LINKING COMMUNITY TO LEARNING: STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF BLOGGING IN THE FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION COURSE

A RESEARCH PROJECT

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

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MASTERS OF ARTS

BY

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Introduction

As both an undergraduate and a graduate student I was able to become familiar with blogging through my coursework, as several classes I took throughout the years required me to contribute to a class blog. The objectives were always different: sometimes the blogging simply acted as a method of recording questions before a face-to-face class session, while other instances of blogging asked me to respond to readings and interact with my peers. Despite my lack of experience with blogging outside of the classroom, I almost always found it to be a helpful tool for deconstructing class readings or events, and I began to look forward to classes that utilized a blog as I recognized the benefit it had not only for aiding in my understanding of course content, but also for bringing me closer to my classmates and their ideas about common readings.

Blogging as an activity is a good fit for something like the writing classroom; it provides students with an opportunity to produce work published for a real audience, and depending on the way blogging is positioned within the course, this work can take on the role of either low or high-stakes writing. Furthermore, blogging can give emerging writers practical experience with writing in a digital environment. Kathleen B. Yancey’s landmark report titled “Writing in the 21st Century” discusses three major issues composition instructors face when assimilating to the many changes new media is making to our classrooms: “developing new models of writing, designing a new curriculum supporting these models, and creating models for teaching that curriculum” (1). Stressing how big of an influence digital technology has on writing and its instruction, Yancey points out that the relationship between the writer and the
audience is changing as both are now present everywhere, particularly within
digital social networks. Hence, my rationale for implementing a class blog
stemmed from a desire to support new models of writing while allowing
students to become an author and an audience member simultaneously within a
digital space.

In her article, “The Digital Imperative: Making a Case for a 21st Century
Pedagogy,” J. Elizabeth Clark also argues that reform is necessary in order to
meet the needs of the 21st-century student and prepare them to exist and write in
a digital world. Clark chooses to incorporate blogging in her class because the
instantaneous and public nature of blogging makes users published authors with
the click of a button (34). What’s more, blogs afford their users the benefit of
being able to receive feedback and interaction from their readers through the use
of the comment feature. This feature can play a key role in how students receive
feedback from their peers. Rather than traditional models of in-class peer-
feedback, students can use the blog to post their writing and receive numerous
comments from others in the class. Moreover, authors can respond to these
comments, promoting a two-way discussion about their writing that becomes
documented in a digital class space they can return to later in the semester.

When I began teaching first-year composition, I thought I would
implement a class blog in the hopes that my students would have the same type
of positive blogging experience I had. I required students to post informal
responses to readings or in-class activities, assuming they would naturally
engage in these conversations together, commenting back and forth, helping each
other to synthesize the work they were doing in the course collectively.
Ultimately, I wanted the blog to be a space where our often enthusiastic in-class conversations could develop further outside of the time constraints of when we physically met. What resulted, however, was very different. I found that most students felt burdened by being required to post to the blog, and they almost never commented on each other’s posts. Why such silence? What had I done wrong? Why didn’t blogging organically grow into something fun for the students—a break from the monotonous activities they were used to? Did the students not see the value in engaging with the blog and each other?

For starters, it may be that my assumptions about my students’ prior experience with activities like blogging were false as I foolishly assumed many of them already interacted with blogs in their daily online lives. A Pew Research Center study titled “Social Media and Mobile Internet Use Among Teens and Young Adults” found that while 93% of young adults ages 18 to 29 are frequent users of the internet, only 15% of them use blogging, a 28% decline since 2006. The study also found a decline in commenting among teen social-network users, as 52% of them reported commenting on blogs, “down from 76%” in 2006 (Lenhart 24). Not only are students not as familiar with blogging as I initially thought, but they are rapidly losing interest in this tool that many first-year composition instructors like myself utilize as a means of getting the students comfortable with writing and responding.

