

## CHAPTER 1

Writing is a basic language skill that students need to develop and master as they advance in their process of learning a second language. In this context, I refer to different levels of writing, starting with very basic sentences and paragraph writing to essays, research papers, and more.

In my teaching experience at the high school level in Ecuador, I have observed that students do not like to write, not only when they are learning a second language, but also in their native language. In fact, some students are very good at expressing their opinions and ideas orally, but when it comes to writing, they simply do not get engaged in the process.

In this context, I decided to implement a qualitative research study, which is intended to explore and analyze the outcomes of the use of weblogs, as a writing tool, with a group of high school students in a bilingual high school in Ecuador.

Ecuador is a country where weblogs have not been widely used in language teaching, because they are so new. Thus, weblogs may appear strange to English teachers and learners. Despite this situation, students often seem to be up to date with the latest technological advances. Therefore, providing students with a different approach to writing instruction, could affect their writing production in quantity and quality. The activities of this study were organized based on the use of a class blog, which is a shared space between teachers and students, who are able to write in a main area. It was used as a discussion space, and as an extension of the classroom activities. The activities carried out in the study were guided by a pilot study, done with students of the same school, but from a lower grade.

Students completed a survey before and after the study so I could get their personal opinions about the use of blogs. Finally, my personal observations of

students' attitudes and written work during the process are reported in order to derive conclusions.

Following are the research questions that guided this study:

1. Does the use of blogs in the EFL Writing class improve the quality of students' writing?
2. Does the use of blogs in the EFL Writing class improve the quantity of students' writing?
3. What are students' perceptions about blogging?
4. How can the process of using blogs as a tool for high school EFL writing classes be described?
5. What resources are available for teaching blogging to EFL students, and how can they be used?

### **Statement of the purpose**

In my eight years of high school teaching I have rarely found students who are really interested in writing. They write for a grade, and they do not seem to attend to corrections that are made to their writing, or about the writing process.

In today's technological world, students appear to feel the necessity of being "connected". In this context, they continuously text using their phones; they answer e-mail messages with their phones or with portable computers; they even check for daily events, such as movie premiers, sports results, among other activities all of which is done on line. Therefore, I thought about implementing this study to offer them an attractive alternative through which they could experience the excitement of being "connected", together with the importance of expressing their thoughts, the responsibility of writing for an audience, and the experience of collaborative learning.

My role as a researcher and as a teacher is to impart the writing lessons accordingly and to facilitate and monitor all activities, ensuring that students' writing is completed while in an atmosphere of respect and tolerance to their classmates.

### **Statement of the problem**

Students at all levels need to be motivated to learn. This is the reason why we, as educators, should always be open to try new ways and methods so that our students can successfully advance in their learning process.

Therefore, I thought weblogs might be useful tools to be implemented in the EFL writing class. Although, the use of weblogs, and other social networking tools, such as wikis, YouTube and Facebook, may suggest moving to a new pedagogy, which, while not being widely used or even known in Ecuador as an educational tool, can be scary to teachers and to learners, I think educators should always be willing to rethink their teaching methods and processes. But, this can only be achieved if we consider working with online social tools which will offer our students the possibility of enhancing their audiences so that they can work collaboratively, build on the feedback, and reflect on their own growth.

Dave Childers, principal of the Academy for Civic and Entrepreneurial Leadership, a charter high school in Fresno, California, says:

Using online writing tools will allow students to write whenever and wherever they feel inspired, and to be able to speak to an audience that is larger and more important to them than the traditional classroom. There is a reason why we should constantly be looking for ways to incorporate more innovative writing opportunities into our curriculum. (as quoted in Pascopella & Richardson, 2009, p.2)

Therefore, this study focuses on describing how a group of Ecuadorian high school students used weblogs in their EFL writing instruction.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Literature Review**

With the growing use of Web-based networking tools, such as blogs, Facebook, and YouTube, educators must be encouraged to reflect and consider revising our writing pedagogy to one that includes using digital spaces, multimedia, and linked conversations. In this chapter, I review the literature that informs working with technological tools, especially in relation to EFL writing instruction with a focus on new technological tools.

#### **Teaching with technology**

Teaching with technology began years ago with the ideas of pioneers such as Atkinson, 1968 and Suppes & Morningstar, 1968. Since then, the use of technological tools in schools has increased. Researchers have studied the effects of using technology in learning and they have found that there is a great potential to enhance students' learning, but only if technology is properly used (Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1996; president's Committee of Advisors on Science and Technology, 1997; Dede, 1998).

In this vein, teachers should be aware of the constant changes in relation to teaching methods and approaches, they should also be flexible to these changes, which increasingly include knowledge of technology (Glaser, 1984; Putman & Borko, 2000; Shulman, 1986, 1987).

Teaching with technology is not an easy task, especially if we consider the challenges that a constantly changing technological environment represents to teachers. For instance, digital technologies, such as computers, are considered protean (usable in many different ways; Parapet, 1980); unstable (rapidly changing); and opaque (the inner workings are hidden from users; Turkle, 1995). Also, new

technologies have their own propensities, affordances, potentials, and constraints that make them particularly suitable more for certain tasks than for others (Bromley, 1998; Bruce, 1993; Kohler & Mishra, 2008). Furthermore, personal and institutional factors may complicate teaching with technology since teachers may be reluctant to devote time to learning how to teach with technology because they may not have time to do this activity, or maybe when they studied they did not receive any training on how to use it, therefore they are not able to appreciate its value in relation to their teaching practices.

Basically, technological tools may be used to: Bring exciting curricula based on real-world problems into the classroom; provide scaffolds and tools to enhance learning; give students and teachers more opportunities for feedback, reflection, and revision; build local and global communities that include teachers, administrators, students, parents, practicing scientists, and other interested people; and expand opportunities for teacher learning (National Academy of Sciences, 2003).

Educators must realize that technology has become an important tool in education. Computer-based technologies represent an important mean to promote learning, but many issues should be considered in how to educate teachers to use new technologies effectively. For example, what do teachers need to know about the learning process? What kinds of training are most effective for helping teachers use high-quality instructional programs? What is the best way to use technology to facilitate teacher learning?

It is the teachers' responsibility to develop a full understanding of the principles underlying the effective use of technological tools.

## **A Theory for Working with Technology**

The use of computer technologies to enhance learning began with pioneers such as Atkinson and Suppes (Atkinson, 1968; Suppes and Morningstar, 1968). Since that time, the presence of technologies in schools has increased dramatically. Therefore, Siemens (2005) presents a theory of learning that is consistent with the needs of the twenty-first century, a learning theory for the digital age: Connectivism.

Before actually explaining connectivism, we have to consider behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism, which are three learning theories often utilized in the creation of instructional environments, since they hold the notion that knowledge is an objective that is attainable through either reasoning or experiences.

Behaviorism states that learning is largely unknowable, that is, we can't really understand what goes on inside a person ("the black box theory"). Gledler (2001) considers behaviorism makes three basic assumptions:

- Observable behavior is more important than understanding internal activities.
- Behavior should be focused on simple elements: specific stimuli and responses.
- Learning is about behavior change.

Cognitivism claims that learning is a process of inputs, managed in short term memory, and coded for long-term recall. Cindy Buell refers to the cognitivism process in these words: "In cognitive theories, knowledge is viewed as symbolic mental constructs in the learner's mind, and the learning process is the means by which these symbolic representations are committed to memory" (Buell, undated, para. 1).

Constructivism suggest that learners create knowledge as they attempt to understand their experiences (Driscoll, 200 p. 376), in other words, learners attempt to foster understanding by meaning making tasks. This theory, as opposed to behaviorism and cognitivism does not view learners as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge. Instead, learners attempt to actively create meaning; therefore they select and pursue their own learning.

Theories such as behaviorism and cognitivism were developed in a time when learning was not impacted by technology, therefore they have certain limitations. For instance, they consider that learning occurs inside a person, they do not address learning that occurs outside people (i.e. learning that is stored and managed by technology); these theories also fail to describe how learning happens within organizations. In a networked world, the need to evaluate the worthiness of learning something is of great importance, as well as the ability to synthesize and recognize connections and patters, and to be aware of the rapid increase in information. Therefore, Siemens (2004), in an attempt to develop an entirely new approach to be considered when working with technology, raises the following questions:

- How are learning theories impacted when knowledge is no longer acquired in the linear manner?
- What adjustments need to be made with learning theories when technology performs many of the cognitive operations previously performed by learners (information storage and retrieval).
- How can we continue to stay current in a rapidly evolving information ecology?
- How do learning theories address moment where performance is needed in the absence of complete understanding?



- What is the impact of networks and complexity theories on learning?
- With increased recognition of interconnections in differing fields of knowledge, how are systems theories perceived in light of learning tasks?

In the development of his theory, Siemens (2005) integrated the principles considered by the theories of chaos, network, and complexity and self-organization.

Chaos, as science, recognizes the connection of everything to everything. Gleick (1987) states: “In weather, for example, this translates into what is only hal-joking known as the Butterfly Effect – the notion that a butterfly stirring the air today in Peking can transform storm systems next month in New York.” (p.8). This analogy represents that learners are sensitive to learning conditions, which will determine what they learn and how they act based on their learning. In other words, if the underlying conditions used to make decisions change, the decision itself is no longer as correct as it was at the time it was made. The ability to recognize and adjust to pattern shifts is an important learning task.

A network relates to the connections between entities. Connections, such as social networks and computer networks function on the principle that people, groups, systems, entities can be connected to create an integrated whole. Any alterations within the network will have effects on the whole. In learning sense, the possibility that a concept of learning will be linked depends on how well the linking is done. For instance, there are communities that specialize and gain recognition for their expertise; these have greater chances of recognition, thus resulting in forming strong learning communities. On the other hand, weak ties allow only short-term connections and limited access to information.

Self-organization is defined by Rocha (1998) as the “spontaneous formation of well organized structures, patterns, or behaviors, from random initial conditions.”

(p.3). Self-organization considers that learning is a self-organizing process that requires that the system be open in order to classify knowledge accordingly. It is required that learners have the capacity to form connections between sources of information with the purpose of creating useful information patterns.

Connectivism Theory defines learning as “actionable knowledge” which resides outside ourselves and that focuses on connecting specialized information sets, thus enabling learners to learn more, which is considered more important than a current state of knowledge. It is also driven by the understanding that decisions are made on rapidly altering foundations. New information is continually being acquired. The ability to make distinctions between important and unimportant information is vital, as well as the ability to recognize when new information alters previous knowledge.

These are the principles of connectivism: Learning and knowledge rests in diversity of opinions; learning is a process of connecting specialized information sources; learning may reside in non-human appliances; capacity to know more is more critical than what is currently known; nurturing and maintaining connections is needed to facilitate continual learning; ability to see connections between fields, ideas, and concepts is a core skill; currency (accurate, up-to-date knowledge) is the intent of all connectivist learning activities; decision-making is itself a learning process (choosing what to learn and the meaning of incoming information is perceived as a changing reality; what is the right answer now, may be wrong tomorrow due to alterations in the information affecting the decision).

Connectivism presents a model of learning where learning is no longer an internal, individualistic activity. Over the last twenty years, technology has been

affecting the way we live, how we communicate and how we learn, but education has been slow to recognize the impact of technological tools and the changes their use represent to learning. Connectivism provides the learning framework that learners need to advance in a digital era.

### **Changes in learners as result of a digital era**

Increasingly, teachers find it more difficult to hold students' attentions in class. Definitely learners of today are not the linear learners of years ago. Seely (2000), Chief Scientist at Xerox and director of its Palo Alto Research Center, hired 15 year olds to design future work environments and learning environments. His observations are worth considering. For instance, he refers to today's young people kids as "multiprocessing", meaning that they do a series of tasks at the same time, like they talk on the cell phone, listen to music, and use a computer simultaneously. Contrary to what we could think that they are not concentrating. Seely found that their attention span parallels to that of top managers, who operate in a world of fast context-switching, so this short span attention of today's kids may turn out to be very functional for their future working environments. Also, today's kids have the ability of being their "personal reference librarians", since they know how to navigate through confusing, complex information spaces and feel comfortable doing so. Furthermore, the learner of today is not a formal learner who builds his knowledge in an authority-based, lecture oriented environment. Now, with the enormous amounts of information available in the Web, learners constantly discover new things that will continuously add to their knowledge. In addition, actual learners develop the ability to become judges of information. They make good judgments, socially from recommendations of people they trust; cognitively, based on argumentation. The final observation deals with learners' tendency toward action. Previous generations

would not try things; unless they felt ready to do so, if they did not know how to use an appliance they read the manual or called up for assistance. Present generation does not want to read manuals; they want to turn the appliance on, see how it works, discover and try it themselves.

