account of them in language. Sharing reflection is made easier by placing learning in a context – for example, the school placement situation. (p. 71)

Providing support for shared reflection is a critical issue that I will address in Chapter Seven.

Shoffner's (2006) study focused on the value of blogs in revealing students' ideas. Blogs were utilized as an interactive stage where pre-service education teachers shared their views on learning. The study indicated that they believed blogs have the potential to properly reveal their ideas. Students claimed that using a blog was easy to access through the Internet, and agreed that it was efficient in supporting interpersonal communication.

The constructivist notion that learning is basically social in nature led Hernandez-Ramos (2004) to conduct a study in Santa Clara University's teacher preparation program in which he implemented blogs to expose his students to "different forms of reflection based on the constructivist idea that learning is largely social and that people learn better when they learn with someone else" (¶ 3). He did not, however, collect data on the frequency of students' blog posts. Hernandez-Ramos was more concerned with the students engaging in the exercise of reflecting, "not in the traditional sense of writing a paper or journal but in putting it out on the Web and having them experience that sense of exposing their ideas to the world" (¶ 8). He found that the student comments on the blog helped give him precious insights as the instructor. It gave him the opportunity to read the thoughts of students who might not have participated in an in-class discussion. Hernandez-Ramos felt that the blog provided students with a platform for reflective purposes and believed that he saw a part of students that never came out in class, which he thought provided instructors a valuable asset to "get a sense of where students are in their thinking" (¶ 9).

Providing opportunities for students to think critically is important, yet certain limitations may apply. According to Harper (2005),

> Enhanced critical thinking has always been the hallmark of great learning experiences, and it appears that blogging can play a significant role in developing this skill. Even with these significant strengths, the blogging experience also revealed some important cautions for educators. (p. 31)

Teachers need to understand that "students will reveal inappropriate content or comment in an inefficacious manner. Instructors must be quick and diligent in their management of messages posted to a blog" (p. 31).

Kuzu (2007) conducted a study to investigate the views of pre-service teachers on the use of blogs to support instruction and social interaction. His findings indicate that

> Instructional use of information and communication technologies provides teacher trainers with opportunities to train the teachers of the creative society. Blog technologies have been considered among these opportunities, since they are user friendly and flexible enough to support instruction and social interaction. (p. 14)

However, Kuzu also warns that his research indicated a need for studies analyzing the instructional use of blogs to determine effective instructional applications utilizing this technology.

Summary

The literature presented in this chapter provides a theoretical framework for arguing that blogs can be used to support instructional endeavors in the classroom. I have attempted to provide a foundational view of technology and its implications within today's society of learners. I trust that a review of literature defining blogs and discussing their instructional uses to encourage discourse and reflective thinking for pre-service educators has helped to lay the groundwork for the rationale of my study. In order to examine the effectiveness of the instructional and social benefits of blogs further, there is a need for studies which explore and analyze perceived value, students' comfort and interest, and how blogs can be effectively used in foundational pre-service teacher courses. According to Goldman et al. (2008), "despite the burgeoning use of innovative technology in educational and professional settings, research assessing the impact of blogs and online discussion groups on student learning is limited. Publications in peer-reviewed journals are scarce" (p. 1658). In this regard, the existing study aims to investigate not only the views of pre-service education students but also my journey as I determine the effectiveness of my instruction and implementation regarding an

Orientation to Education course blog that was made to support instruction, enhance the learning, and encourage reflection.

Chapter Three: Methodology

In this chapter I will provide a description of the study's design and its justification. I begin with a history and description of the basic principles of the selected methodology of action research. Then, I explain the setting of the study to communicate to the readers the circumstances of the study, and describe the role of the researcher and participants during this reflective journey. I explain the appropriate research strategies I employed during the study followed by an explanation and validation of the data analysis. This chapter concludes with a summary of the methodology implemented in this research study.

History and Description of Action Research

What is action research? Action research simply stated is research into action. It is a methodical examination of one's own teaching. According to McKernan (1991), "action research is research by practitioners to solve their own problems and to improve practice" (p. ix). McCutcheon and Jung (1990) defined action research as "a systemic inquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical and undertaken by participants in the inquiry" (p. 4). Rapoport (1970) provided a definition decades ago stating, "Action research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework" (p. 8). Four themes emerge from these various definitions: "empowerment of participants; collaboration through participation; acquisition of knowledge; and social change" (Masters, 1995, ¶ 6).

Kurt Lewin is believed by many researchers to be the originator of action research. Lewin, an American psychologist in the mid-1940s, assembled an action research theory to support his belief "that in order to understand and change certain social practices, social scientists have to include practitioners from the real social world in all phases of inquiry" (McKernan, 1991). According to Kemmis and McTaggert (1990), "Lewin described action research as proceeding in a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of planning, action and the evaluation of the result of action" (p. 47). Another critical element of action research for educational purposes is the involvement of the teacher as the researcher.

The teacher-researcher movement has evolved over the last few decades to produce a valid and reliable method of qualitative research for teachers to conduct in their own environments. Stenhouse (1971) coined the notion of the teacher as researcher, which according to Elliott (1991) suggested the "dependence of pedagogical change on teachers' capacities for reflection" (p. 16). As the curriculum reform movement swept through British schools during the 1960s, the idea of educational action research was gaining consideration as the research of practical thinking and action (Elliot). This movement began in the United Kingdom, with the effort of Stenhouse and the Humanities Curriculum Project. According to the historical study of action research by Masters (1996), "Stenhouse believed that all teaching should be based upon research, and that research and curriculum development were the sustenance of teachers" (¶ 8).

John Elliott joined the action research stage during this period as he participated in the Humanities Project. As he contributed to this project he recognized the conversion since the idea of "teachers as researchers" to the idea of "teachers as action researchers" due to the approach of giving teachers investigational teaching strategies (Elliott, 1991). Elliott argued that the project made accessible to teachers the accumulated common practical awareness and insights. According to him, “the efforts of the Humanities Project team to facilitate reflective practice in schools generated an important conceptual distinction between the ‘research’ role of the outsider in relation to the ‘research’ role of the insider practitioner” (p. 30). The Project also showed Elliott that action research allowed for formative evaluation of curriculum in addition to summative.

In 1973, the Ford Foundation sponsored the Ford Teaching Project which was led by John Elliott and Clem Adelman. The project took place in 12 schools and included over 40 teachers who carried out action research into the dilemmas of executing inquiry and discovery strategies in their classrooms (Elliott, 1991). The Ford Project was built upon the groundwork laid by the Humanities Project; however, according to Elliott , “it drew on lessons learned from that experience concerning the problems of facilitating pedagogical change” (p. 29). Three main differences occurred throughout the Ford Project that varied from the Humanities Project.

First, Adelman and Elliott placed tighter restrictions on their own “power to control teachers’ thinking about their practice” (Elliott, 1991, p. 31). Adelman and Elliott devised an ethical framework designed to “reduce the amount of control others, including peers and members of the central team, could exert over teachers’ thinking about their practices” (p. 31). The reason for the framework was to communicate to the teachers that they were to use others as resources in their reflections about their practice without depending on their views.

Second, the Ford Project established an organizational framework to give teachers opportunities to reflect together about the triangulated data. Denzin (1970) conceived the term ‘triangulation’ as support for the mixtures of research methodologies. However, it was during the Ford Project that Elliott and Adelman worked out the fundamental ideas underlying triangulation (McKernan, 1991). Triangulation (Elliott & Adelman, 1976) is the practice of organizing different forms of evidence into a more logical frame of reference so that they can be evaluated to determine similarities and differences. According to Woods (1986) "The use of three or more different methods or bearings to explore an issue greatly increases the chances of accuracy" (p. 87). During the Ford Project, Adelman and Elliott collected three sources of data (a taped lesson, and two recorded interviews – one with the teacher and one with the students) and with the teacher's permission, the sets of triangulated data were circulated among the other teachers in the study. The results indicated that the "teachers who had participated in the triangulation studies showed willingness… to discuss their data openly with peers" (Elliott, 1991, p. 32). In other words, whereas the Humanities Project was looking for the fidelity of the outcomes of the project, the Ford Project had the more limited purpose of giving the teachers the opportunity to explore their teaching.

Third, the Ford Project's emphasis on professional dialogue allowed teachers opportunities to create "their own hypotheses and to generalize them across classrooms and contexts," noted Elliott (1991, p. 33). Finally, Elliott (1996) stated that "the Ford Project not only generated a more emancipated and developed form of reflective practice amongst teachers than the Humanities Project, it also generated a more developed second-order form of reflective practice amongst the external change agents" (p. 35). As teachers participated in this deeply reflective study, Adelman and Elliott began to recognize that there were multiple layers of reflections that occurred as a result of the changes. True action research provides various opportunities for practitioners to experience multi-layered reflection that occurs as each layer is exposed. In order to fully understand the framework of action research, this history must be noted and related to the practical applications of action research.

Lewin's model of action research, as interpreted by Kemmis (1980), contained the following general process of steps: identify a general idea, investigation, basic planning, creating the initial action step, applying the first action step, evaluating, and modifying the general plan. Upon completion of this first set of activities, Lewin's model stated that the action researcher then begins the following series of cyclical activities: explaining the second action step, completion, assessment, modifying the general plan, creating the third action step, completion, and assessment. The list of activities continues on in this manner throughout the research process displaying that action research is *recursive*.

So, what steps must a teacher take to conduct action research in his/her classroom? Elliott (1996) described the following phases, similar to those of Lewin, of the action research process:

1. Identify and clarify the general idea
2. Reconnaissance
    a. Describe the facts of the situation
    b. Explain the facts of the situation
3. Construct the general plan
4. Develop the next action steps
5. Implement the next action steps

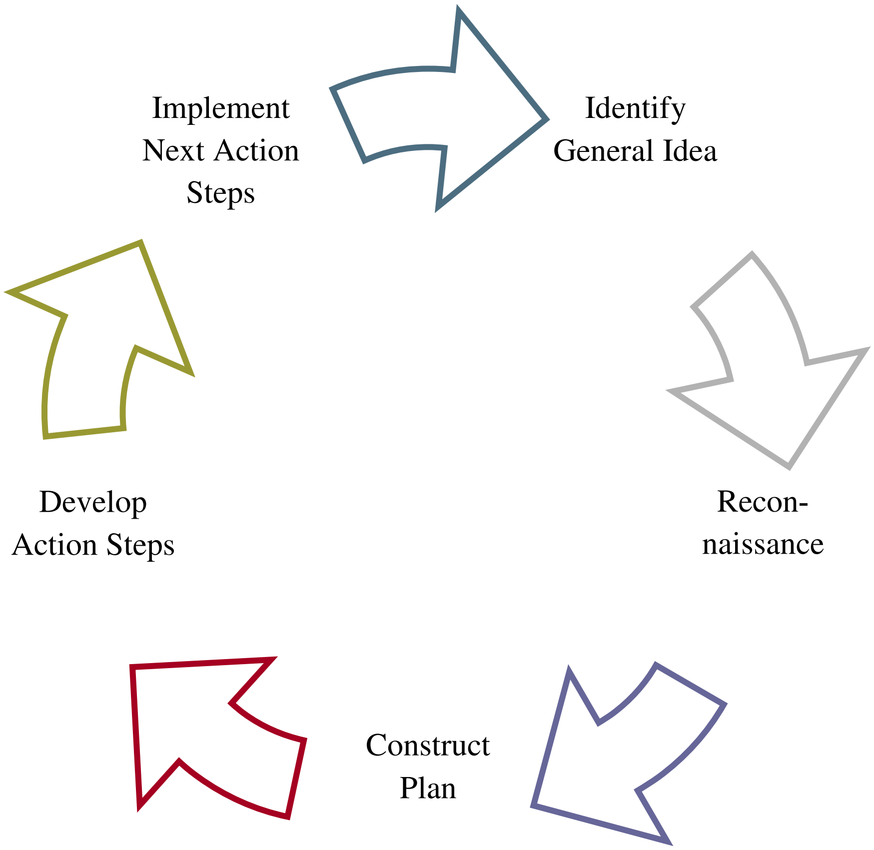

Figure 1. Elliott's activities of action research

According to Elliot (1985), action research is often the "most neglected mode of reflection in schools" (p. 38). Too often in schools and universities, educators attempt to transfer pedagogical abilities from a skilled host teacher to a novice by offering step-by-step instructions. Schütz (1964) described this type of transfer as "recipe knowledge." Unfortunately, becoming an effective educator and reflective practitioner one must go beyond "recipe knowledge," and action research can move educators in the right direction. It is unfortunate that more researchers do not consider this methodology when attempting to diagnose a particular situation in education because, as Elliot (1985) noted, action research is concerned with the everyday realistic problems that teachers experience, instead of the theoretical problems identified by pure researchers within a field of expertise. As action research has more and more become a component of university courses in teacher education and in advanced degree programs, many courses are requiring some form of teacher-research (Feldman, 1994). Not only is action research increasing in university settings, it is also now being utilized in school districts for in-service professional staff development. As the use of action research in schools is growing, we must examine the validity and reliability of this methodology.

Is action research capable of generating scientifically supported results? Greenwood and Levin (1998) insisted that "action research can and does produce valid and meaningful social research results" (p. 54). Just as action research is described as a repeated cycle of action, implementation, and evaluation, Greenwood and Levin believed that

> Much research in the sciences can best be understood as a successful and disciplined form of repeated cycles of testing the relationship between thought and action. In other words, the sciences indeed are radically different from the contemporary social sciences, but not for the reasons conventional critiques give…. By separating science from action, they sever the connection between thought and action that permits the testing of results both in the physical and biological sciences and in action research. (p. 55)

As the aim of action research is the ongoing cyclical relationship between thought and action, Greenwood and Levin disputed that action research is more "capable of producing scientific results in a positive sense than conventional social science" (p. 56). However, it is worth noting that Kurt Lewin, the social psychologist and an initial supporter of action research, "operated with a view of social research as both scientific and socially engaged.

Lewin understood clearly the link between action research and the scientific method" (p. 56).

Greenwood and Levin (1998) added that science is a highly recursive endeavor involving continual action-reflection-action sequences:

> The amount of time spent cross-referencing resulting data with expectations, checking and re-checking for fit, and action on the data to assess the effects of particular actions in relation to expectations about how the data will behave is a dominant characteristic of science. Thought and action cycle around each other repeatedly, as they necessarily do in any kind of action research. (p. 65)

Another scientific argument that supports the validity of action research stems from the idea of general systems theory. In general systems theory, the examined elements are systems, not individuals or separate institutions. "Individuals operate within systems that create process environments that affect the outcomes of behavior in complex ways…. The world is a complex, interacting array of systems and system processes, bumping into each other in a variety of ways" (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, p. 70). Both general systems theory and action research deeply depend on a holistic analysis of the world. Greenwood and Levin concluded that humans are understood "to exist only within social systems, and these systems have properties and processes that condition human behavior and are in turn conditioned by that behavior. Social systems are not mere structures, but are processes in continual motion" (p. 71). Action research can be described as a process in continual motion; therefore, making it an appropriate comparison to general systems theory.

When determining the credibility of action research, one must verify its internal and external arguments. The internal reliability is generated by the "collaborative character of the research process. Its direct consequences in altered patterns of social action constitute a clear test of credibility" (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, p. 80). The external reliability is "knowledge capable of convincing someone who did not participate in the inquiry that the results are believable…. Action research believes that only knowledge generated and tested in practice is credible" (p. 81). Another important issue of credibility lies with the fact that action research does not "generalize through abstraction and the loss of history and context. Meanings created in one context are examined for their credibility in another situation through a conscious reflection on similarities and differences between contextual features and historical factors" (p. 84).

As practicing teachers conduct action research in their own classrooms, they are able to consciously reflect on the context to create new knowledge. Erzberger, a teacher conducting action research, began asking questions about the description of action research as she wanted to "do more than the <u>monitor and adjust</u> that is Schön's (1990) reflection-in-action" (Feldman, 1994, ¶ 5). Feldman examined Erzberger's dilemma and determined important suggestions for action research in pre-service and in-service teacher education programs. He found that if teacher-research is going to be effective a "radically different conception of what counts as research must be accepted. The focus shifts as the teacher looks at the ways in which she can project from her educational situation in a way that generates new educational situations," said Feldman (¶ 15). Feldman concluded,

> What is important for the teacher are the decisions she makes and the actions she takes as a result of those decisions. She can then ask whether by deciding to act in a certain way, and then in fact acting, she has modified her educational situation in the way in which she has envisioned it. (¶ 24)

Ironically, this *radical way of thinking* resembles classic scientific investigation! As we conclude the scientific trustworthiness of action research, we must not forget the political accountability issues facing schools today that could benefit from action research.

Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the government and the public have made it clear to educators that there must be a level of accountability (with the majority of the burden being placed on the teachers) that holds schools to a high standard that meets the needs of all learners. Whether one agrees or disagrees with the Act, most would recognize that its enactment has forced schools to take more responsibility for student learning while deflecting other reasons for poor school achievement. Nonetheless, school leaders are trying to find ways to reform their schools. Often, school improvement leaders attempt to analyze the vast amount of educational research to guide their improvement efforts. "However, many practitioners do not find that either formal or applied academic research is very helpful" (Mertler, 2006, p.10).

Teachers cannot simply allow others to examine their practice or assume that outsiders know what it is on the basis of test scores. Teachers must become their own best researchers in their own classrooms, seeking answers to many school improvement questions. Teachers have been requested repeatedly to become researchers and practitioners who are more self-reflective (McKernan, 1996). McKernan commented that the ability to "both produce and understand research is of singular importance to a profession" (p. 19). He continued that action research is the ideal methodology for the education and empowerment of teachers. By investigating their own practice, educators can improve and achieve a higher level of accountability and change. Action research provides the ideal vehicle for such self study. As Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007) stated, "Action research is a systematically evolving process, a living process changing both the researcher and the situation in which he or she acts" (p. 133).

Table 1. *My Action Research Cycle Timeline*

Semester/Year	Action Research Process	What I did
Spring 2009	Identify general idea	I utilized a class blog for instructional purposes in three sections of *Orientation to Education.*
Summer 2009	Conduct reconnaissance, construct the action research plan, and develop the action steps	I described and reflected upon the facts of my use of the class blog in a personal journal. I wrote lesson plans and clarified blog topics to be used in the fall 2009 semeseter. I determined the schedule for data collection in the fall 2009 semester.
Fall2009	Implement action plan, identify ideas, reconnaissance, and determin new action steps	I implemented action steps through actual lesson plans and blog implementation in all four sections of *Orientation to Education*. However, data was only collected in one section. I collected data through questionnaires, focus groups, fieldnotes, feedback cards, and an outside observer. By using the collected data, I described the facts of the situation and determined which action steps needed to be taken throughout the remainder of the semester.

Action research is a systematic and critical examination of one's own teaching. Action research encourages teachers to study their own instructional practices with their own students to draw some conclusions, and possibly to raise difficult questions regarding their own pedagogy within the given context of their situation. Mertler (2006) noted that action research concentrates specifically on the “unique characteristics of the population with whom a practice is employed or with whom some action must be taken” (p. 10). Through implementing this type of research, teachers are better able to analyze their own effectiveness or ineffectiveness as a practitioner. I chose to utilize action research as the methodology for my study to facilitate reflective practice in my own teaching. Originally, I set out to evaluate the effectiveness of the blog, but I ended up also focusing a great deal on studying my teaching. This method of research provided me with triangulated data that could inform me of my own teaching practices, in addition to the implementation of the blog. The timeline of my action research cycle is found in the table below.

Setting of the Study

University

This study was specific to one class of students in a teacher education program at Lindenwood University. Lindenwood is a four-year, private liberal arts university situated among a host of linden trees on the 500-acre campus located in the heart of St. Charles, Missouri, a suburban community of 52,000 people just west of St. Louis. According to Lindenwood’s website, Lindenwood offers “more than 120 undergraduate and graduate degree programs to approximately 14,500 students through values-centered programs that lead to development of the whole person,” (Lindenwood University Website, n.d.). Lindenwood accepts 58 percent of its applicants, while the 75th percentile of ACT scores of accepted students is a score of 24 (Lindenwood University Information, n.d.).

Program

The School of Education has the largest enrollment of any academic school at Lindenwood University. A portion of the conceptual framework of the Lindenwood School of Education is based on the faculty's agreement that,

> The general outcome of the teacher education program must be teaching professionals that believe and implement teaching as a blend of "art" and "science"…. Teaching as an art because teaching is a craft that must be learned and applied in an authentic environment. Teaching as a science because it must be influenced by research and best practice for optimal student learning to be achieved. (School of Education, 2008)

The teacher education program is a degree program that leads students on a journey toward teacher certification recognized by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education of Missouri (DESE.) All undergraduate students seeking teacher certification, regardless of the level of certification being pursued, are required to take the following five foundational courses: *Orientation to Education, Psychology of Teaching and Learning, Measurement and Evaluation to Enhance Learning, Education of the Exceptional Child,* and *History and Philosophy of Education.*

Course

This study was conducted in a course titled, *Orientation to Education*, one of the five foundational courses. Usually *Orientation to Education* is the first education course in which students enroll, so the students tend to be young and in their first year at Lindenwood. Students enrolled in this course receive three credit hours upon successful completion of the coursework and completion of a thirty-hour practicum, during which they are required to observe a certified teacher for thirty hours of instructional time. The course seeks to provide them with a general overview of the field of education. They are also taught the requirements of the Lindenwood teacher education program such as CBASE testing, online portfolio, Praxis II, and student teaching application.

I had taught this course for two years prior to my research study, beginning in the fall semester of 2007. There were five sections of *Orientation to Education* offered during the fall semester of 2009, which was the term the research implementation took place. Of the four sections of *Orientation to Education* that I taught, I chose to conduct the research in my Tuesday 11:00 a.m. section, as it was the last of three sections I taught on Tuesday mornings, which allowed me an extended period following the class session to reflect upon my classroom experiences.

Participants in the Study

This study was conducted as an action research project; therefore, I was the main focus of this study, but the usefulness of the blog was also a major focus. As I began examining the blog, I determined that I would also be investigating my own teaching. However, the research would not have been possible without the help of my students and an outside observer, whom I shall call my *critical friend*. I thus obtained data from at least three sources – allowing for triangulation, as previously explained. Information about the outside observer will be provided later in this chapter. The data collected from the students and my critical friend were important components of the data I generated during this study.

Students

The participants of the study were the students enrolled in EDU11000-Section 11 *Orientation to Education.* Of the 34 students enrolled in this class, 19 were freshmen (24 credit hours or less), five were sophomores (between 25 and 54 credit hours), eight were juniors (between 55 and 84 credit hours), and two students were seniors with more than 84 credit hours. Although the class mainly consisted of underclassmen, some students who transferred to Lindenwood from another school or had recently changed their major found themselves an upperclassman in this class. The students in this semester's course ranged in age from 17 to 36. However, it is important to note that although the mean age was 27, and the median age was 19. As noted previously, as this was the first education course usually taken, most of the students were young. No fewer than 15 of the 34 students were 18 years old. Twenty-one of the 34 students were female. Of the students not residing on the campus, two of the students lived in Illinois, 24 lived within a 50 mile radius of St. Charles, and seven lived in Missouri towns outside of a 50 mile radius of St. Charles. One student lived in a suburb of San Antonio, TX while not living on-campus. Twenty-nine students resided on campus while five students lived off-campus.

Teacher-Researcher

At the time of the study I was an assistant part-time professor. I began my teaching career as a public high school and middle school mathematics teacher for eight years prior to taking five years off to attend to my young family. My first university teaching position was as an adjunct professor at Lindenwood University teaching *Elementary/Middle School Mathematics Methods*. After one year of teaching *Math Methods,* I began teaching *Orientation to Education* and *Foundations of Education*. The course *Foundations of Education* was very similar to the *Orientation to Education* course except that the students were all graduate students pursuing their Master of Arts in Teaching Degree, a program designed for adult non-traditional students who already possessed an undergraduate degree but were now interested in teacher certification.

Prior to and during this study I was also a doctoral student pursuing an Ed. D. in Instructional Leadership. My purpose in pursing a doctorate degree was to qualify me for a full-time university position as Lindenwood requires all full-time faculty members to have a terminal degree. One year prior to this study, in the summer of 2008, I had been a student in an Instructional Leadership course, in which I was introduced to and expected to participate in a class blog. I found this technological tool very meaningful and effective in helping me to reflect upon my past and present teaching experiences. My positive blogging experience motivated me to include a class blog into all three sections of *Orientation to Education* the subsequent semesters. Accordingly, I implemented the blog into my course plan to be used in all three sections for the first time in the fall semester of 2008.

I continued using the blog in each of the three sections of *Orientation to Education* I taught in the spring semester of 2009 with very few changes. Other than reading the students' assessment of the course via the end-of-course evaluation, I did not solicit their views about the course or the blog. Due to their general approval of the class, I (unfortunately) assumed that most of the students enjoyed the blog, which led me to making only minimal changes to the blog in the spring semester. The only changes made to the blog were superficial in nature. Due to the fact that I chose to leave the course blogs online for students' future reference, I could no longer use the same web address. I continued using Blogspot.com; however, the title of the blog and the web addresses changed. The other change I made allowed for easier grade keeping. In the fall semester of 2008, I titled each posting only with a description of the topic, i.e. Your LU Program. In the following semester, I began titling each blog with words that were indicative not only of the week's topic, but also of the week of the semester, e.g. Post 4 – Your LU Program.

My willingness to discover best teaching practices and my desire to implement effective technology tools into my classroom, along with the compelling desire to complete my doctorate, inspired me to conduct this research study investigating the role of the blog in the context of *Orientation to Education* in the fall semester of 2009.

Elliott (1996) stated,

> What makes teaching an educational practice is not simply the quality of its educational outcomes, but the manifestation within the practice itself of certain qualities which constitute it as an educational process capable of fostering educational outcomes in terms of student learning. (p. 50)

If I could reflect on the consequences of using the blog in this course and determine if it had helped the students reflect upon their practicum experience, then I could revise and improve my teaching practices involving the blog in the course, as well as share my experiences with other people working in cognate settings.

Action research allows teachers to study their own instructional practices and their own students, to draw some conclusions, and possibly to raise difficult questions regarding their own pedagogy within the given context of their situation. It is, thus, *insider* research. I was the insider and an active participant in the study as the course instructor. I examined my own involvement in the course preparation, weekly classroom methods and strategies, and blog participation. Kemmis and McTaggert (1988) noted that a discerning feature of action research is that "those affected by planned changes have the primary responsibility for deciding on courses of action which seem likely to lead to improvement and for evaluating the results of strategies tried out in practice" (p. 6). I investigated my general and specific pedagogical practices used with the students inside the classroom and on the class blog. I examined my role in the blog and compared it to my previous involvement.

According to Greenwood and Levin (1998), action research “focuses on specific context and demands that theory and action not be separated, and is committed to the idea that the test of any theory is its capacity to resolve problems in real-life situations” (p. 79). I am the most qualified person to investigate and determine the theories and actions that stem from my classroom. Of course, I influenced the methodology and outcomes so my role in this action research could not be overlooked. My research, my teaching, and my role in the study were all immersed in the situation.

The purpose of the research is to investigate my own teaching; therefore, to attempt to separate my role as researcher from my role as the teacher would be futile and counterproductive. McKernan (1991) argued that “the major rationale for teachers as researchers is in terms of a professional response and democratic notions of teacher autonomy in professional curriculum judgement” (p. 55). The participant researcher has two main purposes: to take on the position of a member in a setting and to delve into the ethnographic atmosphere of the setting (McKernan, 1991). As Greenwood and Levin (1998) were comparing physical and biological science to the iterative cycles of thought and action involved in action research they noted, “Predictive activity takes the form of intervening in the phenomenon under study to change its state in a desired direction. This is precisely what the experimental method in science does and what action research aims to achieve in the social world” (p. 64). My role in this study as a participant was essential. Feldman (1994) echoed these ideas as he said,

> As the teacher engages in the research process she comes to a different understanding of her educational situation that results in her deciding to act in different ways…. By reflecting on those events, the teacher has gained insight, a new perspective, a different understanding of her educational situation. She has gained knowledge, she knows more about teaching and how to teach. (¶ 12)

The original focus of this study was to prove the value of using the blog in my course; however, another focus emerged as I recognized the need to reflect upon my curriculum and lesson implementation. In addition to confronting these local-level issues, this study tackled some general issues from which I felt educators in various teaching situations could benefit. In this sense my study had the potential to provide general findings. Pre-service teacher educators can gather information from this study which could possibly help their students participating in practicum experiences. Through the utilization of a class blog students were required to reflect upon their practicum experiences and share their reflections with classmates. Pre-service teacher educators might collect information from this study that would benefit their teaching practices. Also, elementary and high school teachers might utilize information found in this study to aid them in their pursuit of most effective uses of technology in the classroom.

Data Collection

According to Winter (1989) it is extremely important to gather information that will

> tell us more than, as practitioners, we usually know; for example: making systematic records where usually we are content with our spontaneous impressions, making permanent records, where usually we are content to rely on our memories, and collecting detailed statements from people whose general opinions we usually take for granted. (p. 20)

To provide a thick description and as complete a picture as possible of the way the blog functioned in my course, I employed several sources of data including my personal reflective field notes, student questionnaires, student focus groups, student blog reflections, student written comments regarding class sessions, and observations from an outside observer. Triangulation of multiple data sources gave the possibility of trustworthiness to the study.

Personal Reflective Field Notes

Schön is one of the most significant writers on the topic of reflection. He noted that it is crucial to develop a new body of research-based information that is the result of a thorough investigation of what professionals actually do. According to Schön (1990), a reflective practitioner is one who possesses an implied way of knowing which is instinctive rather than deliberate. He added that "although we sometimes think before acting, it is also true that in much of the spontaneous behavior of skillful practice we reveal a kind of knowing which does not step from a prior intellectual operation" (p. 16). Therefore, I wrote personal reflective field notes after each class session and periodically throughout the study pondering my role and my teaching practices. I also wrote frequent reflections on the data collected from the students and my critical friend. These data were printed, coded, and analyzed for patterns and themes.

