

Introduction

When we decided to use a class blog for this course, we had two main goals, to get students to write on a regular basis and to have them understand what blogging entailed including how it interacted with the mainstream media and other aspects of the Internet. The course was titled “Web of Influence” and was meant to explore the influence of blogging from several angles. We examined bloggers' own perceptions of what blogging is and how it affects society. We also read Duncan Watts' *Six Degrees* to explore the mathematical and sociological issues related to networks, of which blogging is just one example. And we delved into the darker side of blogging with books such as *Fahrenheit 451* and *1984*, looking at blogging as a source of uncensored information that the government may try to control or use for illicit purposes. It made sense for the students to blog and to fully immerse themselves in the blog network in order to see for themselves how it worked. But we also recognized the potential that blogging had to improve their writing skills and so we decided that their assignments should come from the blogs, that they should select posts from the blog and develop them into lengthier, meatier pieces. This approach was in keeping with our theoretical foundation of motivating the students' writing by having them attempt to attract an audience and of approaching the class as an emergent and interactive space. Thus, we encouraged the students to choose topics and to write in ways that attracted an audience (by having interesting titles and linking to outside sources, as a simple example) and to comment on each other's work and the work of the pieces to which they were linking.

We were successful on many fronts. In examining some of the statistics from the blog and correlating those with other factors, such as their grades and their level of participation, it's clear that the majority of the students achieved a high level of involvement, writing and commenting on the blog regularly. Also, in reading over interviews with several students about their participation on the blog and its effect on their writing and revision process, it's clear, too, that they internalized the external

audience they experienced via the blog and took that audience into consideration when writing their papers. In addition, our statistics show that students who engaged with that external audience more often received higher grades than those who didn't, suggesting that not only was it important to reconceive the audience as being something other than the teacher, but also to interact with that audience and take their views into account when writing.

But there were some interesting and somewhat disappointing results as well, which suggest ways of altering the approach to better take advantage of the presence of the blog audience and the feedback it provides. For example, many students chose not to include versions of their blog posts in their final portfolios, negating the primary benefit we saw to beginning with a blog post in the first place, that of writing for and receiving feedback from someone other than the teacher. This occurred even with the best of students, suggesting a reluctance on their part to think of the blog posts as something worthy of turning into an academic paper.

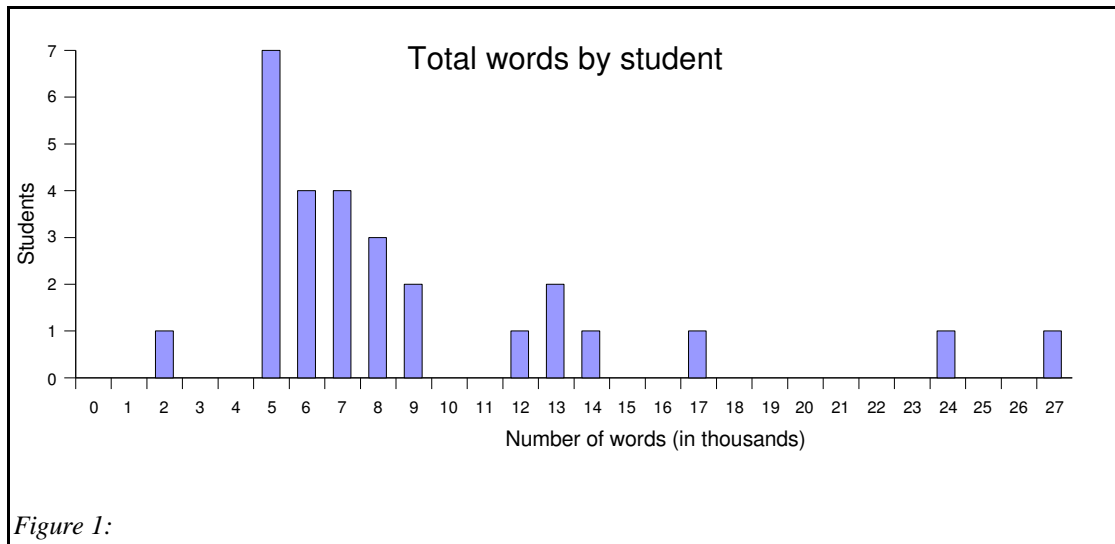
Also, we saw no connection between the general level of participation and the grades students received on the portfolios. Our hope had been that the more someone participated in the blog, the better their writing might be in the end. This is a somewhat easier factor to draw conclusions about. Because blog participation was graded based on quantity not quality, it was often the case that a student would attempt to improve their participation grade by writing a large number of low-quality posts to boost their numbers. They might look like, from the numbers, that they were at a high level of participation

when in reality, their posts might be brief and cover topics that were not appropriate for converting to papers. I will show some examples of this and suggest some possibilities for altering the grading scheme to ameliorate this problem.

In what follows, I will first show some general statistics that demonstrate the level of participation the students achieved on the blog as well as the interaction both on the part of the students and from visitors to the blog. I will then show some quantitative analysis of the blog and the conclusions one can draw from those. To further support the conclusions drawn from the quantitative analysis, I will examine several students' papers and interviews conducted with them about their writing on the blog and for their papers. What all of this analysis demonstrates is that, while improvements might be made to some parts of the approach, the fundamental aspects of the approach do instill a better sense of audience and an increased level of interactivity with other people and a wider range of topics.

General Statistics

The sheer volume of writing that took place on the blog is rather astounding. The students wrote a total of more than 265,000 words in posts and comments, or about 700 double-spaced pages. On average each student wrote almost 9,000 words or 23 double-spaced pages. Those figures do not include the subsequent drafts and papers they wrote based on the blog posts which would boost the numbers slightly higher. Figure 1 below shows the distribution of words by student.



Most students fell in the 5,000-7,000 word range; the median was 7,700. In terms of practicing their writing, they had ample opportunity and took advantage of that opportunity.

In addition to practicing writing simply by writing frequently, we also wanted the students to include links in their posts and, fairly early in the semester, required them to do so, both because linking to articles and blog posts had the potential to bring visitors to our site, but also because we wanted the students to learn to incorporate outside sources into their writing. Across all posts and comments, the students had over one thousand links, averaging at least one link per post or comment though some students incorporated many more. As I will show later, linking was a significant factor in determining how well they did in the class.

Linking also helped us attract an audience from outside our immediate community, an effect that is explained in Chapter two above. To find out how successful we were, we conducted a monthly log for the month of October, still early in the semester,

but late enough that the blog had a significant amount of content and had been indexed by various services, including search engines. That report shows that only 48% of the page requests were coming from inside of the Bryn Mawr network, meaning that over 50% of our page requests in that month were from visitors outside of Bryn Mawr (<http://woi.brynmawr.edu/stats#org>). A majority of these visits were from search engines such as Google and Yahoo, but we also received fifteen links from other sites where people specifically commented on an individual post or the site as a whole (<http://emergent.brynmawr.edu/emergent/WebOfInfluence>). Another twelve links have come in after the end of the class. Some have even added us to their list of favorite blogs. On average, during the month of October, we received 233 visits per day. That's a pretty sizable audience after such a short time online. Attracting such a large audience so early was due in large part to the efforts of the students.