All those aspects work together turning learning from being abstract to being concrete. In fact, according to Seely (2000), knowledge has to be seen in two dimensions, the explicit and the tacit. The explicit dimension involves learning concepts, and the tacit deals with action. Much of knowing is acquired in action, through participation in real world tasks, with other people, around real problems. In this context, Seely (2000) refers to a “learning ecology”, an ecology that is open, complex, adaptive and that comprises dynamic and interdependent elements; ideally, the offered by the Web.

### **A New Medium**

The Web gathers numerous authors, who are members of groups of common interests, many of which have a lot of expertise in both tacit and action fields. When the learner navigates the web and joins a virtual community of his interest, a new powerful source of learning emerges, since in the web, individuals are rarely just producers or just consumers; instead, they read and write, they absorb and critique, they listen and tell stories, they help and seek for help, thus providing new points of view to the learners.

Another important characteristic of the web is that it is the first medium that considers multiple intelligences: visual, textual, social, musical, kinesthetic, and abstract, therefore educators finally have a way of enabling students to learn based on their particular way of learning.

A third aspect of the Web is that it combines the small efforts of the many with the large efforts of the few. By enriching the available information, each user may well add up information and expertise, thus users will build on each others' knowledge.

Indeed the Web nowadays is fundamental to learning, but educators must be careful since not necessarily all web content may lead to productive learning. Nowadays, judgment, navigation, discernment, and synthesis become critical aspects of education.

### **From the World Wide Web to the Educational Read/Write Web**

Tim Berners-Lee referred to his vision of the web upon its creation back in 1989, with the following words: "The original thing I wanted to do, was make it a collaborative medium, a place where we all meet and read and write" (as cited in Richardson, 2010, p.1), so, initially the internet was a network of computers used to exchange text and data, but, later in 1993 the web turned into a colorful source of information and entertainment. By the end of the twentieth century the web positioned as a research tool connecting people worldwide.

But, even then, anyone who wanted to contribute to the web had to have knowledge of HTML codes to create web pages and run them. However, as years passed, publishing on the Internet became easier. Therefore, creating what Will Richardson (2006) calls the "Read/Write Web", (Richardson, 2006, p.3) where virtually anyone not only can access any material from the web, but also can create his/her own material.

These advances have transformed society in many ways, and education is not an exception, as Laurillard (2002) expressed: "There is no progress...in how we

teach, despite what might be possible with the new technology” (Laurillard, 2002, p.2), meaning that teachers must not fail to maximize the chances that learners have if technology is introduced in the learning process, and that technology without good teaching methods is not worth it.

Due to the information explosion and new advances in communication, new approaches in teaching are necessary. As Will Richardson (2006) expressed: “We are no longer limited to being independent readers or consumers of information...we can also be collaborators.” (Richardson, 2006, p.3)

Consequently, it is essential that educators rethink current teaching methods in order to provide students with new learning experiences that are not just the mere transmission of information, but also the creation of situations that develop students’ critical thinking abilities, promote further investigation, and provide lifelong learning experiences that will serve as the foundation to construct future learning.

These new experiences refer to technological means of learning, considered by Stukel (1997) as a revolution in higher education. This revolution mainly includes E-learning, defined as: “Training delivered on a computer (including CD-ROM, Internet, or Intranet) that is designed to support individual learning or organizational performance goals.” (R. Colvin, R. Mayer 2006, p.7). E-learning considers on-line applications such as games, simulations, blogs, wikis, podcasts, and others referred to as Web 2.0 tools, which make it possible for students to create while engaging in the learning process because these means present certain features that can serve to integrate collaboration with self-study and the dynamic adjustment of instruction.

Essentially, we must realize that computer environments to teach writing are not a choice anymore. In fact, in upper and upper middle strata of society, it is

strange to find students that do not use computers on a regular basis, for writing research papers, for communicating with peers and teachers, for commenting on daily social events, and for many other purposes.

In fact, according to a recent Pew Internet and American Life Project study, in the United States, 85 percent of youth aged 12-17 engage in some form of electronic personal communication, which may include: text messaging, sending e-mail or instant messages, or posting comments on social networking sites. Therefore, all areas of society: politics, journalism, businesses in general, are undergoing transformational changes, and educational settings cannot just ignore these changes.

In Ecuador, the Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos (2010) reports the following about homes that possess information and communication technologies: 76,3% of the country's population own mobile phones, 13% have home access to internet, 26,3% have computers, and 17,5% have access to cable television.

### **Literacy and Technology**

Nowadays when we refer to literacy, it is inevitable to relate it with technology. Parents, teachers, and students, all are immersed in a technological world, but teachers wonder about whether technological tools will improve or not students' literacy skills. To answer this question, deeper issues about literacy and its relation to society must be considered, such as: social changes, linguistics, aesthetics, and morality (Bruce, 1997).

In fact, educators may take different positions toward working with technology. Some may take a neutral stand, arguing that technology is needed but that it should be studied in a different context, not to be included in the curriculum; other educators completely oppose to technology, they feel they should hold human

conceptions against the technological. In contrast, others are in favor of using technology since they realize that adapting the various technological tools in the curriculum will serve to improve literacy education. We also have the skeptical, who do not consider technology as a “marvelous” thing until they have had the experience and therefore realize its educational benefits. But, despite the difference among those positions, as educators, we should ask ourselves if we are trying to build a wall or a bridge between technology and literacy, and consider our willingness to innovate as we include the use of technological tools in our teaching practice. We will soon discover that there is nothing to be gained by idealizing a literacy separate from the available technological tools.

Furthermore, according to Bruce (1997), literacy is a sociotechnical practice, which relates to fundamental epistemological and ontological issues. We use it to redefine ourselves, and to become capable of knowing and doing new things.

Finally, conceiving literacy without technology is not worth it any more. Technologies do not oppose or replace literacy, but rather they are a part of it.

### **The New Literacy and Writing in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The National Council of the Teachers of English (2008) defines literacy as “a collection of cultural and communicative practices shared among members of particular groups” (para.1). It also considers that as societies and technology advance, literacy changes. In fact, today, a literate person is considered one that possesses all the abilities and competencies that make him capable of participating in virtual environments both using receptive and productive skills, that include reading, analyzing, posting commentaries, or making contributions.

The Ecuadorian Ministry of Education has also considered these changes in literacy in Registro Oficial no. 400 of August 29, 2001, which says:



## CAPACITACIÓN INFORMÁTICA

A inicios del siglo XXI ya no es suficiente saber leer y escribir, pensar que con ello se tienen los conocimientos para enfrentar la vida y el proceso educativo. Ahora es necesario conocer los instrumentos básicos de la Informática. Aprender computación, conocer un paquete mínimo de programas de uso general, saber navegar en Internet. Quien no tiene este dominio básico es un analfabeto digital, la verdad es que en el país se ha ido ampliando la brecha entre los alumnos de planteles privados caros y la mayoría de los que concurren a la educación pública. Mientras los unos tienen conocimientos informáticos cada vez más sofisticados, los otros carecen de los mínimos recursos para evitar el analfabetismo digital. Considero una de las prioridades de mi gobierno el realizar el esfuerzo que sea necesario para empezar a dotar a todos los planteles del país con el equipamiento básico que permita la enseñanza y con un componente técnico informático que ponga a nuestros jóvenes en contacto con los instrumentos de conocimiento de este siglo. *[Beginning the 21st century, it is not enough to know how to read and write, and to think that with this, one has the knowledge to face life and the educational process. Now it is necessary to learn the basic computer skills: learn how to use a computer, how to work with the basic computer programs, and how to navigate the web. Who does not possess these basic skills is digitally illiterate. The truth is that in the country, the breach between students attending expensive private schools and the ones attending public schools is growing, while the first group acquire more and more sophisticated computerized knowledge, the others do not even have the basic means to avoid becoming digitally illiterate. A priority of my government is to provide public schools with all the necessary equipment in order to allow our youth to be in contact with the instruments of knowledge of the current century.]*

It is also important to consider that, as with any form of literacy, media literacy can be taught and learned, either as a separate course or it can be included within other subjects. Therefore, its content may vary depending on its use. For instance, when used within other subjects it can be helpful to reinforce concepts, to promote critical thinking and further investigation of a given topic or to provide students with extra practice.

Since the nature of literacy has changed, so has the nature of writing. Therefore, NCTE policy states that the twenty-first century reader and writer must have the abilities to:

- Develop proficiency with the tools of technology.
- Build relationships with others to pose and solve problems collaboratively and cross-culturally.
- Design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes.
- Manage, analyze and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information.
- Create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multi-media texts.
- Attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments.

(NCTE, 2008, “Definition of 21<sup>st</sup> century literacies”, para.1)

In the same way, the NCTE lists the following considerations as to promote profound changes in accordance to new literacies:

- Our schools and our nation (the United States) need to recognize and validate the many ways we all are writing.
- We need to develop new models of writing, design a new curriculum supporting those models, and creating models for teaching that curriculum.
- We need to make sure that all students have the opportunity to write and learn in intellectually stimulating classrooms.
- We need to recognize that out-of-school literacy practices are as critical to students’ development as what occurs in the classroom and take advantage of this to better connect classroom work to real world situations that students

will encounter across a lifetime. (NCTE, 2008, “Writing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century”, para. 2)

Of outmost importance is that both teachers and students consider ethical issues when using material published in the web, by providing attribution for quoted material and corresponding citations. (Code of best practices in fair use for media literacy education, NCTE, November, 2008)

In general terms, literacy is the ability to make and communicate meaning through the use of a variety of socially contextual symbols. Literacy is "not in isolated bits of knowledge but in students' growing ability to use language and literacy in more and broader activities" (Moll, 1994, p. 202). The definition of literacy is dynamic, evolving, and reflects the continual changes in our society. Literacy has expanded to include literacy in information and communication technologies and critical literacy (Cunningham, 2000; Harste, 1994; Leu, 2002; Moll, 1994; Paris, Lipson & Wixson, 1994; Yopp & Singer, 1994).

In this context, when working with media, we must establish the difference between media literacy and the simple use of media. For example, when teachers use the media to convey facts and information, or to project a film to reward the class, this is not media literacy since they are just using media for its intended purpose, which is to inform and to entertain. Media literacy is the capacity to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms.

As educators we must realize that our expectations of literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have changed and will continue changing due to technological developments. As Hicks (2009), Assistant Professor of English and Director of the Chippewa River Writing Project at Central Michigan University, states: “Kids are now writing for real audiences and for real purposes, not just other kids in the class or the refrigerator

door. They are composing on computers and on phones in text and multimedia. These are substantial changes.” (para.5). These changes affect the writing process that is benefited by the generation of ideas in a collaborative environment. Therefore, writing is not anymore an activity that happens inside the classroom. The different forms that writing may acquire are a result of the relationship between the writer and the reader.

Writing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century considers accommodating instruction to the various technological tools that are available for our students. We must evaluate which these resources are to make the best use of them.

In this vein, it is interesting to consider Sugata Mitra’s conference at LIFT 2007, where he talked about his Hole in the Wall project. Mitra carried out an educational technology study where young kids from socially and economically remote areas in India were provided access to Internet and educational technology through a screen placed in a hole in a wall. Students did not receive any formal instruction as how to work with technology, but they self instructed to use the computer and the Internet. By the end of the project 300 children became technologically literate in six months with one computer. Mitra’s view is that educational technology must first reach the underprivileged, since they may be more motivated and perform better than students in urban schools.

In Ecuador, urban upper and middle class private schools are the ones that are provided with technological tools for education. Besides, not all the population has access to Internet services. In fact, according to the last survey performed by INEC (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos) in 2010, 29,4% of Ecuadorians had access to Internet services, compared to 12% in 2009, and 3% in 2005 (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2). Furthermore, three out of ten Ecuadorians have accessed internet in

2010, principally from sites of public access, and more than half access daily (see Figure 2.3). Statistics also show that 40% of Ecuadorians use Internet access for educational reasons, 27,2% use it to obtain information, and 22,4% use it only to communicate through the social networks. But, this increase has mainly occurred in the urban areas: 37% compared to 12% in the rural areas. In Ecuador, generally schools of middle and upper class are the ones equipped with the necessary technological tools. But, a recent report from the government stated that through the “Plan Nacional de Conectividad”, it has already provided with computer labs with internet access to 2,300 public schools in Ecuador.

Figure 2.1 Resultados del censo 2010 de población y vivienda en el Ecuador.