Student Questionnaires

I collected semi-structured questionnaires from the students at two different occasions throughout the study. The first questionnaire, dispensed on the first day of class, asked students about their comfort level with technology and more specifically their experience with blogging inside and outside of the classroom. I also administered a final questionnaire during the last class session to obtain information about their views on the same topics and a few additional topics pertaining to their recent blog experience upon completion of the course.

Focus Groups

Participation in the focus groups was voluntary. I organized focus groups at two different times during the study. I chose to have the focus groups conducted during a regularly scheduled class session. Due to the relatively large number of students in the class, they were placed in smaller groups for the purpose of creating more intimate focus groups. The first set of focus groups took place on Tuesday, October 6th, 2009 from 11:00 a.m. to 11:50 a.m. in various classrooms and faculty offices at Lindenwood University seven weeks into the course. There were 37 participants in this set of focus groups. Thirty-three focus group participants were students, four participants were group facilitators asking the questions and documenting the student responses. As I did not want my presence as their course instructor to influence or inhibit any of the students' responses, I invited Lindenwood School of Education faculty members to facilitate the groups. However, only two faculty members were able to help, so the other two facilitators were students – one student, Susan (name has been changed), was a student in the study group and the other student was a Work and Learn (university work/study program) student. The Lindenwood faculty members and the Work and Learn student were "outsiders" to the study while Susan was an "insider" to the study.

The second set of focus groups was conducted in a similar matter on Tuesday, November 19th, 2009 from 11:00 a.m. to 11:50 a.m. in various faculty offices at Lindenwood University 12 weeks into the 15-week course. The main purpose of the second focus group was to determine if the students' views about the blog had changed while they had been excused from attending class for five weeks to allow an extended opportunity for the students to complete their field experience hours. There were 30 participants in this set of focus groups. Twenty-five participants were students, five participants were group facilitators asking the questions and documenting the student responses. Again, I chose not to be a participant of these focus groups because I felt that my role as teacher might discourage students from being honest in their responses. During this second set of focus groups, all five facilitators were Lindenwood School of Education faculty members. I transcribed the focus group data for coding and analysis.

Students' Reflections Posted on the Blog

I collected student responses from the class blog. These responses were essential to the study. These responses provided insight into the students' viewpoints during the study. Students were required to post two comments onto the blog site each week. Their first response was to be an answer to the question(s) I provided for them on the blog site each week. Some of the blog topics were based on class content, some were based on the text book content, and some were based on their practicum experiences. Student responses were printed, coded, and analyzed for topical themes and evidence of reflective practice.

Students' Written Comments Following Each Class Period

Beginning in the second week of the study, I tried to require students to write comments on an index card I provided. They were to pick up a card on the way in the classroom and were encouraged to write down any thoughts they had during the course of the 75-minute class period. Their comments could be about the class blog, teacher instruction, student participation, assignments, etc. I tried to require them to write anything that would benefit me as their instructor. These cards were collected after five class meetings in September, and on November 24, 2009. The students did not fill out cards during the intervening weeks because two of the dates were the focus group class sessions while five of the dates the students were out of class working on their practicum. I typed up student comments to be printed, coded, and analyzed for themes.

Outside Observer – Critical Friend

As the lead teacher of the *Orientation to Education* course, I had an intimate knowledge of the setting. An outside researcher would not have had my background knowledge and participatory view of the situation. However, this viewpoint comes with issues that must be addressed; while an insider view is useful and essential with action research, it might have been difficult for me to look critically at my data (Horwitz, 2007). Elliott (1994) noted that using an outside observer can be useful to collect information and communicate the data to the teacher by making comprehensive notes as he observes in the research setting. Dr. Owen van den Berg, a Lindenwood doctoral program faculty member, was my critical friend whose contributions in the form of observational notes and feedback from the perspective of an outside observer were used as one source of data. However, I would consider Dr. van den Berg as more of an inside-outside observer, as he joined the class on four occasions to gain a clearer understanding of the context of the study.

In an *Educational Leadership* article, titled "Critical Friends," Bambino (2002) commented as follows on the idea of having a significant outside observer participating in the process:

> Having a critical friend creates opportunities for colleagues to challenge their own practice as well as that of their peers. The work is critical because it challenges educators to improve their teaching practice…. The work involves friends who share a mission, offer strong support, and nurture a community of learners. (p. 27)

Dr. van den Berg volunteered to assist me on my action research journey. He attended four of the classes offering observational notes on my instruction, and he provided frequent verbal and written feedback on student and teacher blog participation. Dr. van den Berg was not an active participant in the class blog, although he was not completely a passive observer in class as he made a few comments from time to time. Dr. van den Berg was an outside reader of the blog as I gave him access to read the blog, but he did not participate online in any of the blog discussions. We met weekly to review the data, and we corresponded via e-mail with regular frequency to share our observations and reflections. These observations and discourses via e-mail were printed, coded, and analyzed for recurring themes.

Process and Analysis of the Study

Analyzing the data was an inductive process that took many steps. As the data were collected, typed (in some instances), and printed, they were organized into two labeled notebooks for identification purposes. One notebook contained all of the blog comments provided by the students throughout the entire semester. The other notebook contained the remainder of the data which were labeled and ordered in the following way: Student Demographics, Feedback Card Comments, Owen's Observations, Threaded e-mails with Owen, My Fieldnotes, Pre-Study Questionnaire, Focus Group #1, Focus Group #2, Post-Study Questionnaire, End-Of-Course Evaluations, Lesson Plans and Syllabus.

The first step in my analytical process occurred when I reviewed my research questions and my intentions for the study. Initially, I read through all of the data. As I knew I would be using grounded theory, it was important for me to let the themes emerge from the data. I did not want to force the data to fit into any preconceived categories. Grounded theory, as introduced in 1967 by Glaser and Strauss, “seeks not only to uncover relevant conditions, but also to determine how the actors respond to changing conditions and to the consequences of their actions” (Corbin & Strauss, 1997 p. 3). I attempted to collect and analyze the data bearing in mind the following list of grounded theory procedures provided by Corbin and Strauss :

1. Data collection and analysis are interrelated processes
2. Concepts are the basic units of analysis
3. Concepts must be developed and related
4. Sampling in grounded theory proceeds on theoretical grounds
5. Analysis makes use of constant comparisons
6. Patterns and variations must be accounted for
7. Process must be built into the theory
8. Writing theoretical memos is an integral part of doing grounded theory
9. Hypotheses about relationships among categories should be developed and verified as much as possible
10. A grounded theorist need not work alone
11. Broader structural conditions must be analyzed. (p. 3-10)

As I kept the previous procedures in mind, I read through the data for a second time as I began coding them. I made comments in the margins, identifying the major categories that were emerging (Woods, 1986). Table 2 shows the initial categories for coding in the order in which they first appeared in the data.

Table 2. *Initial categories for coding*

Administration	Class Opener	Practicum

Assignment Effectiveness	Discourse	Teachable Moment
Blog Discussion	Diversity	Teaching style
Blog Instructions	Facebook	Technology
Blog Organization	In-Class Activities	Time Management
Class Activity	Lesson Plan	Time Constraint
Class Discussion	Placement Issues	Transitions

Next, I determined that I would organize the codes into my original investigative categories – My Class Instruction and Blog Implementation, as found in the table below.

Table 3. *Second Set of Categories for Coding*

Instruction Codes	Blog Codes
Pre-Class atmosphere and class opener	Facebook/Platform/Gadgets
Administrative/Organization	Students' prior use/Instructions/Feelings about
Assignment effectiveness/Instructional use of technology	Acquaintance tool/Pictures
Class Discussion/My interaction with students	Why Blog? /Reflective practice/Practicum
Time Constraints/Lesson Plan Formation	In-class blog discussion/class opener
My instructional style	Topics/Points/Level of Participation
My transformation/Reflective Practice	Time constraints
Action research and my fears	My participation

Practicum Break/Reflective Practice	Students' desires vs. my professional opinion

Next, I met with Dr. Nancy Robb-Singer, a professor at University of Missouri at St. Louis who had previously conducted a study on digital communication. As Owen had had me read her Ed. D. study, he made arrangements for me to meet with someone who would have a good sense of the study I had conducted. At this meeting on December 17, 2009, I shared with Dr. Robb-Singer that I was concerned about my number of codes and she recommended that I condense the codes. She recognized some cross-over between some of the codes. She suggested that I continue playing with the data and the condensing would become clearer, if there was any condensing to be done. She also suggested that I use different colors to signify the various codes in the data to make it easier to analyze. It was at that time that I came up with the final codes as found in Table 4.

Table 4. *Final Categories for Coding*

Discourse	Administration and Organization
Practicum Break	Time Constraints
Provide atmosphere of safety, trust, and care	Feedback
Student participation/My participation in Blog	Why Blog?
Facebook	Tension

At this point in the data analysis I began writing Chapter Five using concepts that I had formulated where it seemed "several different pieces of data, or issues, had certain structural properties in common" (Woods, 1986, p. 130). I began with specific observations and reflections from the data collected. Then I noted any patterns and recurring themes in the data, which in turn I used to formulate tentative hypotheses. Finally, I developed general conclusions and theories using not only the data "but also the setting, the participants, and anything else that contribute(d) to the uniqueness of the specific context under investigation" (Mertler, 2006, p. 124).

As I continued writing Chapter Five, I wrote with a mixture of themes topically and chronologically. As my supervisor Dr. van den Berg read the first draft, he suggested that I write the story chronologically. I was thankful for his suggestion as I felt the story would be easier to read from a sequential standpoint. Mid-way through the study my students were not in class because they were out participating in the 30 hour practicum. This break in our class meetings was the logical place to end Chapter Five as one of the facets of my investigation was to evaluate the effectiveness of the blog's ability to encourage reflection while away from class. I wrote Chapter Six in the same chronological fashion as I had written Chapter Five. I continued using grounded theory to determine the patterns and recurring themes in the data to tell the rest of the story.

Although this is a detailed description of the procedures that occurred during my data analysis, there were many other moments that inspired my knowledge. In particular, my ongoing dialogue (in-person and virtually) with colleagues and students helped me to comprehend my data in different ways. As I shared my thoughts and participated in these discussions, I benefitted and was able to determine what the analysis of my data was saying.

> Action research is, first and foremost, a way of keeping the conversation going. Action research's methods aim to open horizons of discussion, to create spaces for collective reflection in which new descriptions and analyses of important situations may be developed as the basis for new actions. (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, p. 86)

Summary

In this chapter, I began with an historical context of action research followed by a description of the methodology explaining the cyclical system of analyzing one's own practice. I provided a portrayal of the setting and the participants involved in the study. Then I explained the various forms of data collected during the study. Finally, I discussed the methods of analysis used in the study. In the next chapter I will describe the antecedents that led to the action research plan – the "how" and "why" I chose to use weblogs as an instructional tool in my classes. I will also provide an explanation of the research plan that I implemented for the study.

Chapter Four: Background – The Historical Context and Design of the Action Plan

"Blogging to learn, learning to blog." Burgess (2006, p.105) used these words as a title to an article discussing her experience with weblogs in higher education. Although she used this title to represent her utilization of blogs as learning tools while the students created their own blogs, I use those six words to commence this chapter as I describe the events that preceded this study on my voyage as I learned to blog. As I embarked on this journey to improve my practice using blogs in the classroom, there were some important landmarks along the way which must be addressed to fully understand the action research plan that will be discussed in detail at the end of this chapter. Chapter Four begins with the history that led to my Internet usage in the classroom. This discussion is followed by a description of how I began integrating a web course management system, WebCT, into my classroom. The chapter continues with a presentation of how and why I first began using a weblog in my classes and what events led up to the study that is central to this dissertation and which began in August of 2009. In order to understand the context of this study it is important to recognize why I wanted my students to use *blogging to learn,* yet I had to *learn to blog*.

My History of Internet Usage in the Classroom

My experience with technology in the classroom goes back quite a distance to 1995 when, in my second year of teaching, I utilized an electronic gradebook software program. There were no computers in the classrooms at Fort Zumwalt South High School where I was teaching secondary mathematics. The school had one computer lab class equipped with approximately 20 computers in which students interacted with the computers if they were enrolled in a computer programming class. Teachers could utilize these computers before or after school for general word processing and/or grade keeping purposes. I do not remember any teachers utilizing the computer lab at school, just as I did not use the school's computer lab. I used my computer at home – an Apple II E. I not only used the computer for electronic grade keeping purposes but also for some of the graphics, which are now quite outdated. I used my home computer to create birthday cards for each of my students.

I recollect that many of my colleagues were not at all interested in learning how to use a computer for grade keeping purposes or at all for that matter. It was viewed by many as an inconvenient and difficult device which could not possibly be easier or more convenient than the typical green gradebook and calculator. However, I recognized its value even though it was time consuming to enter the grades from my gradebook into the computer program at home. The two main reasons I appreciated the electronic gradebook were because of the capability it provided me to determine grades more frequently and more easily than using the typical gradebook and calculator, and because it enabled me to easily share this information with the students. I quickly recognized how many students appreciated and used the frequently updated grade sheets as motivation and feedback to drive their future performance.

In 1996 while working on my Master's Degree in Education at Lindenwood University, I was introduced to the World Wide Web during a graduate class designed for educators interested in utilizing technology. The course instructor showed the class this new phenomenon and demonstrated that many educators were using the World Wide Web to share lessons and to create a classroom webpage. I had a mixture of emotions and thoughts about this new technological breakthrough. Obviously, I had no idea the impact that the World Wide Web would have on the world, but I recognized that this was an interesting and fascinating platform for people to share information. My other thought was more of a practical consideration as I did not think it was very user-friendly, at least it was not user-friendly for me. As I worked on a class assignment of creating a classroom webpage, I remember spending hours trying to use hyper-text markup language. I finally figured out how to add an image onto the page after much frustration. This meek attempt at web development was my first and last experience with the Internet for a long time. I went back to using computers for word processing and spreadsheets and not much else for a number of years.

As the use of technology expanded rapidly inside and outside of the classroom, I continued being interested in utilizing technology to improve my instruction; however, it was not until the spring semester of 2007 that I began using the Internet to enhance my classroom instruction. In January of 2007, I joined the Lindenwood faculty as an adjunct instructor teaching *Elementary/Middle School Mathematics Methods* to undergraduate teacher education students. I utilized the Internet to enhance many of my lessons. The classroom in which I taught *Math Methods* was equipped with a computer connected to the Internet and an overhead projection of the computer screen. Having this technology readily available allowed me to utilize the Internet frequently during instructional time. I began using the Internet during classroom instruction more frequently for things related to teaching math to children and also to access the Lindenwood website to remind students of the variety of resources available on the School of Education's portion of the website.

For the fall 2007 semester I was asked to teach *Orientation to Education*, an introductory general overview of education, teaching mostly freshmen and sophomores pursuing the field of education. I continued to teach two sections of *Math Methods* while I added the two sections of *Orientation to Education*. As most of the students in the *Math Methods* courses were juniors and seniors I began to see a difference in the maturity and reflective levels of the students early in their pre-service educational career compared to those students nearing the student teaching experience. Many of the students in *Orientation to Education* needed more nurturing, assistance, and support in their coursework and fieldwork than did the older students in the *Mathematics Methods* classes. This difference in maturity level and behavior is to be expected but to teach both groups at the same time was a stark reminder of the growth and development that takes place over the life of a pre-service teacher on his/her journey to becoming a teacher.

My Experience Using a Course Management System

During the fall semester of 2007, I decided to utilize WebCT, a Web-based learning environment for my courses. This course management software allows professors to post assignments, class notes, lectures, grades, online quizzes, course activities, and discussion forums. It provides a virtual platform for communication between the professor and student. According to Mooney (2007), WebCt was designed to allow instructors to create and update course websites without knowing how websites work or understanding HTML. One of the main advantages of WebCT for the students was its accessibility at any time of the day or night. A few of my colleagues were utilizing this tool and singing its praises. My curiosity and desire to integrate technology into the classroom led me to learn more about WebCT and use it to enhance my instruction. I experimented with it in both *Orientation to Education* and *Mathematics*

Methods, simply using it for its capabilities to post word documents, such as the syllabus and course schedule.

I knew that I could use WebCT as much more than an online folder for class documents; however, early in the semester I was not interested in learning how to use the other applications of the program. During the semester, I did attempt to figure out how to use the software for grade keeping purposes, but I found the layout confusing and the grade keeping function difficult to understand. Very few of my students utilized WebCT for my classes. I did not require them to use it, and many of them did not need to access the documents that were provided in class. A few students who missed class were directed to WebCT to retrieve class documents. I appreciated this function of the program as it saved me from having to carry extra copies of past assignments and course work to class each week for students who were absent. However, many of those students expressed frustration figuring out the procedures for accessing WebCT. Once students successfully accessed WebCT, however, most found it easy to log in and navigate the site. I determined at the end of the fall 2007 semester that I would learn more about its capabilities and utilize it more in my classroom.

In the Spring of 2008 I learned how to upload a quiz into WebCT for my *Orientation to Education* classes. I did not give traditional quizzes in *Math Methods*, therefore, so only the *Orientation* students experienced WebCT for the quiz application. After all the students had successfully accessed the system during the semester, I felt it was time to give them an opportunity to complete a quiz on WebCT. I allowed the students to use their textbook, but they were told not to complete the quiz with a classmate (even though I knew there was no way I could keep this from happening).

After I had set up the quiz, I programmed it to be open for a two-hour window during our normally scheduled class time. I was very nervous the day of the quiz because I was afraid students would not be able to log on to the system, and I feared many would call me in a panic. I should have known that this young generation of students would not have as much anxiety as I did about this “new” technology because many of them were so accustomed to using online tools. When the moment for the online quiz arrived, I received one phone call from a student. The only reason she was calling was because she had been absent the week before and had forgotten that we did not have traditional class that day. She was calling to ask where we were.

When I reminded her of the WebCT quiz, she quickly excused herself from the phone conversation to get to the computer lab to complete her quiz. I felt victorious when the quiz window closed, and every one of the students had successfully logged into WebCT and taken the quiz. Grading the quizzes was extremely easy as I had already entered in the correct answers when I had generated the online quiz. I simply had to click one button for the system to grade all of the quizzes. I needed some help from a WebCT expert at Lindenwood to show me how to create the quiz on WebCT, but once he had shown me the directions it was relatively easy to complete. When I realized that it literally took one second for the computer to grade all of the quizzes, I was extremely pleased with WebCT. I only gave one quiz that semester; however, I did utilize WebCT for document retrieval purposes in both of the courses I taught at that time, *Orientation to Education* and *Math Methods*.

So, by May of 2008 I knew WebCT could be helpful to me and that I could utilize it more in the classroom; however, I felt that it was not as user-friendly as I wanted it to be for my students. With a summer to reflect and learn more about the program, I decided to take a short break from WebCT and revisit it before classes started in the fall. The following month I began my doctoral journey as I started attending my first course toward the Ed.D. in Instructional Leadership at Lindenwood University.

How and Why I Began Using a Blog in the Classroom

In June, 2008 I attended my first doctoral course, called *Instructional Leadership*. I was nervous and excited. I had no idea what was in store for me. It had been almost ten years since I had been a student, but I quickly figured out that this class would be like none other I had ever experienced. The course instructor, Dr. Lynda Leavitt, was the Assistant Superintendent of Special Services in the Clayton School District teaching adjunct classes for the Lindenwood doctoral program. She challenged my thinking on a lot of my classroom practices and the way I viewed student achievement. Through her lessons, our class discussions and our class blog, I experienced cognitive dissonance with the following topics: homework, school improvement plans, curriculum, student motivation, education in different cultures, and using technology. She introduced us to using a class blog.

We met twice a week because it was a summer class that met on Mondays and Wednesdays. On the first day of class Dr. Leavitt reviewed the course objectives, one of which indicated that the student will gain in-depth understanding and knowledge of instructional program improvements at the district, building and classroom level. It was at this point in the lesson that she showed us the class blog. Dr. Leavitt logged into the blog on the overhead computer screen for the ten students to view. The website was on the syllabus for our reference purposes. Dr. Leavitt modeled step-by-step procedures for reading the blog, posting to the blog, entering our names, and submitting the post to the blog. She did not give us written instructions on how to access the blog. I had no problems accessing it following class and posting my comment and name; however, some students did not post the first week because they said they had a hard time remembering the steps to posting on the blog. Dr. Leavitt showed the steps again and after the second class period, there were no student complaints about access difficulties.

After reviewing the course objectives and describing the blog posting procedures, Dr. Leavitt noted that we had to post twice each week, one comment with our personal response to the question(s) posted and a second comment to respond to someone else's previously posted comment. Dr. Leavitt usually posted her question(s) on Friday mornings, and we were expected to post by the following Monday night's class. The blog interested me so much that every Friday I eagerly checked the blog to see what Dr. Leavitt had written. I was so keen on this new technology and her posted questions that I was usually the first to post, which meant I had to keep checking back throughout the weekend to see when someone else had posted so I could post my reply to another's comment. Even after I had posted the required two comments, I found myself frequently checking the blog throughout the weekend to read the ten classmates' comments.

I remember how I felt after the first week of blogging. I was excited about putting a face with the names of the people on the blog. I remember wishing the blog had pictures next to each person's post because I wanted to connect the face with the name. I was genuinely interested in what everyone had to say. I wanted to learn more about my classmates. What made these people tick, and were they enjoying this class as much as I was? In class we were relatively quiet, but on the blog people were forced to share their views. I felt I knew these people a little better because of the blog. However, I do remember wanting to talk about the blog discussions in class. Dr. Leavitt rarely led us in a collective chat about the conversations taking place in our virtual community.

The following weeks I eagerly checked the blog on Friday mornings to see what Dr. Leavitt had in store for us. As the semester progressed, I still very much enjoyed the blog, but it did lose its novelty. I continued to post mostly on Fridays for the next six weeks, but my interest in my classmates' replies somewhat diminished. I still posted lengthy, thoughtful answers, but it was not quite as exciting. When I posted my second response it was usually to the second or third comment posted on the blog. I did not always read all of the blog posts, especially if they were posted on Mondays.

Overall, Dr. Leavitt's class blog introduced me to the world of blogging for educational purposes, and from my first encounter with the blog I recognized that I wanted to implement a blog in my *Orientation to Education* classes. Many of Dr. Leavitt's posts and ideas could be issues I would address in my class blog. Due to the difference in experience level of the students (pre-service undergraduate students versus doctoral graduate students), I knew that the level of participation, level of reflection and depth of experience would probably be different; however, I knew that I could utilize this technology and possibly enrich the learning in my class. This led me to my first attempt at incorporating a blog into my courses.

In August, 2008, I created my first blogs to be used in my fall semester courses – three sections of *Orientation to Education* and one section of *Mathematics Methods*. Originally, I was going to create two blogs – one blog for all of my *Orientation to Education* students and one blog for my *Mathematics Methods* students. However, I determined it would be in the best interest of the Orientation students to be reading and writing for students only in their own class section. If the students in all three of the Orientation sections were to be included in one blog, the number of comments posted would exceed 100 as there were more than 35 students in each section. I did not want the blog to simply be a virtual bulletin board for student comments. I wanted the blog to serve as a platform that would allow students to dialogue with one another and get to know each other better. Therefore, I created three blogs with identical content yet different blog titles and web addresses for each of the three sections, and I created an entirely different blog for the students in Mathematics Methods. I chose to use www.blogger.com, a free blog creation website, simply because it was the same website that Dr. Leavitt had used for her class blog.

I said to Dr. Leavitt in June of 2008 that I was seriously interested in utilizing a blog in my classroom. I asked her for blog creation instructions and for permission to use some of her blog topics that applied to my course, *Orientation to Education*. Dr. Leavitt gave me permission to use anything from her blog I needed, and said it was a relatively simple process through the website www.blogger.com. My first experience creating a blog at the website was very successful. After creating a username and login, I navigated around the website utilizing the tabs at the top of the main screen titled; Posting, Settings, Layout, and View Blog. After approximately two hours, I had created four class blogs, with titles, web addresses, my profile, and a blog posting for the first week of class. Each blog looked different because of the design layout templates I chose for each individual blog. I chose different layouts knowing that I would check the blog frequently, so a different look for each class would help me recognize which blog I was visiting. I was shocked how easy it was and how professional the blogs looked. Just as I had felt when using WebCT, I knew that I was only skimming the surface of the blog capabilities, but I felt that I was on my way toward effective blog integration into the classroom.

I introduced the blog to the students during the second week of class in early September of 2008 in relatively the same manner it had been modeled to me two months earlier in Dr. Leavitt's class. I showed them the blog Internet link on the screen at the front of the classroom. I demonstrated the procedures for accessing, reading, and posting to the blog. I did not provide the students with a handout of instructions, assuming that all of the students would be able to remember the steps. I provided a brief oral description of my expectations for the blog participation, and I directed them to the syllabus where I had a breakdown of the class points and the numerical value placed on the blog. In both *Orientation* and *Math Methods,* I valued each weekly blog assignment worth 10 points – five points for the original comment and five points for the comment on a classmate's comment. The total blog value equaled 5% of the total score in *Math Methods* and 6% of the total score in *Orientation to Education*. Although these amounts were arbitrarily chosen, I intended the blog to make up a small part of the final grade.

As the semester progressed, I thoroughly enjoyed using the blog in my classes. I looked forward to updating them each week. At the beginning of the semester, I planned on posting every week, but as five weeks went by and the students were going to be excused from class for the next four weeks due to their fieldwork observations, I determined that I would take a break from the blog, allowing the students a five week break from blogging. My rationale was simply to relieve the students from coursework so they could concentrate on their observation experience. When classes reconvened in November, we resumed blogging until the end of the semester in December.

Taking care of the blog was a constant chore the weeks we were in session. Although blog maintenance was quite time consuming, I liked determining what weekly questions and supplemental materials I thought would help the students meet the course objectives and relate to the weekly topics taught in class. I spent many hours visiting the website www.YouTube.com to find video clips relative to the weekly objective. Unfortunately, I did not spend much time reading the students' comments. I skimmed their comments as I recorded the students' participation points in my grade book.

At the start of each weekly class meeting, I would begin with a brief generic comment about the blog telling the students they were doing a great job and would sometimes bring up my posted question for a five-minute in-class discussion. I did not specifically address any student's individual post or a threaded dialogue between one or more students. I missed many teachable moments that semester regarding the blog.

If I had been asked at the time what my focus was, I would have said that the blog was being used to increase student learning; however, in hindsight, I believe my focus was on increasing *my* learning as I created *my* first blog with *my* first posts, *my* first use of gadgets (additional functional applications placed in the margins of the blog), and *my* overall feelings of implementing this new technology in my classroom. I believed I was on the cutting edge of using technology in the classroom and assumed the students were learning from it just as I had been transformed the prior semester with my first exposure to blogging in Dr. Leavitt's classroom. Because I had been intrinsically motivated to post early and extensively to the blog when I was a student in the doctoral level class, I assumed my undergraduate students, who were younger and more technologically literate than most of us older students, would also be intrinsically motivated to post early and often to the blog. I took for granted the notion that my students would embrace the class blog and would automatically appreciate the blog and its many applications to the course.

As I looked back at my grade book from the fall semester of 2008, I noticed some interesting issues of my first semester of blog implementation. Of the 18 students in *Math Methods*, 10 of them completed all of the blogs, and the other eight students completed all but one, which means 100% of the students had missed zero or one of the blogs. Of the 107 students in Orientation to Education, only 17 students completed all of the blogs by the due date, and 20 students completed all but one of the blogs by the due date, which means that 35% of the students had missed zero or one of the blogs. Twenty-three students chose to complete half or fewer of the blog posts, which is 21% of the students.

Toward the end of the semester I started noticing that fewer and fewer students were participating in the *Orientation* blog, so I decided to allow them to turn in old blog posts for any and all weeks that they had not completed. My rationale in doing so was that I wanted the students to experience the reflections necessary to complete the blog posts. Twelve Orientation students turned in old blog comments and I chose to give them full credit. In hindsight, that was not a good choice. I was modeling poor teaching by not setting a clear example of adhering to a deadline. I was placing little value on my previous deadline, which was not fair to those students who had followed the rules and posted on time.

In October of 2008 as I was sitting in *Capstone I*, the course in the doctoral program that requires students to discover, evaluate, and state an issue of important concern to practitioners of educational administration, the instructor, Dr. Cynthia Bice, encouraged us to turn to our neighbor and discuss our ideas for our dissertation topics. I was having a difficult time focusing in on a topic. I knew I was interested in technology, and so I was leaning toward studying online courses and their effectiveness, but I was also interested in student achievement in public versus private schools. A specific dissertation topic was not jumping out at me.

One night, as I sat down to the computer to start doing some preliminary research on some of my possible topics, I turned my attention to my *Orientation to Education* class blogs. I thought I would come back to the dissertation research in a few minutes after quickly updating my class blogs, and then it hit me. Blogging for instructional purposes interested me a great deal. I then knew I needed to study classroom blogs. I was not sure exactly what I wanted to know, I just knew that I had really enjoyed participating in the blog as a student and that I believed it was helping my practice as a teacher of *Math Methods* and *Orientation to Education*. Although I felt the blog was beneficial for the *Math Methods'* students, I knew I would not be teaching *Math Methods* after the fall semester of 2008, so I looked forward to how it might impact my *Orientation* students.