Methodology

To analyze the blog and its effect on students' awareness of audience and their interactivity, I took two approaches. First, I wanted to try to quantify this effect and so I measured student participation on the blog in relation to their writing grade. I counted the number of posts they made, number of links they made, and number of comments made and received. I ran a Pearson Correlation between each of these factors and between each factor and their grade on their portfolios. I also measured the number of reads and comments each post received against whether or not the student selected the post to include in the portfolio. Finally I measured each factor against their portfolio grade to

determine if any single factor contributed more or less to their success on the portfolio.

The numbers did not tell the whole story, however, and so I sought qualitative information that might help piece together what the students were doing between the writing on the blog and the writing they produced for their portfolios. I asked for volunteers to be interviewed. Five students volunteered and I interviewed all of them using the same set of questions (see Appendix #). Next, I analyzed one student's writing from blog post to draft to final product including the feedback she received on the original post. I interviewed this student a second time to ask them why she chose to make the changes made from draft to draft. I analyzed all of this material to see how she conceived of audience and how that conception affected or did not affect the revision choices she made. Doing this qualitative analysis gave me a better picture of how the students were using the blog in their writing process.

Results

I wanted to quantify several aspects of the blog activity. I postulated that higher levels of involvement in the blog would result in higher writing grades, so I looked at the number of posts, comments, and links measured against the portfolio grade. I attempted to correlate these factors with each other to determine a general level of activity. I also postulated that perhaps one or more of these factors had an effect on the final portfolio grade. Finally, I wanted to determine the effect the audience had on students' decisions about papers included in the portfolio, so I measured the number reads and comments a post received against whether or not that post ultimately ended up in the portfolio.

Correlations

Our first measurement was to run a Pearson Correlation test between posts, comments made (in posts only), comments received, links made and portfolio grade. The table below shows the results:

Correlations

		Posts	ComMade	ComRec	Links	Grade	Class
Posts	Pearson Correlation	1	.548**	.863**	.659**	.032	.320
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.003	.000	.000	.882	.104
	N	27	27	27	27	24	27
ComMade	Pearson Correlation	.548**	1	.275	.827**	.311	-.119
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003		.165	.000	.139	.553
	N	27	27	27	27	24	27
ComRec	Pearson Correlation	.863**	.275	1	.438*	-.094	.468*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.165		.022	.663	.014
	N	27	27	27	27	24	27
Links	Pearson Correlation	.659**	.827**	.438*	1	.388	.053
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.022		.061	.793
	N	27	27	27	27	24	27
Grade	Pearson Correlation	.032	.311	-.094	.388	1	-.652**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.882	.139	.663	.061		.001
	N	24	24	24	24	24	24
Class	Pearson Correlation	.320	-.119	.468*	.053	-.652**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.104	.553	.014	.793	.001	
	N	27	27	27	27	24	27

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 1: Pearson Correlation results

The number of posts made correlated most highly with the number of comments received, but it was also highly correlated with the number of comments made and number of links made. The number of links made might be explained by the number of posts; however, the average number of links for the top five posters ranged from 2-4 per post while the average for all other bloggers except one was one or less than one (see Table 2).

Blogger ID	# of posts	# of comments made	# of comments received	# of links (posts)	Grade (writing only)	Class	Average links/post
26	30	144	77	123	4	1	4.0000
5	45	81	167	91	4	2	2.0000
8	17	61	55	74	3.8	2	4.0000
18	26	72	76	52	3.7	1	2.0000
9	14	47	30	50	4	1	3.0000
22	24	65	77	42	3.7	1	1.0000
16	19	64	63	34	0	2	1.0000
11	19	45	60	27	3	2	1.0000
2	18	15	62	25	3.5	2	1.0000
17	28	26	178	22	3.3	2	0.0000
6	18	49	45	20	3.7	1	1.0000
25	12	33	24	19	3.7	1	1.0000
10	15	55	43	19	3.7	1	1.0000
27	9	29	4	19	3.7	1	2.0000
23	14	38	38	19	3.7	1	1.0000
28	16	27	50	18	3	2	1.0000
19	11	78	24	17	0	1	1.0000
21	25	53	65	17	4	1	0.0000
3	12	46	36	17	3.5	2	1.0000
20	12	17	37	17	4	1	1.0000
24	17	34	70	14	2.5	2	0.0000
1	14	28	34	12	3.7	1	0.0000
15	15	29	50	11	3.3	2	0.0000
4	9	22	26	11	4	1	1.0000
12	24	33	60	11	2.5	2	0.0000
7	8	33	34	11	0	1	1.0000
13	11	12	29	6	3.7	1	0.0000

Table 2: Blog statistics sorted by # of links

Number of comments made also highly correlated with the number of links made within the posts. Comments received correlated fairly highly with the number of links.

Regression analysis

I ran a regression analysis on these factors with the dependent variable as the portfolio grade to see if the grade was dependent upon any one factor. The number of links made correlated most highly with grade, showing a coefficient of .964 (see Table 3).

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	4.491	.231		19.434	.000
	Posts	.001	.010	.027	.141	.890
	ComMade	-.010	.005	-.663	-2.143	.045
	Links	.015	.005	.964	3.224	.004
	Class	-.662	.134	-.762	-4.954	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Grade

Table 3: Regression analysis

ANOVA on portfolio inclusion

Blogger ID	# posts included in port.
21	3
18	3
8	3
28	3
23	3
22	3
2	3
6	3
1	2
4	2
20	2
27	2
25	2
24	2
9	2
12	2
17	2
10	1
5	1
11	1
15	1

In examining the effects of the number of comments and reads a post made on whether the post was eventually included in the portfolio, I determined that these factors had no significant effect on whether the post was included in the portfolio. In fact, in examining the raw data, I found that many students wrote papers for their portfolios that did not derive from a blog post (see Table 4). The requirements for the portfolio were to have three papers derived from posts that had been revised over the course of the semester. However, over half of the students in the classes included at least one paper that did not derive from a post.

Table 4: Number of posts included in the portfolio

Discussion

The correlations primarily suggest that a student who is active in one area of the blog also tends to be active in another area of the blog. A student who posts frequently also tends to comment frequently and to have more links and receive more comments. Because posting was the primary required activity, achieving a high level of activity in this area suggests that students will be fully involved with the blog as a whole. Teachers who want to encourage this broad activity should encourage as much original posting as feasible. We made no specific requirements for number of posts but regularly gaged blog activity to see if students were participating regularly. If activity seemed to be dropping off, we mentioned it in class and made suggestions for how they might pick up their blogging activity. We might also mention the fall off in activity to individual students who were not contributing as many posts as others and tried to discover why they were not as involved. Though one blog activity (posting) seems to lead to increased activity in other areas, the activity level certainly doesn't occur spontaneously. It needs to be nurtured in many ways. However, the activity level is very visible, both for the class as a whole and for individuals, making it slightly easier to know if students are struggling with their writing practice.