Blogs can also play a vital role in bringing the class closer together. In “Teaching with Blogs,” Stephanie Hedge says she uses blogs in her writing courses primarily because they lend themselves to community-building and can provide instructors with more opportunities to get to know their students
because, as Hedge points out, blogging allows students to personalize their writing by composing in their own voice and making individual choices regarding font, color, size, etc. More simply, blogs get students writing, and Hedge finds that when students blog, they “form connections with each other quickly.” Affirming Hedge’s assertions regarding the relationship between blogging and community, Olivia Halic et al. studied the effects blogging had on an undergraduate course and found blogging acted as a catalyst for cultivating community, especially through commenting that was happening between the students. What’s more, the students’ sense of community had a major impact on their perceptions of learning—“when the sense of community was higher, students reported higher levels of learning and vice versa” (211). However, only about a fourth of the students valued the ideas expressed in the comments they received from their peers, which resulted in a negative perception of community and, ultimately, learning as well.

The perceived value in blog comments can take many forms, and given the correlation between community and learning, it’s important to understand not only how blogs can be used in order to foster community but also how students see the need for using blogs in the classroom. Shailey Minocha and Dave Roberts looked at how student use of the comment feature influences their work in the course and found that the comment feature was of monumental importance to the students; they wanted comments and expected to receive them. It was through the comments that students were brought closer together emotionally, as one student noted blogging “helped me feel as if I wasn’t struggling on my own, made me feel more connected” (299). Similarly, Lucinda
Kerawalla et al. also found that the comments bloggers received from their peers became “a source of emotional support” (Kerwalla, “Characterising” 28). When students were faced with an obstacle in their work and discussed it on the blog, their peers would share similar stories of hardships, leading to less anxiety in the group.

A continuation of this study found that students see the need for comments on their blog posts but were often “disappointed by the lack of interaction,” leading to a lowered sense of community (Kerwalla, “An Empirically” 35-36). Most of the comments students received on their blogs were from the instructor-- not other students. One participant expressed disappointment because the lack of comments made him question the quality of his writing (Kerwalla, “An Empirically” 35). The community that is built (or not built) affects student learning in distinct ways, as we see in this student whose confidence as a writer was greatly diminished as a direct result of the lack of interaction.

It’s clear that the comment feature can facilitate community in many ways, but chiefly, as discussed here, in the form of feedback on writing or as emotional encouragement/understanding. The patterns in this research suggest that when successfully integrated and used, blogging can influence students in the following way:

**BLOGGING ➔ COMMENT feature ➔ COMMUNITY building ➔ GREATER UNDERSTANDING**

*Blogging* provides a unique forum in that the writer and audience are brought closer together, and the affordance of the *comment feature* gives the writer the
opportunity to engage in a two-way dialogue with their audience. Specific to a first-year writing classroom, the comment feature can be utilized in many ways to facilitate community building (like peer feedback or emotional support), which in turn can help the student gain a greater understanding of the course.

Stuart Glogoff notes that the comment feature adds another element of interaction necessary for students to connect with one another, but Homik and Melis found student bloggers put more time and effort into their own posts than they do into their comments. In their analysis of student blogging, Liping Deng and Allan H.K. Yuen also found that while blogging promotes social interaction, students tended to use the space for social support in the form of complaints rather than reflection about the course and this rarely resulted in a sustained discussion, as most comment threads never inspired two-way dialogue. How can we get students to a) see the importance in using the comment feature, and b) use it in such a way that a two-way conversation between the author and the audience can result?

While the opportunity for social interaction is there, students may not embrace the comment feature naturally—a peculiarity considering how they comment on Facebook. A 2012 Pew Research Center study titled “Why Facebook Users Get More Than They Give” found on average, every time a Facebook user updates her or his status, she or he makes at least four comments on other statuses, revealing people are more likely to comment on another user’s profile than to update their own (Hampton, “Why Facebook Users” 14). More data on Facebook commenting was garnered in a related study, “Social Networking Sites and Our Lives,” which shows that the comment feature is one of the most used
components of Facebook among 18-22 year olds. 16% of users in this age group comment on other users’ information once per day, and 21% leave several comments within one day (Hampton, “Social Networking” 9). Perhaps Facebook is a site where students more easily see the community they belong to than they do within the context of their English blog. This leads me to question if students are even aware of the features blogs can afford them—how do they see the activity of blogging in relation to their own learning?

