

Sustained Blogging About Teaching: Instructional Methods that Support Online Participation as Professional Development

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Abstract Successfully preparing prospective and practicing teachers to blog as a means of professional development requires more than simply introducing popular blogging platforms, teaching technical moves and assigning an arbitrary number of blog posts. To assist teacher educators who aim to engage teachers in sustained blogging to advance their professional growth, the author presents instructional methods drawn from scholarship on effective writing instruction, including the following: examining mentor texts in the form of teacher-generated blog posts; exploring writing territories (i.e., the topics, genres and audiences for whom a teacher could write); and pursuing specific purposes for writing to generate a number of focused blog posts from a single general topic of professional interest.

Keywords Blogging · Online participation · Professional development · Teacher education · Teachers as writers

Scholars have long contended that blogging stands to contribute to a teacher's professional growth and development (e.g., Loving et al. 2007; Luehmann and Tinelli 2008; Martindale and Wiley 2005). Accordingly, there has been a push for teachers to make their instructional practices public (Lieberman and Pointer Mace 2010) and to “put [themselves] out there” (Hicks and Turner 2013, p. 62) by blogging about

their experiences in the classroom. Such contentions about the potential of blogging and encouragement for teachers to write on the Web have been substantiated by research investigating teachers' experiences blogging about issues related to teaching and learning. Researchers have documented practicing and prospective teachers maintaining blogs as a means of reflective practice (Ray and Coulter 2008; Ray and Hocutt 2006; Shoffner 2009; Wopereis et al. 2010), contended that blogging supports collaborative inquiry among teachers (Ciampa and Gallagher 2015), and posited that blogging stands to support a teacher's professional identity development (Hanuscin et al. 2014; Luehmann 2008; Luehmann and Tinelli 2008). Additionally, researchers have shared narratives from teachers who, by participating in professionally oriented conversations online via social media—including blogs—have found relief from a sense of isolation, established networks of support, informed their thinking and shaped their practice, positioned themselves as writers, generated new professional opportunities and enhanced their capacities to support students (Rodesiler and Pace 2015).

Despite recent research that points to the value of blogging and other forms of online participation as teacher professional development, scholarship detailing sound instructional methods for preparing teachers to blog as a means of advancing their professional growth is relatively limited. Hungerford-Kresser et al. (2011), for example, offered ideas for facilitating blogging among prospective teachers in light of challenges they encountered firsthand. Their focus, though, was on prospective teachers in a program of study blogging in response to assigned readings. Scholarship presenting specific instructional methods teacher educators can implement to advance sustained blogging about teaching as a form of professional development is sparse. Thus, this article features instructional

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methods drawn from scholarship on effective writing instruction that teacher educators can employ as they move towards fostering purposeful, self-directed and sustained blogging among practicing and prospective teachers.

Instructional Methods

Given the aforementioned benefits routine blogging stands to offer practicing teachers, teacher educators must consider the ways they can prepare teachers to write on the Web as a means of exploring teaching and learning. Literacy scholars Daniels and Zemelman (2014) noted a distinction between *assigning* reading and *teaching* students to read. Similarly, *assigning* blogging as a task that must be completed is not the same as *teaching* teachers to blog about their professional interests. Rather, preparing prospective and practicing teachers to blog must extend beyond simply introducing viable blogging platforms and accounting for the basic technical aspects associated with blogging, such as embedding images and videos or inserting hyperlinks. Teachers new to blogging as a means of professional development stand to benefit when teacher educators take a page from the scholarship generated by teachers of writers and incorporate instructional methods that (a) account for the study of mentor texts in the form of teacher-generated blog posts, (b) facilitate the exploration of writing territories (i.e., the topics, genres and audiences for whom a teacher could write) and (c) prompt the identification of specific forthcoming blog posts.

Examining Mentor Texts

The use of mentor texts in the teaching of writing is a method teachers, writers and scholars advocate (e.g., Fletcher 2011; Gallagher 2011; Hicks 2013). Mentor texts are real-world models that writers examine to get a sense for how other writers construct texts (Gallagher 2011). Using this method, teacher educators can present select blog posts to illustrate how teacher-writers capitalize on multimodal affordances, share their classroom experiences and explore issues related to teaching and learning.