I enjoyed teaching *Orientation to Education* but always felt constrained by time; I felt the blog was helping me inspire, motivate and introduce those students to the field of education in a virtual environment outside of the classroom. Over the next few weeks, I looked for any literature I could find about classroom blogging. After reading some journal articles and abstracts, I decided I wanted to do a mixed methods study on the effectiveness of the classroom blog. I started writing some of chapters one, two, and three. As suggested by my committee chair, Dr. Deb Ayres, she and I met with the

CORD (Conversations on Research Design) group to discuss my study. This gathering of graduate research professors, accompanied by the doctoral student and committee chair, is a "resource to help students think through various approaches to doctoral research in a topic of their choosing" (Lindenwood University Ed. D. Handbook, 2008, p. 10). The group helped me understand that this study would involve a mini-ethnography in my own class and that maybe action research was the route I needed to take. A few months went by when I made very little progress.

In April of 2009, I attended an oral defense of a dissertation written by another doctoral student. I was not particularly interested in her study; I simply attended so I could watch the process of the defense and get motivated to work on my paper. After the defense, I introduced myself to a man sitting to my right, Owen van den Berg. During the defense, he had asked some thought-provoking questions about the correlation between the studied program and MAP (Missouri Assessment Program) scores. I learned that Dr. van den Berg had extensive background and knowledge in action research – he was definitely a resource I needed to utilize. At that time, the whole research idea frightened and intimidated me. I am a practitioner, not a researcher, I thought.

By the time the spring semester of 2009 approached, I knew that I was going to be studying the effectiveness of the blog for my dissertation; however, I had not narrowed my research questions or decided upon a methodology. Even though I was no longer teaching *Math Methods*, I continued implementing the blog in three sections of *Orientation to Education* with some minor adjustments based on my observations from the previous semester. I had had one semester of experience utilizing class blogs, and I believed the first semester of implementation had been successful. A few students made positive comments in the end-of-course evaluations regarding the use of technology and in particular the blog. However, I had expected the majority of the students to comment on how great the blog was, so it was interesting for me to come to grips with the idea that maybe not every student had enjoyed blogging as much as I had. I still felt, though, that I needed to continue with the blog and use it for two main purposes: encourage out-of-class dialogue and reflection, and to push students to utilize technologies in the classroom.

I did not feel that there was a need for a great deal of change in the blog topics and tools used. I chose to leave the fall 2008 course blogs online in case students wanted to reference the blog later in their college or professional career. For this reason, I chose different web addresses for the spring semester blogs. However, I did make a few changes for the upcoming semester.

In addition to the layout change of the comment section, which was completely out of my control, I was also pleased with my decision to change each week's blog title. By giving each blog a title like "Blog 1 – Title," I was better able to keep track of them in my grade book. It was also easy for students to verify when I gave them grade printouts that displayed which weekly blog they had missed. In regard to the layout change, the blogger.com website staff changed the layout of the comment section of the blog. The width of the comment section was increased in addition to the comment text size being decreased. These changes allowed for easier reading of lengthy comments as the text was condensed on a wider screen, instead of being long and narrow chunks of text that did not lend itself to reading extensive reflections. I appreciated this change because I felt students wrote longer, more thoughtful responses and they were much easier to read.

As I reflected back on the blog implementation during the spring semester of 2009 by looking at the blog and my grade book, I noticed that the number of students in my three sections of *Orientation to Education* were 34, 18, and 14. These class sizes were much more manageable in the classroom and on the blog, than the previous semester in which all three of my sections had 35 or more students. I began wondering if there was an ideal number of students for a class blog. When I was in my doctoral classes experiencing the blog for the first time, it took me a few weeks to get to know the names of the 10 people in my doctoral class that met twice a week. For many of my students there were 35 people in a class that only met eight to ten times a semester. Could the students truly get to know one another through the blog with these parameters? Maybe it would be better if I broke the class into smaller groups for the blogs. The only problem with that was the blog management. It took quite a bit of time to post the blog topics and upload the YouTube videos to each class blog. If I broke each class up into groups of 10 for the blog then I would have 12 blogs to manage instead of four. This was a serious constraint that concerned me. It might have been manageable if I had had a graduate assistant to help me. On the other hand, maybe I was exaggerating the problem. I wondered what to do.

Of my 66 total students in the spring semester of 2009, 25 completed all eight of the blogs on time, while twelve students only missed one week of blogging, which meant 56% of the students had missed one or none of the blogs. Twelve students completed half or fewer of the blogs, which was 18% of the students. In comparison to the previous semester, there were more students completing more of the blogs and a smaller percentage choosing to complete half or fewer of the blogs. I also noticed that the students' blog entries were getting shorter and shorter as the semester continued. At that time I began considering that I possibly needed to give students more feedback and mentor them on what I expected from a quality post.

Upon meeting Owen van den Berg in May of 2009 at a doctoral student's oral dissertation defense, I knew I wanted to learn more from him about action research. Through a string of threaded emails in which I presented my goals and research questions, Dr. van den Berg offered to assist me with my study. Early in our virtual conversation, he taught me that action research would involve me and that I should take a closer look at my research questions, none of which included me. Dr. van den Berg and I began meeting weekly as he guided me through the process of conducting action research. He encouraged me to reflect in writing about my past experiences with the blog and what had led me to that point.

Although I was not teaching any classes or utilizing a class blog during the summer, I reflected on my prior blog experiences as I wrote down my thoughts weekly and sometimes daily. At our weekly meetings, Dr. van den Berg and I discussed those reflections and his written feedback. During the summer of 2009, building on those reflections, his feedback, and our many face-to-face and virtual conversations, I learned much about myself and how I was implementing the blog in my classroom. I began creating the action plan to make changes and adaptations to the class blog during the fall of 2009.

On August 10, 2009, I typed the following reflections that demonstrate my growth throughout the summer regarding not only the use of student feedback but the way in which I viewed my students:

> I have come to recognize that I have not tapped into one of the most valuable sources of information and feedback about the blog and my own teaching and that is the source of the students. I look forward to asking for and receiving their feedback to determine which blog topics were valuable to them and which they would like to see changed. In May I wondered which topics were valuable to them and which were not, and I never even once considered how simple it would be to ask them….
>
> I jumped to the conclusion that my students were immature and I viewed them as an untilled garden. However, I have now come to recognize that they are beginning students who are learning and growing. I must be careful not to overwhelm them and me as I strive to guide them into becoming reflective practitioners. Many students come as an overgrown garden having to unlearn much of what they have perceived about teaching. It is my job to meet them where they are and be okay with that, instead of thinking of them in a negative and immature light. (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, August 10, 2009)

As noted above, I experienced some professional breakthrough moments as I first recognized the way in which I truly perceived my students. Once I recognized my unfair judgment of them, I was able to view them fairly and accurately which might help me better meet the students' needs in the future. The final "light bulb moment" for me is evidenced in the excerpt below taken from the same journal entry written on August 10, 2009, which shows my clearer understanding of action research.

> Finally, I have now come to recognize that this action research involves me. I am the research tool being used here. I now view myself as a practitioner and researcher. On May 30th, I wrote "I am a practitioner, not a researcher." Well in just three short months I now know that is not true. I am a researcher. I am always making adjustments to my lessons, collecting data, analyzing the data, making adjustments to my lessons, collecting data, analyzing the data, making adjustments… The cycle continues as I strive to provide the best quality instruction to my students. (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, August 10, 2009)

The Action Plan

Course Design

After having taught *Orientation to Education* for four semesters to 13 different sections of students, I felt comfortable teaching the course, yet I determined that in addition to making some adjustments to the course schedule and content, I would also tackle some issues pertaining to the blog that needed improvement. Having only used the blog for two semesters with six sections of *Orientation to Education* students, there was need for further development of the blog. Just two weeks before the fall semester started, I wrote the following in my journal, “I have transformed my views and beliefs about the best way to ensure learning in my classroom with the assistance of a classroom blog” (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, August 10, 2009). In the following pages, I will attempt to explain how my views and beliefs were transformed as I created the action plan to be implemented in the fall semester of 2009.

Although my main focus was on the blog and the consequences of its use in my class, it was important to determine the overall design of the course. Just as in previous semesters, I hoped to guide the students through an introduction to the field of education, while also providing opportunities for them to understand the expectations set upon them for successful completion of a degree from Lindenwood and certification from the state of Missouri. I also recognized that another important component of the course was the thirty-hour practicum in which the students would observe a teacher in the classroom. As the course content was under consideration, it was important to first determine the schedule for the course.

Course Schedule

In previous semesters, I had excused students from attending eight weekly sessions of the 16-week semester to allow opportunities to complete practicum hours. However, when designing the course for the fall semester I decided to require the students to attend class 11 weeks out of the 16-week semester. By adding three more required class meetings, I would gain valuable instructional time. I added two required weekly class meetings along with requiring all students to attend class during finals week, even those who would be exempt for reasons I will explain later. As a result, the syllabus was designed with class meetings scheduled in weeks one through seven and weeks 12 through 14 with the practicum break in weeks eight through 11 and Thanksgiving break during week 13.

I determined to place the "weeks off" during the second half of the semester to allow the administrative staff ample time to place the students in local schools. The students' practicum placement was a crucial component of the practicum experience for a number of reasons. It was in the best interest of the student to be placed in a host teacher's class as quickly as possible to allow the student plenty of time to complete the practicum by the end of the semester. Not only did timely placement allow the student ample opportunity to complete the practicum, but it allowed the student to experience the practicum while applying topics discussed in class and on the blog. When students were placed late in the semester, not only did they become anxious, but they missed out on many learning opportunities. I took the practicum placement issue into account as I determined the course schedule, trying to push back the "weeks off" as far as I could.

When I first started teaching this course, placements were usually determined within the first five weeks of each semester. Due to a personnel change in the fall semester of 2008, the placement procedures were not as smooth and swift as in previous semesters. There were students still being placed in the 12th week of the semester. In the spring semester of 2009, the process was improved; however, according to office personnel, placing students for practicum experiences had become increasingly more and more difficult. Possibly due to greater pressure on local school administration to improve test scores, many local school district employees had expressed the concern that pre-service “observers” could be seen as an instructional distraction to practicing teachers.

According to education office personnel across the state, this was not a problem only for Lindenwood. In November, 2009 at a statewide higher education meeting, many college and university staff members expressed how difficult it had become in recent years placing practicum students and student teachers. Although no real solutions were provided at this meeting, it was important to begin the dialogue about the difficulties experienced so that we can move toward acceptable alternatives.

In addition to adding a few extra class sessions into the course schedule for practicum placement purposes and much needed instructional time, it also helped me to provide ample time for conducting focus groups and questionnaires. I scheduled the first focus group to be conducted during the class period of week seven. It was important to collect the students’ views of the blogs during the first half of the semester, prior to their time away from class.

During the students’ break from class during weeks eight through 12, they would still be living on campus, attending other classes, and (hopefully) observing their host teacher. Even though the students were excused from attending *Orientation to Education* class, they were still juggling academics, extra-curricular activities, and social interests, while squeezing in time to go to their assigned school to complete their observation hours. In past semesters, I had not required students to blog during this break from class; however, when designing the course for the fall semester I determined that I had missed many educational opportunities for the students to reflect upon what they were observing.

During the summer I noted in my journal on three different occasions that I should require the students to blog during their practicum break.

> Maybe I need to require students to comment on the blog during our break while they are observing. The last two semesters I only required them to blog the weeks we were in class. But the more I think about it I could really take advantage of their observation experience and they could reflect upon the things they are observing – teacher traits and student behaviors. I could encourage them to look for specific things in one week…. Maybe a pointed question could really help them get more out of the observation experience. (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, May 10, 2009)

As this idea was making more sense, I continued contemplating this change as I wrote in my journal three days later.

> In the past, I have not required them to blog while they were out doing their practicums. But I could really use it to their advantage. Many students do not know what they are looking for as they are observing their teacher…. I could pose thought provoking questions and best teaching strategies that I want them to look for and then reflect upon. (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, May 13, 2009)

Just two weeks before classes started, I had determined that I would require the students to blog during the practicum break as I wrote about it again in my journal.

> In May, I had a quick thought about having the students post to the blog during their off-weeks. Now just three months later, it has become on of the focal points for improving the blog and my course in general. I am looking forward to collecting data to determine if the continuation of communication during the off weeks through the blog will increase students' feelings of connectedness to the class. (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, August 10, 2009)

Consequently, I determined that the students would be required to reply to 14 posts weekly throughout the semester, instead of replying to eight posts as required the previous semester. Due to the fact that there would be six more posts than the previous semester, I had to determine the blog topics. An explanation of how I determined the blog topics is provided later in this chapter.

In designing the course, I determined that week 12 would be the week we would gather again after the break. As one of the main goals of the blog was to provide the students with opportunities to reflect upon their practicum experience, I wanted their opinions prior to, during, and after their 30-hour observation. Therefore, I scheduled the second focus group to be conducted during week 12, to determine if the students' views had changed about the blog since the focus group conducted during week seven. The focus group would take up the majority of the class.

I provided the students with one more week away from class during week 13 to continue working on their practicum. The class would reconvene during week 14, when we would have an in-class discussion about their observation experiences, a chance to attend to any Lindenwood paperwork, and discussion of content involving partnerships between school and the community. The 15th week of the semester was designed to be the class period in which the students would be submitting all of their practicum documents. At this class session, I anticipated the students completing all necessary paperwork, such as the application to teacher education program and disposition procedures, taking the post-study questionnaire, and participating in a final culminating activity. The 16th week of the semester was designated as finals week, and I expected all students to attend class that week.

Ever since I started teaching this class, in an effort to collect the four important documents students needed to place in their education file - teacher education application, disposition procedures, online portfolio registration, and practicum timesheet - I had given them the opportunity to be exempted from taking the *Orientation to Education* final if they submitted the documents needed prior to finals week. In past semesters, I had not required the exempted students to attend class during finals week. However, I decided that by requiring every student to attend class during finals week I would be gaining another opportunity for instruction and allowing an extra week for those students who might need extra days to complete their practicum hours. During this final class session, every student would complete an end-of-course evaluation and write a summative reflection. The exempted students would then leave class, while the students not exempted from the final would remain to complete the comprehensive final exam. As I had frameworked the entire course schedule from weeks one to 16, details of the course content and blog implementation could now be selected.

Course Content

The three major components of the course content were as follows: a general introduction to the profession of teaching, the administrative duties required by Lindenwood and the state, and the practicum experience. I did not see myself as conveying specific educational philosophies, theories, and/or methods. Although such ideas were important, they would be taught in later courses. However, as I attempted to address the course and lesson essential questions, I hoped to provide the students with varied opportunities to shift their thinking from viewing education from a student's perspective to that of a teacher's viewpoint.

While the major components of the course did not change, I had learned the value of using backward design (Wiggins, 1998) when planning lessons and units of study. Simply stated, backward design means that as a teacher plans a lesson he or she should begin with the end in mind. In past semesters when teaching this class, I had utilized a Madeline Hunter style lesson plan. However, having learned the benefits of backward design just prior to conducting the study, I decided to implement backward design lesson plans in my *Orientation to Education* courses. Fearing that I might become overwhelmed with the research study, I was tempted not to change the course design or lesson plans and focus solely on the changes that would occur with the blog; however, I decided that it would be unfair and unethical to withhold meaningful lesson design and possibly more effective learning experiences from the students.

In addition to the temptation to not change the lesson plans, I also had to address the issue of having adequate time for data collection. Elliott (1991) stated "the problem of time for insider research tends to be viewed as a teaching vs. research dilemma" (p. 66). I knew that as I designed the course, I needed to allow sufficient time for the students to complete questionnaires and attend focus groups. Yet, collecting the data would take valuable instructional time from the already time-strapped course. Yes, the data collection would take time away from classroom discussions and activities; however, not only was I collecting the necessary data, but I was modeling the process of action research to my students. When designing the course content, I scheduled time into the lesson for the 11:00 section of students (the group being studied) during weeks one and 15 for students to complete the questionnaire and weeks seven and 12 for the focus groups. In the sections of *Orientation to Education* not being studied, I scheduled that time for in-class discussions.

For an assignment in one of my doctoral courses, I wrote six lessons for *Orientation to Education* determining essential questions from the course objectives determined by the university. I had always used objectives in the past when designing lessons but had not formulated those objectives as essential questions that drove my curriculum. There are three stages in the backward design process; "identify desired results, determine acceptable evidence, and finally, plan learning experiences and instruction" (p. 6). I had determined prior to the start of the fall semester that I would implement these new lesson plans during the portion of the lesson set aside for content. Knowing that the course consisted of program administration, practicum, *and* content, there would be a limited amount of time to accomplish all portions of the previously prepared backward design lesson plans, but I was going to try. On the day before the semester started, I expressed anxiety about implementing these new lesson plans, "I hope I am not trying to change too many things at once" (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, August 24, 2009).

I had determined that the essential course questions were *How do I become an effective teacher?* and *What do effective teachers know and do*? I added these essential course questions to the top of the syllabus as I wanted to communicate to the students the focus of the course. I created lesson titles, lesson essential questions, and class activities that I felt captured the essence of the course (Table 5). I decided to implement the six new lessons during the course in the time already allotted for content. Although I had not written out the specific lesson plans for the entire semester, I added the essential questions to the syllabus corresponding to weeks one, three, four, six, seven, and 14.

Table 5. *Lesson titles and essential questions*.

Week Number	**Lesson Title**	**Lesson Essential Question**
Week 1	Good Teaching vs. Effective Teaching	Why is it important that I am an effective teacher?
Week 3	Wikis, Blogs, YouTube, and Podcasts in the classroom	How can I prepare my students to utilize technology in the 21st century?
Week 4	“Did you hear in the news about that teacher who…?”	Why should I think of myself as a teaching professional?
Week 6	It’s Friday – time for a test!	How do I create an effective assessment?
Week 7	Meeting students’ special needs	How can I teach individual learners in my classroom?
Week 14	Parents, Community, and Schools	How can I develop a partnership between my school and community?

Blog Topics and Implementation

When designing the action plan for the upcoming semester as it pertained to the blog, there were issues that I felt needed to be addressed. Early in the summer, as documented in my journal, I considered the following issues with the blog:

1) Were the topics used last semester meaningful?
2) How should I grade the blog?
3) How do I manage reading all of the students' comments?
4) Should I provide written directions for posting to the blog?
5) Should I provide exemplars of acceptable and unacceptable blog posts?

Through cyclical reflection and feedback from Owen throughout the summer, I determined the following solutions to the questions above as I attempted to create a significant action plan as I implemented the blog into the course.

The most important issue determined was the blog topics to be used. The topics needed to be determined in advance. According to West et al., (2006), it is helpful for instructors to determine blog topics prior to the start of a semester. Due to the fact that I would be requiring students to blog throughout the entire semester, even while away from class as they observed, I created six additional blog topics. In addition, I evaluated the effectiveness of the previously used blog topics. I wrote in my journal months before class started, "More fears – that the questions I post are not engaging enough" (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, May 28, 2009). I shared these previously used blog topics with Owen and his response was "Actually, I think they're pretty impressive" (O. van den Berg, personal communication, May 30, 2009). I received this positive feedback and decided to keep most of the blog topics the same and eliminated only one of the topics because I felt it was vague and had not elicited reflective comments from the students.

In order to use the blog as a reflective tool while the students were observing their host teacher, I utilized questions that in previous semesters I had given to students to reflect upon in their practicum journals. The topics posted on the blog during weeks seven through 12 involved: effective assessments, classroom routines, classroom management, student behavior, teacher-student rapport, and curriculum. A full listing of the semesters' blog topics that I utilized during the study can be found in Appendix A.

Grading the blog was an important matter that I needed to decide on prior to the start of the semester. In early May, I noted in my journal, "How should I grade it – participation or content?" (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, May 9, 2009). The next day I wrote that I had decided to continue grading the blogs based on completion. However, a few weeks later, I still struggled with the issue as noted in my journal,

> Maybe I need to not require the blog, but only on a volunteer basis. This would challenge the students to take ownership in their own learning. I really need to think about this one – some may not be ready yet. The motivation of the points might encourage some students who wouldn't otherwise take part. (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, May 29, 2009)

Owen responded with the following suggestion, "I would stay with compulsion – they can still just go through the motions if they wish" (O. van den Berg, personal communication, May 29, 2009). I decided to take his suggestion of requiring the students to blog and to continue grading on completion.

I also needed to determine how I was going to handle students making up missed blogs. In July I wrote in my journal, "Should I or should I not allow them to make up missed blogs? I have in the past simply because I believe the students will benefit from completing the blog posts even if they are late" (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, July 2, 2009). After reflecting and discussing this issue with Owen, I determined that I would not allow students to make up missed blogs. If I allowed students to make up missed blogs, I would be communicating to all of the students that I did not value their choice to follow the rules and post to the blog during the open window which allowed for collaboration. If I continued to allow students to make up missed blogs, no one would be able to read and learn from their late post.

I decided to continue assigning each blog worth 10 points:five points to each student for posting his/her thoughts about the posted question(s) and five points for posting a reply to a classmate's response. This was the grading strategy used previously, and it did not need to be changed. However, as suggested by Owen, in order to encourage the students to post more than the required two postings, I noted in my journal two weeks before class started, "I will change the wording of the requirements from 'students **must reply once** to each post and **once** to another classmate's post' to 'students will submit **at least one reply** to each post and **at least one reply** to a classmate's post'" (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, August 10, 2009).

Managing the blog was an issue that I considered while creating the action plan. When managing the blog, I had to update the weekly topic, upload applicable YouTube links, read the comments, respond to some comments, and grade the comments. Due to the fact that I had over 140 students, reading, responding to and grading the comments would be a time-consuming task. In May I discussed this issue in my journal,

> My fears – that I will not have enough time to read and respond to all of the comments in a timely fashion. This is a fear due to the fact that in the fall semester last year I had 35 or more students in all of my classes. At times, reading

> and commenting on the blog was overwhelming. I knew I should (or wish there were more hours in the day to) read each class's blog once a day and post comments accordingly. (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, May 28, 2009)

Time management was a serious issue that I could not overlook. I recognized the importance of reading the posts and participating in the blog; however, I knew that I needed to plan for this issue. I determined a solution as noted in my journal two weeks before class started,

> I must make it a priority to read daily and participate more in the on-line discussions through the blog. I want to model to my students and demonstrate to them that I am participating in the on-line discussions, just as I hope they would some day if they choose to ask their students to participate in something similar. I will not allow myself to become so overwhelmed in weeks five through ten due to advising responsibilities that I become uninvolved in the blog. I will acquire a work and learn student to assist me in the office to allow me the time necessary to devote to participating daily in the blog. (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, August 10, 2009)

The overwhelming reality of daily blog participation urged me to seek help. I looked forward to utilizing a resource (a work study student) to assist me with administrative tasks to allow me time to become more engaged in the blog.

In preparation for the upcoming semester I recognized that I had not previously provided students with adequate assistance for accessing the blog. The past two semesters I had simply provided the students with a verbal explanation along with a visual series of steps to access the class blog. After realizing that a few students in each class struggled the first few weeks with learning how to use the blog, I decided to create a handout that might help those who might not feel comfortable with technology or might have forgotten a step or two presented in class. I wrote in my journal, "I will provide the students with a handout on the first day of class that clearly explains how to access it, read the weekly posts, read their classmates' response, and reply to other people's posts"

(M. Bishop, Journal Entry, August 11, 2009). My hope was that this handout would eliminate unnecessary frustration and allow students to focus on the reflecting and sharing of ideas.

The final issue addressed when preparing the action plan was that of providing clear, written expectations about the blog and discussing them in class. This issue had bothered me in the weeks prior to the start of the semester. As I stated it in my journal,

> I will show students three examples of comments posted by students in a previous semester. There will be a class discussion about the various ways students can appropriately post onto the blog… I can not assume that all of my students know what I expect unless I tell them and show them. I was often disappointed with a few of my students' replies. I would get frustrated with their short responses and shallow reflections that did not address all the facets of the question(s) posed. I am hoping that this adjustment to the process will eliminate these frustrations and will allow my students with a clear understanding of a quality reply. (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, August 11, 2009)

By providing the students with a handout of previous blog comments and allowing them an opportunity to evaluate the comments, I hoped to increase the quality of student blog posts during the upcoming semester.

I analyzed the blog topics and implementation issues and determined my action steps. I had chosen the 14 blog questions to be posted, had decided to continue grading on completion, had acquired administrative assistance to allow me more time to manage the blog, and had created a handout explaining step-by-step instructions to accessing the blog, and had generated exemplar comments upon which the students could reflect. Those five major issues had been addressed, and so I felt the blog was ready for implementation.

As I prepared for the fall semester of 2009 I desired to create an atmosphere in which the students would trust that I would provide them with sound advice regarding the administrative requirements, accurate content regarding the field of education, and appropriate practicum experiences. I hoped to generate valuable discussions regarding class topics rather than presenting the material in a lecture format. My goal was to provide many opportunities for reflection in class and through the use of the blog. This period of investigation, described by Elliott (1991) as "reconnaissance," was coming to a close as it was time to move to the next step in the action research process – implementation. The action plan was in place and the semester was about to begin.

Summary

In this chapter I have tried to sketch the antecedents that led me to the point of starting the implementation of my action research project in August of 2009, because I believe that in order to truly recognize and identify with me in my classroom, it is important to understand the historical context from which my instruction using technology stemmed. The journey that began as I utilized a computer for electronic grade keeping purposes, to using WebCT for document retrieval, to blogging for instructional purposes, and to finally understanding my reflections upon this journey, provided a foundation for the action plan that was to be implemented in the fall semester of 2009.

Chapter Five: Launching the Course

August 25, 2009 marked the first day of the 2009 fall semester at Lindenwood University. One of my favorite things about teaching is the excitement and anticipation that leads up to beginning with a new set of students, and this semester would be no different. In fact, I had not been this eager and anxious to get started since my first year of teaching. My anxiety and energy stemmed from the unknown that was about to unfold as I conducted action research with the students in the Tuesday, 11:00 a.m. section of *Orientation to Education*. I had never formally conducted research previuosly; however, I was beginning to comprehend the true meaning of action research as evidenced in my journal on August 10, 2009, just a few weeks before the semester started.

> Finally, I have now come to recognize that this action research involves me. I am the research tool being used here. I now view myself as a practitioner and researcher. On May 30th, I wrote "I am a practitioner, not a researcher." Well in just three short months I now know that is not true. I am a researcher. I am always making adjustments to my lessons, collecting data, analyzing the data, making adjustments to my lessons, collecting data, analyzing the data, making adjustments… The cycle continues as I strive to provide the best quality instruction to my students. (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, August 10, 2009)

As my understanding of action research emerged, I entered the journey anticipating that the results of the research would show me what was working with the blog and what was not. However, I did not start the journey anticipating that the process of conducting the research would show me what was working with my own classroom instruction more broadly and what was not. A lunch meeting with my supervisor, Owen van den Berg, on Thursday, August 27, two days after the first class meeting, confirmed my recognition that I really had to put my teaching under a microscope in order to gain a full understanding of the context in which I was implementing the blog. I could not look at the blog implementation without examining my own instruction and trying to understand how the two were intertwined.

Our Thursday lunch meetings were to become one of the highlights of my week as Owen and I debriefed the events of the class that had occurred two days previously and discussed the reflections we had each written shortly after each class period. At this lunch meeting on August 27, Owen and I conferred about my reflective field notes and Owen's classroom observations. Owen observed in my classroom on five different occasions, three visits at the beginning of the semester, one visit near the middle of the semester, and one final visit near the end of the semester. Before each class period, except for one week in which I forgot, I had emailed Owen my lesson plan which he printed and brought for reference during the classroom observations.

My initial field notes written immediately after class indicated that "I was pleased with how the class went with one exception – time! I never have enough of it" (M. Bishop, Fieldnotes, August 25, 2009). The constraint of time was to be a recurring issue that appeared throughout this study. It was noted in Owen's observations, "No time for discussion and no follow up, though, and she's already dropped the first item on the Lesson Plan" (O. van den Berg, Personal communication, August 25, 2009). Later in the lesson Owen observed, "12h10 it was – the lesson plan had 43 minutes left at this stage, but in this class there were only five minutes left" (O. van den Berg, Personal communication, August 25, 2009). Owen's mention of the time, "12h10," refers to 12:10 p.m. I was obviously underestimating how long it would take to conduct various activities and classroom discussions.

At this early stage in the semester, I often experienced frustration with the administrative tasks that I was expected to take care of in this class, because they left me with very little time to address the content: an introduction to the field of education. I noted the following in my fieldnotes after the first day of class:

> I feel like we spend a lot of time on the administrative tasks and then there is not enough time to cover content… I knew that I would have to adjust my lesson plan with the research group, but wasn't sure how much time I would have. It was worse than I thought. I literally had 5 minutes to discuss content. I felt like I was throwing their assignment at them at the end with little to no background. In hindsight, maybe I should have just not tried to do content today and waited until next week. (M. Bishop, Fieldnotes, August 25, 2009)

In addition to the recurring theme of time in the data, another issue was beginning to surface. As the end of the fieldnotes previously referenced show, my struggle with administrative tasks versus covering content was another emerging theme that I noted early in the semester and had always felt since first teaching this course. I continued in my fieldnotes on August 25,

> I am internally struggling with feeling torn between doing the administrative vs. content. I feel that the university expects so much paperwork for this class (which is necessary – I am not debating that) but I wish I had more time with the students to work on content. (M. Bishop, Fieldnotes, August 25, 2009)

As I advanced through the semester and analyzed the data, I came to the conclusion that I needed to change the way I viewed the word "content." Many of the administrative tasks handled in this course were extremely important and should not be viewed as "annoying stuff" I had to cover before I could get to the meat of the course. The meat of the course was the practicum experience in which the students would observe a practicing teacher. The meat did not come from the words written in the textbook. Although the topics introduced in the course were important, (teaching in the 21st century, education as a profession, diversity in education, partnership between school and community, and a general introduction to students with special needs) all those topics would be taught in great detail in later courses.