S. D. Krause emphasizes how important requirement design is when implementing blogging into a course. He writes, “many writing teachers seem to be using blog spaces as places to facilitate dynamic and interactive writing experiences,” but questions the possibilities blogs have to promote interactivity among student writers. He recounts mistakes he initially made when positioning a blog into his course, namely that he failed to identify how many posts or comments students needed to write, and as a result the blog failed much in the same way mine did. Krause wanted the blogging to “evolve more ‘organically’” and therefore purposefully stayed away from rigid dos and don’ts. However, as he reflects, this approach “translated into ‘vagueness,’” a quality that did not inspire the students to embrace blogging in the ways he had intended. Glogoff says academic blogging “works best when integrated into a coherent pedagogical approach, vested in an appropriate educational theory, and updated regularly by participants.” In short, to successfully integrate a blog into the first-year writing course in a way that promotes community and learning, instructors must reflect deeply on what pedagogical reasoning they have for using blogging and make the purposes clear to the students.
As Jeff Utecht explains, we don’t quite understand blogs, and therefore more analysis of their uses in practice, particularly the comment feature, is important to the field. He notes that it’s the on-going conversation within a blog that is the real benefit, of which commenting plays a significant role. Yet perhaps we aren’t giving students an appropriate amount of time “to leave comments during class—or even as homework on other’s blogs.” It’s these comments that “can deepen learning and understanding” (Utecht 2). Considering the comment feature’s relationship to community building practices and by extension promotion of learning and course understanding, how can we design course requirements to facilitate blogging activity that helps build community and give students a positive learning experience? How do students view the uses and benefits of a blog in the first-year composition course?

Methods

In order to further understand how first-year writers see the need for and benefits of blogging, I surveyed students at Ball State University during the Spring semester of 2012 across two separate sections of English 104: Composing Research, Ball State’s second of two required writing classes. Thirty-five students across these two sections (distinguished as section A and section B) filled out a survey comprised of questions about their prior experience with blogging as well as about their attitudes towards their blogging for this course specifically (Appendix A). I purposefully selected sections that took different approaches to the way in which the blog was implemented in order to encompass multiple models of blog integration into my research.
Section A used a singular class blog on which the instructor generated posts about the course readings and required students to comment on these posts in at least 150 words. Working from a low-stakes writing approach, this instructor incorporated students’ interaction and participation on the blog into their overall participation grade in the course. In section B, blogging played a much more integral role as students were required to maintain individual blogs throughout the semester as part of an immersion project. They were required to blog at least once a week, and comment on their peers’ blogs at least twice a week. Length was not specified by the instructor, but the students were asked to generate “thoughtful and relevant” posts and they spent some time at the beginning of the semester familiarizing themselves with the conventions of blogging by reading and analyzing several well-known blogs.

Participants in section A participated in a blogging model that required them to solely respond to writing generated by the instructor, while participants in section B were asked to interact with each other much more, providing an opportunity to better understand student use of blogging and whether or not community was being fostered by this activity. I, therefore, tracked the blogging activity of fifteen participations from section B within a two-month period, noting the number of posts generated and the number of comments each participant received. To consider how students were responding to one another, I conducted a qualitative analysis of their blogging and commenting by measuring the length of their comments and the depth of engagement with the writing being responded to (did the students directly refer to the post? Did they connect it with ideas or concepts from class or their larger world?).
Survey Results

I conducted a survey of participants from both sections to understand how familiar students were with blogging and its conventions before taking this course, and also to gain a sense of whether or not they found blogging to be beneficial to their learning and the ways in which they perceived the blog to be useful. In addition to general background and demographic information (please see Appendix A), students were asked the following questions:

- Do you read or visit any blogs?
- Have you previously had to blog for academic purposes?
- Do you believe the class requirements for the English 104 blog are difficult to meet? If so, explain what could make blogging easier for you.
- How often do you visit the class blog (to read or post)?
- Have you found the class blog to be useful to you? If yes, how so?
- Do you believe blogging for this course enhances your learning experience? Why or why not?

As students were allowed to skip any questions they didn’t want to answer, several of the questions were answered by less than the 35 survey participants. The results are as follows:

Do you read or visit any blogs?