By examining select teacher-generated blog posts as mentor texts, practicing and prospective teachers can, for example, begin to see how they too might leverage multimodal affordances in intentional and purposeful ways. Take, for instance, a post such as “Family History & Culture” from the blog *Walk the Walk*, which is written by Brian Kelley, a middle-school English language arts teacher in the Northeast United States (Kelley 2015). In the post,

Brian used alphabetic writing (Kress 2003) to provide background regarding his passion for writing about his own family history and culture before introducing a video podcasting project students in his creative writing class completed based on their respective families and cultures. Considering the blog post as a mentor text, teachers might glean various insights. For example, teachers might note how Brian selectively used hypertext to provide readers with opportunities to learn more about particular resources referenced in the post. They might note how Brian used a static image—an old photo of his ancestors—to underscore the family-and-culture theme of both the project and the blog post rather than rely on alphabetic writing alone to convey the theme (see Fig. 1). And teachers might also note how he followed the old writing axiom “Show, don’t tell” as he embedded a video playlist of students’ finished projects to show his imagined audience—presumably teachers who might be interested in facilitating a similar project in their own respective classrooms—how the final products took shape in the end.

With a firm understanding of how teacher-writers like Brian are leveraging a blog’s multimodal affordances, including the capacity to weave together alphabetic writing, hypertext, images and videos to craft compelling blog posts about issues related to teaching and learning, practicing and prospective teachers are better equipped to begin conceptualizing how they, too, might blog as a means of exploring issues related to their professional practice and, ultimately, as a method for advancing their professional growth.

Exploring Professionally Oriented Blogging Territories

Though perhaps a daunting task at times, writing is made easier when writers recognize that they have something to say about topics that resonate with them. And teacher educators who aim to introduce teachers to blogging as a means of professional development can help them identify topics of interest by facilitating the exploration of their *professionally oriented blogging territories*. The concept is an appropriation of renowned middle-school English teacher Atwell’s (2014) “writing territories” (p. 78), the topics of interest about which an individual writes (or could write). When working with practicing and prospective teachers, I extend this notion to also include the genres in which they might blog and the audiences for whom they might blog. To support sustained blogging as professional development, I invite teachers to consider the teaching-related topics they might explore in their blogs, the genres they might produce as they generate blog posts over a period of time

Family History & Culture

February 28, 2015



My great-grandparents & family

Static Image

Hypertext

Alphabetic Writing

Background

I write about my family history and culture. It has grown into a passion of mine.

Several essays of mine have been published in a local writing journal. For example, if you go to the Pennsylvania Writing and Literature Project's (PAWLP) ejournal [210 East Rosedale](#) and flip to page 17, you will see my essay about an aunt: *Cent'anni to a Family Gypsy*.

Fig. 1 A screenshot of the “Family History & Culture” blog post

(e.g., book reviews, reflections, lesson plans) and the audiences they might target as they blog about their professional interests (e.g., other teachers, administrators, parents).

By first sharing my professional writing territories before inviting practicing and prospective teachers to identify their own, I model for them the ways I map out my areas of professional interest and think aloud (Daniels and Zemelman 2014) to illuminate my process as a writer. Table 1 presents an excerpt of professional blogging territories I generated as a model when

introducing the concept during a workshop for practicing teachers in the Northeast region of the United States.

With a variety of professional blogging territories in mind, teachers are better prepared to determine central foci for their blogs and, from there, to project specific professionally oriented blog posts they could craft in the weeks and months ahead. Carrying out such ground-work upfront stands to provide a sturdy foundation for maintaining a teacher’s blogging efforts before they even begin.