[Results of 2010 Ecuador's population census]

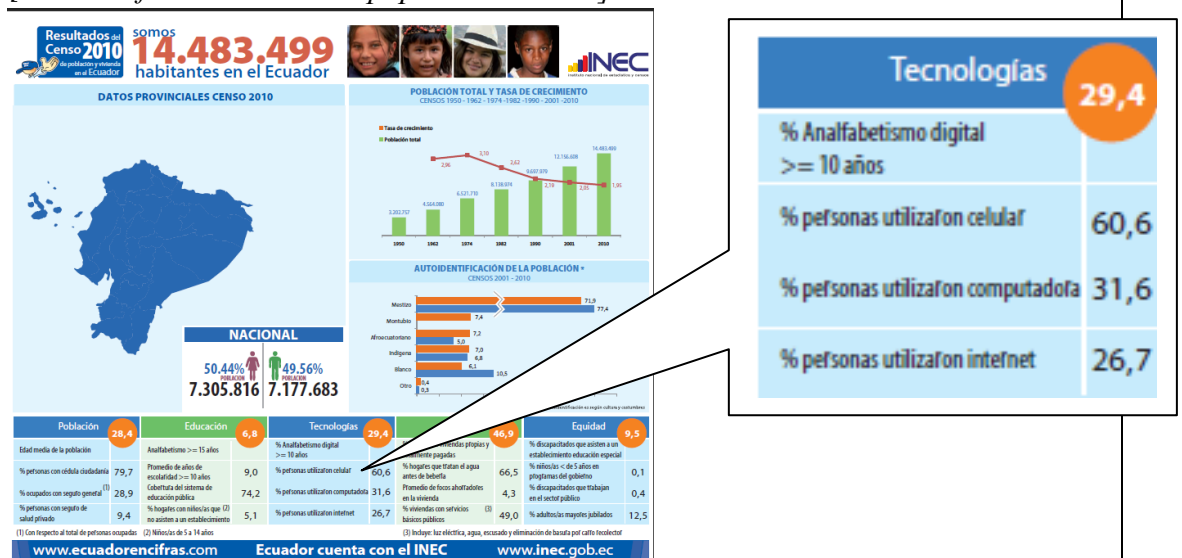


Figure 2.1. Results of the 2010 national population census in Ecuador reported a separate result for technologies. Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censo, <http://www.inec.gob.ec>

Figure 2.2. Ecuadorian Population Access to Internet (2008-2010)

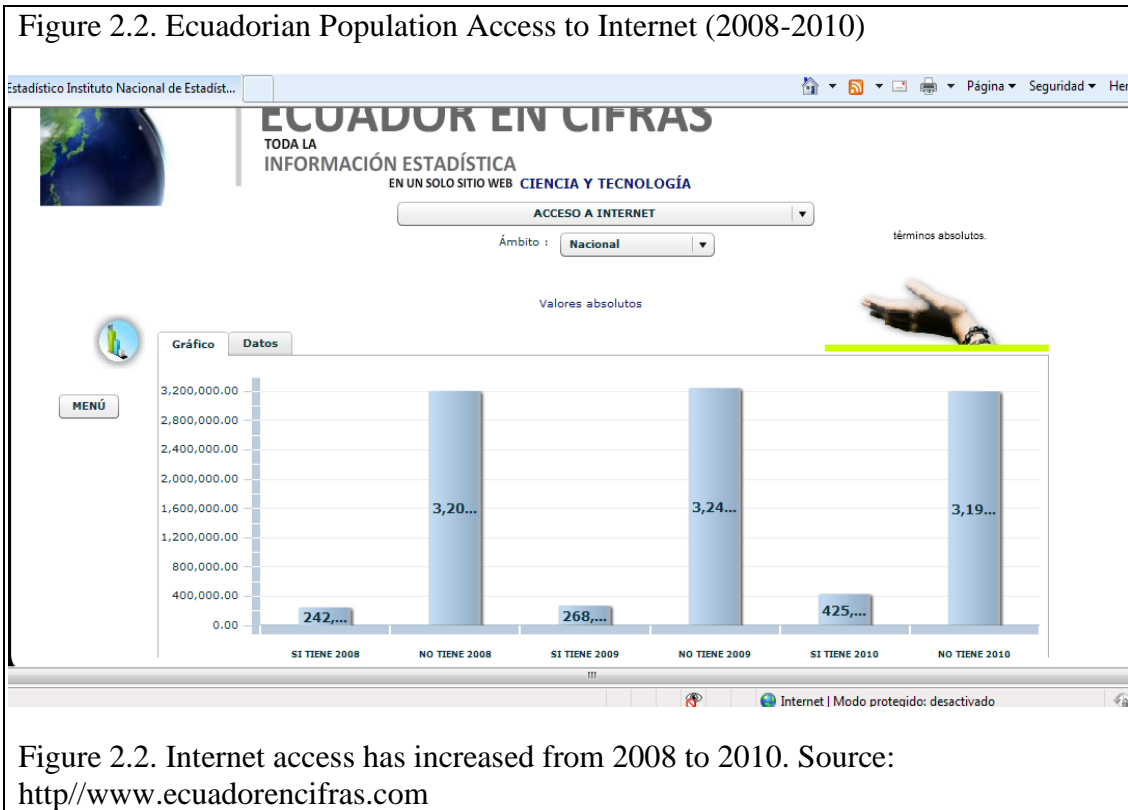


Figure 2.2. Internet access has increased from 2008 to 2010. Source: <http://www.ecuadorencifras.com>

Figure 2.3. National Use of Internet

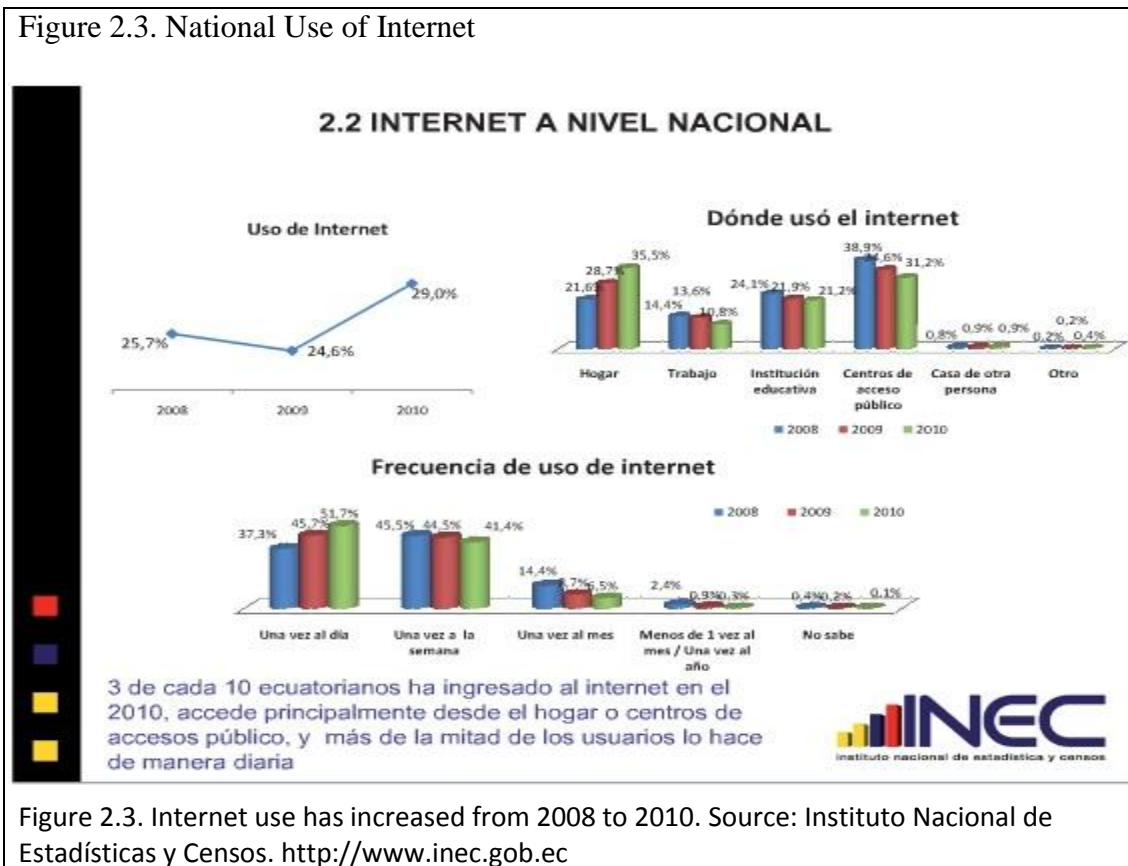


Figure 2.3. Internet use has increased from 2008 to 2010. Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos. <http://www.inec.gob.ec>

It is our responsibility, as educators, to adapt to the new writing modalities, and accept that, as a result of technology, a number of genres have emerged. We must also make the best use of all the technological tools available to us in order to promote students' interest that will lead to lasting learning.

### **Reform of educational settings**

It is undeniable that computers are here to stay, and in this respect, Ely (1990) discusses eight conditions for technological change that facilitate the progress of reform in educational settings: First, he says there must be dissatisfaction with the status quo. The second condition is that those responsible for the change process must have the knowledge and skills needed to get the job done. Third, sufficient resources should be available to support the change initiatives. Fourth, enough time should be allowed for exploration and innovation. The fifth condition is that incentives must exist for the participants involved. Sixth, broad-based participation must be encouraged. Seventh, there must be a high level of commitment on the part of the school's authorities, and finally a strong leadership should be evident.

We are facing a change that is related to the "speed and power of communications, and the expanded capacity to send, receive, and use information" (Ikenberry, 1999, p.57). These are the essentials of the 21<sup>st</sup> century pedagogy, which educators cannot ignore.

Developing technological learning environments is not so simple. For example, Warschauer (2006) found that giving students their own laptops does not mean that they will improve their writing. Teachers know that technology is a tool and it is pedagogy and teaching of content that will improve students' writing.

Koehler, Mishra, Hershey, and Peruski (2002) consider the following areas, as the basis of teaching using technology: content, technology, and pedagogy.

## **Content**

Content refers to the core ideas and the knowledge that make up the course. The content is in essential to what is to be taught by teachers and learned by students. Here it is important to consider that simply browsing hours on the web does not constitute learning. Teachers should track these routes in order to guide students towards material properly related to the content areas that will result in fruitful learning experiences, but at the same time care should be taken in not removing the students' eagerness of exploring and discovering. For instance, the content to be covered in high school literature classes is very different from the content to be covered in a university course. These differences might include procedures, resources (reading lists), knowledge, etc. A clear example can be found in the group of activities listed on the web to analyze Edgar Allan Poe's story The Tell-Tale Heart at <http://www.21learn.com/teamtarget/Passports/EAP/Edgar%20Allan%20Poe%20and%20The%20Tell%20Tale%20Heat%20Curriculum%20Guide.pdf> which include vocabulary development activities, literary elements analysis, and a webquest scavenger hunt for seventh and eighth graders. At [www.shmoop.com/tell-tale-heart/questions.html](http://www.shmoop.com/tell-tale-heart/questions.html), critical thinking and discussion questions may be found for university level students.

## **Technology**

Technology refers to the different technological tools available to impart instruction. Although, we should consider certain constraints, such as students not having permanent access to the internet resources, or schools regulations as it relates to entering specific sites, such as Facebook. Many schools have computer labs available for imparting EFL classes. For instance, in a conversation with Dr. Dara



Gay Shaw, Intercultural language and Educational Resources, LLC she mentioned that there is a public high school located in the largest coastal city of Ecuador that has a computer lab with permanent internet access.

Too often in schools, computing infrastructures are established without taking into consideration if the institution has the human resources that are necessary to make them productive for educational purposes. We must realize that the all-powerful computers are not the solution for our students' different learning needs. Therefore, technology alone cannot create an educational change. Teachers will have to invest time and energy learning how to use computer applications in ways that align with their educational objectives.

Also, teachers should consider that this technological stance may alter their status in the classroom. For instance, students that probably know more than the teacher about technological applications and programs may suggest or try to impose working methods in the classroom. As Selber (2004) mentioned, technology is one of the few areas where one can find an inverse relationship between age and expertise.

### **Pedagogy**

Content and technology come together to influence pedagogy, which constitutes the process or methods of teaching and learning. It involves curriculum planning, purposes, values, aims, as well as strategies for evaluating students. Teachers must realize the many possible ways content, pedagogy and technology come together when using on-line sources to teach, since this consideration will result in students having a successful learning experience.