Owen noted in his observations of the first class period, “She now also talked about the constraints of the course, that it had to deal with a lot of bureaucratic paperwork for the program as well as providing an introduction to teaching,” (O. van den Berg, Personal communication, August 25, 2009). It was even clear to my supervisor that I tended to refer to the administrative paperwork as a constraint. My focus had to shift from “covering” the topics listed above to providing instruction and support about the practicum and the students’ participation in the education program at Lindenwood. Due to the fact that this course only met 75 minutes once a week ten times throughout the semester, I would always be limited by time. However, if I changed the way I viewed what was important, then I would hopefully lessen my anxiety, as that might affect not only me, but also the students. On September 8, 2009, one student commented on his/her feedback card, “Don’t like getting all of the work at the end of class.” Another student commented that he/she “Didn’t like how we tried cramming so many things into one lesson. Feel like we tried to cover more things than I can digest in one class period” (student, Personal communication, August 8, 2009).

Although some would assume that no student would want to be in class longer, one student commented on his/her index card that, “Wished class was 2 hours long so we could have more time to talk” (student, Personal communication, September 15, 2009). This student not only indicated a desire that the class meet for a longer period of time (a point to which I shall return), but also that he or she felt a desire to have more opportunities for dialogue. In the first few weeks of data collection, the emerging themes for me were time and discourse. The following section of this chapter provides an analysis of the dialogue issue as it developed throughout the semester. According to Rust and Orland (2001), “A dialogue is a conversation directed toward discovery and new understanding, where the participants question, analyze, and critique the topic or experience” (p. 85).

Teacher Talk

Pre-service education students early in their teacher preparation program are just beginning their transformation from student to teacher. The course *Orientation to Education* was the first opportunity most of the students had been given to experience a shift in their thinking from classroom participant to classroom orchestrator. “Teacher conversation not only supports meaning making about present events, but it also helps teachers form visions of the future” (Zellermayer, 2001, p.61). Although the previous quote was written to communicate the benefits of teacher conversation for practicing educators, pre-service students can also experience the benefits of “teacher talk” as they form their understanding of their future career and the role they will play as educators. Pre-service teachers are just beginning to shape visions of their future in their own classroom as they become teachers. Zellermayer (2001) noted that “conversation creates a space where professional knowledge can be constantly and consciously reframed and reaffirmed. Creating the space for conversation is not easy” (p. 61).

Creating the space for conversation was not easy in a time-constrained introductory course; however, I valued dialogue as an instructional tool, which was one of the reasons I implemented a class blog. I wanted to allow my students an opportunity outside of class to participate in virtual teacher talk, as evidenced in my journal entry months before data collection: “One of my main reasons for introducing the blog last year was to give students an opportunity to dialogue with classmates outside of class” (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, July 21, 2009). Although I valued discourse and attempted to create various spaces for conversation in and out of the classroom, I neglected to explain this to the students early in the semester. It was not until I was prompted by Owen after the second class session to tell the students why I had asked them to blog and why I valued its use.

In this section of the chapter I will explain the discourse opportunities provided to the students inside and outside of class along with what they revealed their preconceived ideas about using blogs and technology for the purposes of dialogue. I will discuss the need to provide a safe environment in which students feel trusted and cared about in order to optimize discourse opportunities. Finally, I will present data that evaluates the students’ progression in their ability to critically analyze each other and themselves throughout the course.

Preparation

It was important for me to recognize the type of students involved in this study as I analyzed the discourse that took place during the semester in-class and out-of-class via the blog. As noted earlier in this paper, the majority of the students were freshmen (21 students out of 34) and many of them were 18 years or younger (16 students out of 34). All but two students were 21 years or younger, one student being 27 and one being 36 years old. For the purposes of this study, it was also important that I understood the students’ views of technology in the classroom from the first day of class and their comfort level with reading and commenting online. For those reasons, I had the students complete a survey on the first day of class (see Appendix B). The results of those survey questions provided important background information about these students. To explore the level of development of teacher talk throughout the course of the study it was important for me to identify students' prior levels of comfort with technology and their prior knowledge of a blog and its implementation.

On the first day of class, when asked to provide information about their comfort level with technology on a scale of one to 10, a few students rated themselves a six out of 10, a few rated themselves a 10 out of 10, and the majority (26 of 34 students) rated themselves somewhere between six and 10. I read this as an indication that most of the students felt relatively comfortable with technology. However, the four students who assigned their comfort level a six out of 10 should not be ignored. A teacher has to take into consideration when using technology in the classroom that not all students are eager and willing to use the technology. There might well be some students who have anxiety and lack confidence in their ability to work with technology.

As far as their existing knowledge of blogs, 29 of the 34 students noted on the survey that they knew what a blog was, with two students not knowing, two students "sort of" knowing what a blog was, and one student leaving the question blank. Twenty-five students said they had previously read a blog. As most of the students said they were familiar with and had read a blog, it was interesting that more students said they had never commented on a blog than those who had – 18 students replied "no" when asked if they had ever commented on a blog, while 15 said "yes." I took this information as an indication that about half of the class was completely prepared with background knowledge of the structure of a blog and its purposes, while the other half of the class would need varying degrees of assistance learning how to become an active participant in the class blog.

Only eight students said they had ever participated in a class blog before, so even though many students understood that a blog was for dialogue purposes, I recognized that most of them had never used this tool for educational purposes before this course. The final question on the survey pertained to their feeling comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas on the Internet. Twenty-six responded that they did feel comfortable, two students responded that they did not feel comfortable, and six students replied with words such as “sometimes,” “not sure,” and “depends.”

In general, I gathered the following from the pre-study survey: most students knew what a blog was on the first day of class, many had read a blog, fewer students had posted a comment on a blog, and even fewer students had ever participated in a classroom blog. Even though 24 students claimed never to have experienced a class blog, most of them said they would feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas on the Internet.

Virtual teacher talk

I introduced the blog during the first class session, just after the students had conducted the pre-study questionnaire. A brief introduction to the blog was provided along with the requirements, deadlines, and point values. However, I did not provide an explanation of why we would be blogging or the possible benefits of the on-line virtual experience, which was unfortunate that I missed the opportunity to provide essential insight into the possible benefits of the blog.

The students' comments on the first week of the blog indicated that the topic I had chosen for discussion was not one that encouraged discourse or reflection. When asked to post their name and one interesting fact about themselves, nine students shared about injuries, surgeries, and scars, such as a student whom I will refer to as Amy (for anonymity purposes, all names have been changed), who posted onto the blog just a few hours after class,

> When I was about nine months old I had a huge red lump growing out of my throat. It ended up being a tumor which had to be removed. After the surgery I then got staff infection and was in the hospital for three weeks. I now have a scar on my throat to show for it. (Amy, Personal communication, August 25, 2009).

Perhaps Amy's comment encouraged others to share battle scar stories. On the blog the next morning, Katy wrote about tearing her ACL and ruining her knee. She continued on that she now had eight screws and a metal rod in her knee. And Alex wrote the following comment:

> When I was 3 years old I was running in my grandparents backyard and I tripped and cracked my head open on the corner of a flower bed. I now have a scar on my head that looks like teeth marks. I don't remember anything before that. (Alex, Personal communication, August 30, 2009)

Some other similar student responses were from Curtis (five staples in his head) and Kerry (kidney stones). During one of the focus groups conducted during week 12, one of the students suggested, "In the beginning, topics that would have allowed class members to get to know one another would have been helpful. Topics such as, Why did you choose to go into education?" (Focus Group, November 10, 2009).

Although Dr. van den Berg was not an active participant in the class blog, posting comments, he was an active reader as I gave him access to the class blog. He frequently read the students' blog comments and provided me with some observations, such as in his notes from September 2, 20009,

> A final comment, I read through the blogs for the first week, and they felt that they sort of degenerated into who had had life-threatening or otherwise major accidents or illnesses. Maybe the opening "getting to know you" question should turn more towards something like, How did you come to be here (i.e. mention one event or person that played a bit [*sic*] part in why you find yourself sitting in an education course…) (O. van den Berg, Personal communication, September 2, 2009)

When I analyzed the students' blog responses and took into account Dr. van den Berg's observations, I recognized that I had missed an excellent opportunity for the students to start reflecting immediately upon why they were entering the field of education. For the spring semester of 2010, I intended to change the first week's blog topic to one that would read something like this: Why are you in this course? What led you to this class? Are you contemplating education as a career choice? Mention one event or person that played a significant role in why you are enrolled in *Orientation to Education*. In addition to recognizing the missed opportunities early in the semester regarding asking a question requiring a reflective answer, I also realized the importance of talking about student blog responses in class.

I noted in my fieldnotes that in the weeks I had read and prepared specific student blog comments to discuss, there was a much better in-class discussion and reflection of the blog comments. I decided to continue to focus on this strategy as it communicated to the students that I had read and valued their comments. During week six, on September 29, I noted in my fieldnotes,

> Today was by far my favorite class period yet! I was more organized. I stayed at school late last night to make sure I was completely ready for class today. The two things I made sure I had prepared that made things go smoother were – 1) I read every blog entry and chose 3 to discuss with the students and 2) I had all

> paperwork recorded and was prepared to review their missing assignments with them today…. I made sure the 3 comments for each section were different comments than the ones I had commented on previously in the blog. I really sensed that the students were aware that I read their comments and I value their opinions. I didn't do this on purpose, but the students that I chose were quiet students who typically don't say much in class… Last week I had prepared ahead of time the 3 comments I was going to share with my 8:00 section and my 9:30 section but I didn't think I would need to write it out for my 11:00 section because I study their blog so much. I have really learned how important it is to specifically pick out a few for the opening discussion and have them prepared in writing so I don't forget. (M. Bishop, Fieldnotes, September 29, 2009)

The comments from the fieldnotes showed that I was thinking of many teaching strategies that might well improve my effectiveness as a teacher, and the idea of reading every post just before class and *writing down* the comments for class discussion was one of the simplest yet most demanding teaching tasks that I had gained from the study and would continue to implement no matter what type of discourse tool I used in the future.

In addition to discerning the need to change the first week's blog topic and the need to discuss students' blog comments in class, I also learned from the students' neutral responses in week one that it was worth noting that of all of the facts about themselves the students could have shared with the class and with me, many students chose a very non-threatening and non-intimate fact such as a prior illness, accident, or scar. Maybe the students viewed this type of fact as being safe to share with a group of strangers, and maybe that is the right way to start. This finding led me to my next emerging theme, which was the need to provide students with an environment of trust, safety, and care in class and on the blog.

Providing an in-class and virtual environment of trust, safety, and care

According to Clark (2001), good conversations thrive in an environment of trust, safety, and care. One of my goals as an instructor was to make my students feel safe in our learning environment, whether that was in the classroom or in a virtual environment such as the blog. As noted by Dr. van den Berg in his classroom observations of the first class period, "Her enthusiasm for her work and her respect for her students came through very well, so this was a good start" (O. van den Berg, Personal communication, August 25, 2009). However, he also noted that I invited questions, but then immediately deflected them by telling the students that I would talk about that item later. I noted this behavior and consciously decided to work on this behavior in future classes because, in order for students to feel safe and cared about during in-class dialogue, I had to answer questions as they arose from the students, not just when they fit nicely into my lesson plan.

To show the students that I cared about their opinions and valued their ideas, Owen suggested I provide them with index cards and an opportunity at the end of each class period to write anonymously about what they had liked or not liked about anything pertaining to the course: class activities, blog posts, instruction, assignments, etc. As I implemented this strategy from the second week's class on, many students communicated via the feedback cards that they had enjoyed the classroom discussions. "I really enjoy the classroom discussions we have, I feel they are helpful" (student, Personal communication, September 1, 2009); and "Hearing how other kids think is really helpful and bring up great ideas" (student, Personal communication, September 1, 2009). As noted in my fieldnotes on September second, I recognized the importance of this strategy and identified the importance of modeling this part of action research:

> Having students fill out index cards throughout and at the end of class was an excellent way to communicate to the students that I want to know what they think about the class activities, etc. I am also modeling for them as I show them how to

> collect information from their students on an on-going basis. Near the end of class as the students were quietly writing on their index cards, one of the students said to me, “This would be such a great tool to use in a middle school setting where students may not feel comfortable to tell you something in front of the whole class.” I agreed with her and said it would be good for students of all ages. I recognized instantaneously that this student’s wheels were turning. She was observing my behavior and thinking about how she could apply it into her future classroom. Action research appears to be a virus that can spread. (M. Bishop, Fieldnotes, September 2, 2009)

At the time, I did not recognize that this conversation with a student whom I will refer to as Susan would be an indication of future reflections and applications that she would contribute to the in-class and virtual teacher talk. For example, in the second week of blogging, Susan posted the following, indicating that she understood and was interested in using the blog for communication purposes:

> TO ALL- this is completely off subject, but we talked about it the first day of class... It's really easy to have your Lindenwood e-mail forwarded to another e-mail account that you're more likely to check daily….I was supposed to explain it in class on Tuesday, but we ran out of time. (Susan, Personal communication, September 2, 2009)

Susan clearly wanted to communicate with everyone in the class. She wanted to offer them technical assistance with forwarding school emails to a personal email account. This was her fourth comment posted to the blog that week. She had already responded to the weekly topic and had tried to begin a dialogue with two other students. However, it is worth noting that Susan was not the only student who was reflecting and participating in the discourse as another shared with his classmates some information he found that pertained to our in-class discussion about teacher salaries. Chad said, “I would like to address what we talked about in class today on the subject of salaries I looked up my home district in Texas and found that coaching will add around ten grand to my salary” (Chad, Personal communication, September 8, 2009).

Unfortunately, no one responded directly to Susan or Chad's "shout out" to the class. It was as if Susan and Chad threw the ball on the blog, but no one caught it and tossed it back. Zellermeyer (2001) noted that conversation creates a space where professional knowledge can be constantly and consciously reframed *and reaffirmed*. I referred to Zellermeyer's explanation of conversation earlier in this chapter; however, I must revisit it at this time as I emphasize that conversation occurs when participants' professional knowledge is reframed **and** reaffirmed. Not one student via the blog reaffirmed Susan or Chad by acknowledging their posting. However, I did reaffirm Susan's posting on the blog the following day, Thursday at 9:28a.m., by writing that "Susan has shared the directions to having your lionmail sent to a different email. Please take a few minutes to read her post and forward your lionmail to an email address that you regularly check. Thanks so much, Susan!" (M. Bishop, Personal communication, September 3, 2009). Interestingly, the very next comment was posted by Susan on the same day at 1:06 p.m., yet it was not written toward me or the recognition I had just given her previous post. She commented, "Allison – love the quote. Do you know who is credited with having said it?" (Susan, Personal communication, September 3, 2009).

The fact that Susan had posted for the fifth time that week and had not addressed me but another student in the class indicated to me that Susan was very interested in dialoguing with other classmates, and probably also in promoting peer dialogue. Unfortunately, Allison did not respond to Susan's question at all that week via the blog. Even in week two when I thought students would be eager and excited to participate in the blog, it was appearing not to be the peer discourse tool I had originally hoped and intended it to be. Midway through the semester during a focus group one student said, "don't read every comment of other students – just skim to find something to comment on," (Focus group, October 6, 2009). Another student commented during the same focus group, "Hassle, one more thing for outside of class, wish it was a classroom discussion," (Focus group, October 6, 2009). Clearly the students were not all using the blog as a platform for discussion, because some were merely viewing it as an assignment that had to be completed.

However, I tried to use it as a discourse tool to communicate with students during the week in between class periods. Unfortunately, it was not always effective because many students did not visit the blog frequently during the week, so even though when I responded to someone's comment with a follow-up question or comment, the chances were good that the student would not even read what I had said. In the first focus group, one student made the following comment, "One time Mrs. Bishop responded that she wondered if John had a response to someone's comment. I'm glad I saw it so I could respond, but I might not have because I don't always read the whole blog" (Focus group, October 6, 2009). Another student in the same focus group noted, "I don't really go back and read comments either. If something would let you know that someone responded to your comment, like Facebook, it would be great" (Focus Group, October 6, 2009).

During week two, I replied to four different students' posts, but only one of the students, Susan, replied back to me via the blog. However, two students, Ron and Susan, discussed their interest in gymnastics and "bounced the conversational ball" back and forth three times. This is an appropriate time to refer again to Susan, as her role in the class and on the blog was significant. She was a 36-year-old student. For the first few weeks of blogging, it appeared that Susan and Ron were the only students who wanted to participate fully in the online discourse. Interestingly, I neglected to pick up on the fact early on that the students were not using the blog as a discourse tool. I only came to this realization towards the conclusion of the study as I analyzed the data. Early in the semester I was consumed with administration of the blog rather than with taking a closer look at the quality of dialogue, and so made no comments on this dynamic. However, with Owen's help through a series of threaded emails, I realized that there was a serious blog issue emerging that needed to be addressed in the third class period. I will now discuss that matter.

The Labor Day Lull

The second week's blog posting deadline fell on the Sunday night before Labor Day. Many students were not posting until the very last minute, and many were posting after the deadline. I had to determine how to handle the situation – should I give credit or not? Should I address it in class or not? Should I provide leniency or not? What kind of example should I set for the students? Those were all questions I struggled with over the Labor Day weekend. The blog posting requirements provided to the students on the first day of class were that students had to post at last twice each week by Sunday night at midnight. Owen made an interesting observation and thus started the following email thread with me on Labor Day, Monday, September 7 at 10:24 a.m.:

> 10h30 on a Monday public holiday and we have 14 students who have blogged this week, 4 of them at once. It's going to be a fun day!!! Maybe a reflection on what you make of that would be interesting – and does it influence what, if anything, you say to the class at the start on Tuesday? At least you COULD say, well, I understand this was a long weekend and all, but... Fun – a pattern that I did not expect at this stage of the course. There'll have to be about 80 blogs in total to meet the expectation, and we're just over 30. (O. van den Berg, Personal communication, September 7, 2009)

At 9:28 p.m. later that night I replied:

> What a fascinating observation! I wonder if the holiday weekend is to blame? I will certainly bring it up tomorrow. There is usually much better participation, especially at the beginning of the semester. I just looked up the other classes numbers - Tuesday 8:00 class - 16 comments (unbelievable!) 9:30 class - 32 comments Thursday - 30 comments. (M. Bishop, Personal communication, September 7, 2009)

Approximately two hours later at 11:21 p.m. Owen wrote:

> It's a GREAT teachable moment. Should the teacher dock the students 5 points, as the syllabus states, or should she be lenient the first week as it was along weekend? SURELY, you could say to them, the teacher must be tough at the start of the year to show she means business? Is there a "characteristic of good teaching" in the blog list that covers this?! (O. van den Berg, Personal communication, September 7, 2009)
>
> A few minutes later at 11:29 p.m. Owen continued:More and more fascinating. Maybe "setting high standards and expecting them", or "strict but flexible" should be on that list???!!! My personal view is that you need to have all the responses in by the deadline so that you can reflect on them timeously as you prepare for class. Late contributions undermine the group effort and undermine your determination to provide a quality experience, and should not be condoned. Students have all week to deal with a simple task; are they going to be happy if their students simply don't do the required work, and especially if they do so right at the start of the class? The fact that Monday is a holiday is no license to unilaterally extend the deadline by a day.
> So there you have it! Isn't teaching fun! You're doing a great job, and I'm having all sorts of fun going along for the ride. (O. van den Berg, Personal communication, September 7, 2009)

As evidenced in this thread of emails, the Labor Day lull in blog participation needed to be addressed. This was clearly a teachable moment. I decided to address the issue the following day when I saw the students on Tuesday, September 8, I reported on this in my fieldnotes on September 8, the third week of class,

> I started the class with a brief discussion about the blog and why the students did or did not post by Sunday night. I asked the students what should an effective teacher do the first weeks of school – should he/she clearly communicate the expectation and follow through on that expectation? Should he/she be lenient? I was pleased that the students quickly became engaged in the discussion. Brian

> suggested that the teacher should use leniency. Susan said that just like raising children and providing them with clear boundaries that in the classroom the teacher should state clearly the expectation and then hold the students to it. Many students participated in the discussion and hopefully, took away some useful information about what to expect of your students at the beginning of each new term. (M. Bishop, Fieldnotes, September 8, 2009)

A few of the students commented on their feedback cards about our in-class discussion pertaining to the lack of participation and late blog postings. One student wrote, “Teachable moment – good discussion on what is going on in our class and how it will apply to our future classrooms” (student, Personal communication, September 8, 2009). Another student wrote, “Did like how you made a point about the blogs” (student, Personal communication, September 8, 2009). Sixteen students commented on their feedback cards that day indicating their appreciation for the in-class discussion. There were two comments in particular that revealed students were using the in-class discussion about the Labor Day lull as a reflective tool. One student wrote, “I enjoyed you making us think and expand on our answers. It helped me receive different perspectives of different topics and issues” (student, Personal communication, September 8, 2009). The following student noted his or her thinking being challenged as a result of our discussion: “Liked the content we discussed because it challenged me to think about how I will need to change in order to be a good teacher” (student, Personal communication, September 8, 2009).

As the students noted, they were fond of the in-class discussions as the discussions helped them think and go further in their thoughts. Based on the data drawn from the students’ feedback cards, Owen’s observations and my fieldnotes, I had provided an atmosphere in the classroom that discussions were safe and that I trusted and cared about their responses. Yet, the fact that so many had not fulfilled their blog obligations might suggest the opposite – a reticence. Once I had communicated my expectations on August 8 and told them that I would not be giving points to students who posted after the Sunday midnight deadline, the number of comments posted on time increased from 31 in week two to 54 in week three.

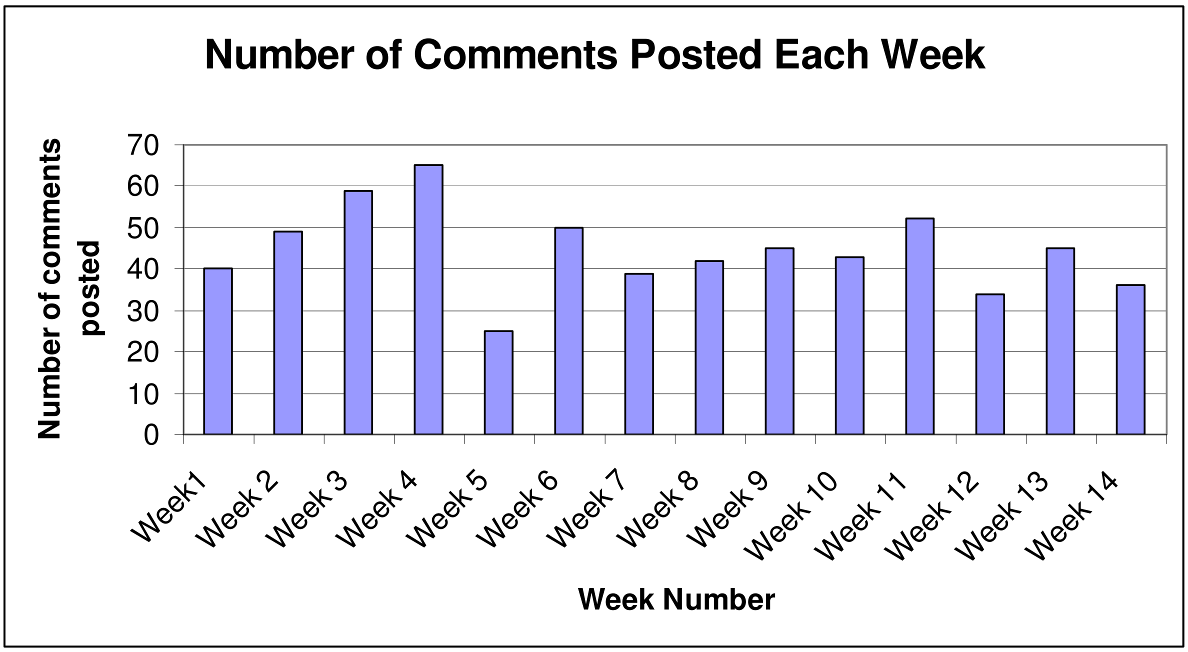

Figure 2. *Number of comments posted by Sunday midnight deadline throughout the semester*

The in-class discussion about the late posts obviously struck a chord with the students, as they noted it on their feedback cards, but it also motivated more of them to post by the deadline the following week. Notice the spike in the figure above between week two and week three as many more students made sure to post by the deadline of Sunday night. This was almost certainly a direct result of the in-class discussion.

The number of posts submitted by the deadline continued to increase from week three to week four but drastically dropped in week five as a result of the blog topic. Students were only required to post once in week five, which is the reason why the number is approximately half of the week prior. The blog assignment for week five was that the students had to browse through the education portion of the Lindenwood website or the School of Education folder on the common folder found on campus computers called PCCommon. The students were to find something new that they either didn't know before or that they didn't know was on the website or virtual folder. They were not required to post to a classmate; however, they were asked to find something different than the previous posts had indicated.

The responses in week six were on the rise again and remained steady until a slight increase during week 11 which will be discussed in Chapter Six. I noted that if all of the 34 students had posted to the blog, there would have been 64 posts each week. Obviously, not every student was posting to the blog on time every week.

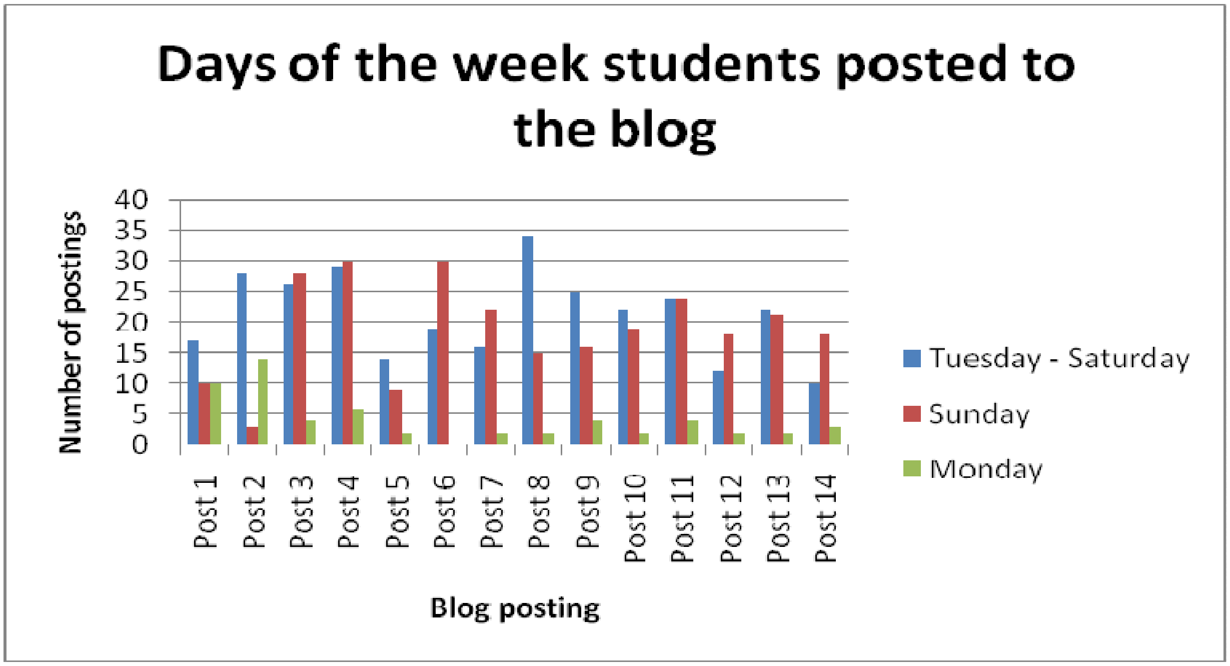

Figure 3. *Day of the week posting comparison*

The previous figure not only indicates that the discussion motivated many students to post by the deadline in subsequent weeks, it also indicates that although more students usually posted on Sunday than on any other day, there were still plenty of comments being posted Tuesday through Saturday. Not everyone was waiting until the deadline. Many students were participating in the blog earlier in the week. Just as the post-study survey results indicated that some students liked the blog and some did not, it appears from this graph that many students participated, perhaps dutifully, prior to the deadline. This could have possibly been those students who enjoyed the blog or who believed in getting the job done in good time.

Before the study began, I often wondered if I should make the blog a requirement and provide an absolute deadline. The data revealed to me that I had to continue to implement a deadline. However, following the comments of many of the students on feedback cards, focus groups and questionnaires, I felt I needed to reconsider this issue. I began to contemplate changing the due date to the day before class at midnight instead of the Sunday night. Many students commented that the Sunday night deadline was acceptable, but a few students recommended the deadline to be the midnight before the class met because they often thought about their class assignments the day before the class met. Therefore, students who attended class on Tuesdays thought about the homework and class assignments on Monday, the day before class. I was willing to try that for a semester and see how it went. I would still have time on Tuesday and Thursday mornings to read through all of the comments and prepare for the blog in-class discussion because I would not be teaching any early classes next semester in spring of 2010. I would be teaching four sections of *Orientation to Education* that semester with two sections on Tuesday at 9:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. and two sections on Thursday at 9:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m.

So if I was successful at providing an in-class atmosphere of safety, trust and care, was the blog providing a similar virtual atmosphere? On September 9th, Owen and I began a threaded discussion via email that challenged my thinking and the purpose of using a blog in this course.

Why Blog?

This is the critical question. Why blog? It lies at the center of the study. In the third week of the study, Owen emailed me a question that was emerging in his mind.