Of the 31 respondents, 14 (45%) answered no, while the remaining 17 (55%) answered yes. However, students who
answered yes were asked to specify which blogs they read or visited and a closer examination of the data indicated that 14 of these students were from section B, where they were required to visit their classmates’ blogs every week. Three students did indicate that they visited blogs of a non-academic nature—their answers were sports-related blogs, fashion blogs, and hair and makeup tutorial blogs.

### Have you previously had to blog for academic purposes?

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<th>Choice</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, and the blog enhanced my learning experience</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, and the blog did not enhance my learning experience</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Have you previously had to blog for academic purposes?

For this question, students were given three choices: “no,” “yes, and the blog enhanced my learning experience,” or “yes, and the blog did not enhance my learning experience.” Of the 33 respondents, 19 (58%) did not have previous blogging experience in an academic setting. Fourteen students (42%) did have previous academic blogging experience, and all but one of them felt the blog enhanced their learning experience.
How often do you visit the class blog (to read or post)? Of the 34 respondents, most (22, or 65%) reported visiting the blog for their course 1-2 times per week, and several others (11, or 32%) reported visiting the blog 3-4 times per week. Just one student (3%) reported visiting five or more times per week. No one indicated that they never visited the blog for their course.

Do you believe the class requirements for the English 104 blog are difficult to meet? If so, explain what could make blogging easier for you.

Presented to them as a short-answer question, of the 33 respondents, 32 simply answered “no,” while one student answered that the requirements were difficult to meet citing the length as being the reason for her difficulty. This student was enrolled in section A, the class that required students to comment on a post generated by the instructor. She wrote, “150 words is far too many to have to post for a blog especially when the question can be answered in 70 words. I feel that I am being forced to overdevelop my argument and repeat myself.”
Have you found the class blog to be useful to you? If yes, how so?

Of the three students who responded negatively to the usefulness of blogging, one student offered elaboration: “I generally just write about whatever the current blog prompt is and pay little to no attention to why I’m writing. It seems to be more of an annoyance to me than a helpful tool.” Yet this seems to be more of a complaint than a reason. The other students who answered “no” or “somewhat” didn’t elaborate further on why they felt this way. The majority of respondents (26, or 81%) found blogging to be useful and provided short answer responses as to why. These were then coded to determine the reasons students found the blog to be useful or unuseful. Among the answers, the following patterns emerged:

- **Community**: students often expressed an advantage to blogging as being the ability to interact with and get to know their classmates, as this came up 12 times in their answers.
  - “Blogging helps me interact with my classmates and meet new people.”
  - “[Through blogging,] you learn about your classmates.”
• **Course understanding:** many times, students explained that blogging helped give them a greater understanding of course content or readings, as this was cited 10 times among the answers. Additionally, course understanding was frequently connected to the notion of community in that students often reported that the interaction they had with their classmates via blogging led them to greater understanding of the course.
  
  o “[Blogging] helped me understand assignments and possibly get some ideas on what I should do.”
  
  o “[Blogging] helps me gain a better understanding by reading my other peer's responses.”
  
  o “[Blogging] helps me understand the readings better by being able to read other students posts.”
  
  o “I could see the views of my classmates and compare those to my own.”

• **Accountability:** students also voiced that being required to blog for their class gave them a sense of accountability to complete assignments or readings. This was mentioned 6 times among their answers.
  
  o “[Blogging] has actually helped me to write. Without it, I feel like I would have slacked a lot this semester in my writing.”
  
  o “[Blogging] has encouraged me to read our text book and improve on expressing my ideas.”
  
  o “It makes me do the reading.”

• **Writing:** not as frequently cited as community, course understanding, or accountability, the mention of writing did come up 5 times. Students who
mentioned writing noted that blogging helped them in their process throughout the semester.

- “[Blogging] worked well for "drafting" my paper; getting ideas out and seeing the response from classmates.
- “[Blogging] has helped with my writing skills.
- “It is a good way to keep track of what I’m writing.”

Other reasons cited less frequently were the ability to easily receive feedback on their work, having a backlog of their writing stored within the blog, and collaboration with other students.