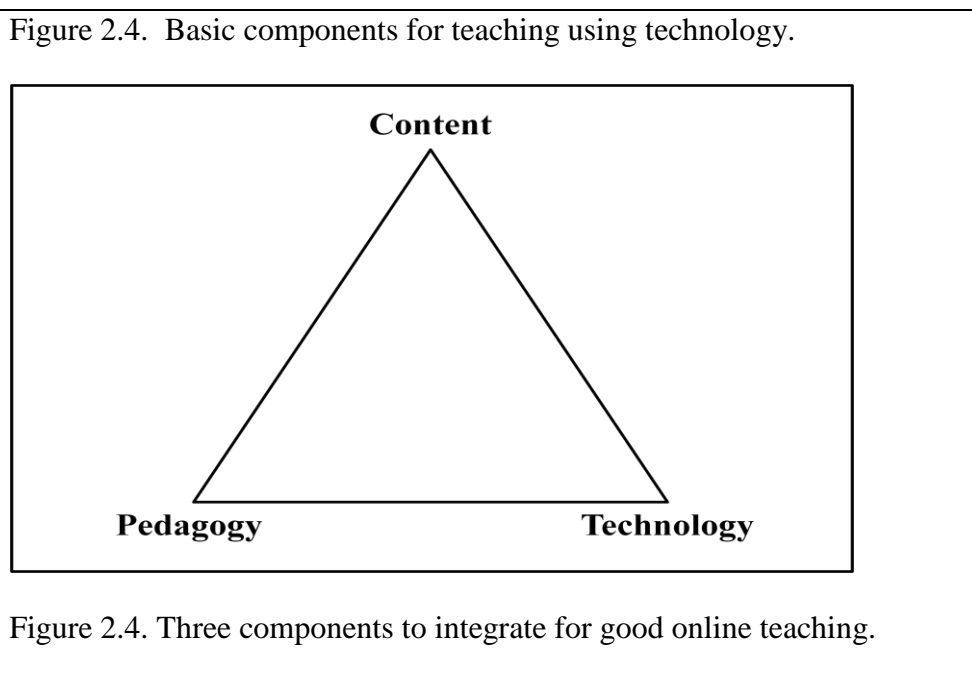
A good example of web activities that promote students' learning are the ones found in Filamentality, which is a web site that provides five learning support

activities for integrating the World Wide Web into student learning. The activities are:

- **Multimedia Scrapbook:** Its goal is to pre-assemble resources for newsletters, bulletin boards, collages, etc. Students have to compile multimedia links.
- **Treasure Hunt:** Its goal is to build students' knowledge by answering to specific questions.
- **Subject Sampler:** Promotes learning by encouraging students to make affective connection to subject matter by responding to websites from a personal perspective.

Some sample activities for the five Filamentality tasks can be found at [keithstanger.com/filamentality.html](http://keithstanger.com/filamentality.html)

Figure 2.4 shows the three components that must be integrated when teaching using technology:



### **TPACK, an approach to teaching with technology**

In an attempt to integrate technology into the curriculum, Shulman (1987, 1986) developed an approach, which framework considers that teachers' understanding of educational technology and PCK (pedagogy and content knowledge) interact among them to produce effective teaching with technology. After Schulman's approach, some researchers have discussed similar ideas, but using different labeling schemes. For instance, Mishra and Koehler (2006) and Koehler and Mishra (2008) proposed the TPACK (technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge) framework, which include these three main components of teachers' knowledge: content, pedagogy, and technology, and the interaction among them. These bodies of knowledge are represented as PCK (pedagogical content knowledge), TCK (technological content knowledge), and TPK (technological pedagogical knowledge).

The teacher's knowledge about the subject to be taught is the content knowledge (CK), which is of critical importance. This knowledge includes knowledge of concepts, theories, ideas, organizational frameworks, knowledge of evidence and proof, as well as established practices and approaches toward developing such knowledge (Schulman, 1986). It is important that teacher possess content knowledge because if they don't they may transfer incorrect information to students, who, in turn, will develop misconceptions.

Pedagogical knowledge (PK) relates to the teachers' knowledge and understanding of how students learn, general classroom management skills, lesson planning, and students' assessment. A teacher with pedagogical knowledge is able to develop in the students a positive disposition toward learning.

Pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) refers to the teachers' interpretation of the content as to find the ways of presenting it to students by means of multiple representations, adaptations, and other ways that promote learning. Basically, being flexible and open minded to students' different ways of learning is essential for good teaching.

Technology knowledge (TK) involves more than possessing the basic knowledge to be considered computer literate. It requires that the teacher understands and masters information technology broadly enough to apply it productively as to identify when it may assist or impede the achievement of a specific goal, and to adapt to continuous technological changes. Technology knowledge poses an open-ended interaction with technology, one that evolves over a lifetime.

Technological content knowledge (TCK) is an understanding on the ways in which technology and content influence and compel one another. In this vein, teachers need to have a deep understanding of how the curricular content can be dictated or even changed because of the application of technologies. In other words, if teachers understand the impact of technology on the practices and knowledge of a given subject, they may develop appropriate educational activities using technological tools for successful educational purposes.

Technological pedagogical knowledge involves the teacher understanding and awareness of how teaching and learning can change because of the application of particular technologies, which includes knowing the pedagogical constraints and affordances of a wide range of technological tools. For instance, web 2.0 applications were designed for purposes of entertainment, communication, and social networking,

however nowadays teachers are successfully using blogs, wikis and podcasts, among others in order to foster students' learning and understanding.

Technology, pedagogy and content knowledge goes further than what Shulman (1987, 1986) proposed as a teaching approach using technology, that is: content, pedagogy, and technology. It refers to the interactions among those three components. Therefore TPACK involves pedagogical techniques that use technologies in constructive ways to teach content, as well as knowledge of what makes concepts difficult or easy to learn and how technology can help students address some of their learning problems. Considering this, we must realize that there is no single right or wrong technological solution for every course, or every subject; it is the teacher who must develop cognitive flexibility, navigate, and learn about technological tools so that he is able to offer effective solutions.

Teaching successfully with technology requires continually creating, maintaining, and re-establishing a dynamic equilibrium among all components (Mishra & Koehler, 2007).

### **The importance of using digital writing tools**

Digital tools such as blogs, podcasts, online chat, and e-portfolios to teach writing are growing more popular every day. These tools are known as Web 2.0 tools because they are intended not only for accessing material published on the web but also for students to create their own material. For instance, when using digital writing, students can create digital texts which may combine images, video clips, audio, and text to create multimodal texts (Kress, 2003; Shipka, 2005). As Jeff Utecht (2007) notes when recognizing the need to tap into his students' engagement with the web 2.0 tools by having them create their own digital stories:

...I decided to harness this power of creativity and have my students create digital stories. Using the free Microsoft application, Photo Story 3, and the tutorials created by David Jakes, my students taught themselves how to use the program to create their stories for class. Then using the K12 group within YouTube that Miguel Guhlin created, the students uploaded the videos to share with a worldly audience. Students as creators contributing their new knowledge to the world. (p.2)

In this sense, outside school, students are involved in all types of on line communications. For example, they write on certain blogs of their interest, making their writing accessible to all kinds of audiences. According to Beach (2009), when students return to the classrooms, they experience a “disconnect between their extracurricular digital writing and their school-based print-based writing” (Beach, 2009, p. vii). Therefore, the teachers should get involved and be prepared to organize learning environments that integrate technology in a way that fosters learning.

For example, instead of asking students to write a five-paragraph essay, they may be encouraged to use a blog to read links related to the assigned topic, then exchange opinions with classmates, properly support opinions, and finally write an essay in a blog that will have a real audience, not just the teacher reading it alone.

Another example is engaging students in digital storytelling to portray any topic selected by the class. In this case teachers will be using the web to foster collaborative learning.

Also, when teachers have students create blogs, wikis, or podcasts, they should emphasize the purposes for using these tools, which are to search for material,

record thoughts, formulate ideas, develop voice, collaborate with peers, revise texts, engage audiences, and reflect on their writing.

Beach et al., (2009) report on the value of digital writing from several observations made to teachers who used blogs, wikis, online discussion, digital storytelling, podcasts, digital scrapbooks, or e-portfolios in order to engage students in writing. He found that as a result of being involved in digital writing, these students were able to:

- Read and respond to all of one another's writing from different classes within a public arena, rather than a student simply handing in a written paper to a teacher as the sole audience.
- Participate in social conversations by freely expressing their opinions without the intimidation of face-to-face interactions.
- Access and rely on on-line references to support their arguments.
- Collaboratively share information and write papers (p.5).

Engagement in writing is probably the most important advantage resulting from the use of digital writing tools since this engagement is essential for improving writing. Generally, students do not feel engaged in the writing process because they do not perceive the purpose or value of it. However, when they feel they are writing to an audience that will provide feedback, and when they learn to self-assess and revise before posting their work (Beach & Friedrich, 2006) their writing abilities improved.

Henry Jenkins (2006) refers to this online social group as a "participatory culture" that has the following characteristics (Jenkins, 2006, p.3):

- Low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement.
- Strong support for creating and sharing one's creations with others.

- Some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices.
- A belief by members that their contributions matter.
- A feeling among members of some degree of social connection with one another.

In the same vein, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, 2008) suggests that students get involved in activities related to digital writing, such as (The NCTE Definition of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literacies, 2008, para.1):

- Building relationships with others to pose and solve problems collaboratively and cross-culturally.
- Designing and sharing information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes.
- Managing, analyzing and synthesizing multiple streams of simultaneous information.
- Creating, critiquing, analyzing and evaluating multimedia texts.
- Attending to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments.

Digital tools also foster collaborative learning environments in which writers and readers interact, therefore building knowledge on each other by the constant exchange of factual information and of personal opinions. From this interaction we might expect students to come up with large amounts of writing which does not necessarily mean quality writing, since this will depend on content of instruction. In this vein, Beach (2009) refers to his own students' engagement with writing as well as the depth of students' thinking and development of ideas within specific academic contexts. Beach uses blogs and wikis in film and media studies classes to foster



critical writing about film and media, as well as virtual learning environments such as Moodle and Ning in all his courses. Having used dialogue journals for years in teaching these courses at the University of Minnesota, he decided to start using student blogs in which the students respond to each other's posts as "blog partners." He found that his students were much more engaged with their blog posts than with journal writing, not only because they could import images and video clips from the media but also because they were sharing their writing with all the other students in the class, something that never happened with the print journals. Then, he had students create chapters for a wikibook on media literacy (<http://medialiteracy.pbwiki.com>) that would be used in future sections of the course as well as be available to a larger online audience.

Also, Glogowski (2006) refers to an activity in which his students began writing about issues of genocide and human rights on their blogs. In this process, they were writing about these topics from their own individual perspectives. However, when they started reading and responding to their peers' posts, they began to perceive the value of links to others' posts to develop their own thinking. Glogowski noted that as all students developed a shared interest in the topic of human rights, they "realized that the topics they had chosen brought them all closer together, through debate, through common research ideas, through links and correspondences that they created based on meaning, based on commonly shared research interests" (p.3)

Finally, through the use of digital writing tools, students learn to evaluate their own writing by reflecting on its effectiveness, or by perceiving the changes and development during their learning process. Teachers foster this reflection by providing students with timely and adequate feedback that give them the criteria for

reflecting on their writing. For example, Anne Beaton, a high school English teacher at Armstrong High School in Robbinsdale, Minnesota, says the following about the use of digital tools in word-processing programs to provide feedback on her students' papers:

I needed to find a way to better utilize their face-to-face time in the classroom. In addition, reading papers and writing feedback by hand had become frustrating – I never felt as though I was able to fully communicate my thinking to the writer. I found myself leaning on catchphrases like, “nice” or “??” or “unclear” rather than taking the time to fully explain myself in the margin. Time spent commenting was replaced by rubrics that served as a quick easy way to distribute comments to the masses. I could simply place an “X” in the box and let the students decipher why their effort fell there.

After her reflection, she started to use the “comment” tools offered in Microsoft Word and she realized how different it was for her students to receive feedback in this way, in which they could really note what the corrections were based on their teacher's comments, which really provided visual examples that served as mini lessons tailored for each student. It is also important to consider that these tools are not just limited to be used in a specific subject. In fact, digital writing can be used across the curriculum in almost all subjects.