Posts made vs. Comments made

Active posters tended also to be active commenters. Were these comments substantial and what, exactly, did they add to their writing and blogging practice? Unfortunately, as I will discuss later, some active commenters also tended to have lower

grades. In looking at the top posters and their comments, one sees that for the most part, the substance of their comments is similar to the substance of their posts. In general, if they made substantial and thoughtful posts, their comments tended to be the same. For example, one blogger, Apathy, who had a significant number of both posts and comments, put as much effort into her comments as her posts. One comment, for example, in response to a post about t-shirts produced by the Lucky Jean Company with the word “Vietnam” printed (<http://woi.brynmawr.edu/apathy#comment-1376>). At 889 words, it was longer than the original post (249 words). In the response, Apathy actually called the company and asked what their reasoning was for creating the shirts in the first place. In addition, she added her own commentary about the issue. On the other hand, another frequent commenter, wrote quite simplistic responses, usually simply agreeing with the original post. Also, her comments averaged only 93 words per comment while the top commenter averaged 106 words per comment. Many of her comments were in response to local issues such as the quality of the food in the dining halls or being a student-athlete. This also contrasts with the previous commenter, who usually commented on national issues and often did original research in order to respond. Another frequent commenter, How I Learned to Drive, made 78 comments and only 11 posts. However, she wrote a total of over 10,000 words in her comments alone, averaging about 130 words per comment. While a handful of her comments were a few sentences, most were lengthy paragraphs, in-depth responses to the issues raised in the original post. In contrast, someone who made 47 comments only averaged 89 words per comment.

These kinds of numbers indicate that, while comments are integral to the creation of a good blogging community, the quality of the comments is equally important. A person who makes frequent insubstantial comments is not participating in a way that will be beneficial either to the student herself or the student on whose work she is commenting. This is not new and has been discussed in terms of peer review before.¹ It seems useful to consider making an assignment at some point to require that comments present another point of view or that students comment on posts with which they disagree in order to help the student who originally posted refine their argument. In other words, some students may need more direction in this area. While we made no such requirement, we often interjected our own comments into the discussion and also pointed out comment threads in class that seemed to be wrestling with a difficult argument rather than using examples where everyone agrees or the nature of the topic was simplistic. We tried, then, both to model what we expected and to show students who were achieving what we expected. What seems clear is that the students who posted often also understood their role as an audience to others in the class and, since they also tended to receive more comments as well (see discussion below), they seemed to appreciate good feedback. So, while instructors might be on the lookout for students who comment for the sake of commenting, in general, commenting seems to contribute to audience awareness.

Posts made vs. Comments received

As I mentioned above, those who posted more often also received more

¹ See for example, Thomas Newkirk, "Direction and Misdirection in Peer Response." *College Composition and Communication* 35 (1984). 301-311.

comments. This makes numeric sense, of course. If a student has more posts on which to comment, naturally, she will receive more comments overall. However, the average number of comments, as mentioned above, is pretty high. One student received an average of four comments for every post written. Considering that many posts in the early days of the course did not receive any comments at all, this is pretty astounding. There were some posts that received as many as 30 or more comments.

With thirty students in the two classes combined, there were certainly enough people within the course itself to provide a significant number of comments; however, for the top posters, they received many comments from outside the class. As I will discuss below, this may be due in part to the higher number of external links made. However, some of the posts drew in comments simply because of the topic. One post about the Choking Game, a game where kids choke each other until they pass out and which is sometimes fatal, drew in twenty comments (<http://woi.brynmawr.edu/node/578>). More than half of the comments came from people outside the class, mostly mothers who'd lost children to this game and from a couple of former participants. The topic was current and interesting and some of the students in the class remembered similar games from their own childhood. Another post about the way young girls dress drew in 37 comments (<http://woi.brynmawr.edu/node/407>). The comment thread began as a conversation among primarily the class members about what influences young girls to dress in sexy clothing. Soon, a couple of other commenters from outside joined in the conversation and eventually, it was just people from the outside commenting back and forth. In all, sixteen

students from the class commented while 21 people from outside the class commented. The discussion covered doll marketing, clothing marketing, parental standards and more. It also included links to more information. Again, the topic was engaging and something the students could relate to but was still quite relevant to people outside the class. Both posts were written later in the semester when the students had had ample experience on the blog and interacting with the audience.

Posts made vs. links

Although there is an obvious connection between number of posts and number of links, comparing the most prolific posters with some of the least prolific reveals big differences not just in the number of links, but in the way those links are incorporated into the posts. For example, Judge Hatchet, who wrote 45 blog posts which contained 91 links, averaged a little over two links per post. Her links clearly describe what they're linking to and are generally fully integrated into her text. Here, she links to an article about a restaurant owner banning children:

Heaven won't have children if it's up to Dan McCauley. [Chicago restaurant owner has recently posted a sign on the front door of his restaurant "Taste of Heaven."](#)

His sign simply states that if children misbehave, they will kindly be asked to leave his restaurant. He claims that children these days lack manners and parents need a nudge to keep their kids in line. Tess Hardnack and her children were kicked out for bad behavior, and she's outraged!

(<http://woi.brynmawr.edu/node/563>).

The link is descriptive and not disruptive of the general flow of the text. Contrast this with a less prolific blogger. Anyone 4 Tennis, who averaged less than one link per post.

Even when writing about an article, she does not link to it:

Being at a single sex school has often been said to be more beneficial for learning than a coed school. Well last week in Newsweek there was an entire article about how beneficial an all womans school is. But the part that I found to be pretty exciting was that Bryn Mawr was the only womans school mentioned throughout the article. It talked about how by being at Bryn Mawr the author herself, was able to concentrate on her studies at Bryn Mawr, and still have the social benefits of having boys right at Haverford.

Other posts of hers simply link using the words “click here” or “link” without any description or integration within the text. It seems then that a student with a high level of involvement gains more practice integrating sources. Posting more often leads students to look for more outside sources and to try to incorporate them appropriately. We did not discuss the integration of links in the class very often, but doing so might have helped someone like Anyone 4 Tennis make better use of her sources. Perhaps, too, we could have commented on the post mentioned above and said, “Hey, this sounds interesting, but where's the link?” It would also be useful, perhaps, to explain why integrating these links is important, suggesting the relationship between using these kinds of sources with library sources. Essentially we are using links in the same way someone might use a journal article or book. Understanding that this is a skill that will be used throughout

their college career might help them take this task more seriously.

Comments made vs. links

There was an extremely high correlation between comments made and links. Unlike the relationship between posts and links, which is relatively direct, comments had no requirement for links within them and there's no reason necessarily why someone who makes a large number of links would make a large number of comments on other posts as well. However, the top commenters usually commented in ways that elaborated or argued with the original post, often by including links to supporting evidence within the comment². Even the weakest among the top commenters, with only 17 post comments, had a high average number of words per comment (135) and had a total of 31 comment links. Here is just one paragraph from one comment on a post about the difference between bloggers and journalists and the future of journalism:

On another note, the reason that journalism varies in presented style is because each has an aim for a different audience. That's why we have so many different (for example) newspapers, like the [New York Times](#), [The Onion](#), [The New York Post](#) (known for it's [sic] straight to the point articles and front page tittles), and many more. They all differ because they aim at each of us in different ways. Each newspaper and writer for that matter wants a specific audience. Will a professional with a PhD (in what ever profession) sit and read [The Onion](#) everyday? I highly doubt it. But, they will have the [New York Times](#) ordered to their house on a daily

² In order to offset the students who included a signature in their comments that included a link to their web site or a quote of the day or other site, I did not include comment links in my count of links. It appears, however, that those who include higher numbers of links in their posts also include high numbers of links in their comments.

basis, because they find “real journalism” from the [New York Times](#) more credible than [The Onion's](#) editorials. The same rule of who’s the targeted audience applies for TV. That is why [FOX](#) and [PBS](#) are so different.