Do you believe that blogging for this course enhances your learning experience? Why or why not?

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<th>Do you believe that blogging for this course enhances your learning experience? Why or why not?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

who answered yes, community and course understanding were the most frequently cited reasons (both came up 11 times among the answers) as to why they felt blogging enhanced their learning experience.

- “It’s a different way to connect with classmates.”
- “It helps us become more of a community.”
- “It is interactive and creates different learning opportunities for my
classmates and I, especially learning from one another.”

• “It helps us interact with each other and also learn new things by learning from each other.”

The fact that many students mentioned the community factor in their answers to a question asking them about their learning demonstrates that the students see community and learning experiences as being closely linked.

Accountability came up again in responses for this question, as three students felt like their learning was enhanced when they felt a sense of responsibility for keeping up with blogging:

• “It makes sure you have read the material before class.”
• “Without it, I most likely wouldn’t do the reading and just hope I didn’t get called on.”

Others mentioned that blogging helped to foster their digital literacy:

• “I think that the blog has helped me adapt to the changing technology in the classroom and the academic tools at my disposal.”
• “You not only get to read what everyone else in the class is blogging as well, but learning how to use the sites and everything helps too; it makes it fun.”

Infrequently cited reasons as to why students believed blogging enhanced their learning experience included blogging kept them organized, blogging fostered their creativity, and that blogging was a new form they could more easily connect with—“it’s not so textbook,” as one student described it.

In contrast to the positive responses, 3, or 9%, of students responded that blogging did not enhance their learning experience in the following ways:
• “I would say that it does not. Blogs are generally for personal use and personal discourse over one's own or someone else's thoughts and ideas.”
• “Not really, it helps but I'm not sure it actually enhances my learning.”
• “No, it doesn't enhance my learning experience, because all we do is read posts and write new posts.”

Two students, or 6%, “somewhat” recognized the potential blogging had for being able to provide them with an enhanced learning experience, but in some form or another, they didn’t achieve that in their course:
• “Somewhat, I think it was helpful to having a better understanding of some of the topic we have discussed in class.”
• “Depends. Most students are lazy and leave awful, half-baked comments that simply reiterate what you said in the post.”

The second student obviously sees his learning experience as being directly influenced by the other students in the course, something the other students also picked up on as course understanding and community were often linked together in the positive responses. This student, “Mark,” was a participant from section B, the individual blogging course, and will be discussed further in the following section to examine how the comments he received negatively impacted his perceptions of his learning.

**Blogging Analysis**

The instructor for section B, as mentioned before, required students to maintain individual blogs throughout the semester as a part of a unit she refers to as, “Project: Experiment.” This mini-immersive learning project required that
students pick something to do different for thirty days and track their progress
via a blog they were responsible for setting up, designing, and maintaining. With
the instructor’s guidance, students selected immersive experiments to undertake
like learning how to play the piano, studying the effects of napping, or giving up
television. After setting up and personalizing their own spaces, the instructor
then linked to each student’s blog from a main class blog—the hub of the course
where students could find information about assignments and the class schedule,
and access one another’s blogs. Later in the semester, the students would
position their 30-day experience within a research paper on a distinct aspect of
their immersion project, and were reminded to be cognizant of this as they
progressed through their thirty days.

The instructor stressed that blogging would help them to “develop
familiarity with the online world,” and act as a space for them to keep track of
their research and lay a clear path for where they were headed with their project.
Because their information would be visible to the rest of the class the instructor
asked them to consider the following questions:

- Who might be reading this blog in and outside of this class?
- How do other bloggers present and relay their findings?
- How is my project affecting me?
- How is the information I blog about important in larger contexts?

Students were expected to generate posts about their project at least once a week,
but were encouraged to blog more. Students were also asked to respond via their
blogs to questions the instructor would pose regarding course readings and
concepts. These prompts usually occurred once a week. Additionally, students
were required to comment on at least two of their classmate’s blogs each week. Their posts and comments were due every Wednesday by 11pm, and assessment of their blogging activity would rely mainly on completion but also on effort as the instructor specified she expected their posts to be “thoughtful and relevant.”