Table 1 Professional blogging territories excerpt

Topics	Genres (within blog posts)	Audiences
- Teaching English	- Reflections on teaching	- Practicing teachers
- Integrating technology	- Reflections on conferences	- Administrators
- Pop culture in the classroom	- Book reviews	- Parents & guardians
- Media literacy education	- Essays	- Legislators
- Sports & society in ELA	- Parodies	- Prospective teachers
- Teacher education	- Reactions to readings	- Myself
- Professional development	- Lesson plans	

Table 2 Excerpt of an example purpose-driven blog-post projection

Topic of interest: media literacy education in the ELA classroom	
Purpose	Prospective blog posts
Express and reflect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reflect on the challenges associated with teaching media literacy - Express thoughts about the role media production plays in media literacy - Express beliefs about the importance of media literacy in today's world
Evaluate and judge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Evaluate a book related to the topic of media literacy education - Judge the appropriateness for using select media in the secondary classroom - Evaluate the effectiveness of a recent lesson focused on media literacy

Projecting Purpose-Driven Blog Posts

Once teachers have identified areas of professional interest by establishing their professional blogging territories, their next challenge is figuring out what it is they want to write about such topics. It is one thing for a teacher to recognize a broad interest in media literacy education, for example, but it is something altogether different for that teacher to identify the ways he or she could sustain a blog about that topic over an extended period of time. Drawing from the work of English teacher Gallagher (2011), I help teachers establish foci for future professionally oriented blog posts by turning their attention to the *purposes* of their writing. Though there are many purposes for which people write, I encourage teachers to consider the six common purposes Gallagher identified: (a) express and reflect; (b) inform and explain; (c) evaluate and judge; (d) inquire and explore; (e) analyze and interpret; and (f) take a stand/propose a solution (p. 10). By considering broad topics of interest in light of these distinct purposes, teachers can find new, varied and specific ways to explore their professional interests.

For this activity, first I ask each teacher to consider their previously generated professional blogging territories, and then I invite them to select one topic from their list that might serve as the focus of their blog. Next, as Gallagher (2011) described doing with students in his classroom, I ask teachers to brainstorm three possible blog posts for each of the six purposes identified, which results in 18 different ideas they could explore in future blog posts. So, for example, with the purpose of *inform and explain* in mind, a teacher interested in blogging about media literacy education more generally might project blog posts that aim more

specifically to (a) explain instructional methods employed when teaching media literacy; (b) inform readers about the range of media texts featured in their school district's curriculum; and (c) explain what makes a particular text effective for teaching a specific media-literacy concept. To further illustrate the projection of purpose-driven blog posts, Table 2 features an excerpt of a projection I generated as a model when introducing the writing activity during a workshop for practicing teachers in the Northeast region of the United States. Furthermore, the [Appendix](#) consists of a chart used to assist teachers in generating a list of prospective blog posts by considering the various purposes for which they might write.

Conclusion

Successfully preparing prospective and practicing teachers to explore teaching and learning by writing on the Web entails considerably more than simply assigning them to generate an arbitrary number of blog posts. By engaging teachers in intentional and purposeful practices—examining teacher-generated blog posts as mentor texts, exploring professionally oriented blogging territories and projecting purpose-driven blog posts—teacher educators stand to contribute to the professional development of teachers whose participation online is sustainable. With a sense for the craft of leveraging a blog's multimodal affordances, a firm recognition of the topics, genres and audiences for their blogging and a clear vision of future purpose-driven posts they could write, practicing and prospective teachers—and any other professionals for that matter—are better equipped for self-directing their professional growth.

Appendix

Projecting Purpose-Driven Blog Posts

Identify one topic of professional interest in the box below. Then, for each purpose identified to the right, brainstorm three specific ideas for potential blog posts related to that topic of interest.

Topic of Professional Interest

Purpose	Ideas for Future Blog Posts
<p>Express and Reflect</p> <p><i>Example: Express your beliefs about teaching; reflect on lessons or classroom experiences.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • •
<p>Inform and Explain</p> <p><i>Example: Inform other teachers by explaining your approach to teaching a specific concept or strategy.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • •
<p>Evaluate and Judge</p> <p><i>Example: Evaluate books related to your content area or areas of interest within your field.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • •
<p>Inquire and Explore</p> <p><i>Example: Explore alternative methods for teaching content you've struggled to teach to date.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • •
<p>Analyze and Interpret</p> <p><i>Example: Analyze student work (with permission) & interpret where additional instruction would be helpful.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • •
<p>Take a Stand/Propose a Solution</p> <p><i>Example: Present problems in your classroom, school, community, or field and propose possible solutions.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • •

Note: This chart was adapted from Write Like This (Gallagher, 2011, p. 13) to help teachers identify a range of potential blog posts based on a single topic of professional interest.

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