> What would you be doing if you were not backboning the course with the blog, and why is this better? Sorry, but it really is a key question for your final reflections - not just how well it worked, but was it really a better alternative. I suspect it is, but why? (O. van den Berg, personal communication, September 9, 2009)

So, why blog? One comment provided by a student during the first focus group indicated one benefit of blogging, “The blog makes you stop and think. It is a good critical thinking strategy,” (Focus group, October 6, 2009). Another student, Curtis, inadvertently answered this question in his weekly blog posting just three days prior to Owen’s email. The blog topic I chose for this third week was technology in the classroom. The students were to respond to the following:

> Watch the Technology YouTubes on the left. We viewed some of these videos in class but some of them we did not. Please make sure that you have viewed each video either in class or through the blog. Reflect upon what you saw. What are your thoughts about technology in the classroom? How could the Amazon Kindle change typical textbooks in the future? Please share an example of how a teacher effectively or ineffectively utilized technology in the classroom. (M. Bishop, Personal communication, September 8, 2009).

Curtis responded as follows:

> …I also think this blog project we are doing in class is another interesting way to communicate with the students. Some people may be shy in class to state their opinion but by blogging, it makes it more comfortable and also lets people know your interested in the topics. (Curtis, Personal communication, September 8, 2009)

Another student, Kate contributed her ideas about communicating with technology that led to a deeper question about the differences between face-to-face discourse and online discourse.

> … Anyways, i was trying to comment about what curtis said that blogging is nice for students who are to shy to speak in class. i have to ask is it technology that makes people shy ? After all they can't edit what they say in person but they can online or in a text. A perfect example would be is you meet someone on myspace or on facebook and you have convos and then you finally meet then in person, it is weird… I just feel like people really are losing their ability to talk to others which is important, i feel like middle school students may like activities where they don’t have to talk because they don’t want to be judged for what they say. It’s bad when you see a group of people at the mall or anywhere for that matter where people are together but they really arnt because everyone of the kids is texting... (Kate, Personal communication, September 10, 2009).

Although I was unsure of Kate's point about technology making people shy, I thought the point she was trying to make was that when people communicated virtually they had the ability to edit text. Face-to-face interaction is raw, unedited (to a degree), and authentic. It is easier when communicating virtually to edit one's thoughts and possibly exaggerate the truth, which is easier to get away with in a virtual world as opposed to the real world.

Although there was truth to Kate's observation, the reality that educators had to recognize was that this generation of students was much more dependent on virtual forms of communication. Educators must provide safe environments, real or virtual, that allow participants to freely share their ideas. But the question I needed to ponder for myself and my course was - did I need to provide both a real AND virtual environment for sharing? In week four of the study, I was not convinced of the answer to this question. However, I was recognizing the importance of discussing a few of the students' blog comments during class.

Not only was it important to provide another opportunity for the students to converse outside of classroom, but it was noted by many students, Owen, and in my own reflections that I should not neglect the importance of discussing the blog comments during class. This was especially important early in the semester as the level of blog participation was particularly low as many students had not posted twice by the due date. After the Labor Day lull and the following in-class discussion, I recognized how vital it was to communicate my expectations clearly to the students. The discussion and clarification was critical as I was trying to build an atmosphere of trust. I wanted the students to know that I cared about their comments, and to trust that I was reading their comments and assigning grades appropriately as indicated on the first day of class and in the syllabus. Students noted that an effective way to start class was with a discussion of comments posted on the blog the previous week. However, students overwhelmingly indicated from the index cards that they preferred to start class with meaningful YouTube video clips.

Using YouTube

On September 15, 2009. I read the following comments on the feedback cards: "I like the YouTube videos and discussion," "The YouTube was very interesting," "I really liked the youtube *[sic]*," "Love Youtube *[sic],"* "The YouTube videos were very informative by saying that the littlest things can get you in trouble" (student Personal communication, September 15, 2009). The following week I did not show a YouTube and one student commented on his/her card, "No you-tube*[sic]*?" (student, Personal communication, September 22, 2009). Even though I had felt the YouTube videos were important since incorporating them into my lessons the year prior, in week four of the study their value was confirmed to gauge from my fieldnotes on September 17,

> The YouTubes seem to be a big hit. I like using them because they are usually short visual images of the lesson at hand. I always enjoy looking at the students while they are watching the YouTubes. Every single time I have looked 100% of the students are watching the screen. No one is texting, no one is writing anything down, no one is talking to their neighbor. It is fascinating that they enjoy them so much. I will definitely keep them in my curriculum. (M. Bishop, Fieldnotes, September 17, 2009)

Clearly I recognized their value; however, at this point in the study I had not really reflected upon where the YouTubes belonged in my lessons. I eventually came to the conclusion that showing a YouTube video clip was an effective way to start the class. I believed it would be a motivating tool for students to make sure they were in class on time and immediately presented an issue for consideration in the class.

Appreciation for guidance

As this course was usually taken early in a pre-service teacher's college career, an important assignment in the class was completion of a four-year plan with the help of the student's advisor. Students who had transferred from another college or university might only need a two- or three-year plan. During the fifth week of the semester, after an in-class explanation of the program planning sheet and the specific requirements of the School of Education and Missouri Department of Secondary and Elementary Education, I encouraged the students to schedule an appointment with their advisor to determine a comprehensive plan for the duration of their Lindenwood experience. Some students required a great deal of assistance with this activity. Regardless, this plan needed to be discussed with and approved by their academic advisor. The assignment was worth 50 points simply as a motivating tool to ensure that the students took it seriously. Twenty-nine of the 32 students completed and turned in this assignment. Of the 29 students who completed, 10 submitted the four-year plan after the originally stated due date, the most common reason being that they could not get in to meet with their advisors. For that reason, I decided that in future semesters I would communicate clearly to the students that the first due date was a recommendation, but that I would accept it later in the semester.

At the conclusion of this class period on September 22, one of the students wrote the following on the index cards, "I love how we are doing our four-year plan. Knowing how much longer and what I still have to take really helps stay on course" (student, Personal communication, September 22, 2009). Another student stated, "I like how we went over our four-year plan, and what we need to do to complete" (student, Personal

Feedback, September 22, 2009). “I really like how you walk us through everything. Some teachers just give us forms and paperwork and not tell us what it is for. I do not feel lost with you, unlike other teachers” (student, Personal Feedback, September 22, 2009). Another student agreed as he or she stated “Very stressed about my upcoming schedule because I came in as a junior so I fell behind. But going through everything made me feel a lot better” (student, Personal Feedback, September 22, 2009). According to this data, there are a number of students who appreciated this in-class activity and the guidance provided regarding their plans.

The following class period, I met with each student one-on-one out in the hallway to check over their four-year plan, while the rest of the class was viewing a movie about education in other parts of the world. On this particular day, there were 27 students in attendance. Of the original 34 participants, two had dropped the class and five were absent. Although it was difficult to squeeze individual meetings into a 75-minute class period, I felt it was important for me to carefully go over their plans *with* them, in particular those students seeking secondary certification because they did not have an education advisor. Many advisors did not help the students create the plan, they simply provided the students with a program planning sheet. Many students struggled with correctly reading the program planning sheet and creating the four-year plan. For example, many non-education advisors did not know (or communicate to the student) that no other courses could be taken the semester during student teaching, so I had to clarify that for students who had incorrectly planned to take other courses during that semester. According to the student feedback, they appreciated the guidance I provided on this four-year plan.

The day of the one-on-one meetings, five feedback cards specifically referred to my help with the four-year plan. Student comments ranged from feeling helped and reassured to feeling stressed; however, every comment noted appreciation for the one-on-one feedback provided. One student noted, "Really helpful and reassuring that you looked over our four year plans with us and fixed them if they needed fixing or okayed them" (student, personal communication September 29, 2009). Another student said, "One-on-one with teacher was very helpful, 4 year plan was nice to see in front of you rather than per semester" (student, personal communication, September 29, 2009), while another remarked, "Still a little stressed over 4 year plan. Glad you met with us in the hall" (student, personal communication, September 29, 2009).

In my fieldnotes on September 29 I indicated the following about the one-on-one meetings with the students,

> I reviewed her 4 year plan giving her a few suggestions as needed. I reviewed with her that she still needed to submit her background check, disposition and foliotek registration. I explained that she was doing a great job posting each week to the blog on time and then I dismissed her to go back into the classroom. I continued this procedure with all students (M. Bishop, Fieldnotes, September 29, 2009)

Feedback

Feedback to Students

The data in my study indicated that students desired in-class feedback, assignment feedback, and online feedback via the blog. On October 6, 2009, the students participated in the first focus group, which I had asked others to facilitate to increase the likelihood of the validity of the students' responses. During this first focus group, halfway through the semester, a few students addressed the issue of feedback when asked if they felt that the instructor's participation in the blog was satisfactory and if not, why wasn't it. One student said, "Maybe get more out of it if she responded, tell me what she wants." The next comment was, "Do not know what she's grading us on," followed by this comment, "It would be good for Ms. Bishop to follow up with conversations during the week" (Focus Group, October 6, 2009).

Halfway through the course, some students were clearly articulating their desire for feedback. In the focus groups on October 6, 2009, one student said, "I don't like the blog because I don't get feedback on whether it was okay what I said." In that same focus group another comment made was "My blog participation was not satisfactory and maybe I would have been more motivated if I had more feedback." I would need to consider this issue for future semesters, though I did provide some feedback.

One instance during the study in which I did provide feedback occurred during the fifth week on September 22, 2009. As noted previously, I met with the students one-on-one to review their four-year plans. Not only did I use that time to discuss their plans, but I also used the opportunity to provide feedback about the quality of their blog postings. I reflected on this in my fieldnotes later that day,

> Last night I made a note in my grade book for students who were posting late to the blog or were not posting very thorough comments. David was one of the students who was posting late and his week five comment was not thorough. When he and I had our one-on-one meeting I explained to David my expectations and that he did not receive points for submitting the blog late and that I expected him to take the blog more seriously. He seemed to completely understand what I was asking of him – he had his head down saying, "I know – I really need to work harder at that." I have never had a conversation with any of my students about the poor quality of their blog comment. I used to get very frustrated with some of my students' blog posts, but I never did anything about it. So really, I have low expectations because I gave them all of their points anyway! I was missing valuable teachable moments by not modeling for my students what a teacher should do when he/she expects more from a student. I was modeling that you give full points even when a student doesn't deserve it. I am anxious to see how David does this week. (M. Bishop, Fieldnotes, September 22, 2009)

Unfortunately, David did not post onto the blog the following week (week six). He did post one comment the following week, but it was late. He submitted his comment and a 19-word reply to a classmate on Monday morning at 2:24 a.m. During week eight, he posted on Sunday at 5:04 p.m.; his reply to my posted question about the students' host teacher's classroom management skills had many grammatical errors but was quite thorough:

> the teacher I am observering does an awesome time going from one activity to another weather its notes to taking a quiz. Usually when they take a quiz the students grade eachothers papers and then turn them into the teacher then after that they usually go right into taking notes using a smart-board. I also think that she has wonderful control of her classes, the students tend to goof around like every class but they know when to stop and to get work done that why they usually get done with their work early. The class routine usually starts with attendance the teacher has assigned seating with the desks in rows to make it easier after they jump right into what they need to do for the day. (David, personal communication, October, 18, 2009)

Sadly, this was David's last blog posting for the semester. He did not post any comments during weeks nine through 14. The reasons for David's lack of participation are unknown, but would be an interesting further study to determine exactly why some students choose not to participate fully in the class blog. I neglected to follow up with this issue, and I did not devote time or attention to learning why various students chose not to participate. Due to David's lack of class and blog participation, and a few missing assignments, he received a grade of C in the course. He might have been struggling with transitioning to college as this was his first semester and his overall grade point average in all of his courses in the fall semester was 1.857.

Chad, another student who I spoke with about the poor quality of his blog postings, commented during the second focus group that he had become motivated to participate more in the blog, "when she told me I lost 40 points," (Chad, Focus Group, November 10, 2009). Clearly, Chad needed the feedback that he was not receiving all of his class points. The points were the motivator, but the feedback was the communication mechanism. Without the feedback Chad might have been unaware or in denial that he was actually losing points.

The data demonstrates that feedback is an important instructional tool that can benefit students. As an instructor of future teachers, I needed to provide more feedback opportunities to my students not only for in-class activities, but for their blog entries. I felt I had not modeled this effectively for my students. The next semester I intended to provide general feedback to the students about their blog comments during the in-class discussion about the weekly blog topic and comments. I had neglected to provide this type of feedback and came to recognize this as an essential component to effective blog implementation. Most students desire feedback. Do teachers desire feedback? I thought I did, but I really did not.

Feedback to Me as the Teacher

Early in the study, I recognized that during my years of teaching, I had not trusted my supervisors to provide me with feedback on my teaching that was meaningful and authentic. I struggled early in the study receiving feedback from my critical friend, Dr. van den Berg. It is important to note the following significant moment in my transformation as a reflective practitioner. As I tried to provide a safe atmosphere for my students, I needed to trust and understand that Owen was providing a safe atmosphere for me to critically look at my own instruction. During the second week of the semester I reflected the following in my journal:

> On a general note, it has been interesting for me to experience someone evaluating my teaching. Before last week, it has been eight years since someone has been in my classroom to observe me and provide me with feedback that would help my instruction. I believe that is one thing missing on college campuses. I don't know if other universities observe and evaluate their faculty members, but Lindenwood does not. (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, September 3, 2009)

I was coming to recognize the importance of receiving professional feedback. I continued on in my reflections about my history of receiving professional feedback and my growth in recognizing its value.

> However, teaching in public K-12 one is evaluated one to four times a year depending on years of experience. Reflecting back on those days in which I was evaluated by a principal, I remember how nervous I would get because I wanted to be perfect! I wanted to do everything right. I didn't want him/her to find anything wrong. What a travesty! Why did I have this view? I certainly don't think I am the perfect teacher and didn't back then. Evaluation and feedback are crucial if one wants to improve, but ironically there were only a few things ever suggested to me to improve my instruction in the nine years that I taught in public school….I have learned more from Owen in one week than I learned from my evaluators in public school over nine years. (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, September 3, 2009)

This illustrates the importance of professional feedback. My reflections certainly demonstrated my personal and professional growth. Having myself been somewhat unnerved by Owen's original critiques of my classroom practices, I came to understand how important it is for all teachers to experience such a process, as long as it is collegially done.

> Educators need to stop feeling like being observed and evaluated is a test that must be conquered, and start viewing it as a true learning experience that can make us better practitioners. And principals need to provide helpful feedback that will make the teacher better…. And when a principal tries to give constructive feedback many teachers feel defensive and don't truly step back and learn from the process. This is a travesty and we are being quite hypocritical because we are constantly providing feedback to our students and we expect them to change, yet we are not able to do it ourselves. (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, September 3, 2009)

I continued on in this journal entry about my feedback transformation. Prior to this experience I had almost always received positive professional feedback. By experiencing the uncomfortable reality of critical feedback I was able to move beyond the discomfort and acknowledge the value of feedback.

> That is one thing I am learning right now, I didn't expect that to be one of the outcomes of this study but it is only week two and I can feel my transformation. Last week after I read Owen's comments I was bummed. I was actually a bit depressed that evening. I thought I had presented a really good lesson and after reading Owen's valid and constructive comments I felt that if I had to get a grade I would have been assigned a "C." Last week I slept on it and woke up the next morning feeling better as I recognized that this is part of the journey. I am not perfect and should not expect myself to be. Fast forward seven days. Last night as I read Owen's comments and suggestions I had a very different outlook. I wasn't sad or depressed I read the suggestions and comments with an open mind instead of a defensive one. Maybe I had a different outlook because I implemented many of his suggestions from last week and they worked. I saw and experienced the value from the previous week's experience. This is a barrier that took a week for me to break. I believe that many teachers have a similar barrier. Teachers expect to get A's on everything so they expect to always receive only positive feedback when being evaluated…. I am truly grateful for this experience because it is helping me see the value in feedback of my teaching. After reading Owen's assessment of the class period last night I have been able to reflect upon some of my teaching practices that are working and some that need adjustment." (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, September 3, 2009)

Through this study I learned first hand the powerful effects of feedback. Without Owen's feedback, I would not have been able to grow, change, and improve to the degree that I did over this semester. So how did that affect me in the classroom? I realized that I needed to provide ample feedback opportunities to my students so that they would have similar opportunities for growth, change and improvement. In addition to providing feedback for in-class assignments and blog comments, I needed to provide more feedback and support to the students while they were out of class during the five week break. This was a vulnerable time during which students and I could easily become detached due to our physical separation. In my fieldnotes on October 6th just before the long break, I noted, "I really hope the blog does two things – 1) keeps us connected during the break and 2) helps the students look for specific items while observing their host teacher," (M. Bishop, Fieldnotes, November 6, 2009).

Students' Written Feedback on the Use of the Blog

Mid-way through the semester on October sixth, just before the students would be excused from attending class for five weeks as they observed their host teacher, they participated in focus groups led by other university instructors I had invited in to perform the task. The results of the focus group indicated to me that many students liked the blog because they were able to read other students' thoughts. Another reason noted was that the blog provided students with an opportunity and time to reflect and think about different topics. The next most frequently stated benefit of the blog was that it allowed the students the opportunity to express their own opinions and ideas. When asked if they liked blogging, there was a mixture of responses. Two-thirds of the responses noted that they liked the blog, while one-third of respondents indicated that they did not like the blog, which could have correlated with the 22 of 32 students who actually posted to the blog during the week of October 6, 2009. Many students during these focus groups commented that they would like a Facebook format better, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

This was the last class period prior to the five week practicum break. When asked during the focus group what their overall views of the blog were, according to the notes taken by the facilitators, some expressed their approval. One student said, "I like the blog. I like hearing other people's opinion." Brian simply stated, "It's awesome." Kate said, "Blogging is a good activity, we get to express our feelings and opinions – there is more time to reflect, you feel you can open more." However, not all of the views were so positive as the following comments were made: "I don't like blogging – I do it for the grade," "The whole idea of blogging makes me disinterested," "I don't really like it." A few students expressed strongly their dislike for blogging, "I only do it for the points. I feel like – crap I've got to blog, not sweet, I get to blog" and finally, "I can't imagine blogging for fun. If it was optional… nobody would do it. Maybe Susan would do it." Clearly, there were some students who were not as enamored of the blog as I had anticipated. Some students were even willing to verbally challenge the value of the blog and make fun of a student who was enjoying and actively participating in the blog. As I reflected upon the students' responses during the focus groups I was surprised by the negativity of many of the responses.

In addition to the students' challenging the value of the blog, I had concerns and fears before and throughout the study regarding their perceptions of the blog. The summer before the study began I wrote the following in my journal about an interesting fear I had about the blog:

> I fear that some students will view the blog as a waste of time. I do not want students to think it is a waste of time. I have struggled with a similar fear since I have started teaching – that students will not like or value my class and/or my methods and/or me. I have this strange notion that all of my students will like and value all of my assignments all of the time. I am not sure where this came from – it might be my general desire to please people. I am looking forward to addressing this fear throughout this study. I need to allow my students to have their own opinions and ideas that might differ from mine. (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, May 28, 2009)

This action research project gradually changed me from an instructor with an unproductive need for approval to one who welcomes feedback and has confidence in her professional knowledge to make effective instructional decisions. The transformation did not occur overnight and there is still progress to be made. As I reflected on the history of the blog implementation in my class, I wrote in my journal on July 21,

> In the Spring of 2009, I had one semester of being the instructor and utilizing a class blog under my belt. I felt that the first semester of implementation was successful. A few students made positive comments on the end-of-course evaluations regarding the use of technology and in particular the blog. However, I thought the majority of the students would have commented on how great the blog was. It was interesting for me to come to grips with the idea that maybe not every student enjoyed blogging as much as I did. However, I still felt that I needed to continue with the blog and use it for two main purposes – encourage out-of-class dialogue and reflection AND require students to utilize technologies in the classroom. I did not feel that there was a need for a whole lot of change in the blog topics and tools used….. (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, July 21, 2009)

Just three weeks later my transformation was slowly occurring as I wrote in my journal some important conclusions I was forming:

> I also used to expect that all students would like the blog. I assumed they would find the technological tool as valuable as I did. I jumped to this conclusion. Not every student is going to like the same things and that is okay. (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, August 10, 2009)

After writing this important revelation that it was okay that all students were not going to like the same thing, I still had not come to the realization of what I was going to do with the information! Apparently, I expected the students to all love the blog and only say good things about it, just as I did with Owen's observations and feedback. However, the last few sentences in the journal entry above indicate my own growth as a professional learning how to deal with the insecurities that come with teaching. I was starting to recognize that without the students' honest feedback I would not be making forward progress with improving the use of the blog. I was wrestling with and finally conquering the notion that student dislike of an activity was not a sign I should not use it in the classroom.

Closing Words

My action research journey began as I quickly learned that I needed to examine my instruction as well as the blog. Through this examination, I realized that I needed to change the way I viewed what was the important content to be taught. Instead of always feeling rushed and cheated by having to prepare students for the practicum and other necessary paperwork, I recognized the value of guiding the students through those necessary requirements. My sense of the importance of creating an in-class and virtual atmosphere of safety, trust and care was discovered as I examined the idea of "teacher talk" in and out of the class. The Labor Day Lull phenomenon was analyzed as the number of postings drastically dropped during the holiday, which then led Owen to ask the essential question, "Why Blog?" As I wrestled with this question along with the students' feedback from the first focus group, I came to a fuller understanding of my struggle to deal with feedback. The first half of the study provided many insights, a topic to which I shall return in the final chapter. First, however, I need to provide a reflective narrative on the second half of my course.

Chapter Six: Completing the Course

Tuesday, October 6, 2009, was the last class period before the students would have a month away from class to continue their practicum hours, even though they remained on campus for their other classes and commitments. This was the seventh week of the course, and beginning on October seventh, I would not see the students again until November 10, 2009. Approximately one-third of them had not been placed yet or had not begun their observation hours for various reasons. For those students still not placed by the education office staff, the arrangements would be made while they were away from my class. As I had no control of the placement situation, I checked my mailbox frequently and upon receipt of the placement papers, I would communicate their placement arrangement via phone and e-mail. I made the following comments about our separation in my fieldnotes after class on that day:

> I feel like a mother bird kicking her baby birds out of the nest. I am always nervous to let them go…. I told them about the blog expectations while they were away. They are to use the blog posts as an opportunity to reflect upon their practicum experience. I suggested they check the blog early each week for the new topic. This will help them know what to look for that week while they are observing. And then they can post their reply later in the week. (Melanie, Fieldnotes, October 6, 2009)

Although I recognized the value of the practicum break, I still experienced anxiety about having the students leave, perhaps because I would not be meeting with them face-to-face for many weeks. Yet when I reflected later on my fieldnotes, I noticed that I had not seemed unduly concerned about those students who had not begun their observation. The issue of timely practicum placement was obviously important, never mind my lack of concern, and will be discussed later in this chapter.

Dichotomy of the "Real Course" and the "Phantom Course"

Once the students went out into the schools the seventh week of the semester, for all intents and purposes, the course was essentially over. The "Real Course" had concluded and the "Phantom Course" had just begun. Although we would continue communicating via the blog, we would not be meeting during weeks eight through 11. The weeks following the break consisted of very little content as I had planned a focus group and needed to wrap up the course and research study with a semester review and questionnaire. On November 24, 2009, approximately half of the class period consisted of a lesson regarding parental involvement in schools, basically the only new "educational" content introduced in the entire second half of the semester, which is why I described the second half as the "Phantom Course." Just as the word "phantom" indicates something without material substance, the second half of the course, in retrospect, lacked material substance. For that reason, the narrative of the second half of the semester that follows takes into account that the course was effectively over: the momentum of the course definitely slowed. Therefore, even though I discussed the first half of the semester chronologically in Chapter Five, here I will present the themes that emerged during the second half of the course topically.

Importance of Timely Practicum Placement

The timeliness of the practicum placement was crucial not only to allow students ample time to complete their 30 hours of observation by the end of the semester, but also to afford them the same opportunities to reflect upon their experiences during in-class assignments and through the blog as those students placed earlier in the semester. I instructed the students, verbally and in writing on the blog, that if they were not placed in a school yet, they were to respond to the posted blog questions reflecting upon any past or current teachers or coaches. On October sixth, following our last in-class session prior to the break, the students were to respond to the following blog posting:

> Most of you have already begun your classroom observation. The next few blog entries will be based upon what you see in the classroom in which you are observing. If you have not started your observation, answer the questions by observing the assessment practices of one or more of your Lindenwood professors. Please do not use names of teachers, professors or students. How does the teacher assess the progression of the students' learning? How does the teacher determine a need for further instruction? How does the teacher determine and document when a student reaches mastery of a learning objective? I have posted a YouTube presentation by Rick Stiggins about Assessment for Learning. Take 6 minutes and watch the YouTube – it will help you know what to look for in your classroom. (M. Bishop, personal communication, October 6, 2009)

The following student's blog comment indicated two recurring issues – length of reply (which will be discussed later in this chapter) and timely practicum placement. Jason was finally placed in the thirteenth week of the semester, and so he had not been placed by the seventh week when he posted the following 73-word comment to the blog:

> I haven't begun my classroom observation because I haven't been placed yet, but I was an assistant coach this summer for a high school level team. I watched the coach, who I had played for, handle the kids and handle situations from parents to the concession stand. He also worked to give kids rides to games if they needed them. This is something I wouldn't want to do, but would for a player. (Jason, personal communication, October 12, 2009)

Jason's short reply did not answer any of my posted questions and did not indicate that he had a clear understanding of assessment, possibly because he had not been placed yet. Jason could have benefited more from the blog had he been observing a teacher. For many students, observing a teacher provides them with the scaffolding on which they are able to apply and reflect upon issues, such as how assessment could be used in the classroom.

Over the next few weeks, some of the students continued observing during the break, while others were still anxiously awaiting their long overdue practicum placements. A few local school districts were particularly slow at placing some of our practicum students this semester for various reasons. Via e-mail and during face-to-face conversations, some students expressed to me their anxiety and frustration that the office staff had not yet placed them. They felt that they were not able to take advantage of their weeks off class to observe a practicing teacher. As noted earlier, not only were the students annoyed with the situation, but it kept many of them from being able to take full advantage of the blog topics as they did not have a current frame of reference to help them respond to the posted topics. Many found themselves at the end of the semester not having completed their practicum. Although they could take an incomplete, which allowed them an extra semester to complete the practicum, this caused unnecessary anxiety for the students who had no control over the situation as evidenced in their communication with me. That said, even though Jason and others were not able to take full advantage of the blog until they were placed, it did provide a virtual community to which they could remain connected.

Staying Connected Through the Blog

In previous semesters I had not required the students to blog during the break, and I had not posted any new topics. A few months prior to conducting the study, I wrote the following in my journal on May 10, 2009:

> In the past I have not required them to blog while they were out doing their practicums. But I could really use it to their advantage. Many students do not know what they are looking for as they are observing their teacher….I could pose thought provoking questions and best teaching strategies that I want them to look for and then reflect upon. (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, May 10, 2009)

I determined in August 2009, as I wrote the action plan to be implemented in the fall, to require weekly blog postings even during the practicum break.

During the first week of the practicum break in October, I therefore continued the blog in anticipation of its impact while the students were away completing their field experience. Of course, as the students were away from our in-class sessions, I could not discuss the blog comments in class. However, I looked forward to reading their comments as the topics related to what I assumed they were observing in their various classrooms. Although most students were not using the blog as a discourse tool to participate in an ongoing dialogue with other students in the class, many were using it as a virtual bulletin board to reflect upon my posted questions as they related to their observation experience. I waited anxiously wondering if the quality and length of the student comments would decrease as I would not meet face-to-face with them for many weeks. However, the opposite occurred. Most of the students' comments met or exceeded my expectations and the length of the posts in the second half of the semester was about the same as the first half as displayed (see Figure 4).

Does Word Count Provide Valid Data?

When looking at the following graph of the average word counts for the students' initial blog post and reply to a classmate, weeks two and seven had the highest average word count. In week two we had a regular class meeting, but week seven was their first week away from class for the practicum break. During week two, the students had to choose three qualities or actions of an effective teacher, and write about why they thought those three were so important. The students had collectively created a list of such qualities the week prior in class. The list was provided on the blog, but the students were instructed to choose a different quality or action if they did not see their preference listed. The blog topic in week seven was the first posting related to the students' observation experience. The students were to reflect and write about their host teacher's use of assessments in the classroom. I recognized that just because a student typed many words did not necessarily mean the words written were highly reflective of their experience or that they answered all of the questions posted. However, I felt that many of the longer comments contained more substance and depth of reflection.

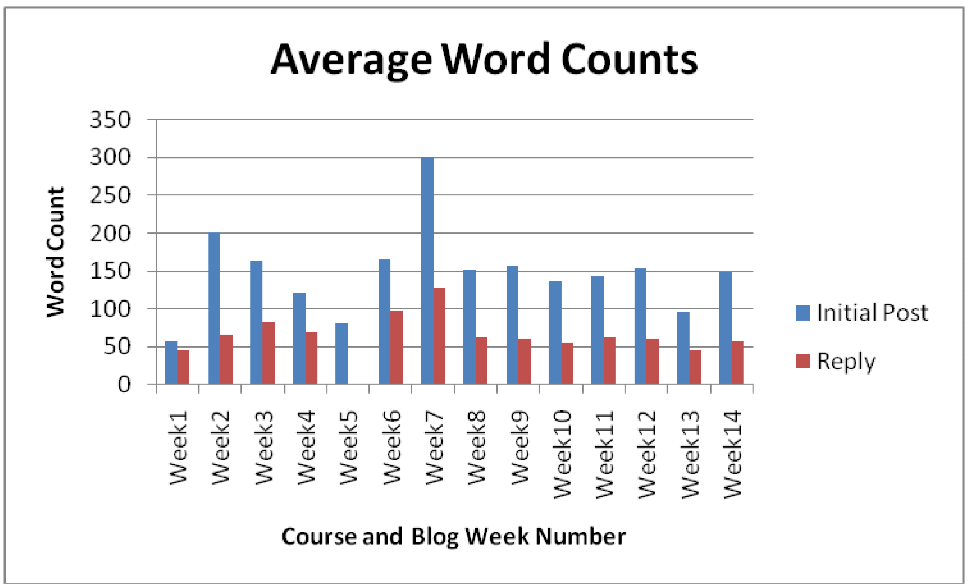

Figure 4. *Length of students' blog comments*

The topic during the seventh week provided the first opportunity for them to reflect about their practicum experience on the blog, and for those students not yet placed, I explained how they could still reflect upon the posted question(s) by observing their current professor(s). I anxiously awaited their responses, as this was the first time I had required students to blog during the practicum break. I was not overly concerned with the number of words typed, but hoped the students would answer the posted questions as they reflected upon what they were observing in the classroom. I will now describe what I found when I looked carefully at the postings of four different students. The four students were chosen based on an attempt to provide information from a wide range of students enrolled in *Orientation to Education*. I studied the blogs of two females, Bethany and Allison, and two males, Curtis and Ron. Of those four students, two had been placed early in the semester, Bethany and Curtis, and two were placed later, Ron was placed in week 13 and Allison was placed in week nine. Three of them, Bethany, Curtis, and Ron were all 18 at the start of the course, while Allison was 20-years old and was a junior with prior experience in education courses.