Fifteen of the 22 enrolled students from section B agreed to participate in this portion of the study, which aimed towards gaining a greater sense of how blogging was actually occurring in practice. As the following table reflects, the number of times each of the 15 participants generated a post was counted, as well as the number of comments they received from the other members of the class. On average, students posted to their blogs 14.86 times and received an average of 11.4 comments on their blogs within the two-month period:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Posts Written</th>
<th>Comments Received</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>15</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
<td><strong>14.86</strong></td>
<td><strong>11.4</strong></td>
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</tbody>
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Most students (12, or 80%) posted anywhere between 11 and 20 times, while 2 students (13%), participants 13 and 14, posted more than 20 times. Only one student (7%) posted less than 11 times—participant 12 generated 10 posts within the two-month period.

The amount of comments received varied much more than the amount of posts each participant wrote. Most students (6, or 40%) received between 11 and 15 comments from their peers. Three students (20%) received between 6 and 10 comments, and three students (20%) received between 0 and five. Two students (13%) received between 16 and 20 comments, and one student (7%), participant 6, received more than 21 comments on their blog.
In general, participants posted to their own blogs about the same amount of times with the exception of participants 13 and 14 who posted almost or over twice as much as the average of 14.86 posts. The number of comments each participant received on their blog varied much more than the number of times they posted; as the table reflects, one student received as little as two comments, while another received as many as twenty-four. A closer examination reveals that even students who received few comments may have still benefitted from the interaction they participated in while blogging.

Requirements, Timing, and Quantity

Participant 2, or “David,” is the student who only received two comments:

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<th>Participant</th>
<th>Posts Written</th>
<th>Comments Received</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>2, David</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
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This may have had to do with both the time at which David posted his writing, as he, and other students as well, developed a habit of blogging right before the 11pm Wednesday deadline. Because the deadline for blog posts and comments were the same, this left potential commenters little opportunity to respond to David’s blog as part of their commenting quota of two per week. In contrast, students who frequently posted on Sunday and Monday nights received the highest numbers of comments. What’s more, participants never commented retroactively; they only left comments on posts written for that week. Despite only receiving two comments throughout the two-month period, David
recognized the benefit of commenting because as his survey responses indicate, the biggest advantage of blogging for him was being able to interact with the community of his peers. Even though peer interaction with his own blog was scarce, David was able to interact through the comments he left for other students.

**Quality versus Quantity**

Conversely, Participant 6, or “Brianna,” is the student who received the most comments on her blog, 24 in total, and yet many of these comments failed to engage directly with what Brianna wrote about.

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<th>Participant</th>
<th>Posts Written</th>
<th>Comments Received</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6, Brianna</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24</td>
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Despite the quantity, the comments Brianna received frequently lacked quality as they almost never deeply engaged with her writing or her project. Consider the following post where she invites suggestions from her peers:

> When it comes to the research paper and narrowing down my topic to a specific point that I want to argue, I have still not decided on what exactly to write. I was thinking about making it about how college students can change their lifestyles to become healthier, but am not positive yet. So if anyone has any ideas, I'm up for suggestions! :)

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*Posted by [Redacted] at 12:57 PM 0 comments*
Here she is inviting students to engage with her ideas, but no one leaves any comments. Later in the semester, Brianna once again put out a call for comments in regards to how she should approach her research paper, and this time she received two comments, but they were superficial (“keep it up” and “good job”), illustrating that quantity over quality shouldn’t necessarily be valued in peer commenting. Ideally, students would construct quality comments in the sense that they interact directly with the post they’re responding to and address specific concerns from the author. But the students rarely indicated in their blogging that they needed or even wanted feedback from their peers, and when they did, like in Brianna’s case, it produced less than helpful results.

**Quality, Quantity, and Effects on Learning Perception**

Participant 4, Mark, was another student who took it upon himself to specifically encourage comments to little avail. Like David, Mark received a less than average amount of comments, and like Brianna, the comments he received failed to interact with his writing in an engaged way.