She includes in her comment all the links to the news sources she references, giving people the opportunity to visit the sites and perhaps judge for themselves if they're not familiar with those sources.

The tendency to link within comments still doesn't fully explain why someone who makes more comments also makes more links within posts. One might speculate, however, that the student who has included more links in their posts is armed with more information from other sources and therefore, might feel more confident in commenting on others' posts which may touch on subjects they've written about or considered writing about in their search through sources. In addition, as one student told me during an interview, she quickly realized that when she commented frequently on others' work, she received more comments on her own work and she enjoyed that feedback. She also felt that in order to fully participate in the blog project and make it successful, it was necessary for everyone to comment as much as possible, to provide feedback for fellow students and encourage them when they wrote interesting things (Personal interview). In other words, students who link more frequently often felt a vested interest in creating a truly interactive site.

Comments received vs. links

In looking at some of the students who received the most comments, two

possibilities for the relationship between comments received and links come to mind.

First, linking to news stories and blogs or other websites is likely to bring in people from the outside who might then comment on what we've written. Second, linking indicates a use of outside sources, of tackling topics outside the limited sphere of college life. While I think these two possibilities hold true, it's also true that sometimes the student simply picked good topics or posted frequently enough to draw in enough comments regardless of how much she linked. For example, Judge Hatchet received 168 comments and made 90 links. But she also posted 45 times, far more than anyone else in the class, making it more likely that she would receive more comments. However, only five of her 45 posts did not receive any comments, showing that most of her posts were interesting enough to inspire people to comment. Though Judge Hatchet received some comments from the outside, most of the comments she received were from members of the class. She certainly appealed to the local audience.

Apathy, another prolific linker, received 77 comments and had 123 links. She received many comments from outside commenters and she often responded to them, making the comment section of her posts a real conversation and drawing people back to comment again. For example in a post about feral children, Apathy responded to every comment. Of the eight total comments, she made four. So many of her received comments were from herself; however, this shows a willingness to interact with her audience and respond to their questions. Another student who received a similar number of comments (76) only had 52 links, still an average of 2 links per post (she had 26 posts).

Looking at the lower end of the scale also reveals some possibilities for why some students received more comments than others aside from the possibility that links drew in outside interest. One student, who received only four comments, had on average two links per post; however, she only had nine posts total over the course of a fourteen-week semester and those posts averaged about 250 words. In other words, her overall level of involvement was fairly low. So while linking often does draw in commenters whether from the outside or because students are interested in topics outside the narrow world of college life, receiving comments also tends to depend on a generally high level of participation.

Overall, these correlations, as mentioned at the beginning of the discussion, suggest that a student who is active in one area tends to be active in other areas as well. However, there also seems to be, in looking more closely, a qualitative aspect. Merely having high levels of activity doesn't necessarily mean that one will receive lots of comments or do well in the class overall. So while it is important to achieve high levels of activity, one must also be aware of the quality of that activity. This is, of course, a harder thing to measure, but one-on-one conferences in which the teacher can assess the quality of posts and comments, or even peer review of that quality, could encourage quality work.

The effect of links on the grade

Interestingly, the one factor that had a positive effect on the portfolio grade was the number of links a student made. The more links a student made, the higher their

grade. There are a couple of possibilities here. First, the students who made more links tended to be exploring a wide range of topics and reading more broadly than those who linked less. They had more models for their writing and included more outside sources in both their original posts and the final products. Also, I believe they took their audience into account, trying to find topics of interest both to themselves and to their audience on the blog. Those who included an average of two or more links per post were often presenting more than one side of an issue, thereby making their posts and the resulting papers more complex resulting in a higher grade for the portfolio.

Secondly, these students were generally highly involved in other areas, making more posts and comments as well as links. As explained above, high activity in one area typically correlated with high activity in another area. Although no other area of activity affected the grade, those who linked more in their posts also posted more frequently, received more comments and made more comments. They were practicing writing more and receiving more feedback about the effect their writing was having on their audience so that when it came to the portfolio, they had more information about their writing and could adjust it appropriately. They just had more experience writing and interacting with writing than those whose activity level was lower.

Certainly, linking to and incorporating appropriate outside sources is beneficial to developing as a writer, but I don't think it would be appropriate to encourage just this behavior. Obviously, someone could simply write a post that was primarily a list of links and that would not encourage the development of good writing skills. However, I do

think it's important for students to write about something other than themselves. Links to other sources can lead to that kind of writing. In terms of developing an audience, too, links are likely to bring in feedback from the outside as discussed in chapter two. A simple list of links won't inspire much commentary, but links that are part of a developed argument usually inspire some kind of response. It is this more sophisticated version of linking that is likely to lead to improved writing and thus, an improved grade.

Portfolio inclusion

One fascinating revelation in examining this data was to discover that many students included papers in their portfolios that had not originally appeared as blog posts. Also, it seemed that students paid no attention to whether a post was “popular,” that is whether it received a large number of comments or had a high number of reads, when deciding whether to include a post in the portfolio. In keeping with the idea of having the audience shape the students' writing, I had hoped that they would consider the comments and general positive reception of a post when it came time to turn in papers and especially to develop their portfolio. As stated earlier, over half of the students included at least one paper that did not derive from a blog post in their portfolio. In looking at the numbers, of the posts that were in the top 25 most read posts, only two were included in the portfolio. That number only doubles to four in the top 50 most read posts. Posts that received the highest number of comments did not have any better chance of being included in the portfolio either. Of the top 25 most commented-on posts, again, only two were ultimately included. Of the top 50, only three were included.

While the most popular posts as defined by number of reads and number of comments were not necessarily the strongest in terms of their writing, on most occasions, they were good raw material. It would make sense, then, for those posts to be the starting point for a more developed paper. When I asked a couple of students about this, I got some interesting answers, which shed light not only on this specific situation, but also on inexperienced writers' approach to writing more generally. The student I'm profiling below, Girl Meets World, had this to say about why she included papers that weren't blog entries and speculates about why some others may have done so as well:

I think that when you write about a particular subject, like in a blog, you can sometimes feel like you are finished with that subject matter. . . . [I]t is nice to have a fresh start when you are writing a paper. The fact that you might have already written about it in a blog can sometimes weigh you down, because then you feel like your paper is limited to the point of view that is expressed in your blog. (Response via email).

Expressed in this excerpt is a resistance to revision, a resistance to take a successful piece of writing and make it better, because there's a feeling that if it was successful in one format then there's no more to be done with it. The student feels weighed down by the previous version of the paper rather than seeing it as raw material that can be dramatically altered if she chooses to. As we'll see in the detailed qualitative analysis below, this resistance plays out even when a student uses a blog post for a paper; the revisions are minimal from draft to draft.