Bethany had been a diligent student, yet very quiet in my class. She had had perfect attendance and had not missed a single point on any of the assignments. Bethany had expressed an interest in pursuing elementary certification. Prior to the seventh week, Bethany's comments on the blog were thorough and quite lengthy in comparison to most of the other students. I felt that her 297-word response (the longest) in week seven was also reflective. Her thorough response to that week's blog topic read as follows:

> I have been placed into 4th grade class. My favorite grade! The teacher that I observe is a wonderful teacher. She has 27 years of experience in the teaching field. She knows exactly how to get the students involved and assess them on what they just learned. For example, in the morning before class begins the students are given a daily quiz over something they learned the day before. She told me that this is a great way to get the students involved early. They are ready for this quiz every morning and sometimes they do great and sometimes they do not, but it helps them assess what they learned the day before. Another way the teacher assess the students is not by giving them a test, but asking the students a question and having them answer by raising their hands. If the teacher choices a math problem to quiz the students on, then they can answer using their fingers.

> They all showed me the different ways they, for example show 65 on their fingers. It is a excellent way to get the students involved, plus in 4th grade they all want to answer even if it is wrong.
> IF the students need further instructions on what they are learning the teacher ask them more questions on the same topic. She gives them different views on the same topic. She changes the lesson plan all the time because she wants the students to understand everything before they move on. The students have completely mastered it when they all have passed the assessment she give verbally and they answer verbally. She knows her class well enough to know when they are having trouble on a particular lesson/ section. The teacher will create different strategies to overcome the problems. (Bethany, personal communication, October 8, 2009)

Bethany's lengthy and reflective blog posting indicated to me not only that she was willing to thoroughly answer the questions about how her host teacher assessed the students, but that she had a basic understanding that assessment did not simply involve a test, but a series of ongoing actions and decisions by the teacher to determine where the students were in their learning.

Curtis, on the other hand, had not been a quiet student as he had participated in many class discussions. His overall attendance had not been perfect as he had missed three of the 12 class sessions. Curtis was pursuing elementary certification and by week seven had been placed, but while his 134-word reply did not adequately answer all of my posted questions, it revealed a possible need for some students to be able to veer "off topic."

> I have observed only a few hours for a first grade class in Orchard Farm. She records progression in many ways. for example, for about an hour, the students get into groups and work on certain tasks like spelling words, free reading, playing with puzzles...etc. while the majority are in the corners, she brings 5 students to her desk and works and test them on their reading skills. she has binders for each student in the class and records their progress at the end of the day. she also takes about ten to fifteen minutes in the beginning of class to make sure they understood the last section. she motivates the students to read and make progress by putting marbles in this fish bowl. once the line is reached, they win a pizza party. (Curtis, personal communication, October, 11, 2009)

Curtis's emerging understanding of how assessment could be used in the classroom became apparent to me through his relatively short posting, which indicated to me that a word count might not be fully reflective of the richness of a posting. And the fact that he had diverged from the topic in the last two sentences from assessment to motivation indicated that some students could benefit from feeling free to write about whatever they wanted from their observation experiences.

Robb-Singer and Zeni (2004) indicated that when students are provided an opportunity to use narrative about their experiences in the classroom, some "connect backwards and forwards as they draw together what they have learned in their university education and apply it in a real classroom with real kids" (p. 37). Owen alluded to this idea on May 10, four months prior to the start of the semester, when he responded to something I had written in my journal. As I had been contemplating having the students blog during their practicum break, I wrote "I could encourage them to look for specific things in one week." In the margin of my notes, Owen wrote "Not necessarily – or look for specific thing(s) <u>plus</u> anything else that strikes you." I did not pick up on his suggestion or give it another thought until the semester was over. I had not communicated to the students that they could write about whatever struck them, yet some students did it anyway, which indicated to me that some of them could possibly benefit from this simple, yet specific addition to how they were allowed and encouraged to respond on the blog. As some students used it to communicate ideas not specifically asked in the originally posted questions, others took the opportunity to link lessons learned in other courses to the topics referred to on the blog.

During the eighth week, the students were to reflect on the blog about what classroom routines their cooperating teacher used. Allison was a junior who had transferred from another four-year university. She was much further along in her pre-service program than most of the other students. She had already completed three education courses, and in addition to being enrolled in *Orientation to Education* during the fall 2009 semester, she was enrolled in three more education courses, one of which was *Classroom Teaching and Management* that also had a 30-hour practicum. Allison had only been absent from one class session and she participated regularly in class discussions. By the eighth week she had not been placed, yet she wrote the following 229-word reply:

> Frustreated still.. no placement but high hopes for this week.. Anyways in my classroom managemnt class we actually did a whole big project with this so I will use some of what my classroom rules and procedures who use..
> Classroom arrangement for a health room- All desks facing forward so each student can see the board without having to turn their heads to much. Teachers desk in the back of the room for supervision. Desk turned away from any windows to help with distraction. plenty of trashcans and storage near my desk for easy access.
> Classroom procedures: Students should be respectful to others in their classroom. When announcements are being made their should be no talking. Tardines can occur 2 times in my class period (PE) one way is to be late to the locker room, second is to be late to the gym after getting ready. There will be absolutely no gum,soda, orfood allowed in the locker room or gymnasioum. Students will earn their grades. My grading scale: tes are 15% dresscode is 10% and participation is 75%.
> Safety and secrurity- NObody should be in the locker room unsupervided. Students must remain in locker room until a teacher brings them into the gym. Students are not to touch any equipent set up for class. Students are to teat all equipment with respecet. (just some rules and procedures). (Allison, personal communication, October, 18, 2009)

Although this posting was filled with grammatical issues, Allison's lengthy posting answered every one of my questions and also indicated a clear understanding of classroom routines (in addition to a continued frustration of not being placed). She utilized resources created for another class and applied the learning from that class to what was assigned on the blog, which I thought was an acceptable and appropriate way to respond to the blog without having been placed yet.

During week nine, the students were to write about classroom management and student behavior. I provided the following paragraph to guide their reflection:

> Many first year teachers struggle with student discipline. By answering the following questions, recognize the behavior strategies used by your cooperating teacher that work or do not work in the classroom. How are expectations for behavior, routines, and learning explained? What are the guidelines for classroom behavior? How is appropriate behavior encouraged? How does the teacher react to inappropriate behavior? What techniques both verbal and nonverbal are used to cue appropriate behavior? What strategies does the teacher use to prevent problems? (M. Bishop, personal communication, October 19, 2009)

Ron, an 18-year old freshmen also still waiting to be placed, was a quiet student in class. He had only missed one class period and had earned every point possible during the course. Ron was a history major as he worked toward secondary certification. He did not have a car on campus so he was very limited when he requested schools for the practicum, and unfortunately for Ron, the school district that placed students the slowest that semester was the school district within walking distance of Lindenwood. When I would see Ron on campus throughout the semester, he would often smile and wave. Sometimes he would even stop and chat, as he told me he was not upset about the practicum placement situation. He wrote the following 171-word response to the questions listed above:

> I have never had a teacher that was straight out of school, but i can imagine that disciplining the class would be challenging. With a teacher that has just gotten out of school and started a teaching job, especially in high school, it might be easy for the kids to goof off and get away with it because of the close age between the

> teacher and the student.
> I think it the best strategy for a new teacher would be to start off pretty strict and set the tone and as the year goes one and as you establish relationships with students, you could start to ease up. That way they know that you can be strict if needed. There should be certain guidelines to the classroom. They should mostly be rules that won't distract other students from doing their work though. (Ron, personal communication, October 27, 2009)

Ron answered my posted questions and appeared to me that his understanding of classroom management was emerging. He did not refer to specific verbal or nonverbal cueing techniques or strategies a teacher could use to prevent problems; however, he attempted to recall how his past teachers handled behavior and projected his own ideas about he would handle classroom management. Overall, I felt that Ron's 171-word reply was an adequate response, especially for someone who had not yet been placed.

Retrospective Excursus: Revisiting the Students' Blogs

As noted on page 136, the layout of this course essentially contained two phases: phase one consisted of seven weekly class sessions in which we discussed administrative issues, educational content, and practicum preparations; and phase two, which took place during the second half of the semester, and which consisted mainly of five weeks of practicum break plus a few weeks of course and research wrap-up. As I looked closely at the postings of the students mentioned above, I had another look at all 14 weeks of their blog postings for comparisons throughout the entire semester. When I wrote Chapter Five, the themes that emerged as I analyzed the data from the first half of the course indicated much of what **I** had experienced from the action research experience. A few issues that resulted from the blog were discussed; however, I did not look very closely at what themes might emerge from the students' blog comments were they to be carefully studied. Woods (1986) provides the following thoughts regarding theory:

> Concepts emerge from the field, are checked and re-checked against further data, compared with other material, strengthened or perhaps reformulated…. However, though theory might be said to be well 'grounded' in the data, it does not simply 'emerge' or 'come into being', nor is it *immediately* (italics added) revealed…at some stage there must be a 'leap of the imagination.' (p. 147)

The recognition that I needed to go back and look closer at the students' blog posts did not occur to me immediately. I experienced a "leap of the imagination" while writing Chapter Six as I looked at the content written on the blog. The "leap of the imagination" began when I decided to look more closely at word count, and continued as I recognized the importance of studying the blog comments of specific students over the entire semester. I will discuss these developing insights below.

Ron, whose ninth week blog I quoted on the previous page, and who was an 18-year old student not placed until the 13th week, posted early each week and completed all but one of the blog entries. After reviewing Ron's comments throughout the entire semester, I felt that he had attempted to answer each one of my posted questions. I also felt that his responses were usually not reflective, and it appeared that he was not making connections between most of the topics posted and how it would affect him in his future classroom. Perhaps he just wanted to get his blog entry done without caring too much how adequately he dealt with the task set. There is the possibility that he was simply going through the motions.

In particular, Ron's response during week eight seemed to me not thorough enough. On October 13, I posted the following blog topic:

> Students feel safe and secure when there is a set of classroom routines. Please reflect upon what classroom routines your cooperating teacher uses in the classroom. What are the established procedures in the classroom such as attendance, beginning class, ending class, clean up, etc? What is the physical arrangement of the classroom, tables, desks, positioning, etc? How does the

> teacher transition the students from one activity to another? Reflect upon the classroom routines – Are the routines providing a positive, safe, and secure plan to ensure student learning? Do you agree with the routines that the teacher uses? Why or why not? (M. Bishop, personal communication, October 13, 2009)

Ron started his blog entry with, “From my experience of thirteen years of school, my teachers have had the same basic procedure for their class. Most of the time the teacher will wait for everyone to be seated and then take attendance....” His opening sentences indicated to me that he had a difficult time remembering or chose not to list the details of the various classroom procedures that he had observed in his previous schooling experiences. Almost certainly his response would have been much more reflective and thorough had he been placed and observing a teacher.

In comparison to many of Ron’s other postings, in week 11 he appeared to have a clearer understanding of the topic of “teacher-student rapport.” Even though he had still not been placed in a classroom, he gave the following specific examples of how his past teachers had connected with students as they built rapport:

> …Some of the ways my teachers would connect with the students is they would find out their interests or their hobbies. If they found out they were involved in a sport they would follow up on the person and asked how their games went. Even if students got to class early, they would start conversations with them asking how their weekend went and what all they did. They would then respond by telling them what they did that weekend. That way both people learn a little more about each other. (Ron, personal communication, November 11, 2009)

Ron was at a disadvantage because he was not observing in a classroom at this point, but here he provided an adequate understanding of teacher-student rapport. Overall, I felt that Ron benefited from the blog, but he could have learned and reflected more about the topics had he been in a classroom.

Allison, on the other hand, had not been placed early in the semester, yet she had used the blog to reflect on her previous and concurrent classroom experiences. The fact that Allison was a junior and concurrently taking three other education courses probably helped her reflect on the posted topics. Prior to her placement, she referred in the blog in weeks two and eight to what she had learned in her other education classes. In response to the topic of classroom routines in week eight, Allison started her lengthy posting with, "Frustreated still.. no placement but high hopes for this week.. Anyways in my classroom management class we actually did a whole big project with this so I will use some of what my classroom rules and procedures were…" (Allison, personal communication, October 18, 2009). The previous quote was used on page 144 to represent the length of Allison's postings, but is repeated here to show her ability to use the lessons she had learned in another education course for the purposes of the blog topic. Allison continued to show a clear understanding of the importance of classroom routines.

After Allison had been placed in week nine, she responded to each blog posting with thorough and reflective comments regarding what she had experienced from her practicum. During week 11 regarding the blog topic of teacher-student rapport, Allison provided specific examples of strategies her host teacher used to model positive teacher-student rapport like sense of humor and respect. She concluded her posting with the following comments:

> I can tell the students really respect her and I believe this is because they feel like she really cares and takes intersest in their daily lives. Just last week the students had to run the mile and there was one student who didn't even want to give it a try so the teacher ended up running the last three laps with him. I thought that was really encouraging. (Allison, personal communication, November 3, 2009)

Allison had demonstrated that she understood the importance of teacher-student rapport. She might well have understood this with or without being placed, but having been placed at that time allowed her the opportunity to observe teacher-student rapport in action and report her observations on the blog.

Bethany and Curtis, on the other hand, had been placed prior to the sixth week of the semester. Of the four students whose blog comments I went back and reviewed, Curtis had the shortest average word-count, yet most weeks he demonstrated significant mastery of the blog topic. As indicated on page 142, Curtis not only veered "off topic" during week seven, but also in weeks two, three, and eight. As he veered away from the specific questions, his responses were still quite reflective, such as the following concluding paragraph of his post he made on September 8, 2009 when he was asked to share an example of how a teacher effectively or ineffectively utilized technology in the classroom:

> …Being in high school for four years, you would think the school would teach you how to use Microsoft word, excel, and power point in a computer class for projects and spreadsheets but none of my teachers explained them. Still to this day I have not worked on excel or powerpoint. In two weeks, I have two power point presentations I have to give without any knowledge of the program. (Curtis, personal communication, September 8, 2009)

During this week, Curtis posted his longest response at 402 words. His first three paragraphs, not shown, provided a very clear picture of his understanding. His final two sentences, as noted above, that veered from the original topic, showed me that he understood how his previous teachers' actions had continued to negatively affect him.

During weeks nine and 13, Curtis responded with very short and incomplete responses at 46-words and 75-words respectively. In week nine, Curtis responded to my five posted questions regarding management and student behavior with the following comment:

> In my first grade class at Fruita Elemtary [name changed], my teacher uses positive reinforcement to the children who are listening. for example, when a student is talking, rather than punishing that child she hands out candy to the other who are being quiet. rewards for the behaved. (Curtis, personal communication, October 20, 2009)

Not only did Curtis struggle with correct grammar, but his short response indicated to me that he either hurried his response or he did not have a clear understanding of classroom management and student behavior. Curtis' response in week 13 was similar, yet interestingly he was the first student to post that week. Curtis was not alone as many of the students' comments were much shorter in the final two weeks of blogging. Even Bethany's comments were shorter in weeks 13 and 14 than in any other week.

Bethany was another freshman who had been placed early in the semester. Even though she was in her first year of college, she had participated in a high school program called Cadet Teaching that allowed her to observe in a practicum setting during high school. Perhaps this previous experience in the classroom helped Bethany write very lengthy and reflective responses throughout the entire semester. Even during weeks two and three, before many students had written insightful comments, Bethany had reflected on her Cadet Teaching experience as she wrote about the qualities of an effective teacher. She referred to a time when the teacher she had observed demonstrated ineffectively how to care for students.

> The teacher began laughing because the child could not pronounce a good amount of the words. My heart went out to this student because the teacher did not care that the child cound not read, but instead made her read to the entire class while she laughed in the background. (Bethany, personal communication, September 6, 2009)

In addition to her references of her cadet teaching experience, Bethany posed rhetorical questions, referred to previous teachers, and even wrote about how the topic related to a current political issue. On October fourth, in response to a discussion about education around the world, Bethany wrote the following:

> In some ways it upsets me because I want my children to get the best education possible and I do not see how they can in America. I think Obama is taking the correct direction in helping k-12 education in America. Obama wants to extend the school year, which means only 3 weeks for summer break. I agree I like the summer break, but I think it is too long and the students start to slowly loose the information they were taught in school. (Bethany, personal communication, October 4, 2009)

Bethany's response exceeded the expectations I had for this topic. Even though she had grammatical errors, she synthesized and analyzed the information as she applied it to current politics. As Bethany often wrote lengthy comments, I recognized that in addition to the quantity of her postings, the quality of most of her postings surpassed my expectations.

Importance of Feedback

In previous semesters I had felt that I had not provided students with enough feedback regarding my expectations for their blog comments. In an attempt to improve the length and/or quality of blog postings from previous semesters, I therefore created a handout just before the semester started (see Appendix B). During the second week of class, I provided them with the handout that contained three examples of comments posted by students in previous semesters. I intended to lead a class discussion about the various ways students could appropriately post onto the blog. One of my goals of providing and discussing this handout was to encourage the students to write thorough (and somewhat lengthy) responses on the blog. I had not intended to give them a minimum word count, but had wanted to challenge them to thoroughly answer the posted questions. Unfortunately, there was little time to discuss this handout in class and I never referred to it again. I provided the students with only a few guidelines for blog posting and did not clearly communicate my expectations. I had not given adequate feedback and continued to struggle with providing feedback throughout the semester. All students could have benefitted, but probably especially those who had not been placed. Providing feedback is always a time-consuming instructional strategy; nevertheless, its importance cannot be overstated. I failed in this regard, and the value of the blog to the students probably suffered because of this.

The Benefit of E-mail Reminders

As the course moved along, and as I became more concerned about my lack of feedback, I eventually decided to send the students a reminder e-mail during the 11th week of the semester on October 29 to remind them to blog and how the blog might affect their grade. I should have been sending a weekly reminder e-mail earlier in the semester, perhaps starting in week one. The e-mail I sent read as follows:

> Hi everyone!
> This is just a friendly reminder to make sure that you are blogging. Do not forget that each week's blog is worth 10 points - 5 points for your first comment and then 5 points for your comments about someone else's posted comments. With 13 graded blogs for the entire semester there are 130 points out of 1000 total class points that will come from the blog. If you are not keeping up with the blog your grade could be lowered a complete letter grade….I look forward to seeing everyone the week of November 9th. (M. Bishop, personal communication, October 29, 2009)

So, did the e-mail reminder help students remember? I believed it did as I noted the following in my journal on November second, just one week before class reconvened, "I think the e-mail reminder helped a few students. Each class had a few more posts this week than last" (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, November 2, 2009). Not only did the number of posts increase from 42 to 52, but six more students posted to the blog the week after the e-mail reminder than the week before. However, three students who had posted in week 10 prior to the reminder e-mail did not post during week 11 after the reminder. Apparently, some students benefited from the reminder e-mails, and some did not. Figure 5 indicates that the blog had a higher number of comments posted the week following the reminder e-mail than in any of the preceding six weeks.

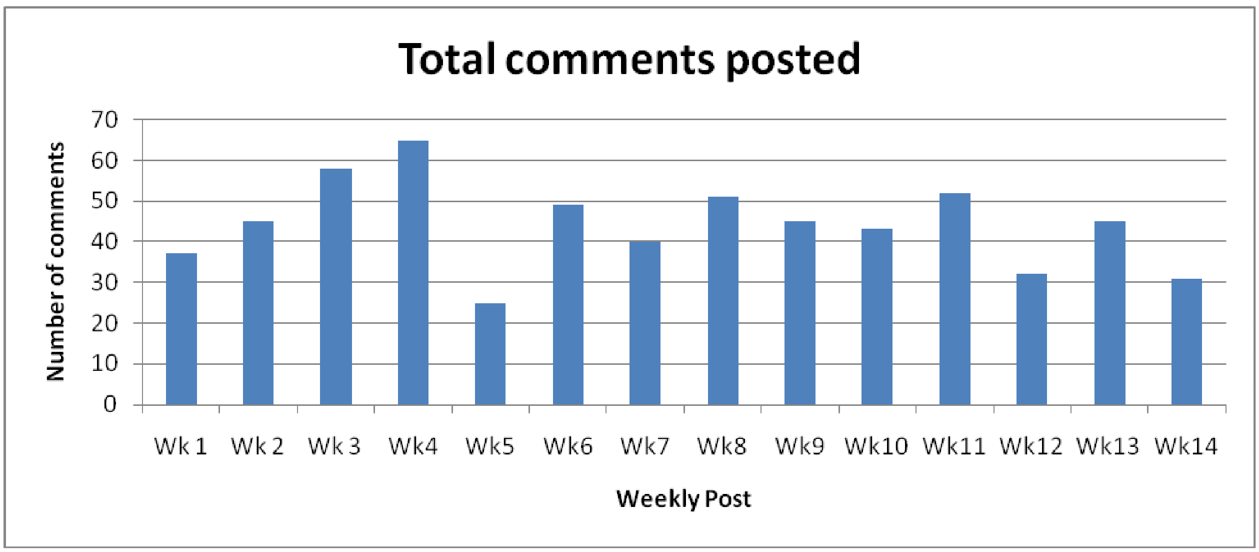

Figure 5. *Total number of comments posted each week*

The graph indicates that there had been a steady increase in the number of student comments until week five when they were instructed to post only one time due to the nature of the blog topic. Starting in week six the number of comments posted remained steady between 40 and 50 until week 11 when there was a small upward spike, possibly as a result of the reminder e-mail. Unfortunately, there was a dip in number of posted comments in each of the remaining three weeks.

Second Focus Group – Had their Views of the Blog Changed?

When the students came back to class on November 10, textbook and practicum discussions took place. However, the second round of focus groups was conducted during the first 45 minutes of class, again conducted by other professors invited to facilitate. The purpose of the second focus group was to determine if the students' views of the blog had changed while away on their practicum break. When asked what their overall views of the blog were, one student said, "It is nice to feel connected to the class." Another student said, "Blogging was more beneficial when the class was not meeting," while one student commented "At first I looked at it as easy points, now the questions are more specific and more beneficial."

Many of the questions I included on the second focus group were the same as the first focus group (see Appendix C). However, to discern if the students thought the blog had helped them while they were away from class, three of the questions I added were "Were the topics posted in weeks seven through eleven helpful in your reflection upon your observation experience? If yes, how were the topics helpful? And if no, what topics would have been more helpful?" (Focus Group, November 12, 2009). One of the students responded, "It kept me on topic so I knew what to watch for," while another student said "Good questions – made you think and reflect on how I would incorporate the ideas into my own classroom someday." However, not all of the students had such positive remarks about the blog during the break. "The blogging requirement was somewhat annoying," "I like it but it is busy work," and "I feel like blogging is redundant because we talk about it in class anyway. It's a way of using technology for the sake of using it" (Focus Group, November 12, 2009).

Just as I had matured in my willingness to accept professional feedback and use it constructively, I had also come to recognize that I could use some of the students' comments to reconsider how I might utilize the blog in the future without changing everything or eliminating the blog just because they hadn't liked it. I had discovered the importance of listening to and learning from the students regarding how my classroom instruction and blog implementation might be improved based on their input. The students offered some insightful suggestions during both focus groups, some of which I intended to implement in 2010, some of which I would not, and some of which I felt I needed to reflect on further. The table below indicates the many suggestions students provided for improving the blog, drawn from the reports of the focus group sessions. The left-hand column refers to feedback on October sixth and the right-hand column refers to feedback provided on November 10, 2009.

Table 5. *Focus Group responses regarding ways to improve the class blog*

Student suggestions - Focus Group #1 *October 6th*	*Student suggestions – Focus Group #2* *November 10th*
Extend due date to the day before class	Add pictures of classmates
Ask more thought provoking or controversial questions on the blog	Have two different sets of questions – one set for those students who are already participating in the practicum and another set for those students who have not started yet
Provide more feedback on blog posts	Tie it to a social network
Actually use content in the blog for class	Offer prizes or gift cards to encourage student participation
Use WebCT instead – it is more organized	Use twitter
Make it more like Facebook because Facebook sends you an e-mail when	Find a way to notify us when someone

someone has sent you a comment	commented on our blog
It would be better if it was a smaller class, break it into blog groups	Assign more points to each blog
Make sentence requirement for blogging	Do something to make the students remember
Post question earlier in the week	Offer specific questions geared to our own individual field
Offer multiple blog categories to get people's differing opinions	Eliminate the blog, text instead
Take out the LU website posting and show us in class instead	Make it easier and more accessible

This Table shows that the students provided some perceptive suggestions prior to and upon returning from the break. The most common suggestion provided by the students was to utilize a social network, such as Facebook or Twitter, instead of the blog.

The Appropriateness of the Blog as a Communication Platform: the "Facebook Factor"

A further explanation of the findings from the two focus groups (one conducted on the day before the practicum break and the second one conducted the day the students came back from the break) will be provided later in this chapter. However, it was important to note that at this point in the semester I struggled with many of the students' responses because they had suggested in the focus groups that Facebook was a better alternative to the blog. When the first focus group findings indicated that *some* of the students said they would prefer an alternative to the blog, such as Facebook, I misread the feedback. I wrote the following in my journal just after reading the responses,

> After a quick glance … I was struck by how unimpressed the students are with the blog. A few students commented that they wish the class was smaller and others suggested we have smaller groups on facebook. Facebook was mentioned a few times. I feel I need to seriously look into this option. Students like that facebook

> sends them an e-mail that someone has commented on their facebook. That would be a neat application for the students. I am learning that students EXPECT immediate feedback. The blog is not immediate. They have to go back and check it – they wish the feedback came to them in the form of an e-mail. One suggested WebCt for the format. Their participation in facebook, myspace, and twitter is almost as necessary as breathing for them. Blogging is old, relatively speaking. It is not fast and there is not instant feedback, therefore it is viewed as an annoying assignment that an old teacher makes us do because she thinks it is engaging us because of the technology. But it really isn't up to speed with what we like and are used to. I am excited about learning what the students really want, expect, and need out of my class. I am coming to the realization that the blog may not be the answer. I am open to that possibility. And I am ready to learn from them. (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, October 11, 2009)

Just two days later as noted in my journal below, I started to accept the students' disapproval without assuming I needed to embrace their notion that Facebook was better. I had not only read the students' blog comments but had also looked closely at all of the focus group comments and reread my journals, which reminded me of the benefits of the blog and of some students' enjoyment of the blog. I wrote the following comments in my journal on October 13, the first week of the break:

> Just after reading this week's blog, which is their first week "off" of class period, I am very pleased with the students' reflections. Many of the students wrote very in-depth responses to my questions about assessment…. I am very glad that I am utilizing the blog during this "off" period because I hope it will force them to be looking for certain things from their host teacher…. I now know that the students may not be excited about posting to the blog each week, but I still think it is worth doing. There will be some changes that need to be made and maybe some procedural and platform changes, but I still feel strongly that the students benefit when they are forced to reflect upon the teaching they are observing. The blog is a convenient (for me, maybe not for them) place for students to write about their observations and read about other students' experiences. (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, October 13, 2009)

During the two days between journal entries as I took time to digest and reflect upon their responses, I came to conclusions not only about the benefits of the blog, but also about how I initially perceived the students' feedback. I continued in the following journal entry that I had come to recognize and appreciate my own professional expertise, and I realized that I had become overly concerned with the need for student approval:

> After last week's focus groups I was convinced that I needed to scrap the entire blog and try something completely different. It is very important to me what my students think. Their opinion matters to me. Maybe it matters too much. I need to remember that many of them are young and still approach things as they did in high school. For example, I can't assign the blog and tell them it is not for a grade, that it is just for their own growth. Maybe one or two students would do it. As the instructor, I can see the end goal that I have for them. (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, October 13, 2009)

I noted in my journal the internal dialogue I had experienced regarding the pros and cons of using Facebook. However, just two days after my initial shock, disappointment, and concern that some students did not like the blog, the words below indicated that my confidence was growing in my professional opinion as I tried to learn from the students' suggestions:

> The format of this blog does not lend itself to true dialogue. It is bulky and not easy to see when someone replies to you without having to read every single word of every person's post. It would be great if the students were sent an e-mail when someone replied to them on the blog. I think students would be more inclined to reply. It would be great if I could set this up like a facebook page. All of the content could be on the page. Links are easy to attach. I could easily attach the YouTube links. Students would be able to comment directly under someone else's post. Everyone's picture is on facebook.
>
> One of the limitations I can think of right now is that students would have to shorten their posts. Facebook is not a good platform for a 3 paragraph post. Maybe what students would prefer is fewer questions at a time. Maybe they could answer one question. Then a few days later answer a question and respond to someone else. It would be very interesting to figure out a way to make it work, but I am not opposed. Now I am curious about any literature that might be out there about incorporating facebook into the classroom. I am always willing and excited about trying the latest and greatest thing in my classroom. I want to make sure that I don't do it just for the sake of doing it, but I should do it because it works. I wonder if WebCt could do everything that Facebook could do would the students still prefer Facebook? Or would they prefer WebCt? I wonder if they really do not want their academic world to collide with their personal world. Maybe they don't want to mix the two. (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, October 13, 2009)

As I compared Facebook, WebCT, and the blog, I grappled with important issues that would need to be considered.