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<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Posts Written</th>
<th>Comments Received</th>
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<tr>
<td>4, Mark</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
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</table>

He was mentioned earlier as being the only student who felt blogging did not enhance his learning, citing the lack of quality comments as a direct reason. Mark’s sentiments coincide with a study conducted by Nicole Ellison and Yuehua Wu, who found that student bloggers appreciated the capacity blogs had
for providing them with feedback and interaction from their peers, but often
became frustrated at the amount of time they spent constructing their posts only
to receive little to no interaction from peers. Mark posted 14 times within the two
months, yet received only 6 comments— far below the average of 11.6. Mark
wrote almost the same amount of times as Brianna, yet received a fourth of the
amount of comments she did. But why? It could have been because Mark’s
project dealt with some complicated concepts (he was studying lucid dreaming),
and his posts were often much lengthier than the conventional blog post—one
post was over 700 words long, while Brianna’s never exceeded more than 200
words.

Mark produced one of the most introspective blogs of the group in terms
of his writing about and treatment of his experiment. In a post where he
identified his project topic as being lucid dreaming, he avoided the traditional
route that most students took (“For this project, I will…”). Instead, Mark
recounted the first time he ever had a lucid dream. His narrative is suspenseful,
and he concluded by addressing his readers directly:

This, everyone, was my first true lucid dream. It happened last semester after I got back from
my two AM classes and took a nap. This event inspired me to research lucid dreaming, and
ultimately learn how to trigger them more often.

I hope you enjoy content like the above, as I’ll be doing several experiments relating to sleep and
the waking world. Stay tuned.

Posted by [redacted] at 1:14 PM 0 comments
He gets to work on his lucid dreaming experiment right away and eagerly posts the results of the first week. He then goes on to explain what adjustments he plans to make to his experiment in the following week and then addresses potential commenters directly:

Despite having provided his peers with a starting place for their comments, no one engages and Mark was left with no feedback or interaction. On a later post, Mark received three comments, but they are less than stimulating:

- “haha thats a great story”
- “Extremely creative! Nice job :)”
- “He ha, that was good. Super unexpected.”

Rather than engaging with his ideas in order to originate their own and continue a conversation, students seem to only address ideas Mark already presented in his writing, similar to what Brianna experienced. I noted that Mark was more likely to receive comments from his peers on the posts that were much shorter than his average post. For example, he received three comments on a post comprised of 155 words, while a 559-word post and a 748-word post received none. It seems as though students were selective in which two blog posts they wanted to comment on each week, picking posts that may have been more easy to digest and respond to. One can understand why Mark waivered when asked
whether or not blogging for this course enhanced his learning experience—his survey answer of, “Most students are lazy and leave awful, half-baked comments that simply reiterate what you said in the post” indicates that he didn’t value his peers’ comments, which negatively impacted his sense of community ultimately leading to his feeling that he did not have an enhanced learning experience.

**Blogging, Community and Requirement Design**

Stuart Glogoff writes that when interacting within a virtual environment, “students have a tendency to lurk rather than participate,” but it’s our measure of what it means to participate that matters. Participation seemed to only be evaluated by quantity in both examined sections; section A measured length of comments while section B required 1 post and 2 comments per week. Assessing blog participation solely on quantity can result in less than stimulating comments, as evident in David, Brianna, and Mark’s blogs. However, students did see the value in quantity as the survey showed many felt they benefitted from blogging regularly. Perhaps it was simply the act of blogging and commenting that helped to build their community—knowing other students were reading and writing too contributed to their sense of community and enhanced their learning experience.

Again, community and interaction with peers weren’t the only benefits the students recognized in blogging. Posting and commenting also helped to foster course understanding, and provided many students with a level of accountability that helped them to stay organized and prepared for class. However, given the correlation between peer interaction and learning, how can
we design blogging requirements so students are engaging in ways that promote community and the positive learning experiences many of the students reported having? How can we foster a community through the ways in which we require students not only to blog, but to comment on each other’s blogging as well?

**Due Dates**

First, setting two separate due dates for posting and commenting is absolutely essential. As we saw with David, students who waited until the eleventh hour to post are given almost no feedback from their peers. The largest factor influencing how many comments a single student received generally boiled down to the time at which they posted. In most cases, the blogs that received a high number of comments were no different than those that didn’t in terms of quality and length, and after examining the timestamps on each blog I concluded that those who received many comments, like Brianna, were those bloggers who completed their posts well before the Wednesday night deadline.