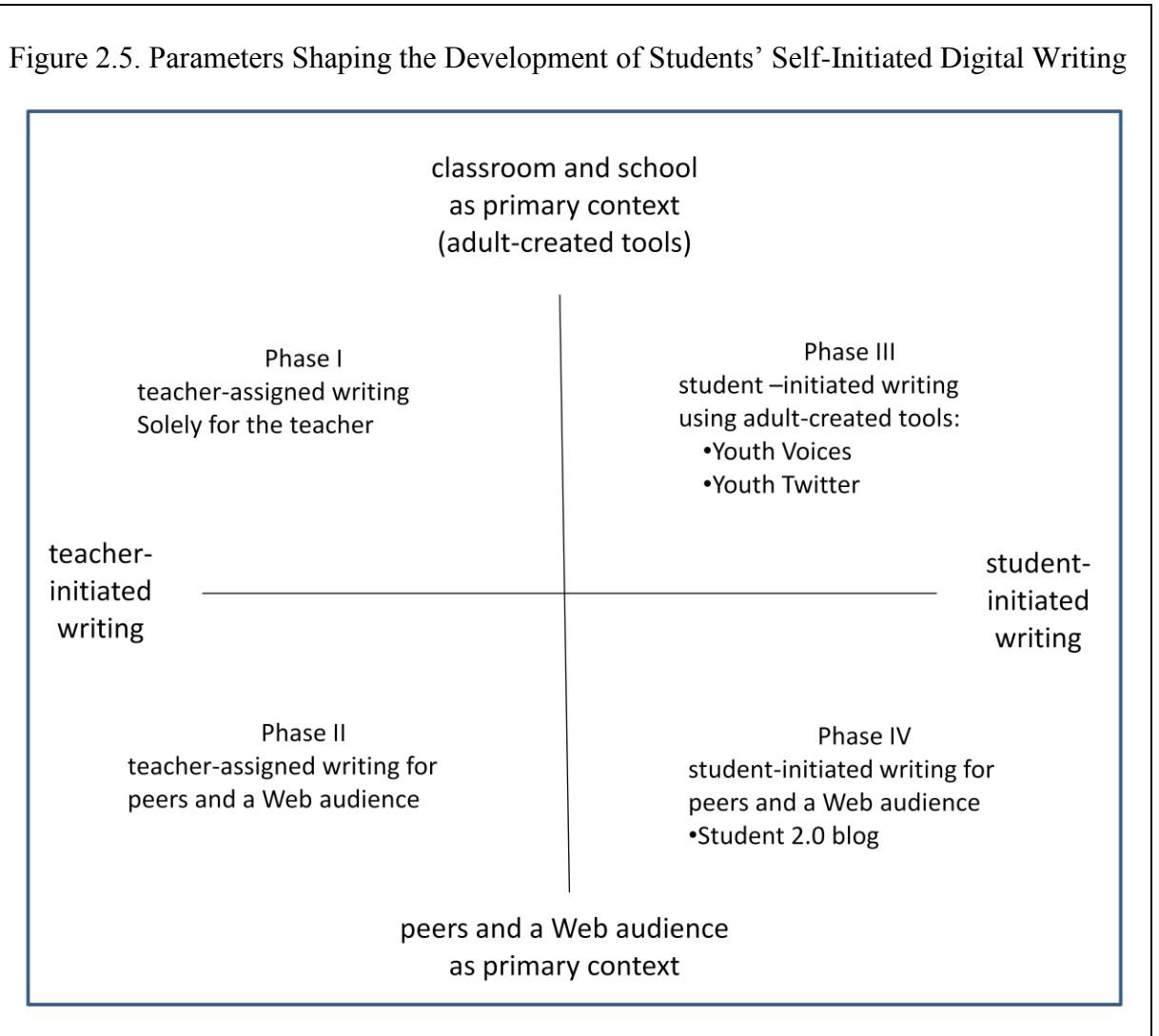
Among the many strategies and instruments available to teachers in order to apply the principles considered in this approach, the use of blogs represents a valuable tool for its ability to create conditions for ideas generation, research, and collaboration, especially with teenage learners who are accustomed to interacting online with the social media.

### **Developmental stages in the use of digital tools**

When fostering students' digital writing, Burell (2008) warns that blogging can become "just another way to turn in homework. Blogging, like thinking, creativity, and other joys, turned into an aversive horror by the forces of schooliness" (Burell, 2008, p.1). Therefore, Beach et al., (2009) suggest that teachers should consider how students perceive the use of digital tools, more than just as a means of completing writing assignments.

Fostering students' self-initiated writing occurs in four phases (Richardson, 2009, pp. 13-16): 1) Teacher-assigned writing which is done for the teacher in a school context, for example, using blogs to hand in homework assignments. 2) Expanding the audience to peers and larger Web audiences: This stage is what James Gee (2004) describes as "affinity spaces", meaning writing spaces that are built based on the groups' common interests. Students feel that they are contributing to a collective knowledge area which turns the web into a kind of huge brain. Also, Konrad Glogowski (2006) describes these spaces as "third spaces", which he differentiates to "first space" home and "second space" work or school spaces. In these third spaces students use a more informal language and they are exposed to different perspectives and ideas. For example, when entering an open blog about capital punishment, where students will read others' comments, respond to them and express their thoughts as well. 3) Self-initiated writing in which students feel comfortable with writing to peers and web audiences, and they become ready to start self-initiated writing, which means that they do not need a teacher to prompt their writing. Although, elementary and middle school students may still need modeling and support. In this stage, students use sites created by teachers and adults. In this final phase students use digital tools as social sites. They no longer write in response

to prompted assignments, but they write because they want to do it. This stage is very important because it leads to increased writing as they develop a sense of ownership. Examples of this phase are free social blogs or sites such as Facebook or Twitter (see Figure 2.5).



**The process approach to writing and the use of blogs**

The process approach to writing is supported by researchers who teach writing in the first language (Calkins, 1994; Boscolo, 2008) as well as by English as a second language and English as a foreign language professional (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996; Campbel, 1998; Liu and Hansen, 2001; Nation, 2009). It involves multiple and repeated steps that drive the writer to closely consider the topic,

language, purpose for writing, as well as the social reality of an audience. The process approach basic principles include prewriting, peer and teacher feedback, and revision (Ferris and Hedgcock, 2005). Furthermore, this approach considers the fact that writing involves a relationship between the writer and his or her audience that results in an awareness of real social situations and an inclination towards working with others.

### **Weblogs: A brief history**

Blogs are currently being used as a powerful tool in a series of social areas, ranging from politics to education. For instance, there are some political campaigns around the world that have been conducted by this means, also businesses use weblogs for public relations, customer service, and internal communication, among other uses. Although education is slowly adapting to this technological tool, the number of teachers that decide to involve their students in these fast growing communities is increasing (Blood, 2000).

Going back in history, in 1998 there were some sites, which today are categorized as “weblogs”. These sites received this denomination from Berger (1997). Garrett (1999) compiled a list of sites, and in November of that year he sent this list to Cameron Barrett who published the list on *Camworld*, Others sent him their URLs for inclusion in the list. By the end of 1999 Garret’s page of weblogs already contained 23 blogs.

Soon a community of “bloggers” (web log editors) emerged, since Cameron’s list was easy to read, and most interested people took a part in it. At this point more people began publishing their own weblogs. Consequently, Cameron’s list grew and he shortened it to only the ones on which he could follow up. Other bloggers did the same. In 1999, Brigitte Eaton created the *Eatonweb Portal*, where she included only

certain blogs that observe a simple criterion: that the site consists of dated entries.

This generated negative comments among the weblogger community and they started a debate on what was and was not a weblog, but since *Eaton web Portal* was the most complete list of weblogs available, Eaton's position prevailed.

Up to this point, only people with programming experience who already knew how to make a website could create a weblog, which mostly contained links to certain news articles or to certain addresses in the web, accompanied by the editor's commentaries. Then, readers could leave their comments on a very short space provided. If readers wanted to leave a longer commentary, a separate essay was necessary.

Then, continuing with the rapidly spreading community of bloggers, Pitas launched in July 1999 the first free build-your-own weblog tool. Then in August, Pyra released *Blogger*. All of these services are free and even people without programming experience can easily access them. Blogs turned into a sort of short-form journals, which were frequently updated with information such as: something noticed on the way to work, notes about the weekend, family news, a reflections on the school day, etc. Links took the blogger to the sites of other bloggers, therefore expanding the community.

Soon thousands of weblogs were created. Some were topic-oriented, alternative viewpoints, and free-form notebooks, all of them with their specific purposes, but all "empowering individuals on many levels." (Blood, 2000, p.6)

### **Social constructivism as related to the use of blogs in education**

Vygotsky (1978) developed social constructivism as a theory, which premise is that social interaction is basic in the development of cognition. It also emphasizes the significance of social interaction in meaning making activities (Galloway, 2001).

This theory considers that learning takes place when knowledge is constructed as a result of students' participation in discussions, conversations, and similar activities, instead of the teacher passively transferring knowledge to the students (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Ibrahim, Silong & Samah, 2001; Kerka, 1997). Therefore, learning is the result of students being exposed to meaning-making activities. For example, having students actively search for information and making sense of what they know and have understood, and not memorizing without doing a critical analysis of the information.

Social constructivist also considers as a principal part of the learning process that the learners must have confidence in their language ability, in consequence being able to use the language to explain, to negotiate, to discuss and to socialize with peers during learning activities.

The essence of blogs enables the users to interact with each other in order to share their thoughts, ideas and information. Therefore, the use of blogs relates to this theory, whereby the learners acquire knowledge through investigation and active discussion. In other words, the learners actively participate until they are able to develop their own understanding.

### **The pedagogy of weblogs**

To our students being on-line is becoming a way of living. Prensky relates: This on-line life is a whole lot bigger than just the Internet. This online life has become an entire strategy for how to live, survive and thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where cyberspace is a part of everyday life” (Prensky, 2004, p.11).

How exactly do weblogs help students learn? How do they relate to the curriculum content? Richardson answers: “The Read/Write Web is still in its relative infancy, and the answers to these questions are just being clarified.” (Richardson,

2010, p.26). But Richardson, 2010, so far, reports the following advantages on the use of weblogs:

- Weblogs promote constructive learning: Since teachers and students create content for the World Wide Web, it becomes easily accessible to millions of people. Therefore, the idea of having a large potential audience motivates us as educators to create meaningful assignments, and motivates students by enhancing the relevance of their work.
- Weblogs expand the walls of the classroom: Through weblogs students have the possibility of contacting other students in a different geographical location, experts, scientists, authors, etc. in order to consider and evaluate their points of view on particular topics of common interest. In this way, students will learn to collaboratively construct content, which is a very important skill in today's society.
- Weblogs can foster metacognitive reflection: Students will keep records of their assignments, to which they can always refer, so they are used as a basis for future development and reflection.
- Weblogs are a democratic tool that supports different learning styles: When students are too shy to speak in the classroom, they may find it easier to comment on the weblogs, therefore giving a fair opportunity to everyone. Also, all ideas, including the teacher's are equally presented in the blogs.
- Blogs enhance the development of expertise in a particular subject of interest: When the blog focuses on one topic, students accumulate knowledge on that specific area, and they develop a basis on which they will construct future learning.



- Blogs teach 21<sup>st</sup> century literary skills: The extent of our collective knowledge doubles every 18 months (Olofson, 1999), therefore we must give our students the possibility of developing skills such as research, organization, and synthesis of ideas that will help them towards acquiring the information that becomes available on line.

These are some advantages of using weblogs, but according to researchers, the advantages will be directly related to the learning experiences instructors design for their students.

### **A new form of writing**

When dealing with weblogs, writing can take many forms. Students may use blogs as their personal journals, as a space to comment about topics covered in the class, to summarize readings, or to publish school events for a larger audience. Blogs provide a wide variety of opportunities for students to write due to their structure, creating what Richardson refers to as “connective writing” (Richardson, 2010, p.28).

According to Richardson (2010) this is a form of writing that starts with reading. The biggest difference traditional writing, has when compared to academic blogging is that students are taught the grammatical conventions and then they are asked to write. In connective writing students first, critically read about what they are going to write. Richardson (2010) mentions the following differences between writing in the traditional way and blogging: Writing stops; blogging continues; writing is inside; blogging is outside; writing is monologue; blogging is conversation and writing is thesis; blogging is synthesis.

Professor Leu from the University of Connecticut says, “Online reading and writing are so closely connected that it is not possible to separate them; we read only

as authors and we write online as readers.” (Leu, O’Byrne, Zawilinski, McVerry, & Everett-Cocapardo, 2007, p.266).