My supervisor, Owen, responded to my October 11 journal entry with the following thoughts:

> Certainly the feedback makes one wonder what the optimal medium is for constant feedback from the students. Some mentioned WebCT, but most felt that FB was the way to go – and I worry about trivializing the course to suit the students' ("pre-university") notion of what constitutes adequate work or work that is sufficiently in-depth. We can't simply follow the latest super-quick fad and turn all out educational practices that way. The focus groups were used in part because Melanie wanted to be absent when they were conducted, so that the feedback could be more honest. Certainly, she comes out of the feedback very well – students in general seemed to enjoy the course and appreciated her enthusiasm and consistent feedback. Certainly the notes captured by Caroline Epps [name changed] reflect a great appreciation for the teacher…. So, whatever they think of the blog, they think highly of the teacher and of the general organization, content and presentation of the course. (O. van den Berg, personal communication, October 23, 2009)

Owen's observations indicated two important issues: utilizing the most recent fad to suit the students could trivialize the course; also, regardless of their views of the blog, the students had responded positively to how I had organized and presented the course. He offered the following advice as he described a strategy that could be implemented to address the issue of my large classes:

> I DO think that breaking a class of 35 up into smaller cohorts makes sense, and I think this was something I had mentioned as a possibility to MB earlier on – certainly when I have used WebCT with doctoral students, having them in smaller groups seems to make the activity more authentic (and one could even make the grade a group grade, evil thought!). (O. van den Berg, personal communication, October 23, 2009)

Clearly Owen was communicating his concerns with using Facebook while providing suggestions of incorporating WebCT and/or smaller cohorts. After reading my journal notes which I e-mailed him on October 13, Owen noted my professional growth within the two days between journal entries,

> Wow! MB has come a long way from being somewhat freaked by my feedback on her first class to a no-holds barred reflection in this e-mail. After wanting to dump the blog after an initial reading of the focus group feedback she is now VERY NUANCED in looking at the issue from a whole range of perspectives. Also, and admitting that maybe she is too concerned about her students' feedback, she is able, very soon after the initial exposure to the focus group feedback, to state about the blog that "I still think it is worth doing. There will be some changes that need to be made and maybe some procedural and platform changes, but I still feel strongly that the students benefit when they are forced to reflect upon the teaching they are observing". YES! But, perhaps more importantly, the shift in thinking is from the MEANS ("is the blog a good idea") to the PURPOSE (how can I best within my course have the students reflect critically … and how can I promote "true dialogue" [p. 2 of journal]), And that's how the "topic [of the dissertation/ research] must be allowed to shift", as John Elliott put it somewhere. The blog may not have got all the students to think critically about what they are doing, but it has certainly got MELANIE to do so!... I think this journal also indicates how one's thinking takes shape and changes as one tries to write it down. To sum up, this journal confirms for me the richness of the reflection and pondering of alternatives that is possible if one is willing to investigate one's teaching systematically and critically. Marvellous stuff! (O. van den Berg, personal communication, October 23, 2009)

Owen's comments were very encouraging and reminded me of the many benefits of the process of action research. As I chronicled my thoughts and actions prior to and during the study, the changes in my thinking were evidenced throughout the written reflections.

As the semester continued and the students had been on their practicum break for a few weeks I continued to think about the implications of the focus group responses to blogging. I wrote the following in my journal on October 21:

> Maybe some students do not want me in their electronic world. Maybe some students prefer to keep their two worlds separate. Maybe it is a matter of age or maybe it is a matter of personal preference, regardless of age. That is what I need to find out. But then what do I do with this information? Does it change my approach? Does it change the way I teach the students? These questions lead me to the next point that has been on my mind over the last week. So what if the students don't like it…Does that matter? Some students don't want to observe a teacher, but I make them do it because I know it is good for them in preparing

> them to become teachers (and DESE says I have to.) Some students don't like to read the text book, but I still require that because there is some important content that students should read. Some students don't appreciate writing their thoughts in the practicum journal, but I still require it because it is important for them to reflect and be held accountable for their own learning during the practicum. On the other hand, there are always a handful of students who are eager to observe a teacher, read the text and write in their journal. So why has it bothered me that the data collected from the focus groups indicates that many students do not enjoy the blog…. I am evolving as I recognize that just because the students did not ALL like the blog, it's okay to continue doing the blog. However, I believe I can learn from their input and make the experience even better…" (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, October 21, 2009)

I clearly struggled with the students' feedback even though I had made some progress in the few weeks prior to this journal entry. I continued to experience cognitive dissonance as I tried to make sense of what to do with the conflicting feedback. I began to understand that the students were entitled to privacy in an increasingly invasive "virtual world," yet I needed to learn from their feedback regarding Facebook and WebCT.

After the first focus group data communicated to me the students' desire to utilize Facebook, I began contemplating this and WebCT as a possibility. However, I was not convinced, as can be seen from what I wrote in my journal on October 21,

> I can learn from their input and utilize a different platform such as WebCT or Facebook. I know I could use WebCT in the future – I am quite familiar with the platform because I have used it in the past. However, the reason I switched to the blog format was because I liked the look of the blog, I liked that I could post youtube [*sic*] links easily (I think I can on WebCT – just never learned how), and because of the picture capability. I am nervous about using Facebook for a variety of reasons, but security and students being appropriate are my two biggest concerns. I would have to learn how to set up a private group for us through facebook and I am unfamiliar how to do this, but I have never let my inexperience with something stop me from doing what I thought was best for students. I am quite anxious to see how I will feel in a few weeks after I seem them again. It will be very interesting to see if they feel any differently about the blog in general and the blog topics that are designed to make them reflect upon their observation experience. (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, October 21, 2009)

Owen reminded me that tension is part of the action research process as he wrote the following regarding my October 21 journal notes:

> Exploring your values, having them confront you, creates tension, because you want to meet your own values and your own self-image. Look at the "anxiety words" in this paragraph – "bothered me", "I am nervous", "I am quite anxious". AR is threatening, because it brings you face to face with your uncertainties and frailties. So I laud you, first, for being able to be so honest with yourself and, secondly, for being able to share that. (O. van den Berg, personal communication, October 23, 2009)

Owen's comments resonated with me. At the time I was encouraged that I did not need to discontinue the use of the blog just because some of the students had suggested Facebook. As the practicum break was coming to a close, I continued thinking about my internal tension, but I became more focused on seeing the students again and hearing what they had been learning during their practicum experiences.

Many of the students referred to social networking during the focus groups, questionnaires, and feedback cards when asked of their thoughts about the blog. One student noted during the second focus group, "We're used to Facebook and texting which is much faster." Another said, "Easier if like facebook [*sic*]. you get notifications and could go back and respond." One student said, "Overall I like blogging and seeing others opinions. I do think it is unorganized – I like Facebook structure better." When asked what could be changed in order to make the class blog more beneficial, each group talked about how Facebook would be the preferred alternative to the blog. According to the notes taken by the facilitator for that focus group, "Students kept talking about Facebook. They were getting excited and coming up with implementation ideas and strategies that would alleviate the most common fears of security and privacy. There was a lot of discussion about how it would work," (Focus Group, October 12, 2009). The data from the second focus group revealed that the students' views had not changed about their preference for Facebook instead of a blog. Many still desired the convenience, quickness, and instant feedback that Facebook provides, that the blog did not.

So what did I do with this information? Although I had decided that I would continue using the blog for the Spring 2010 semester, I was not convinced that I would use it in years to come. I decided to continue using the blog until I had had time to research more about the uses of Facebook in the classroom, even though I was not convinced that Facebook was the best solution. The data I had gathered indicated that the blog had strengths and weaknesses. I recognized that the blog's restraints were obviously bothersome to many students. Ironically, the reason I had originally switched from using WebCT to a blog was simply for the facility of the design. I thought the blog looked young and trendy and assumed that my young students would enjoy it for these reasons. I was very wrong. The students did not seem to care about how the blog looked. There was not one single comment anywhere in the data that indicated the students liked or appreciated the design of the blog. If I had not conducted this action research, I might never had known the students' views of the blog. At this point in the study, although my focus had shifted from my classroom instruction to the effectiveness of the blog, it was time for the pendulum to swing back to the classroom as there were still two class periods left in the semester that I needed to not overlook.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Parental Involvement Lesson

November 24 was essentially the first full class period since the practicum break. There had been one other class meeting since the break on November 10, but it had been taken up mainly by the second focus group discussion. So, as we gathered together again on November 24, there were administrative issues to be discussed, yet there would be time during this lesson to address education content. When, at 11:23 a.m. (class started at 11:00 a.m.), I moved on from a brief restatement of the paperwork needed to be turned in by the end of the semester to content, I was pleasantly surprised to find that I had almost 45 minutes left to dig into content presented in the textbook pertaining to parental involvement in schools because in previous weeks of this semester there had been very little time to address core content. After showing the students contrasting YouTube videos demonstrating two different levels of parental involvement and how schools and teachers were affected by parental involvement, we moved to the final segment of the class session in which I encouraged students to begin thinking about how to communicate with parents.

I showed the students a “good” and “bad” example of an e-mail a teacher might send to a parent. By discussing the written text of each example, we collectively compared and contrasted the two different e-mails as they were posted side-by-side on the screen at the front of the room. Finally, I asked the students to write an e-mail pretending they were the teacher needing to communicate an issue to the parents of one of their students. Instead of giving them the scenario, which I had done in past semesters, on the spur of the moment I decided to let them choose a scenario such as one they had observed during their practicum. The correspondence was intended to communicate the situation to the parent(s) and to solicit the parents’ help in assisting the student with the issue at hand. In addition to containing the previously listed information, the e-mail was to contain something positive about the child, grammatically correct language, and contact information. As the assignment was to be handed in at the end of the class period, the students seemed to work diligently during the last ten minutes of class. Upon completing the assignment they were to fill out an exit feedback card, and after both were submitted the students were dismissed.

Almost every feedback card regarding the class session on November 24 included a comment about the student's appreciation of the parent communication discussion and assignment. One student said, "I really liked going over the note to the parent," while one student said, "great class discussion and the letter was a great idea." One student wrote the following, "Liked: The motivating YouTube videos. I also liked the examples of e-mails."

While the students had commented positively about this section of the lesson, Owen had some alternative thoughts and suggestions about this section of the lesson, which he had observed. In his observation reflections Owen noted, "The 'academic' topic of the day came next, and dealt with promoting parent involvement…. I felt this segment left the politics of discrimination untouched…. I thought this section presented essentially a teacher-centric position…." (O. van den Berg, personal communication, November 24, 2009). When I read Owen's reflections about this section of the lesson and his disagreement of my YouTube selections, I pondered my selections and how I had neglected to discuss the reality of many people's situations that might cause parents to not be more fully involved in their child(ren)'s education. Owen's constructive feedback was:

> I was uncomfortable with part of this, because I think the same letter can have dramatically different consequences for a student depending on home circumstances. To say "can do better" is going to get some kids beaten and others supported! I think there needed to be some discussion about circumstances under which one might write a different letter… So I felt that the parent segment could

> at best claim to do what it promised – to start the discussion. I did think, though, that it needed a sharper social, political and economic focus…. (O. van den Berg, personal communication, November 24, 2009)

I had never before thought about my aversion to discussing educational politics in my classroom. My avoidance of discussing educational politics was possibly an extension of my desire to please people and my professional insecurities about taking a stand and defending it. I also recognized that my insecurities stemmed from my fear that I might offend someone. However, I felt that I began making strides in this area as my confidence and professional knowledge of educational issues was increasing through the coursework I had recently completed for the doctoral program. I had now recognized that I should not avoid these types of discussions when they were appropriate in the context of the class.

Consequences of Using the Blog

Second Questionnaire Results

As stated on p. 108, I asked the students to fill out a questionnaire on the first day of class. Conducting a pre-study questionnaire not only helped me understand where the students were in their comfort level of technology and blogging, but it also served the purpose of a pre-test so I could compare their responses made on a similar questionnaire given at the end of the course. The last actual class session occurred on December 1, 2009. The time slot on December eighth was set aside for the summative assessment and final exam for those students who were not exempt. On December first, 25 students in attendance participated in a second questionnaire. Prior to looking at the students' responses on the end-of-course questionnaire, I wrote down what I thought the results might indicate. I anticipated that the students would rate themselves higher than they had when providing their technology comfort level on a scale of one to 10 when they had completed the same question on the questionnaire in the first course session. I guessed that their responses would mostly be five or higher with a few outliers at the bottom and more outliers at the top. Figure 6 compares the technology comfort level of the students as indicated on the first and second questionnaires.

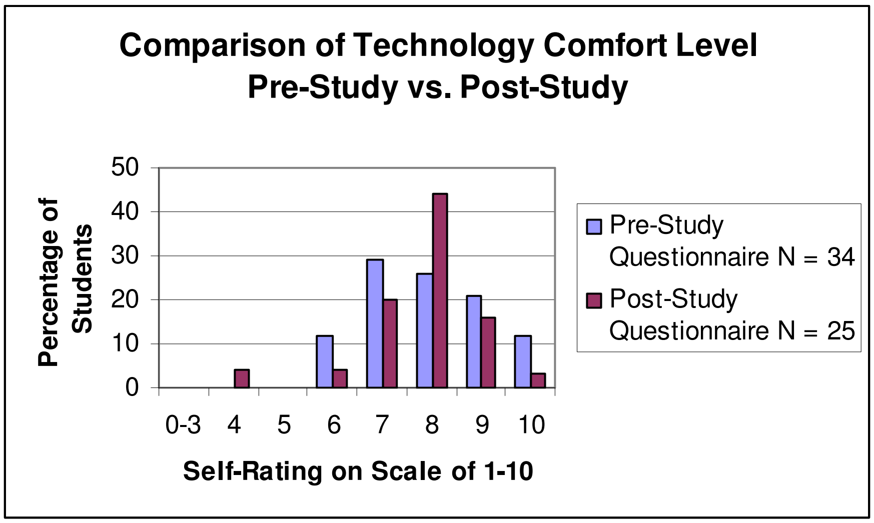

Figure 6. *Comparison of students' technology comfort level prior to and at the end of the study*

It was important to note that 34 students participated in the pre-study questionnaire, yet only 25 participated in the second questionnaire near the end of the study. The average rating on the first questionnaire was 7.91, while on the second questionnaire the students rated themselves an average of 7.96 on a scale of one to 10. The median rating remained the same at eight out of 10 on both questionnaires. Essentially, the average and median student rating on his or her technology comfort level remained the same pre- and post-study, which is interesting, though I do not know what to do about it. This is an instance of the near impossibility of knowing how to interpret the data.

The students' responses to the question about using blogs in the classroom surprised me. I anticipated there would be some indifference or a resounding "no" when asked if teachers should utilize blogs in the classroom. However, 12 students said teachers should use a blog, while only one said teachers should not use a blog. Twelve students gave conditional answers such as, "Yes, but not twice a week," and, "Yes, depending on their students' age level." When asked if they would use a blog in their own classroom, I anticipated that 50% of them would say "yes," while 50% would say "no." My assumption was more accurate with this question as 10 students said "yes" and 12 said "no, while three said "maybe." However, it was worth noting that seven of the students who wrote "no" stated that they would not use a blog because they were going to be teaching young children who were too young to read and write using a blog. One student who responded "no" to the question, qualified his or her "no" by stating that he or she was going to teach math and did not think it was conducive to using in a math classroom.

The following results from the survey indicated there were many positive views about using a blog. However, again we must consider that there were fewer students (25 versus 34) participating in the second questionnaire than on the first and perhaps, the absent ones might well have been more negative. However, there was still important information to be learned from the students who participated in the final questionnaire. When asked if they felt comfortable expressing their views on the class blog, 21 students said "yes" while only two said "no" and two left it blank. The following comments were also provided: "Easier to express ideas in writing than verbally;" "I was able to get my point across and I could add or delete information as needed;" and finally, "It still felt anonymous because no one knew who I was." The preceding comment reminded me that the blog was not helping all of the students get to know one another better which was one of the original intentions of the blog. I had hoped that all of the students would take the time to post their photograph on the blog as it would appear next to each of their comments; however, only six students posted their photo. I looked into the possibility of taking the students' photographs with my own camera and loading them onto the blog, however, each individual blog user had to upload his or her picture through his or her profile. I did not have access to their personal profiles. Even though our face-to-face contact was essentially over halfway into the semester, photos on the blog could have increased the chance that students would have felt more connected. There was a mixed reaction when asked if the blog had helped them feel more connected to their classmates as 10 students said "yes," eight students said "no," three said "somewhat," one said, "yes and no," two left it blank, and the following comment was worth noting, "Honestly not as much as I thought."

I was pleased to find that, when asked if their learning had been enhanced due to the blog, 15 students said "yes," two said "no," and eight replied with words other than "yes" or "no." One student wrote: "It broadened my horizons due to much critical thinking," while another admitted, "I was lazy and didn't read the comment." One student said, "I feel it was enhanced because I was able to learn about a new way of learning and use a different type of discussion." Another comment reminded me of the benefit of requiring the students to blog during the practicum break: "While we were out it kept us connected."

To sum up, the students' responses on the second questionnaire on December first did not differ much from the input they had provided during the focus groups conducted on October sixth and November 10, when asked what they liked and did not like about the blog. The overwhelming reasons people said they liked the blog was because they had enjoyed the chance to read other people's views and because the blog allowed them to share their opinion. I do not know how many *did* read other people's views; however, I gathered that most students who actually blogged each week (about 2/3 of the students) had read, or skimmed, at least one other student's comments each week as they were required to post a comment in response to at least one other student.

When asked for reasons why they did not like the blog, there were a wide variety of reasons given: not convenient, no notification that someone commented on your post, writing twice a week, time consuming, but the most frequently stated reason was that the blog was difficult to remember.

End-of-Course Evaluation and Summative Assessment Results

Up to this point, much of the study had indicated some important administrative findings involving the blog, such as the importance of: a) implementing due dates; b) education related topics; c) providing ongoing feedback to the students regarding the quality and length of their postings; d) e-mail reminders; and e) timely practicum placement to increase opportunities for reflection. However, other benefits of the blog (perhaps the most important from an educational perspective) were revealed as I read the end-of-course evaluations the students completed in December. In order to access their grades during the second and third weeks of December, the students had to complete a course evaluation online through their student portal. The results of the evaluations indicated that many students felt they had learned a good deal about teaching and the university procedures through the course and the practicum. The results also indicated that the blog had assisted some of the students with these processes.

What the Students Learned from the Course

In the end-of-course evaluations, students were instructed to discuss strengths and weaknesses of the course. With this open-ended invitation to share their thoughts, the evaluations' results indicated that many students claimed that they had not only enjoyed the course, but many commented how much they had: learned about the steps involved in obtaining a degree, learned from the practicum, and learned about being a good teacher.

One of the goals of *Orientation to Education* was to inform the students of the many steps involved in the Lindenwood pre-service program. I intended to guide them through the various policies and procedures of the program as many of the students were young and had just started in the program. A few students commented specifically about this issue when listing strengths of the course. One student said, "It gets everything done and prepares you for a major in education at Lindenwood so it was highly useful." Although this part of the course was not always interesting, the following comments indicated that students learned about the program: "Class was boring, but Mrs. Bishop really knew what needed to be done to get a degree in teaching. I really appreciate that," while another student discussed the following as a weakness of the course, "Boring paperwork, but needed to know what needs to be completed before graduation."

As noted in Chapter Four, my essential course questions that guided my course were *How do I become an effective teacher?* and *What do effective teachers know and do*?. Ultimately, the course was designed not only to provide a general overview of the field of education, but to teach students how to become an effective teacher through the practicum, classroom assignments and activities, while being supported by the blog. The results of the end-of-course evaluations indicated that the course had helped many students learn about being a good teacher. Some of the strengths listed were as follows: "I learned a lot about being a good teacher," while another said, "I learned a lot about what I will have to do in the future to become a good teacher." Although eight positive comments were made regarding me as the instructor, the comment that struck me as an indication that the student had specifically discovered the importance of becoming a good teacher through the course was, "This was my FAVORITE class! I am now so excited to be a teacher! This was a very informational class and will be very useful when I become a teacher!"

The university template for the end-of-course evaluation was designed for students to evaluate the in-class experience. It did not provide specific questions for students to provide feedback regarding their perceptions or value of the practicum experience. I believed that the most important part of my course was the practicum experience, in which students were able to observe what effective teachers know and do. Although there were issues with the practicum placements, some students indicated on the end-of-course evaluations that they had learned from the practicum. Two comments indicated the benefits of the practicum, as one student said, "practicum was invaluable," while another said, "The required practicum gives a lot of observation to make sure that teaching is for me!" Twenty-six of the 32 attending students completed the end-of-course evaluations; two of the 34 originally enrolled students had dropped the course early in the semester. Twelve students did not complete their 30-hour practicum by the end of the semester which resulted in an incomplete grade which would be changed upon completion and submittal of all practicum documents.

How the Blog Supported the Course and Contributed to the Learning

When asked to discuss the strengths of the course on the end-of-course evaluations, but without being prompted to discuss the blog, two of the 26 students who completed the evaluation commented specifically about the blog, "Really like the blog," and "The constant communication with the Professor and fellow classmates through the blog was very helpful." The second comment indicated not only a positive view of the blog, but that it had aided the student's ability to communicate. Although there were only two specific comments made about the blog regarding the strengths of the class, it was interesting that there was not one comment about the blog when students were asked to discuss weaknesses of the class. There were only seven weaknesses listed, two of which could be considered a positive as the comments regarded class not meeting enough. One weakness noted was that the textbook had not been necessary, while three students mentioned that the class and the paperwork were boring. The final weakness noted was the length of time it took to be placed for the practicum.

Another source provided me with more student feedback on the role the blog played in supporting the course and contributing to student learning. On December eighth, just before the final exam, I had asked the students to write a one-page summary of what they learned from the course. Nineteen of the 31 summaries referenced the blog.

Many of the responses indicated that the blog, in fact, had supported the course and contributed to the learning.

The first paragraph of Ron's assessment discussed how the blog supported his learning:

> Over the course of this semester, I have learned a lot about teaching and education. The first and probably most surprising thing that I have learned the importance of is the blog. I was not fond of the blog at first. I really wasn't too much of a fan toward the end just because it was tedious. However, I really learned a lot from it. When I am a teacher I would like to have one of my own. (Ron, personal communication, December 8, 2009)

Diane commented how the blog had helped her reflect upon her practicum experience, "Even though I didn't always remember to blog I thought that the subjects made us think and look farther into our observation that I would maybe not have thought of" (Diane, personal communication, December 8, 2009). Brett discussed how the blog increased his understanding of how to incorporate computers into the classroom,

> Although I wasn't a fan of the blogging I am glad that we were forced to do it because it made me use the computer in a way I never had before. Life itself is a learning experience and I know that the more I know about computers and technology the more I can use them in the future to help my students. (Brett, personal communication, December 8, 2009)

The final comment to which I will refer was from Chad. In the first half of the course, Chad had had not posted each week to the blog. After I had told Chad how many points he had missed, his blog participation improved. On the last day of class, Chad wrote the following on his Summative Assessment about how the blog supported his learning:

> Even though I didn't like it very much I also feel like I did learn from the blog. It provided good insight for me and it was cool to work together with others to come up with ideas on how to better teach. If someone has the desire to use it, the blog can be a very effective tool. (Chad, personal communication, December 8, 2009)

Chad's words provided evidence that the blog was an effective tool for him, as many of the other comments indicated that it had supported the learning and the course.

Closing Words

I began Chapter Six with an explanation of how I felt when the students had left for the practicum break. An analysis of how the practicum break affected not only the structure of the course but all of us participants, led me to examine the content of the blog posts. As I noted the length and depth of blog comments, I took into account that timely practicum placement and lack of feedback were issues that might have contributed to those factors. I went back and looked closely at the students' blog comments throughout the course for depth and quality of postings. I then reflected upon the students' suggestions of using Facebook instead of the blog. I also experienced tension as I contemplated how I should respond to the feedback from the students and Owen. On a practical note, this time away from the students allowed me to try a new strategy as I e-mailed the students reminding them to post to the blog. Finally, I discussed some important lessons I learned regarding my reluctance to discuss political matters in my classroom. The post-study questionnaires, end-of-course evaluations, and summative assessments indicated valuable insights into the use of the blog. These findings resulted in certain reflections and ideas for future action, which will be discussed in the final chapter.

Chapter Seven: Implications of the Study and Opportunities for Future Research

The purpose of the study was to investigate my use of the blog in the context of the course, *Orientation to Education*. I set out to learn the consequences of using the blog in the course and determine if it could help the students reflect not only upon their practicum experience but also about teaching in general, which would, in turn, provide me with information that would help me improve my teaching practices involving the blog in the course and generalize the effectiveness of using a blog for educational purposes for others in a similar setting. After much guidance from my supervisor, and research about the methodology of action research, the following research questions emerged for the study:

1. What are the consequences of using a blog in a pre-service teacher Orientation course?
2. Will the students' ability to reflect upon their practicum experience, and more specifically upon teaching, be enhanced if I implement a weekly blog in the course?
3. How could my implementation of the class blog and my reflections on the process help others who are in a similar setting?
4. In the context of a teacher education program, if I were to use a class blog again, what would I change?

Lessons Learned

Consequences of Using a Blog in a Pre-Service Teacher Orientation Course

I found the blog to be an effective tool that allowed the students an opportunity to communicate with their classmates and instructor in a virtual community that supported the information learned during class and from their practicum experience. As the nature of this course limited us to relatively little face-to-face contact, having this additional method of communication available 24 hours a day provided a place in which students could share their thoughts and read others' thoughts regarding the education topics presented. The blog allowed *all* students an opportunity to express ideas, even those who might not have felt comfortable or chose not to participate in in-class discussions.

It is important to note, however, that although the blog was effective in providing an *opportunity* for students to communicate with one another and the instructor, it was not effective in engaging most of my students in meaningful discourse. Many factors may have contributed to this phenomenon: the age of the students, class size, blogging requirements, or layout and functionality of the blog, to mention a few. Most students posted their two required comments and did not participate in back-and-forth dialogue with one another on the blog.

As evidenced by the comments of the students in their summative assessment of the course, the blog enhanced their learning. One of the intended consequences of the blog was that it would support the students as they developed deeper insights into teaching. One student noted the following thoughts about the blog on his summative assessment on December eighth, "Many would respond to others, which created a very deep conversation about ideas and tactics on how to be a better teacher…. I really did like the blogs due to the enlightening discussions," while another student wrote, "The blog gave us new ideas and made us be creative and view others viewpoints on different situations" (student, personal communication, December 8, 2009).

As stated previously, there was relatively little face-to-face time during this course, and certainly not during the five weeks the students were scheduled to be participating in their practicum while excused from attending class. In previous semesters when I had not required students to blog during the break, I felt very distant from them, and perhaps they also felt isolated. By utilizing the blog during this time, an important benefit that was felt, not only be me but also by some of the students, was that it kept us connected: the blog served as the glue that kept us together. One student commented on December eighth on the summative assessment, "We had a blog to do throughout the whole semester and that kept us connected and thinking about our class," and another student provided an interesting statement, perhaps referring to the break, that "I learned about blogging. I didn't like it but it reminded me that I have a teacher and a class" (student, personal communication, December 8, 2009).

The Blog's Role in Enhancing the Students' Reflection on the Practicum

One of my goals in requiring the students to blog during the practicum break was that it would encourage them to reflect upon what they saw as they observed a practicing teacher. The topics during the "off-weeks" encouraged the students to look for and reflect upon specific teaching ideas, strategies, and concepts, such as classroom management, organization, assessment, teacher-student rapport, and curriculum. One student made the following comments on the summative assessment on December eighth about how the blog had affected him during the practicum:

> The questions on the blog helped me realize a lot of things as well. It asked questions about individual learners, classroom organization and set up. It made me think about these things when I was doing my observation. I learned I need to be able to work with an individual learner and that little things like how the room was arranged would make a big difference in a child learning. (student, personal communication, December 8, 2009)

By providing the students with specific topics for which to observe and reflect, the blog offered a reason and a virtual place to reflect.

Given that the blog could enhance the students' ability to reflect on the practicum, and to discuss their experiences with their classmates, the timeliness of practicum placements was crucial. In a course of this nature, which requires a juxtaposition of "theory" and "practice," prompt school placements are crucial if all students are to have the same opportunities for learning and reflection.

My conviction was that the teacher's role in providing feedback regarding the students' participation in a blog is very important. There are various ways teachers can provide feedback to improve student participation, such as through one-on-one conversations, e-mail reminders, up-to-date grade sheets, and in-class discussions. While I implemented some of those strategies, I neglected to provide clear and timely verbal or written feedback to individual students regarding the length and quality of their postings. However, my lack of feedback was essentially a form of unspoken feedback that the length and quality did not matter to me. Many students did not answer all of the questions posted, yet I awarded them all of the possible points for the blog. Providing feedback is a time-consuming activity, yet if a teacher is interested in implementing a blog in his/her classroom, then he/she must understand that finding time to provide feedback must be a priority.

Can the Blog be Used in Comparable Settings?