**Involving the Author**

This is not to say that the quantity of comments should always be valued. Although blogs can be venues for low-stakes writing as was the case in section A, this doesn’t mean they should be void of complex writing. Involving the author in the commenting process can help students understand what type of feedback will benefit the author the most and provide them with a starting point for their comments. For instance, requiring that the authors pose questions to their commenters could help to promote positive and sustainable interaction. Furthermore, students may benefit from commenting on a variety of other students’ work. In certain contexts, students receiving feedback from someone
who is familiar with their work can be advantageous. However, in this context, when students received comments multiple times from the same commenter, the quality of comments gradually decreased over time. By the third or fourth time a participant commented on the same blog, comments were reduced to those two-word phrases that rubbed Mark the wrong way, like “good job” or “that’s funny.”

A Two-Way Conversation

When designing blogging requirements, it’s also important to remember that students can oftentimes benefit just as much from commenting as they can through actually blogging, as we saw with David, the student who despite receiving the least amount of comments indicated he still benefited from the interaction he achieved through commenting on other students’ blogs. Therefore, the comment feature should be used and used frequently while keeping in mind that commenting is meant to facilitate a two-way conversation. In the aforementioned study by Liping and Deng using the comment feature for social support resulted in dead-end comment threads; the researchers concluded that the author of a post holds the most power in terms of facilitating a discussion through the comment thread in that the way comments are responded to can either help or hinder a discussion. Perhaps it would be beneficial to require students to respond to the comments they receive in order to inspire more interaction. Furthermore, requiring retroactive commenting can help carry earlier threads through the remainder of the course. This may help prevent students from feeling like their hard work on their blog posts is wasted, allowing them to
view their blogging as work that will hold meaning into the future instead of just week to week.

*Matching the Language with the Goals*

Most importantly, specific and clear language used in the requirements description can help students to understand exactly what we’re looking for regarding *why* they are blogging. Certainly the instructor for section B articulated why the students should blog, but the words “thoughtful” and “relevant” were used to describe the types of writing she wanted to see. These terms might mean something entirely different to a first-year writer than they do to an instructor. What outcomes are we hoping the students achieve with their blogging practice? How can we direct their writing so it funnels towards those outcomes? What language best represents these goals?

There are many items to keep in mind when designing blogging requirements, from the logistical concerns like due dates and quantity, to more abstract concerns like encouraging author involvement and selecting the language that best represents the goals. Certainly there are a number of ways to integrate blogging into a writing course and requirements will take shape differently depending on the purpose of blogging, but overall this study shows just how important of a role the comment feature plays in promoting community and understanding. However, we must be cognizant of how the comment feature is actually being used in relation to the requirements we design because as in Mark’s case, the comments received might deflate their perceptions of learning. Carefully identifying how we can position a blog in a first-year
composition course to match the goals we hope to meet is the next step towards providing students with a positive learning experience.
Works Cited


Homik, Martin, and Erica Melis. "Using blogs for learning logs." *Proceedings of*


Minocha, Shailey, and Dave Roberts. "Social, usability, and pedagogical factors influencing students learning experiences with wikis and blogs."


Appendix A

1. Personal Information
   Name
   Major(s)
   Minor(s)

2. Do you read or visit any blogs? If yes, please specify which blogs).

3. Have you previously had to use a blog for academic purposes?
   __ No.
   __ Yes, and the blog enhanced my learning experience.
   __ Yes, and the blog did not enhance my learning experience.
   If you answered yes, please specify which of your previous classes used a blog.

4. Do you believe the class requirements for the English 104 blog are difficult to meet? If so, explain what could make blogging easier for you.

5. How often do you visit the class blog (to read or to post)?
   __ Never
   __ 1-2 times per week
   __ 3-4 times per week
   __ 5 or more times per week

6. Have you found the class blog to be useful to you? If yes, how so?

7. Do you believe that blogging for this course enhances your learning experience? Why or why not?