It also seemed strange to me that students wouldn't choose posts that had received a lot of feedback to develop into papers. Not only were these posts often strong posts, but there was a good deal of additional material to work with in the comments. For example, one of the most popular posts by Girl Meets World, entitled “Would You Confess Even if you knew you'd get in Trouble” details the story of man who accidentally shot someone but then didn't contact the police out of fear of getting into trouble. One commenter suggests that this is common and points to some other examples and laws that seek to alleviate this problem:

This is a horrifying story, but is not uncommon in even crimes of less serious nature. The state of Montana has recently been toying with a [bill](#) that would allow minors to go to police to report a crime without fear of getting in trouble if they had been intoxicated [sic] at the time that the crime took place. This bill was introduced because a lot of young girls have been getting raped at parties where they were drinking, but because they don't want to get an [MIP, Minor in Possession](#), a very serious punishment in Montana, these girls will just suffer with the knowledge that this has happened to either themselves or friends who they saw it happen to. (<http://woi.brynmawr.edu/node/318>)

This response suggests the possibility of taking the original post in a different direction, of exploring laws that encourage people to report crimes without fear of the consequences of being charged with a crime themselves. Still another comment relates the story to local college policy about reporting someone who has passed out from drinking too much

without getting in trouble for underage drinking. So several potential directions were suggested and yet this post did not get incorporated into the portfolio. Again, Girl Meets World comments that she and other students might tire of a popular post and want to move on:

[I]f a particular post got so much attention, the writer may have become sick and tired of that particular subject and couldn't force themselves to write one more thing about it. (via email)

Also she suggested that “what is popular is not always what is most interesting or important to the writer.” This response makes some sense. Some of the popular posts covered topics that related to popular culture and might have been more difficult to translate into more formal papers.

The biggest issue in moving from blog post to draft to portfolio seems to be a resistance to revision or a lack of understanding of what revision is, that it can entail a complete overhaul of a paper and not just minor edits of existing text. Certainly, this is not a new problem to writing instruction. To overcome this, an instructor might suggest completely different directions that students might take with their existing material, perhaps even drawn from the comments, which might model for them how they can use the feedback they are receiving. Perhaps early on, the instructor might suggest using just a sentence or two from a blog post to start a paper, giving the student a fresh start but using the basic idea generated by the original post. Or the student might be paired with someone who provided a substantial comment to a post to explore other possibilities for

the direction the paper might take. Getting students to make substantial revisions is one of the bigger problems facing writing teachers. The blog provides some unique opportunities for instructors to work with students on substantial revisions by making use of the comments, using the blog as an idea generator rather than a drafting tool, or pairing students with others who have responded to their post or written on similar topics. It might be worthwhile even to devote a class to using one or more of these methods to redevelop a post.

Qualitative analysis

At the end of the semester, I asked for volunteers to be interviewed in depth about their experience in the course. I received responses from five people. Though I will, in some cases bring in the responses of all those people as a point of comparison, my analysis will focus primarily on the student known as Girl Meets World, with whom I conducted several follow-up interviews. I chose Girl Meets World because, of the students who responded, she was the most average in terms of her blog activity. A couple of the respondees were at the very high end, two were somewhere in the middle and one was at the low end. I thought she would best represent an average student in the class.³

In looking at an individual student, I wanted to see on a micro-level whether or not students developed a better awareness of audience and how much that awareness affected their revision process. These are two factors that are difficult to gage in looking at

³ All the students who responded had very positive feelings about the class. Those who weren't pleased with the class or its format, especially the blogging aspect of it, did not respond. I did have one student who struggled with the blogging part of the class respond initially, but then backed out. Her perspective would have been valuable.

statistics like the ones analyzed above. I interviewed the students about their perceptions of the audience as it related to the blog and to formal papers. I asked about their participation in the blog and how comments affected what they wrote and changes they made to their papers.⁴ I also looked at their papers and analyzed the revisions they made from draft to draft, trying to determine if the comments had any direct effect on their revisions. This more detailed look at one student's blog participation and resulting writing illuminates some of the statistics above and provides insight into how using a class blog might be made more effective for individual students.

Audience

The statistics above do not show any direct correlation between the audience and the students' resulting writing. For example, students did not use the number or quality of comments or popularity of a post as a determining factor in whether that post was included in the portfolio; however, from the interviews, it seems the students became very aware of the audience on the blog and that awareness factored into their final papers. One student whom I interviewed said to me during another blog workshop, "Nothing happened until we got an audience. It's all about the audience."⁵ Thus, while a direct correlation between the comments and the revisions may not exist, the students' responses in the interviews indicate that they may have internalized the public audience from the blog and kept it in mind as they were revising. Specific suggestions might have been

4 Full list of questions is available in Appendix #. The same questions were asked of all five students.

5 Judge Hatchet said this to me while we were helping other women's colleges set up blogs. They wanted to keep the blog private and Judge Hatchet tried to explain her experience in my class and how important the audience was to the blog's effectiveness. The blog that we were helping them with was part of a grant called, somewhat ironically given this conversation, "Women's Public Voices."

ignored, but the general idea that there were other readers out there stuck with the students.

I asked the students if they considered their audience at the beginning of class and who they thought their audience might be. Nearly everyone had a limited view of the audience at the beginning. Most included in their response something about their writing being read by the teacher or thinking of their writing primarily as an assignment rather than as a way to communicate their ideas. Girl Meets World's response was typical:

When it first started . . . all I thought was my professor's gonna be reading this I didn't . . . like I knew it was gonna be on the Internet . . . but I don't think I conceived that other people would actually care.

This kind of response corresponded with my sense of who they thought their audience was initially and many of the first blog posts sound very stiff as a result. Partly, this was their perception of being graded, but it was also due to our own feeling our way through how to use the blog. Fearing that some students might be a bit lost, we made an assignment for the first two posts. These largely backfired on us and the posts, for the most part, turned out badly. That was the first week and we changed our tack quickly, encouraging students to read blog posts widely and to model their writing on those rather than thinking about writing an assignment. It's likely that even if we'd started without set assignments, we would have gotten the same results since the students lacked audience awareness at the beginning. It also shows how difficult it is to break a pattern students have been trained in for almost twelve years up to this point. Writing is only for a grade.

To have writing serve another purpose and another audience would take some work and a little reprogramming.

As we started to get our first visitors from outside our class, the students' perceptions of the audience began to change. We made a point of pulling up the stats page in class to show the students that we were getting people visiting from not just outside our class, but also outside the college itself. Only a small percentage of people ever leave a comment, so seeing that we did indeed have readers was very important to their conception of audience. *Girl Meets World* explains:

Then we got feedback from them [our readers] which was . . . that's what did it for me. When I started getting comments from people who weren't in the class, that's when I said "Wow, other people really are reading this not just like a school project." So I think as we realized that, I think that's when writing got better 'cause we weren't so formal.

Others responded similarly, with similar phrasing: "people are really reading this." The reactions among the five interviewed students varied. Some thought about their style, their punctuation and grammar in addition to their ideas, but most considered their audience in more complex ways, thinking about how people might find their writing and thus what they might be thinking and what they might need from their writing. *Girl Meets World*, for example, used the external audience to consider her topic from other points of view, even those that might disagree with her:

I began to think of what other people's perspectives were, like what are they

coming from, what are they expecting to see and things like that, and also because the Bryn Mawr name was attached to it, how Doug brought up in class one day like, you know perspective students could be reading this, alumni.