In order to compose the posts, students are required to write with clarity in an organized manner, giving special attention to their editorial practices, which must take into account the potential audience. Also, students must analyze sources to identify accurate and trustworthy information to be included as a link in their entries. (Beach, Anson, et.al. pp 161-163) Publishing an entry in the blog is just a step that leads to further writing, when readers respond to the postings, blogging continues, deepening the conversation, and increasing our students’ potential learning. So, blogging is never really finished, as long as the blog is on the web, students can always go back to interact and produce.

So, blogging is not just posting, it is about analyzing, synthesizing and establishing relationship to the content being linked. Furthermore, extended analysis over a longer period of time that bases on previously posted links and comments is considered complex blogging.

### **Blogging and student age**

Now, what is the right age to introduce our students to this writing genre? Obviously, we cannot expect elementary students to go through all the process that extended blogging requires, though teachers could provide them with interesting and relevant sites and teach them how to write about what they found useful or what would they like to see. At the primary level, it would be a good choice to integrate parents, other teachers, and friends as audience.

Middle school students, through critical reading, analysis and synthesis may enhance their learning about topics they consider of interest. Again, it is important that the teacher design learning activities that promote blogging in its true form,

which is not just posting, but rather the exchange of opinions which lead to arriving at conclusions, either as a group or as individuals..

Older students may be asked to build on existing posts, by making contributions from different sources and presenting new ideas about the topic.

### **The Use of blogs across the curriculum**

Due the flexible nature of blogs, they can be included in all subjects of the curriculum. For instance, a math teacher may use blogs as a means of introducing new concepts, as a place to share links, or as a forum for discussion about the class. Science teachers can use blogs as a space to invite experts to share with their students, therefore making learning meaningful and real. In reading classes, blogs may be used to analyze characters while students exchange ideas with other classes and even with the author. In Composition classes blogs may be used to foster writing and to make students reflect on their rhetorical strategies, or to conduct online debates while students post written arguments against or in favor of a specific topic.

These are some examples of educational blogs:

The Write Weblog, created by Anne Davis (See Fig 2.6), is a place where fifth graders comment on their learning about writing and it is a clear example of how elementary students can benefit using blogs, through ideas exchange, reflections and conversations.

Figure 2.6. Anne Davis's blog for elementary students Writing class.



Figure 2.6 Anne Davis blog, retrieved from

[http://itc.blogs.com/thewriteweblog/2004/11/who\\_says\\_elemen.html](http://itc.blogs.com/thewriteweblog/2004/11/who_says_elemen.html)

Darren Kuropatwa (2005) is a math teacher who uses a Weblog (see Fig 2.7) as a starting point for the introduction of new concepts, a place to share links and ideas with his students, and a forum for discussion about the class. It is an interactive learning site for students, where they reflect on how to study for tests, and share what they are learning.

Figure 2.7. Darren Kuropatwa's blog for a Calculus class

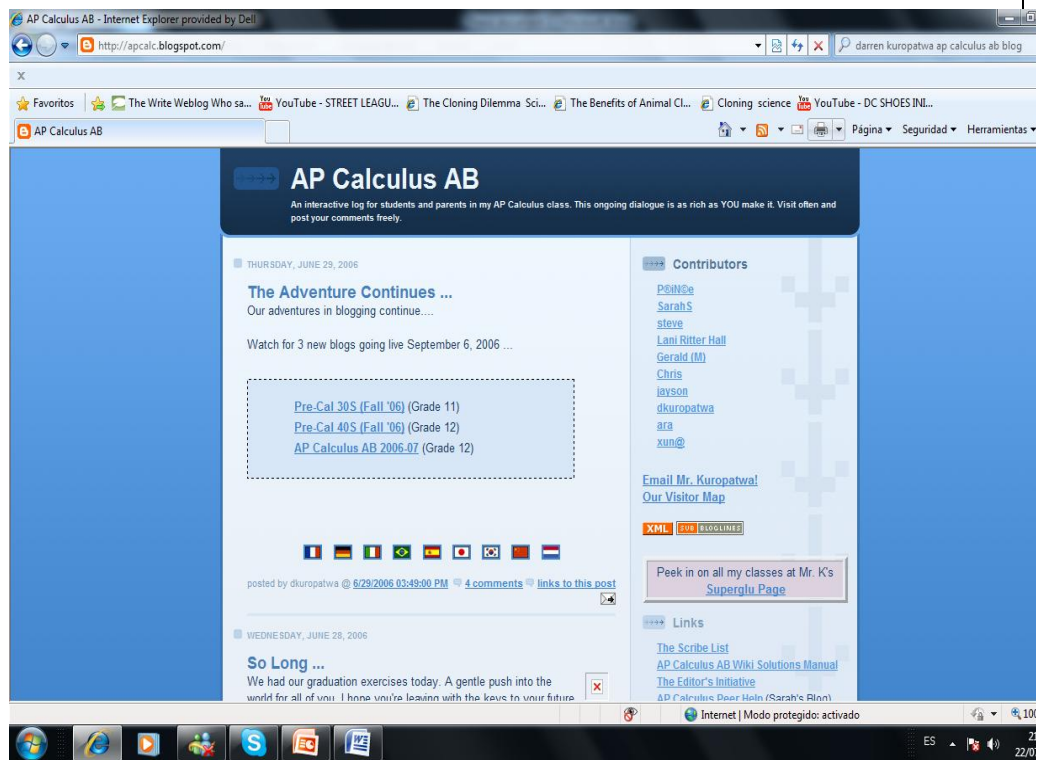


Figure 3 Darren Kuropatwa's blog. Retrieved from:

<http://apcalc.blogspot.com/>

Will Richardson's blog *The Secret Life of Bees* (see Figure 2.8) created a collaborative space where students can learn from each other and also from the author of the book *The Secret Life of Bees* (Kidd, 2002) by analyzing and discussing its multiple literary aspects.

Figure 2.8. Will Richardson’s blog on the book “The Secret Life of Bees”

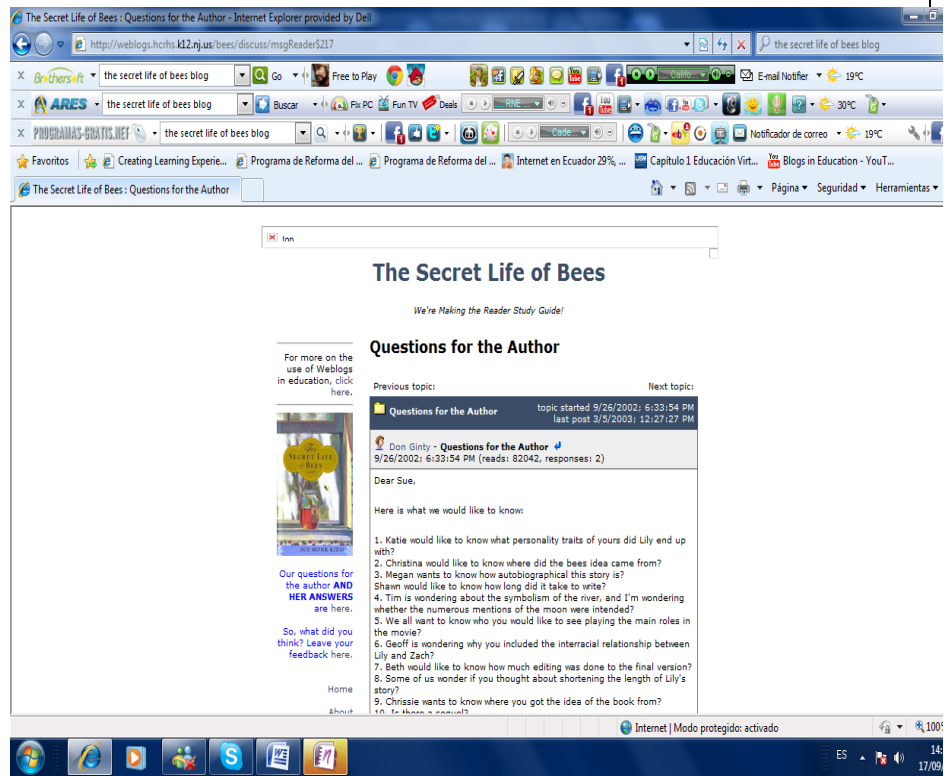


Figure 2.8. Will Richardson’s blog The Secret Life of Bees analyzes literary aspects the book. Retrieved from: <http://central.hcrhs.k12.nj.us/bees/>

Elizabeth Boeser from Bloomington, Minnesota, created a blog (see figure 2.9) to promote her 12<sup>th</sup> grade college writing class to conduct an online role-play as their students reflected on their reading of the novel *Montana 1948* (Watson, 1993). Because she wanted her students to learn persuasive writing, she decided to set up an online debate in which students would adopt roles and post written arguments in opposition to or in favor of a given topic.

Figure 2.9. Elizabeth’s Boeser’s role play blog to promote students’ writing

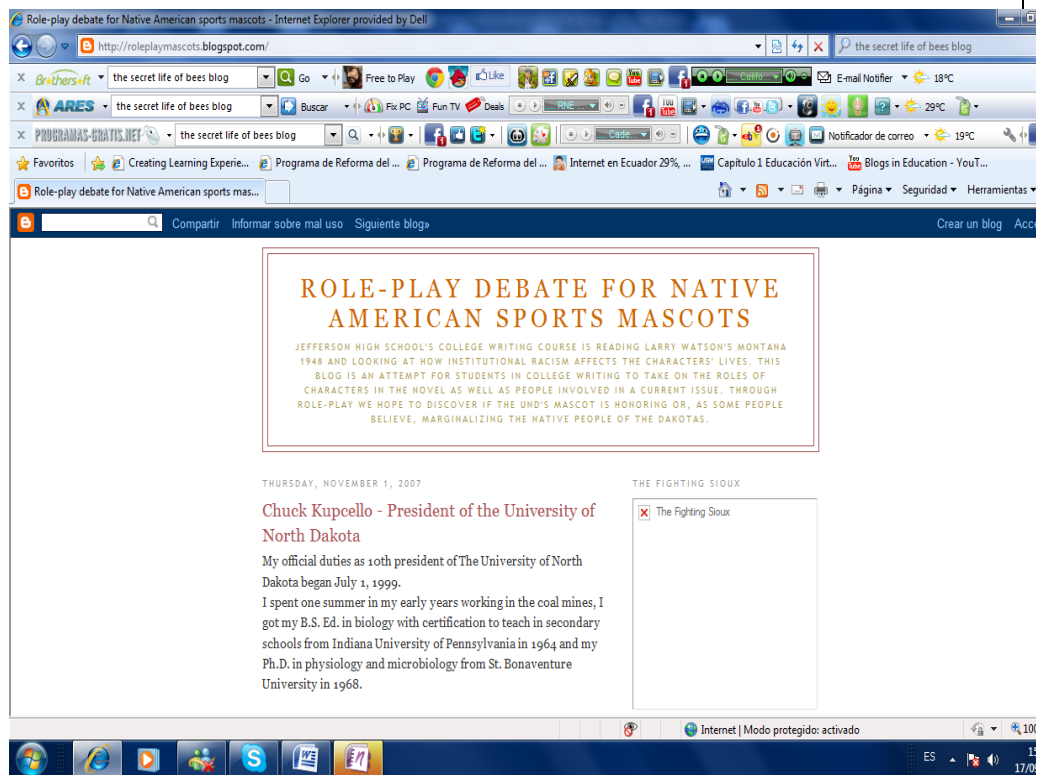


Figure 2.9. Elizabeth Boeser’s blog Role Play Debate. Retrieved from:  
<http://roleplaymascots.blogspot.com/>

As show with the preceding examples, depending on its use, blogging has the unique potential of affecting students’ learning in such ways that they develop their critical thinking, reading, and writing skills. This helps them in becoming media and information literate, and ultimately they learn to work in collaborative environments.

Teaching specialists Fernette and Brock (2005) show that blogging has great potential for positive impact on students. They found that blogging promotes critical, analogical and associational thinking. Blogging is a powerful promoter of creative and intuitive, thought processes which can increase access and exposure to

quality information. Blogging also combines the best of solitary reflection and social interaction (Eide Neurolearning Blog, 2005).

Another important advantage of blogs is the sense of ownership they can create in students, since they become owners and designers of their own space, therefore increasing their level of engagement in the writing process, which will turn them into more productive.