It is reasonable to assume, on the basis of this study, that the benefits of using a blog in a pre-service *Orientation to Education* course will also be experienced in other but similar settings. The use of a blog encourages participants to interact, regardless of the specific course or content. It helped the students in this freshman-level course in many ways, and there is no reason to believe that its many advantages could not be felt in other education courses. However, in order to increase the potential for the learning opportunities, if pre-service educators decide to implement blogs in their classrooms, I recommend that they actively participate in the blog and discuss some of the students' comments in class.

Many students noted their appreciation for the role I played in the blog as I tried to read and comment on the blog at least twice each week, posting thoughts and opinions about others' posts. Just as actively participating in the blog was time consuming, another time-consuming yet extremely beneficial instructional strategy I used during face-to-face meetings was discussing the students' comments taking place in the virtual community. Many students found value in those discussions as indicated during focus groups and questionnaires. The in-class discussions can be brief, yet serve as an important bridge between the virtual and physical learning environment.

When setting up the action plan, I determined that each class would participate in its own class blog. However, with class sizes of more than 35 students, this proved to be problematic. As the students were required to post at least twice a week, the number of postings to read each week was overwhelming to some, including me. Breaking each class into smaller cohorts could increase the possibility that the platform would be used for back and forth dialogue among the students. However, managing the sheer number of blogs would produce another time-consuming matter.

Managing the blog was a lingering issue throughout the entire semester. Others in similar settings might well find this to be a legitimate concern, especially if larger classes need to be placed into smaller subgroups for the purposes of the blog. I found that administering four blogs for my four classes was quite time-consuming. In addition to the hours of reading and commenting to each blog, there were topics to be posted and various links to be uploaded onto each blog. If subgroups were used, the time needed to administer the blogs would be multiplied.

I also need to raise other issues regarding the specific blog postings by students. My study indicated that requiring a specific word count may not be necessary, yet providing feedback could encourage students to be more reflective in their responses and more timely in their postings. Although many students suggested that I not require two blog postings per week, I felt that by requiring the second comment the students needed to read at least one other student's comment to be able to respond. For many students who chose to do the minimum required, I felt that requiring the second comment was a worthwhile and meaningful expectation regarding their blog participation. Determining the due date for posting was an issue that kept emerging. During the study I required the students to post two days prior to their regularly scheduled class to allow me time to read their comments and respond accordingly; however, many students suggested that more might have participated if the due date had been the day before class.

As others contemplate implementing a blog in a similar setting, other platforms should be considered. There are many other platforms that have similar functionality of the blog. WebCT is a course management system that allows instructors to post topics to which the students must respond. Threaded discussions can take place on WebCT, just as on the blog, yet the format is easier to read according to many of the participants as they complained about the blog's "clunky" format. One comment is stacked on top of the other in the order in which it was posted. It is difficult to follow threaded discussions on the blog. Facebook is another type of virtual communication available to pre-service educators which could be considered as they look to implement a virtual communication tool into their classroom.

Changes I Will Make Regarding the Class Blog

The findings of this study have indicated to me that certain changes need to be made regarding my class blog. I look forward to making the following adjustments as I continue in the recursive cycle of action research: change the first week's topic, provide more feedback, discuss the blog during class each week, split the observation off completely from this course, limit the amount of material to be discussed, and research other virtual interactive technologies. A blog does not "teach" by itself; how it is embedded in the design, scope and sequence of a course will obviously affect its usefulness.

As previously indicated on p. 110, I learned that the topic I used for week one did not encourage discourse or reflection. Asking the students to post their names and one interesting fact about themselves turned into an open forum for them to share about past surgeries and scars. Although my reasoning for asking a "get-to-know-you" type of question was to provide students with a non-threatening way to begin the blogging process, I realize that I missed an opportunity for them to begin the semester with a reflection upon why they had chosen the field of education. Starting in the spring 2010 semester, I decided to post the following topic on the blog during week one: How did you come to be here? Mention one event or person that played a big part in why you find yourself sitting in an education course.

A recurring theme throughout the entire study indicated the importance of my feedback to the students and the negative consequences of my not providing enough. In the future, I will attempt to provide more feedback in the following ways: weekly in-class discussions regarding my expectations for length and content of blog comments, one-on-one e-mail and/or face-to-face communication if a student's comments are not satisfactory, weekly e-mails reminding students to blog, and monthly grade sheets indicating how the blog is affecting their grades.

Another important lesson learned that will lead to a change in the way I implement the blog in the future is that I will comment on the blog every class session. Making this change will require me to plan accordingly prior to each class session. By reading the blog and preparing specific student comments to discuss, the students might benefit from the discussion of their comments as I noted the following in my fieldnotes on September 29, 2009:

> Today was by far my favorite class period yet! I was more organized. I stayed at school late last night to make sure I was completely ready for class today…. I read every blog entry and chose three to discuss with the students. (M. Bishop, Fieldnotes, September 29, 2009)

I acknowledge the importance of investing time to demonstrate not only to the students that I am an active participant in the blog, but that I am interested in their comments as I attempt to bridge the virtual and face-to-face worlds together.

The most drastic change that will affect the class blog in the future is that starting in the fall semester of 2011, the 30-hour practicum will be taken out of the course completely. *Orientation to Education* will become a three-credit prerequisite class prior to students taking a one-credit practicum class. As I shared information learned during this study with Dr. Cynthia Bice, the Dean of the School of Education, we collaborated to explore some possible program changes that would address the emerging issues. School of Education faculty has been moving in this direction for the past year as many other university teacher education programs offer their practicum courses as separate one-credit courses not necessarily taken in conjunction with foundational courses.

This study has shown me that as Lindenwood makes this program change the students will benefit as the number of instructional hours in this course will increase from approximately 16 hours to 45 hours as the practicum becomes a separate one-credit class. I also believe the students will benefit because the university will be able to collect practicum placement information during *Orientation to Education* and as students enroll in the practicum course the following semester, the office personnel will have had ample time to make placement arrangements. The blog will obviously change at that time as the topics will relate either to the course and/or observation topics. I look forward to continuing the cycle of action research as I study how these changes will affect the blog in the future.

Even though components of the course will be changing in the future, I learned an important lesson I can use regardless of the course that I am teaching. Many students indicated that I tried to cram too many topics into each lesson. One student commented on his/her feedback card on September 8, “Didn’t like how we tried cramming so many things into one lesson. Feel like we tried to cover more things than I can digest in one class period." I reflected upon this suggestion as I wrote the following in my fieldnotes later that day, "I couldn't agree more. My feeling after every class. This might be one of my biggest struggles" (M. Bishop, Fieldnotes, September 8, 2009) I will make a concerted effort to only address the essential items and not try to cram too many activities in each lesson plan.

Another change I intend to make in the upcoming semesters is that I will study alternative virtual interactive technologies. As technology is constantly changing, I must attempt to learn how other technologies can be used in the classroom and determine if there are more effective methods of instruction through the use of technology. I will research ways to incorporate WebCT, Facebook, and/or Twitter into the classroom and will make professional judgements regarding their use in my classroom.

As this study illuminated ways I can improve my instruction and the implementation of the blog in my classroom, I recommend that instructors wanting to implement a blog into their instruction should be aware of the following issue that arises from virtual instruction: its omnipresence. Virtual asynchronous technology is available 24 hours a day, which could possibly interfere with a professional's personal life. As our virtual world becomes increasingly invasive, teachers and students must be careful to find a balance as to not allow the virtual world to take over.

What I Learned from Action Research

The most meaningful lessons I learned from this study arose from the methodology used - action research. Prior to this study, I did not see myself as a researcher. On May 28, I had begun to discover what action research was all about as I wrote in my journal, "Action research is about me and my journey, my thoughts, my fears, my hopes, my reactions to what happens in my classroom with the blog, etc." (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, May 28, 2009). Although I had a clearer understanding of action research, I did not anticipate the growth and transformation I would experience throughout the process. According to Elliott (1991), "Action research integrates teaching and teacher development, curriculum development and evaluation, research and philosophical reflection, into a unified conception of a reflective educational practice" (p. 54). As I studied my own teaching and how I had integrated the blog in my classroom, I experienced rich and authentic personal and professional development. By creating an action plan and implementing, evaluating and researching the outcomes of the plan, I reflected upon those experiences as I made professional decisions and conclusions about my teaching. This reflective experience has taught me the following concepts: to believe in my professional opinion, to recognize the importance of critical feedback, and to view my students as sharers of knowledge rather than empty vessels.

This action research process has taught me to have confidence in my professional opinion. This recognition was slowly churning starting in the summer months prior to implementing the action plan. As I began to take a closer look at my teaching and reflected upon why I chose to set up my class and the blog in a certain manner, I found myself fearful and unsure of my professional choices. On May 28, I wrote in my journal, "My fears today about the blog…. More fears – that the questions I post are not engaging enough… Another fear – that some students will view the blog as a waste of time…." (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, May 28, 2009). Early in the process I was quite fearful as evidenced in my journal entries. The last few sentences in my journal that day indicate that the transformation process had already begun, "This is not easy for me, but then again, if it was easy, everyone would have a doctorate degree. It shouldn't be easy. It should be hard and it should stretch me and help me grow. It already has" (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, May 28, 2009). I continued to grow as I expressed my growing confidence in my journal on October 21, "I am evolving as I recognize that just because the students did not ALL like the blog, it's okay to continue doing the blog" (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, October 21, 2009). I will continue to evolve as I now understand the importance of action research and plan on informally conducting action research in my classes on a continual basis in the future.

The growth in my ability to accept and learn from critical feedback has been another beneficial outcome of this action research process for me. Early in the fall semester as my critical friend, Owen, observed my teaching and provided me with feedback, I struggled with the input. Instead of listening and learning, I immaturely perceived the advice as criticism and had difficulty learning and growing from it. As I implemented a few of Owen's classroom suggestions in the second week of the semester, such as having the students get their own handouts upon entering the classroom and providing smoother transitions between class activities, I witnessed how effective his suggestions were in classroom administration. On September third, I noted in my journal that I was transforming in how I was receiving the feedback,

> I am not perfect and should not expect myself to be…. I read the suggestions and comments with an open mind instead of a defensive one…. I am truly grateful for this experience because it is helping me see the value in feedback of my teaching. (M. Bishop, Journal Entry, September 3, 2009)

Early on in the process I learned how to objectively receive critical feedback from a colleague; however, I also grew in my ability to receive and learn from the students' feedback. Early in the fall semester I expected the feedback from the students to be positive regarding the blog and my instruction. I came to the realization that it was okay if every student did not like every lesson, assignment, or even the blog. However, I did learn by collecting feedback from the students that I could learn a great deal from them.

In the summer prior to the study, I often referred to my students as "kids" and often negatively referred to them as "immature" in my journal. I even referred to them as an "untilled garden" in my journal on May 28. Rather, I now view them as Owen recommended in response to my journal entry, "Maybe an OVERGROWN garden! First, perhaps, they have to UNLEARN! The older we get, the harder it becomes to learn, because of the more we have to unlearn first" (O. van den Berg, personal communication, May 28, 2009). I have now come to a different understanding of my students as I view them as partners in the learning process. I have and will continue to learn from them. They are not "kids," they are "adults" and as I teach them to view themselves as professionals, I will view them as professionals.

I agree with the three supporting arguments that McKernan (1991) provides as a rationale for action research.

> First, that naturalistic settings are best studied and researched by those participants experiencing the problem; second, that behavior is highly influenced by the naturalistic surroundings in which it occurs; and third, that qualitative methodologies are perhaps best suited for researching naturalistic settings. (p. 5)

I believe that as I served the role as "teacher as researcher" in my own classroom I was able to conduct self-critical inquiry as I was deeply imbedded in the surroundings of the situation and was able to problem solve as an insider. McKernan's second idea that recognized human behavior as being greatly influenced by the surroundings certainly applied to this study as the participants in the study were students contributing to the blog and playing a role in the classroom environment. Finally, McKernan's (1991) belief that "naturalistic research refers to investigations of phenomena within and in relation to their naturally occurring contexts" (p. 7) was relevant in this study as I, the practitioner, investigated the phenomena that emerged in the context of our classroom and on the class blog.

Another fascinating element of this action research study was the amount of collaboration and support provided by my critical friend and supervisor, Owen van den Berg. Beginning in May of 2009, Owen and I met face-to-face most weeks to discuss the study, and we met virtually on a consistent basis as we e-mailed one another almost daily and sometimes many times a day. As Owen sent me 196 e-mails and I sent him 209 throughout the study, we left a 53-page paper trail of ongoing dialogue prior to and throughout the entire study. His role in my growth during this study was essential. As he became immersed in the context of the setting, and invested in my growth as a professional, I understood the importance of professional collaboration. Our numerous face-to-face and e-mail conversations allowed us to generate a level of collaboration, that according to Owen went way beyond a typical supervisor/student affiliation. We became collegial partners as we worked together to unravel the layers of the issues found during the study. If I had completed this action research without such a collaborative element, I believe I would not have experienced the level of growth and transformation that I did. Ironically, as this study revolved around using technology in the classroom, the e-mail technology made mine and Owen's collaboration so powerful. So, although the blog did not promote as much reflection among the students as I had expected, the e-mails between Owen and me certainly did.

Implications for Teacher Education

There are many suggestions from the study that I believe can contribute to the body of knowledge for instructors of education courses taught to undergraduate pre-service educators. Most importantly, this research will add to the small number of studies that have investigated the use of blogs in such a setting. The findings generated new insights into what strategies and support are needed by students when in this type of situation.

In addition, the literature noticeably pointed to a need for educators to bridge the technological divide between teachers and students. The results of this study suggest that one way to address this issue is by modeling the use of various technological tools in a pre-service classroom. Throughout this study, the participants gathered insight into utilizing technology in the classroom. I recommend that pre-service teacher preparation programs explore the uses of virtual collaborative tools in their programs, especially in the foundational courses. As many programs expect pre-service students to complete an educational technology class, some programs may not place value on modeling the use of virtual collaborative tools in other education classes. However, this study indicates the importance of modeling the use of such tools in such classes.

Future Research Plans

As with most research, now that the study is complete, I have more questions than answers. I would like to continue on with the cyclical nature of action research as I study other forms of virtual collaborative tools available for instructional use. Focusing an additional study on the alternatives to blogging could unravel a host of possibly more effective virtual tools to be used for collaboration and reflection in and out of the classroom. As a supporter of utilizing technology in the classroom, I support further study of the effectiveness of various technologies not only in pre-service undergraduate foundational classes, schools of education, or in higher education, but for all educators in all settings.

While this action research process was demanding and challenging at times, hopefully it was also beneficial to the other participants in it, the students. With a follow-up study of those participants, I could determine the extent to which this study impacted the participants as they continued in their journey toward teacher certification and becoming teachers in their own classroom. As the students observed action research in process, it would be interesting to learn to what extent this experience had transformed their thinking and actions, not only about implementing a virtual communication tool in their own classrooms some day, but also about implementing action research. As they saw and experienced first-hand how action research was implemented, it would be interesting to know if they decided to model for their own students how to utilize action research to improve their own practice.

Concluding Thoughts

In this dissertation I have attempted to determine and clarify the realities of using a blog in a pre-service foundational education course. Using data collected from the students, my critical friend, and my own reflections, I described the successes and disappointments experienced by me and the students throughout the semester. I originally attempted to answer certain research questions, but throughout the process learned of some of the unintended consequences and described them in this dissertation.

This generation of students is very familiar with using interactive technology, usually more so than the people who teach them. This study attempted to explore how this generation of teachers might use a blog to allow students opportunities to share ideas and reflect in ways that could enhance the learning opportunities in the classroom. As there are various virtual technologies available, educators must not be afraid to learn how the technologies might benefit their students in their own classrooms. This study indicated how e-mails positively affected my professional collaboration with Owen, how blogging affected the students in my classroom, and also how YouTube positively impacted the students. These are all aspects of the broad impact that technology has had on my program, which is why I believe pre-service educators need to provide future teachers with many opportunities to experiment with and learn from the various technologies available to prepare them to teach to the 21st century learner.

In addition to presenting the findings regarding the blog and my classroom instruction, I shared the benefits of using action research. As I implemented and modeled action research with pre-service students, I hope that more future and current educators will embrace this research methodology and will recognize its potential value as we seek educational innovation. Just as this process has certainly influenced me professionally, it has the possibility of transforming educators and revealing possible improvements needed in schools today.

Using a blog for instructional purposes can benefit students personally, professionally, and intellectually. The personal benefits might include, but not be limited to, learning a new technology, sharing thoughts and ideas, and meeting new friends. The blog might also help students professionally as it encourages dialogue between others in the same field, offers new teaching ideas not previously considered, and serves as an example of how to incorporate technology in to the classroom. One of the most important benefits of the blog for some students is its ability to support them intellectually. This study indicated the many academic benefits of using a blog and how it encouraged some students to think critically about the topics presented.

Although using a blog has its limitations, I believe it is an effective platform to allow students opportunities to connect with one another outside of class, especially for students participating in a practicum experience as there may not be consistent face-to-face meetings. The comments provided by the students have been relevant, fascinating, and encouraging. The remarks written by particular pre-service students such as Susan, Allison, Ron, Curtis, and Bethany represent a small sample of the views of all pre-service students. It has been my pleasure participating in this journey, not only on the blog and in class, but also in the process of conducting action research with them. I hope that I have fairly characterized their experiences within the course that we traveled together. Chad summarized his experiences from the course when on December eighth he wrote the following on his one-page summative assessment regarding what he had learned in *Orientation to Education*:

> I feel like I have learned a lot in this class. I feel more confident in my decision to become a teacher and that is very valuable to me because for a while I really wasn't sure. I feel like the job is much more professional than I ever considered it. It takes a lot to be a really effective teacher and it takes a person with real commitment to do it…. Even though I didn't like it very much I also feel like I did learn from the blog. It provided good insight for me and it was cool to work together with others to come up with ideas on how to better teach. If someone has the desire to use it the blog can be a very effective tool. (Chad, personal communication, December 8, 2009)

Just as Chad noted that he had learned a lot in this class, I also feel that I learned a lot from this experience. I, too, feel more confident. My confidence has grown in my passion for teaching pre-service educators and my belief that technology can be used as a tool to educate the future teachers of the 21st century.

Appendix A

Blog Topics for Fall 2009

First Week

Post 1 – Welcome!

Welcome to Orientation to Education! Your growth and learning is the most important thing. The purpose of the blog is to communicate your thoughts and ideas with your classmates. You are expected to submit one blog each week in response to the question given. You will also reply to at least one of your classmate's blog entries.

On or before Sunday, August 30th try your first blog entry. Post your name and one interesting fact about yourself. Don't forget to sign in by using your name. This week you do not have to reply to a classmate's post, but you are welcome to if you choose.
Happy blogging!

Second Week

Post 2 – Qualities of an effective teacher

I've posted many qualities of an effective teacher on the right hand side of our blog....take a look at the list, thinking about the value of each characteristic. After you've reviewed the list carefully, please post your response to the following question.....

Congratulations! You've just landed the teaching position of your dreams. You begin packing your things to fly to the new school district and realize, due to the increased costs of gasoline, you can bring with you only three suitcases. Each suitcase can hold only ONE quality of an effective teacher...which three would you take with you and why?

Don't forget to also post a response to at least one of your peers. Happy Writing!

Third Week

Post 3 - Technology in the classroom

Watch the Technology YouTubes on the right. Reflect upon what you saw. What are your thoughts about technology in the classroom? How dould the Amazon Kindle change typical textbooks in the future? Please share an example of how you saw a teacher effectively or ineffectively utilize technology in the classroom.

Fourth Week –

Post 4 - Your LU Education Program

One of my goals for you this semester is that you become familiar with the Lindenwood School of Education and what you can expect over the next four years of your life. In order to do this, you need to become very familiar with the Lindenwood website, and in particular, the School of Education section of the website. The following link should take you to the School of Education section of the website. http://www.lindenwood.edu/academics/education/ Please browse the site and find something new that you either didn't know before or that you didn't know was on the website. You only have to post one reply this week. It is not necessary that you reply to a classmate. HOWEVER, you must find something on the website that is different than what the previous posts have indicated.

Here are a few things to remember while you are looking for information: 1. It must be related to either Education or your Secondary Field of Study. 2. It can be a form you found on the Guide to Undergraduate Teacher Education, but you must specify what the form is about and when you would use it. 3. It can be something about Student Teaching, but be specific about what you learned. 4. It can be something about Foliotek, but be specific about what you learned. 5. It can be something about CBASE or Praxis, but be specific about what you learned. 6. You will not submit information about a form that another student has already posted. 7. There should be no repeat answers because there are 58 pages in the Guide to Undergraduate Teacher Education. You can access this Guide by clicking the Teacher Education link on the right hand side of the Education page. It is below "Student Teaching" and above "Faculty". Once you have clicked "Teacher Education" scroll down to the bottom of the page where it says "Teacher Education - Download resources" Click the Guide to Undergraduate Teacher Education. You will find sooooooooooo much information there. See you guys next week!

Fifth Week

Post 5 - Professionalism in Teaching

Now that you have read chapter 2 about the professionalization of teaching and we discussed a few of the issues in our last class, I would like for you to reflect upon your 13+ years of schooling and the examples your teachers have set for you. You need to think of a time, experience, or memory of a teacher doing or saying something that exemplified that he/she was truly a well-respected professional. OR you can write about a time, experience, or memory of a teacher doing or saying something that was not professional. Do not use names when you are talking about this teacher. It can be as simple as "One of my high school teachers always wore flip-flops to school." Or it can be a complex issue such as "One of the high school teachers used to go to student parties on the weekend and drink alcohol in front of the students." After you state the issue, type a few sentences about why you thought it was professional or unprofessional and how it affected your learning. Please be sensitive to the fact that this topic is very subjective. Something you might think is unprofessional another person might think is not a big deal. Let's be aware of people's differing opinions. We need to make sure we keep this post PROFESSIONAL:-)

Sixth Week

Post 6 – Education around the globe

After watching 2 million minutes, what are your thoughts about how American education differs from other parts of the world? In your opinion, how does education in other parts of the world compare and contrast to education in America? Do you think American education should be more like education in China and/or India? Why or why not?

Seventh Week

Post 7 – Effective Assessments

Most of you have already begun your classroom observation. The next few blog entries will be based upon what you see in the classroom in which you are observing. If you have not started your observation, answer the questions by observing the assessment practices of one or more of your Lindenwood professors. Please do not use names of teachers, professors or students.

How does the teacher assess the progression of the students' learning? How does the teacher determine a need for further instruction? How does the teacher determine and document when a student reaches mastery of a learning objective?

Eighth Week

Post 8 – Classroom Routines

Students feel safe and secure when there is a set of classroom routines. Please reflect upon what classroom routines your cooperating teacher uses in the classroom.

What are the established procedures in the classroom such as attendance, beginning class, ending class, clean up, etc? What is the physical arrangement of the classroom, tables, desks, positioning, etc? How does the teacher transition the students from one activity to another? Reflect upon the classroom routines – Are the routines providing a positive, safe, and secure place to ensure student learning? Do you agree with the routines that the teacher uses? Why or why not?

Ninth Week

Post 9 – Management and Student Behavior

Many first year teachers struggle with student discipline. By answering the following questions, recognize the behavior strategies used by your cooperating teacher that work or do not work in the classroom.

How are expectations for behavior, routines, and learning explained? What are the guidelines for classroom behavior? How is appropriate behavior encouraged? How does the teacher react to inappropriate behavior? What techniques both verbal and nonverbal used to cue appropriate behavior? What strategies does the teacher use to prevent problems?

Tenth Week

Post 10 – Meeting the needs of the individual learner

After our discussion about teaching exceptional learners, observe this week how your cooperating teacher effectively teaches the exceptional learners in the classroom. Reflect upon the following questions as you post your blog entry.

What modifications or adoptions are made within the course content or curriculum to meet the needs of the individual learner? How does the teacher utilize large group, small group, and/or individualized instruction to meet the learning needs of students? How are student interests and student choice incorporated in to the students' learning opportunities?

Eleventh Week

Post 11 – Teacher-Student Rapport

I believe that the art of teaching is shown in the teacher's ability to have a positive rapport with students. According to Webster's Dictionary, the word rapport means "relation; connection, esp. harmonious or sympathetic relation: *a teacher trying to establish close rapport with."* Hopefully, your cooperating teacher has a good rapport with the students. Watch your cooperating teacher this week in order to answer the following questions:

What strategies does the teacher use to build and maintain rapport with students? How are opportunities for success provided for each student? Do the students have a positive connection with the teacher?

Twelfth Week

Post 12 – Curriculum Structure and Content

Most of you have probably heard about No Child Left Behind. This federal mandate has put a lot of pressure on schools to be accountable for student achievement. It has encouraged districts to realign their curriculum with the state standards. The curriculum is not a guide that sits on the teacher's shelf. It consists of the course content. You will learn a lot more about curriculum in your program here at LU. However, you should be able to observe the following from your cooperating teacher regarding curriculum and content.

Does the teacher:

- Have a course plan which identifies the units, topics, tasks and skills which will be covered during a specified period of time?
- Have a daily plan or structure which identifies the skills and supportive facts, concepts and principles needed for the lesson?
- Begin the lesson with a review of what was covered during the last session?
- Provide exercise activities or skills practice where students can practice and apply the material learned?

- End the class with a summary of what was covered and "learned" during the class period?

Thirteenth Week

Post 13 – Instruction

Research shows that teachers need to vary the methods of instruction. This week reflect upon the following questions to determine the quality of your cooperating teacher's instruction.

Does the teacher:

- Rely to heavily on "tell" forms of instruction?
- Include "show" methods of instruction to demonstrate the meanings of the material being taught?
- Include "do" activities where students apply, or learn, the skills of the lesson?
- Vary instructional methods to ensure meeting the needs of all students?

Fourteenth Week

Post 14 Parent Involvement

Your final blog post will be about parent involvement in schools. After our discussion in class and your reading of chapter 6 you should have a good understanding of how important this connection is for the success of a child. Watch the YouTube links and post a comment about parental involvement. What are your thoughts? Do you have an interesting story from your schooling about your parent or a classmate's parent being involved in school? How important do you think it is? What can you do as a first year teacher to help parents become more involved? Pick one of the questions above as a springboard for your post. I also posted the Homework YouTube in case you wanted to view it again. I have truly enjoyed having you in class. I wish you success on your journey toward becoming a teacher.

Appendix B

Blog Comment Discussion

The purpose of this activity is to begin a dialogue about different ways to reply to a blog post. There are many acceptable ways to reply to my weekly question(s). However, you should attempt to answer the question(s) and provide your personal reflections based on your past experience or your current practicum experience. Below you will find one of my posts and three actual students' comments from the class blog last year. Please read and discuss with your neighbor what your thoughts are about the following comments.

Post 6 - Technology in the Classroom

Watch the Technology youtubes on the right. Reflect upon what you saw. What are your thoughts about technology in the classroom? How could the Amazon Kindle change typical textbooks in the future? Please share an example of how a teacher effectively or ineffectively utilized technology in the classroom.

Student A commented – "I agree with Esther in that technology has its advantages and disadvantages. In each classroom I have observed (my teacher sends me out to other teachers sometimes), all of the teachers have a Smart Board and use it constantly. I think it is amazing as well as the others. It allows interaction with the students through the technology they each use today. I think the Amazon Kindle would be great, but the fact that the student can surf the web bothers me. A way that technology is still a hassle is an example of the teacher I am observing. The computers in the entire school were down Monday and mid-term grades were due at 3. Even though it is advancing, we still can't depend on it!"

Student B commented – "I think the smart board is a great idea. Its a good technolgy in the classrooms and has great potential to be used everywhere. When i begin my teaching career its defintly something im going to be looking into."

Student C commented – "The smartboard is definitely a big advancement in classroom technology and i love it! My high school math teacher was one of the first teachers in our school to have the smartboard and he did a great job with it. He was able to get us all involved in class because it was so cool and fun to use, but we also got a lot accomplished. Amazon Kindle is a good idea but i believe that textbooks in a way are better. Having Amazon Kindle it is easier for students to get off task because you can surf the web and find things to easily distract you, using textbooks you dont have that problem. I think that you retain more with a textbook because you can read and highlight at the same time and you can always have the information with you. Technology in the classroom is a new and effective way to teach, but textbooks still work as well, even though they are not as interesting as a smartboard may be."

Appendix C

Focus Group Questions – Week 12

1. What are your overall views of the blog in this class? And has this view changed since the last focus group?
2. Were the topics posted in weeks seven through eleven (refer to blog topic sheet) helpful in your reflection upon your observation experience? If yes, how were the topics helpful? And if no, what topics would have been more helpful?
3. Finish the sentence, if the blog had not been required during the observation weeks away from class…
4. Was there a particular blog post that you liked or disliked more than the others? Explain why you liked or disliked the post.
5. Do you feel that the instructor's participation in the blog was satisfactory? If no, please explain why.
6. Do you feel that your classmates' participation in the blog was satisfactory? If no, please explain why.
7. Do you feel that your participation in the blog was satisfactory? If no, please explain why.
8. If you answered "no" to the previous question what would have motivated you to participate more in the blog?
9. How do you feel about being required to blog by Sunday night at midnight? Has this view changed since the last focus group?
10. What do you like about blogging?
11. Has this changed since the last focus group? If yes, why?
12. What do you not like about blogging?
13. Has this changed since the last focus group? If yes, why?

14. What could be changed in order to make the class blog more beneficial?

15. What were your thoughts about the gadgets on the side of the blog – the RSS educational news feed and the poll?

16. Did you read any of the RSS articles posted? Which article(s) did you read and why did you choose to read the article(s).

17. Did you participate in the class poll regarding the completion of 10 practicum hours? If no, why not?

*Upon completion of the above questions, explain to the participants that the meeting is about to end. Ask them to take a moment and think about what has been discussed. Then, one by one, ask them if they have any additional comments. If necessary, explore relevant or new comments in greater depth.

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