Girl Meets World was not only concerned about her own writing being perceived a certain way, but also was concerned about how it represented Bryn Mawr. While this concern did not appear in any of the other interviews, it was often expressed during class and individual conferences. Students were aware of the reputation Bryn Mawr had as a prestigious liberal arts college and were concerned about how they might uphold that reputation in their writing, both through the quality of the writing and through the topics the students wrote about.

This conception of audience is much more complex than the simplified audience as teacher. The students thought of themselves not just as writers writing for a grade, but of their reputation as students at Bryn Mawr College and how their writing portrayed that reputation. They recognized that their writing had multiple goals and multiple potential audiences. Because the blog was hosted on Bryn Mawr's website, it could potentially be found by parents, perspective students, or other visitors interested in the college. In addition, our use of tags and links brought in people that were interested in our topics who may or may not realize that the blog is associated with Bryn Mawr. For these readers, the students focused on conveying their point accurately as well as considering other views so that their argument held its own.

This complex conception of audience did not translate to the formal papers at first.

As both Professor Blank and myself can attest, we were somewhat disappointed to see formulaic papers after we'd seen some success on the blog and the first inklings that students were writing for someone besides us. Our perception is confirmed by the students' responses to my question about who they conceived of as their audience for the first paper:

I really knew that my professor's reading this so you know I fixed my spelling and had a real introduction and things like that (Girl Meets World).

You. (Just me?) Because for the most part, I took what I had written to the class and changed subtle things about it so that I was writing to you instead of just the class. (Can you elaborate on what subtle things you changed?) In the beginning, I had written blogs in the style that I normally write in with my blogs which is little to no capitalization and just awful punctuation.(Jhaleh Melomane)

I just think that I have to write it to a big audience of professors because that's what makes me write it like formally and not like everyday English. So I guess it's just like I just use those formal, fancy words and I make it formal.(Salamander)

While many of them moderated their responses a bit by suggesting that they had chosen topics that they might not have chosen because of the blog and that their writing was freer because it began as a blog, they still had trouble initially seeing that their writing on the blog did not have to change so dramatically for the teacher. As I described in chapter one,

writing for the teacher as audience often creates formulaic writing and an extreme concern with such surface-level features of writing as grammar and spelling. Certainly these students express these kinds of concerns, as as we'll see below, the revision process sometimes focuses on these concerns very explicitly, something the students seem to be aware of, but not always able to alter.

One aspect of audience awareness that we thought that the blog might influence was the topics that students chose to write about. Primarily, we thought that they might see that certain topic elicited more response than others and might therefore gravitate toward those topics. To further encourage topic development, we pointed out posts in class whose topics we thought were complex and could therefore be easily developed into papers. To a large extent, this strategy was successful. Girl Meets World suggests that the blog did influence her topic selection, mostly through the feedback she received on her own posts:

I would go to things that that interested me like I like politics a lot so then I would write and I would blog about like Judge Alioto and like the President and things like that. And then I would get comments and links to other bloggers and then I would go and see what they what they were talking what they were linking to and reading what they were saying and then I was getting influence and feedback from that, which I thought was really interesting.

She indicates here that she followed the links that her commenters left for her, which did two things. First, it provided her with other viewpoints on her original topic, as she stated

earlier. Second, it provided her with ideas for new topics. Girl Meets World elaborated quite a bit on topic selection. Here she describes the effect her favorite post had on her topic choice, a post which did end up in the portfolio:

It was on the grade system at Princeton, how they limited the number of A's. I got a lot of comments on that because it was something related not only to me but the class and because it was school-related it was in college and the whole point when you're in college is to get good grades and do a good job and all that and the fact that they were trying to limit the number of A's. That was one of my favorite ones because it was . . . it related not only to me but to a lot of people who are reading it. . . . I think when, you know, I think I got a comment or two from them [other blog writers], later on, it just it made me realize who my audience was and then I would get comments from other people who weren't in school necessarily but their views on it. I think that was one of my best because it interested me so much, it was so relevant.

The post was one of her favorites not just because the topic related to her as a college student, but because also, clearly, she enjoyed the feedback, especially from readers outside our class. As she says, she realized “it was relevant.” Thus, she began to think not just about what she was interested in, but what might be interesting to her audience and to begin to think about framing her topics in ways that tried to communicate with her audience. She knew she had been successful when she received feedback in the form of comments or reads.

Revision

When asked about the relationship between their revision process and the comments they received on the blog, almost all the students I interviewed indicated that the comments provided alternative perspectives, which they then tried to include in the papers they wrote based on the blog post. Girl Meets World found the comments supportive and especially appreciated the fact that they weren't from the professor⁶:

But that's one of the things I loved most about the class is the interactive blog 'cause I would post something and then, in three days, I would get all these comments saying, you know, this was a really good point, you know, and then a link to something else further explaining it or like you really glossed this over or bringing up, again, other perspectives that I hadn't thought of and that's what I've loved. It was like instant feedback and I really liked also, no offense, that it wasn't my professor because you know if your professor says something, you're like “Oh, man I'm gonna fail the class. Like this is gonna be such a big deal.”

Even though GMW appreciated the feedback from someone other than her professor, the feedback she paid the most attention to during revision was still the professor's, especially on the structure of the paper. In fact all the students interviewed indicated that the professor's feedback was most helpful during the revision process, but that they took everyone's feedback into account, including the comments on the blog. As GMW says,

⁶ In the beginning, we did make a handful of anonymous comments, both supportive and redirecting. We wanted to make sure that students realized that people from outside could comment early on, so that they might take writing on the blog seriously. We also made comments as ourselves. After the first two or three weeks, we didn't find it necessary to comment anonymously. Real anonymous commenters filled our role.

“Not everyone who was reading the blog knew that I was turning this into a paper so they were just pointing something out.” Even if the comments didn't factor specifically into the revision process, that feedback was important for providing other viewpoints and gave students at least some sense that an audience besides the professor existed.

Specific revisions

Of the three papers that Girl Meets World submitted for her portfolio, only two were developed from blog posts. The third was related to several of her posts and comments, but there was no direct correspondence to a single post. GMW developed her first paper from what she had said during the initial interview was one of her favorite posts, the one pertaining to Princeton's new policy of limiting the number of A's distributed. The original post was short and the final paragraph directly solicited feedback on the topic:

I am interested to see what the reading community has to say about this. Although I know that many of the students will be quick to say how unfair the policy is, I would hope that they take a little bit of time to put their biases to the side and try to look at it from an objective point of view. Also, for everyone who is not a student, I would hope that you could look at it from a hard-workings students point of view.

Interestingly, GMW also recognizes that her “reading community” might not be constituted only of students. Her comments, however, were only from students. Still they provided some useful feedback which she did end up incorporating into her paper. She

received six comments on the article, one from me suggesting that grades might not matter in the long run and the rest from fellow classmates and two responses from her to their comments. These comments raised some points she had not. For example, Judge Hatchet asked, “If C is average work, shouldn't a majority of the students be receiving C's in school, not A's?” She went on to suggest that teachers “should take a good look at the effort a student puts into her work and grade them accordingly.” Although she didn't incorporate Judge Hatchet's suggestion verbatim, she did add the administrators' point of view and suggested that “both the students and the administration can agree that grade inflation is a problem, the disagreements arise when possible solutions are discussed.” Her original post and subsequent draft contain little of the administration's point of view and instead present a fairly hard line against the policy. The change in draft three suggests that she took Judge Hatchet's suggestion that the administration might have a point.