### **Using Blogs in the Classroom**

Richardson (2010, p.39) reports a long list on the possible uses of blogs in the classroom. Among other items, the list includes reflective thinking for the classroom teacher by using the blog to reflect on teaching experiences; describe what worked or didn't work in the classroom; provide teaching tips for other teachers; write about something you learned, or share ideas for teaching activities or language games,

For the students, the teacher can start a class blog to: post prompts for writing; provide examples of classwork, vocabulary activities, or grammar games; provide online readings for the students to read and reflect on' invite student comments or postings on issues in order to give them a writing voice,' publish examples of good student writing done in class; post discussion topics, links to additional information about topics that are being studied in class; create a literature circle (where groups of students read and discuss the same book);ask students to create their own individual course blogs, where they can post their own ideas, reactions, and written work; link your class with another class somewhere else in the world.

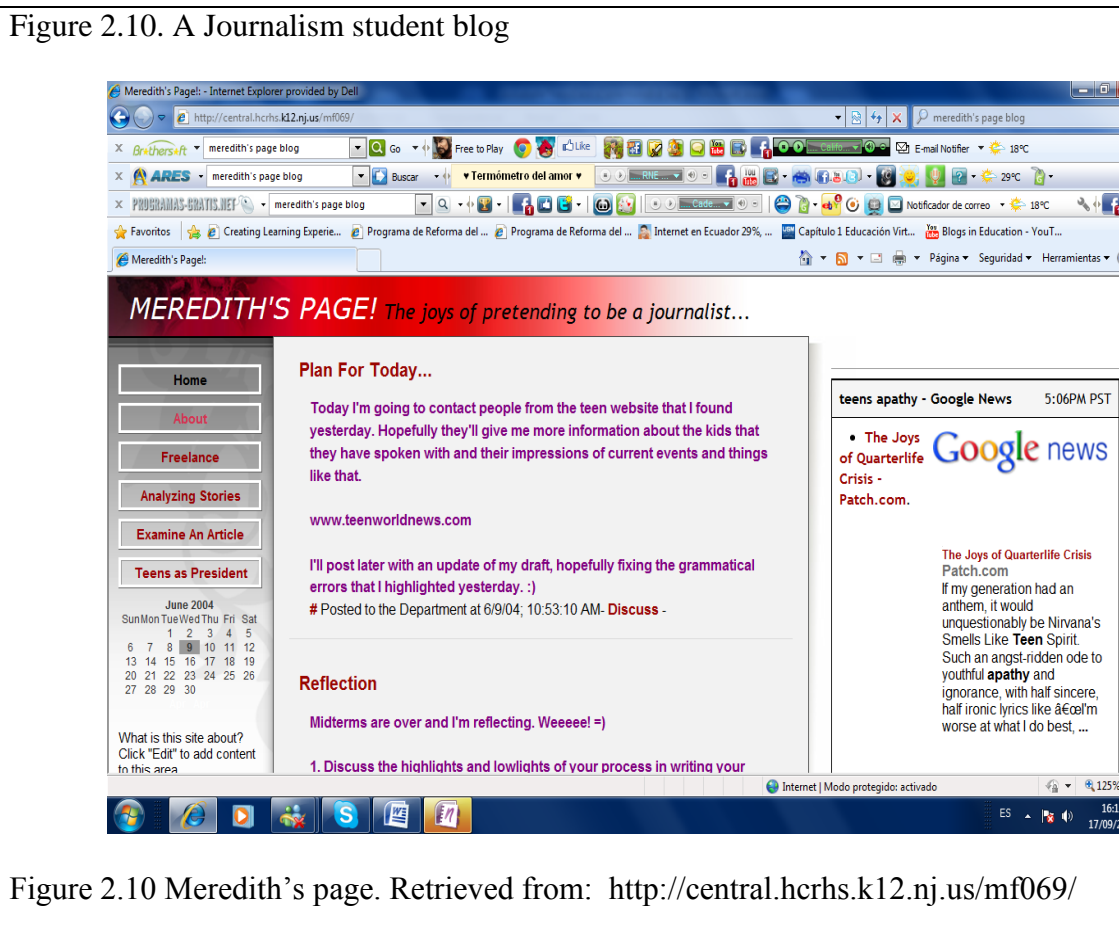
Students may start their own individual blogs to: complete class written assignments; create a portfolio of samples of their writing; express their opinion on topics being studied in the class; write about class topics, using newly learned



vocabulary words and idioms; showcase their best writing pieces; write comments, opinions, or questions on daily news items or issues of interest.

Following are some examples of the possible uses of blogs that I have mentioned before:

Meredith’s Page (see figure 2.10) where a former journalism student created a blog to write her reflections on the work she did in class, homework assignments handed in through the Weblog, and links to articles that she found relevant or interesting to her studies.



Dean Shareski’s blog Ideas and Thoughts (see figure 2.11) includes this educator reflections from his daily work, links to interesting educational sites on the web, ideas for lessons and responses the thoughts and ideas of other bloggers.

Figure 2.11. An educator blog on his teaching reflections.

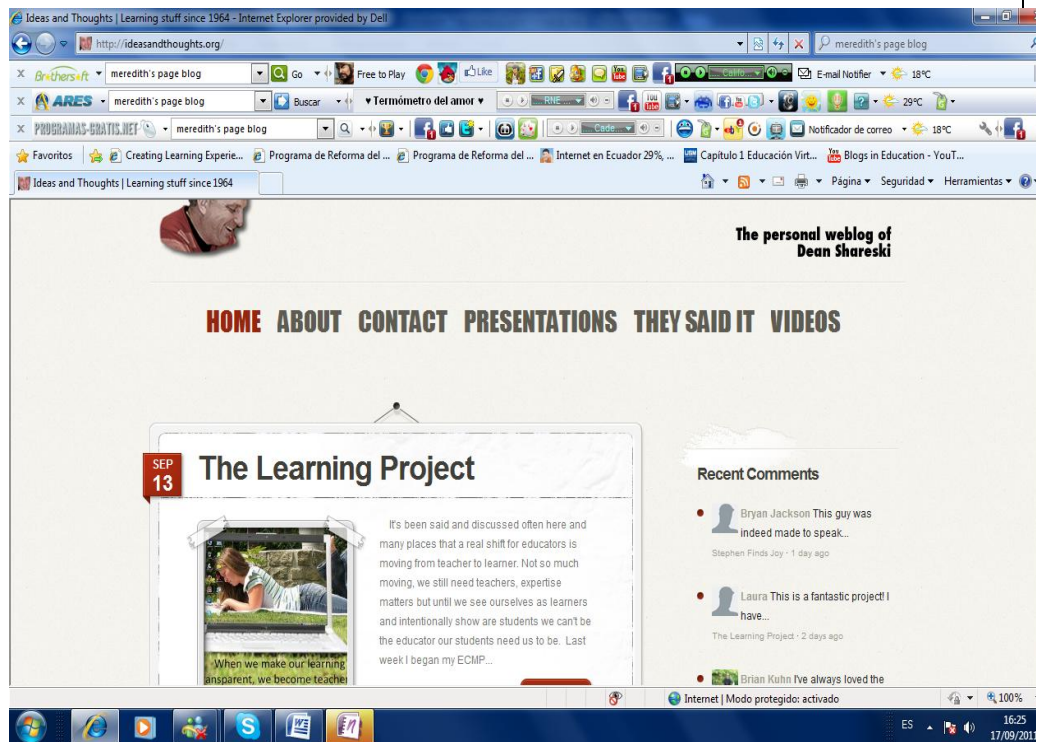


Figure 2.11. Dean Shareski’s blog. Retrieved from <http://ideasandthoughts.org/>

The uses of blogs can be as varied as we decide. The possibilities are those that educators can discover or adapt. In the same vein, educators do not have to be experts to start blogging, as Anne Beaton of Robbinsdale Armstrong High School says after using blogs with her Composition class

(<http://beatonenglish.blogspot.com/>):

For me, a blog is not about bells and whistles. I have snooped around the Web enough to realize that my blog is very basic – I have not even filled in my personal profile. What matters to me is that I have created a space outside my classroom where my students can look more carefully at an issue from class, discuss a text, or (their favorite) chat with one another while writing a paper.

As students use blogs in the classroom, they must perceive it as a social activity, which requires them to construct knowledge based on different perspectives that push them to expand their thinking. Based on this idea, Glogowski (2007) describes five stages associated with creating blog entries:

- Discover: Students identify themselves with a topic of their interest and begin visiting sites in order to find out more about the topic.
- Define: At this stage students post entries in which they share ideas about the topic.
- Immerse: Students act as researchers to create a network of sources.
- Build: Students document what they are learning and get involve with others in discussions.
- Contribute: Students create their own resources, which is a result of what they have learned. Students must be aware of these stages in order to have a successful blogging experience.

### **Types of Blogs**

Aaron Campbell (2003) refers to three types of blogs to be used in the Language classroom: The tutor blog, the learner blog, and the class blog.

The Tutor Blog (see Fig. 2.12): This blog is run by the teacher. It may be limited to posting of homework course syllabus, general course information, or the teacher may choose to post further reading sites about topics previously discussed in class. The tutor blog serves the following purposes:

- It gives daily reading practice to the learners: It is frequent that students find assigned readings too difficult or too boring. This is because they don't perceive a real purpose in these readings. So, the best person to write to them is the teacher. Entries are kept short,

geared towards learner interests, and linked to related online sources to promote further reading. In addition, vocabulary used in class can be recycled or new vocabulary words can be linked to definitions on other sites.

- Tutor blogs promote exploration of English websites: Any entry made by the tutor must provide links to articles and related English content based websites in order to encourage exploration and language practice. For those learners who insist on exploring the web in their native language, being led to interesting English sites will increase their confidence.
- This type of blog encourages online verbal exchange: The tutor must ask students questions, give them riddles, challenge their views, and do whatever is possible to encourage them to comment.
- The tutor blog provides class or syllabus information: Entries in the blog are helpful in reminding students of assignments, and discussion topics among other class notifications. Also, it may be used as a permanent link to the classroom syllabus and rules.
- Tutor blogs serve as a resource of links for self-study: The blog can be organized so that it provides a permanent link to self-study, for example links to on-line quizzes, audio and video files to listen and practice English.

Figure 2.12. The Tutor Blog, ran by the instructor.



Figure 2.12. Tutor Blog. Retrieved from: <http://fceblogger.blogspot.com/2007/03/my-fce-class-2007.html>

The Learner Blog (see Fig. 2.13): These are blogs that are run by individual learners or by small groups of learners. Students can be encouraged to write frequently about their interests, and also they can post comments on their classmates’ blogs. The objective here is that students get writing practice and develop a sense of ownership of their space in the web. In addition, everything that they write can be read by anyone else, therefore promoting further exchange of ideas, resulting in great amounts of writing.

According to Richardson (2009), the major disadvantage of learner blogs is that they need to be monitored to ensure that they are protected by a password and that, students are not publishing private information in their profiles or are not being

attacked by spammers. Also, students may find it difficult to set up their individual blogs, thus requiring additional assistance which could be time consuming.

Figure 2.13. The Learner Blog, ran by individual learners.

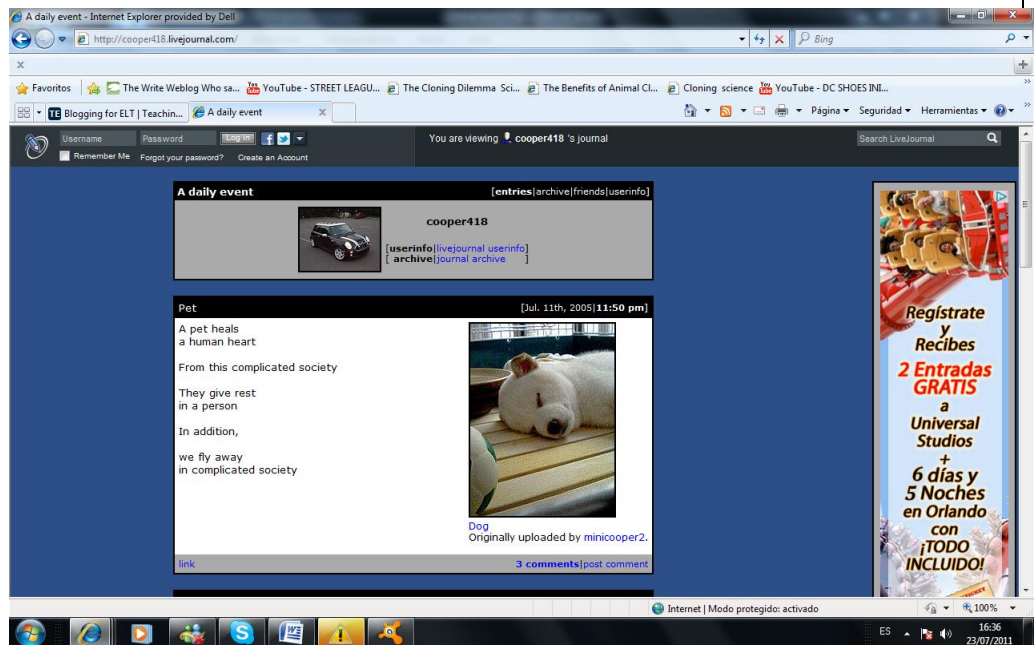


Figure 2.13. Learner Blog. Retrieved from <http://cooper418.livejournal.com/>

The Class Blog (see Fig. 2.14): This is a shared space where teachers and students are allowed to write in the same area. It is used as an extracurricular extension of the classroom. Students may be requested to reflect on writing more in depth about the class themes. One advantage of this type of blog is that it gives the students a greater sense of involvement than in the tutor blog. Another advantage is that all posts submitted to the blog can be monitored so that only teacher-approved posts end up being published. Also, since comments are written by students' peers, they may feel more interested in reading and providing comments to others' posts.