GMW's revisions were also structural and here, she could not rely on comments at all since even the best comments did not offer suggestions for organization. In her first revision of the paper, GMW struck the last paragraph and the first paragraph, adding instead a more formal-sounding introduction. When asked in an interview about why she added the introduction, GMW explained that she felt

my first one was not helpful to the reader. It did not present my ideas clearly and there was no real direction. . . . I thought back to what had improved my papers in the past, and I remembered the traditional intro and how it worked for me then.

Interestingly, this “going back to the past” was a pattern both Professor Blank and I noticed, especially in the first couple of papers. Students seemed to revert to formulas they learned in high school or practiced for the SAT rather than sticking with the structure of the blog post. GMW's paper is a good example of that, even if it ended up being a fairly strong paper. I suggested in the interview that her original introduction “drew people in” and that the new introduction “was a little less personal.” Along those same lines, I noticed that she had removed the I's from the paper. Her response shows the resistance most students have to including any of their personality in a paper:

I felt like, because it was a formal essay for my teacher, it should not be so personal. It should present the facts and the different sides of the story and how I felt and not much more. . . . The one thing I remember from English class in high school is to never, ever have “I” in formal papers. So I guess that the revisions were just me reverting back to what I knew.

Again, she expresses the reliance on old formulas, which include a reliance on facts and not using “I” and those kinds of rules. And she's focused on the teacher as audience, even going back to her high school English teacher, almost conjuring her up in her mind as she writes.

Despite the initial popularity of the paper and the feedback she received from classmates, GMW indicated in her interview, at least, that she was in some way writing for the professor. When I asked her about the challenges she faced in revising the paper from the blog post to something more formal, she was most concerned about writing

appropriately, appropriately for the professor: “One of the biggest [challenges] was trying to think of what my professor wanted to hear and what would be considered the appropriate style of writing.” She added a conclusion and more argument from the opposing point of view, which she said her professor suggested. The resulting paper turned out well and GMW struck a good balance between the initial impetus for writing and appealing to the public audience and the realization that the paper would be graded. However, it's obvious from many of her answers that she struggles to figure out who, exactly she's writing for and how to please the multiple audiences she seems to recognize.

In discussing a weaker paper, GMW indicated that she felt like the paper was unorganized and that maybe she should have outlined it:

It's funny, in high school, I never outlined. My teachers always told us how important it was, but I never really got into it. It wasn't until high school that I found how important they are . . . and how helpful.

I had not suggested anything about outlining or poor organization. I had simply mentioned the paper and she immediately declared it not good. I had suggested that she was simply trying to tackle a bit subject, saying that “it seemed like what you wanted to write about was the way that [Rehnquist's] death was being overshadowed by Hurricane Katrina. It was maybe a statement on the judiciary and the media. That's a lot to tackle in the first paper!” After she began lamenting her lack of an outline, I suggested that filling out an outline is not that satisfying. So, she suggested that maybe the topic wasn't the best. But she still “thought it was important and people should be aware.” Here, she

seems to be struggling with various reasons the paper didn't turn out well. Was it the topic, the organization? She's really unsure. Here, I think she probably depicts the struggle many students go through when facing a paper they know isn't working. They often are unsure about where to begin and about what, exactly, is going wrong. In this case, too, GMW did not receive much external feedback since it was an early blog post and we hadn't quite gained an audience yet, so she also had no feedback from the external audience.

She attempted to “fix” the paper by again adding a more standard introduction, again deleting the first few lines of the blog post and replacing them with lines that sound more like a typical introduction. She drops a paragraph that is very general and which really does add nothing to the paper. Her resulting introductory paragraph is more focused, though it still doesn't draw in the reader. In the second draft, she continued to work on the introduction, dropping much of the initial introduction and focusing in on the fact that President Bush will now have the opportunity to appoint two judges. The three versions don't look that much like each other. The blog post mentions the fact that this now gives President Bush two empty seats to fill, but also tries to make a comment on the way this issue will be lost in the Hurricane Katrina coverage. The second draft tries to highlight the fear of this point being lost to media coverage of Katrina more while adding some background about why the point shouldn't be lost in the first place. The final draft takes out any reference to Katrina and focuses on the importance of replacing two supreme court justices. When I asked GMW about these dramatic changes, she said that

she felt like she needed to start over. Still, she could not seem to find a way to bring focus to this paper, perhaps because she was still tied in some way to the original.

Although GMW claims the changes she made in the “Princeton” paper were driven by a need to return to formulas she learned in high school and feedback from her professor, when I asked if her choices were affected by reads or comments, she said this:

Not necessarily [the number of reads], because some of my posts were just fun ones and they got a lot of reads. But the posts that had a lot of comments I considered because it gave me a lot of feedback, so I could write a good paper.

Yeah, posts with comments helped a lot.

So, even while she may not have directly incorporated comment feedback into her revisions, she seems to have internalized the blog audience and had them in mind, as well as the professor, when she was revising. One reason the Judging History paper may have been problematic for her to revise was that she felt her audience wasn't interested. She, herself, felt the topic was important, but she had trouble gaging whether the topic was interesting to a broader audience because the original post did not receive much feedback. During the interview, GMW said that there was a post that she wished she'd turned into a paper because “it got a lot of comments which was really helpful and the comments were not just from people in the class [but from] outside people [too].” The post she mentioned, “How to Lose Your Job in a Catholic School,” received seventeen comments, most from within the class, but almost all were quite substantial, at least a paragraph long, raising contrary points of view or expanding on the ideas GMW raised in her post. Her

regret that she did not turn this into a paper suggests that she did realize that posts with a good audience and good feedback probably are good material to work with, that pleasing an audience might be an effective approach to writing (or at least choosing material).

The comments from other students about their revision process and their preferred type of feedback confirm much of GMW's conflicted approach to using the comments for revision. On the one hand, they find them useful, but on the other, they claim they used feedback from the professor and from fellow students during a more formal peer review process. Salamander reports, for example, that

I think it was really helpful to actually read other people's comments. I think the blog made the essay more persuasive and I think without the blog I would never been I would have never been able to think about those aspects of the problem.

When asked about what feedback she preferred, she shows the conflict more clearly. She expresses that she found some comments hard to deal with and so the professor's feedback seemed most important, and yet, she ends with the idea that the comments were helpful:

Comments on the blog were really helpful but some of them were like, well I don't even know how to use this one. I think the most helpful would probably . . . I like the idea that the professor goes over my paper. . . . So I think that was the most helpful thing. And just to write the paper to make it like really complete, probably, comments helped a lot.

Comments seemed to function, at least for these students, as a way to consider different

points of view as people raised issues in response to what they had written. The comments usually weren't suggestive of how to develop the post into a better piece of writing and so they, naturally, didn't get incorporated into the students' revision process in quite that way. Instead, they were a reminder to students that there were people outside of the relationship between professor and student who were reading and responding. They seemed to not be fully aware of how these comments were at work in their revisions and in some cases, may have been fearful of using them. Instead they relied on feedback from the professor or fell back into established patterns rather than complicating their work by figuring out how to incorporate these responses. Still, their awareness of an external audience was definitely affected by the presence of these comments, and, as we shall see below, their own responses to others' work indicates that they wanted the comments to provide useful feedback.

Students' role as audience member

At first, of course, our primary audience consisted of the other students in the class and until we received those first visits and comments from the outside, we had to fill the role of audience for ourselves. Even after the audience had been established, we still accounted for some portion of the 50% of the visitors from on campus.⁷ Being a frequent commenter and active audience participant was an important aspect of the course and something we stressed throughout the semester. Primarily, we wanted to students to support each other in this venture and be encouraging. But we also wanted them to

⁷ There's no way to separate out in-class visits from other on-campus visits. Doing so would require my knowing each students' ip address, which is not only technically difficult, but also infringes upon their privacy.

become critical readers of each others' work and try to point out different points of view and problems in arguments in as supportive a way as possible. Reading and thinking and commenting on other people's work also gave the students' ideas about their own work, whether it was comparing it and finding ways to make it better or finding an idea that was inspired by another students' post. Students as active audience members made the blog an active writing community with people writing, receiving feedback, responding to that feedback, and eventually revising based in part on that feedback.

GMW realized early on the importance of being a good commenter. She thought at first that she was just going to sit back and wait for people to comment on her work, but she realized that wasn't going to work.

I would read other people's and then when I commented, I felt like I was helping them out in the way that they helped me out, that I realized things in their papers that they had glossed over and hadn't realized and I liked being able to point it out . . . I also found that if you comment on people's stuff a lot, they have a tendency to comment on yours as well so kind of selfish but not really. And also, because a lot of other people write about things that they found interesting, I would find other interests that way like I would go and find other people's blogs because they had linked to them and the whole interconnective kind of atmosphere I liked a lot. She discovered, then, that commenting also help her own writing. She found ideas, other sources and because she commented frequently, she received feedback on her writing. Another student, Like the State, mentions this feedback loop as well. She, too,

commented in order to point out different perspectives, but she also mentions that she did this because she was checking back on her blog posts to see if she'd gotten any feedback.

I always checked back to my blogs too and read what other people had said. In commenting I was always hoping that the person who had written the blog would read that and maybe get a different perspective on something, if they'd left something out in whatever point they were trying to make.

Like GMW, her main goal in commenting was to point out holes in students' argument or provide alternate perspectives, and, like GMW, she found this aspect of the comments she received most helpful and so emulated that kind of commenting herself.

Another student, Salamander, also liked providing alternate perspectives, but expressed some concern with how that perspective might be perceived. At the same time, she felt that commenting was an important part of blogging.

I liked commenting but I was always afraid to make somebody upset because I'm not . . . I really don't like . . . I felt like when somebody posted something not nice on my blog, I wasn't really happy about it even though maybe that person had a point but they could have said it nicely or something like that. So I tried . . . if I did not agree with it, I would just like try to say, "Well maybe you could consider this too." I really enjoyed reading other people's posts because it gave me the idea of, like, what they're writing about and just compare myself and them and just . . . I don't know it probably helped me in blogging as well. It was sort of like . . . if I saw like other people doing really well it pushed me too so it was sort of like a

stimulation for me.

Not only did Salamander find reading and commenting on other people's posts useful in providing ideas for her own posts, but she also compared her writing to others' and pushed herself to do as well as others. In many ways, Salamander's cautiousness in giving feedback benefits her and the students' to whom she is giving feedback. Her comments are careful and considered and not simply gut reactions. Students need to learn the skill of constructive criticism. Perhaps being on the receiving end of comments that were obviously not thoughtful caused Salamander to be more careful in her own critique. For the most part, the students in the class were measured in their responses, but of course, we had no control over outside commenters. However, if we had received anything truly offensive, we had the power to delete it. The nature of the Bryn Mawr Honor Code, which disallows comparison among students, prevented us from making competition completely explicit, but we did point out in class posts that we thought were particularly insightful or which were receiving lots of attention. For Salamander, at least, this had some benefit.

The Effect of Blogging on Writing

We saw that the students seemed to be more aware of audience in their work because of the feedback they received on the blog. The students also felt that blogging changed the way they wrote. Perhaps most importantly, as Salamander points out, is that they gained confidence in getting their words out there:

It has changed a lot because I feel more comfortable, more confident probably

writing those papers because at the beginning I would just like start writing. It would be like one thought then the other thought and it would be disconnected.

Judge Hatchet felt similarly: “My writing has definitely gained a better voice now that I have been a part of the blogging world. I also am able to write much easier than before.” Fear of writing, especially of doing it incorrectly, is perhaps one of the biggest barriers to improving as a writer. These students intimate that blogging may have helped them overcome that fear and find their own voice.

GMW explains that blogging has also changed the way she thinks before she writes, that “it's all about perspective” and that before she writes, she tries to consider as many different perspectives as possible, as especially, who her audience is. Here she describes the process she went through while writing a paper for a religion class after she had taken the blog class.

I was thinking you know how's my T.A. gonna see this, how's my professor gonna see this, how's someone who knows nothing about this topic gonna see this and how's someone who's an expert on this topic gonna see it, and what am I saying and then what am I . . . what am I unconsciously putting through through my choice of language and things like that. And so then I would have my roommate read over it and she would say little things, she would comment little things almost like other bloggers would on my posts so I definitely think it's changed the way I went about writing.

Jhaleh Melomane also says that appreciating multiple perspectives was important for her:

“It [blogging] has helped me actually because we do a lot of elaboration on sources and things like that and perspectives and we did a lot of that with blogging so I think it has helped me in that respect.”

Reading through the students' final evaluations also indicate that blogging has affected their writing practice. GMW says that blogging taught her that to become a better writer, one needs “to practice writing and to just write . . . while not stressing out about perfect grammar and sentence organization.” She also mentions the benefits of immediate feedback, saying that “because of this [feedback], I was able to understand what my weaknesses were and what I could do to fix them.” Like the State said that having a big audience to address made her think about mechanics and organization because “major grammar and spelling errors and unorganized ideas get in the way of making a convincing argument.” Salamander expressed similar views about feedback and practice writing on the blog, but further, she said, the blog offered “a possibility of participating in public life and a chance of getting involved in community.” This community of learners was perhaps the most important outcome of the blog we wanted to see. If everyone had one inkling of this, then we succeeded in our goals. I think the quantitative results and the qualitative analysis do show that the students developed audience awareness and that most fully participated in the learning community we created on the blog. The importance of this interactive community is perhaps best expressed by one of the students herself:

Bloggers not only passively read the news but also write posts, make comments

and create links. They actively get involved. This vigorous participation makes the “web” look like a real web, a chain of connected sites. The absence of involvement makes the web look like a set of unrelated dots. You can only see the dots; you cannot see the whole picture unless the dots are connected. (Salamander, “Self-Evaluation”)

Indeed, this was our primary goal, to get the students to connect the dots between their writing and the people for whom they write and back to themselves again. We wanted them to see the whole picture of writing and not just the dots. Blogging gave us the opportunity to help them see that picture.