The following are some possible uses:

- In conversation-based classes it can be used for learners to post messages, images, and links related to classroom discussion topics. It could also be a space for them to post thoughts on a common theme assigned for homework.
- With intermediate and advanced learners, a class blog may be used to provide learners with an opportunity to develop research and writing skills by being asked to create online resources for others.
- In international classrooms language exchanges learners from different countries have joint access and publishing rights to the blog. In this way the process will be transparent and could be followed by learners, tutors, parents and friends.
- For reading and writing classes. Individual learners can be given varying amounts of responsibility to publish material arising from postings. The results of this effort are what is seen on a website.

Figure 2.14. The Class Blog, a shared space for teachers and students.

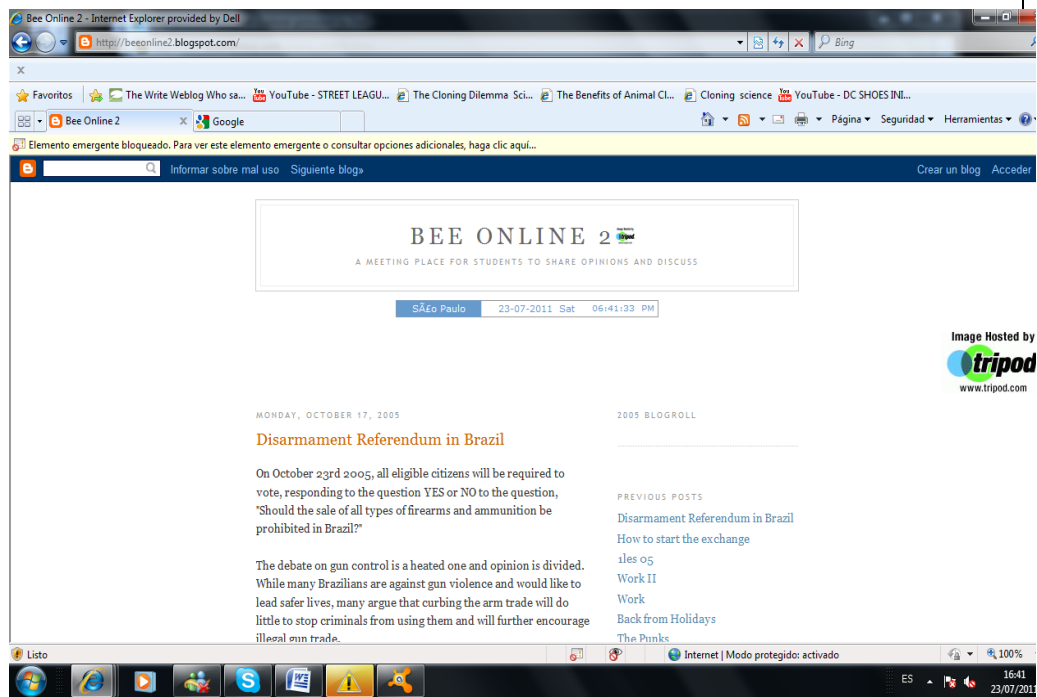


Figure 2.14. The Class Blog. Retrieved from <http://beeonline2.blogspot.com/>

In order to select the type of blog students should use, the purpose of the activity should be considered in the first place. For instance, the learner blog may be chosen over the classroom blog if the purpose is to engage students in self-initiated writing. On the other hand, classroom blogs are recommended for the purpose of encouraging students to interact with their peers, and to promote critical analysis.

### Challenges of using blogs

Before actually using blogs in the classroom, there are certain challenges that should be considered:

**Informality:** Students generally prefer blogging compared to traditional pen and paper writing because they can express themselves in a more natural way. This ease of expression may lead to creating an informal writing environment, which turns



students more productive but does not take into account the grammar conventions of the language.

A student presented his view of informality in blogging as follows: (as cited by Richardson, 2010, p. 121):

It was like a journal, I could write whatever I wanted, and it wasn't so strict, but you could still communicate the idea, you can use the language of our friends. The informality is important. When you are writing a paper, you have to get into the perspective of someone who's academic and educational and you have to write it in that sort of syntax in terms of what the teacher expects.

In studying his students blogging, Steve Krause (2006) noted low quality writing, as he stated "very little writing that could be described as reflective, dynamic, collaborative, or interactive" (p.2).

Students in general tend to use language that is meant to appeal to the audience, which is their classmates and the teacher. Therefore, they may use language that includes sarcasm, pop-culture references, or abbreviations.

In analyzing some of his students blogs (West, 2008) makes reference to this hybrid writing style which includes school and popular culture, as he states:

"...students disrupted AP notions of language embedded in the curricula of their school by incorporating out-of-school literacies into their work." (p.597).

Educators should be aware and ready to deal with these variations in writing. According to Beach (2009), this problem could be avoided if teachers were to devote time to writing with students so that they value their teacher as a member of the blogging activities, instead of just having students write for the teacher. Blogs can also be used after formal classes in which the conventions of writing have been

studied. The key is in the teacher creating the appropriate activities towards a specific learning goal.

Evaluating sources: As students become more involved in working with blogs in their true form, this is reading, evaluating, synthesizing, providing links, and posting, they need to learn how to evaluate sources that are trustworthy and accurate.

In this vein, Stephen Downes (2005) says in his blog that there is no way of exactly knowing whether something you read on the web is true or not, you just have to determine by yourself, based on your knowledge and experience whether to believe or not, he says it is just a matter of trust. This unstable condition is a result of everyone now having a voice on all sorts of topics. But, there are some aspects to be considered in order to determine by ourselves the validity of sources: For instance, a first step could be to find out as much as we can about the author. This includes conducting a Google name search for information related to his profession, title, and his authority on the topic. Students must keep in mind that sometimes even authorized sources may contain bias, so in class they must be taught about identifying bias and propaganda. Finally, students must realize that it is not just a matter of using the first source that becomes available to support their point of view, but that blogging requires time and effort.

Time: Blogging on a regular basis is a time-consuming activity. Even though the act of blogging is very simple, it requires time for students to locate the appropriate content to read and later to post.

Inappropriate content: Educators must make students aware that, when navigating the web, they may come across content that is inadequate for their ages or for their level of knowledge, they may face content that leads them to risky contacts with other adolescents or adults, or probably they may be exposed to pornography or

bad language. In an attempt to prevent this situation, some schools opt for blocking access to certain sites or software applications. But, Beach (2009) suggests that the best way of safeguarding students, rather than simply blocking or restricting access, is to discuss with them the “ethical importance of taking personal responsibility for their online practices” (Beach, 2009, p.20). Since, at home or at school students may encounter these “dangerous” sites. Also, if possible, activities can be controlled and carried out in the school.

It is also important to ask the parents’ permission by holding a general meeting in order to explain how blogging is involved with the curricular issues. If this is not possible, a document explaining the most important aspects and asking for the parents’ authorization should be sent home.

The intrinsic nature of blogs gives the ability to people to write whatever comments they want, this makes them a powerful tool for learning or for offering appropriate feedback.

Privacy: Keeping students personal information private is also a challenge to be considered. In this regard, Beach (2009) advises students to do the following:

- Use only first names and do not disclose personal information.
- Use blogs that are secure and protected by password, so that only the teacher and peers can make comments and access information.
- Avoid language that could harm other students or compromise their privacy.

Issues of access: Principally schools in low-income areas may not count with the necessary hardware and software to work with digital tools, also students may lack broadband access in their homes, or some schools may have one computer lab which most of the time is booked. If this is the case, we must encourage students to

look for alternative ways to have access. For instance, they may go to public libraries.

### **Blogging and assessment**

The grading criteria to be used in the assessment of blogging can be as simple as counting the students' contributions to the blog site, or it can be as complex as evaluating if students use images, videos, other blogs' and sites' links, or even strategies for engaging audience.

Kathleen West (2008) in her analysis of students' blogs noted that we can grade blog entries in, at least, three different ways: If the blog project has not been long enough to allow students to become advanced or expert blog writers, entries can be graded on completion. This is a way of letting students know that you are serious about the project and that they need to complete the assignments. Another way would be to grade the entry on the quality of the content, based on the understood audience. If it is understood that the audience is academic, that the post is a response to a scholarly topic, then grade accordingly. If it is understood that the audience is less sophisticated, other language could be accepted. Another way entries may be graded could be based on the amount of conversation they generate, based on comments and other entries. In this case the quality of the writing is not as important as the quality of the idea.

In addition to this criterion, Beach (2009, p.201) suggests grading could be related to the extent to which students do the following:

- Clearly formulate their positions or opinions.
- Address topics and issues dealt with in class discussions or readings.
- Provide supporting evidence for positions or opinions.
- Employ links to others' posts both within and outside the classroom.

- Reformulate others' material or links in one's own words.
- Engage in comments to peers' posts and reactions to those comments.

Finally, Richardson (2010) thinks it is unreasonable to grade every post that students make, but it may be reasonable to include every post in an overall assessment. Students may select their best posts, reflect on this selection, and post a reflection of their self-evaluation. In general, Richardson suggests evaluating the level of participation, the intellectual depth of the post, the effectiveness of writing, the level of reflection, and the willingness to contribute and collaborate with others.

In summary, assessment practices should be flexible and sensitive, and they must be directly related to the kinds of assignments involved in creating and commenting on posts.

### **The blog platform**

There are many blog platforms available such as, Edublog, Vox, Blogger, LiveJournal, TypePad, WordPress, DiaryLand, among others. Choosing the right platform will depend on the instructor's needs and plans, as well as on the ease of use for younger students, support, and safety

The most popular and easiest platform to use is Blogger ([www.Blogger.com](http://www.Blogger.com)), which is owned by Google. This platform does not require setting up or maintenance of the software. Starting with Blogger implies three easy steps: create an account, name your blog, and choose a template. In the first step you just fill basic personal information, such as user name, password, and e-mail.. Then, you decide a name for your blog, which will be the URL address. Finally, you choose your favorite template. If you change your mind later, most data can be altered, except for the user name and password.

Once you set up your blog, you are the administrator of that web site and you have the right to create, edit, or delete postings. You may even customize the layout of the blog, add photos, insert videos, and audio recordings. You may also configure your blog according to how you want your comments to work. There are four options: only registered users of Bloggers, anyone who might read your post, anyone with a Google account, or only people who are registered members of your blog. For this last option you have complete control, since as you create your blog, you are the one who invites the members. For academic purposes this might be the best option.

Another issue to consider is if you need to read all the postings before they are published. Although Blogger does not directly give this option, it is possible to control this by asking students to save all posts as “drafts” until they get the permission to publish. But, in this case, the teacher must have access to all students’ sites. In this way nothing will be published without consent.

In deciding which blogging platform to use, Beach (2009 p. 125) lists the following characteristics of some of the available platforms:

- WordPress (<http://wordpress.org>) needs to be installed on a school server, therefore it is very secure and contains many powerful features.
- Edublogs (<http://edublogs.org>) does not need to be installed on a school server; it is designed especially for use in schools due to its privacy features and training support available for teachers and students.
- Angelfire (<http://www.angelfire.lycos.com>) has an easy to use editing tool, Lycos-Qumana, for inserting links, tags, and images into blogs.
- Typepad (<http://www.typepad.com>) is a commercial platform.
- Blogs designed specifically for schools, such as Class Blogmeister, Gaggle Blogs, Learnerblogs, Kidzblog, or 21Publish, require teacher monitoring of

student posting. Elgg (<http://elgg.net>) and Industrious Kid's Imbee.com are designed particularly for elementary and middle school because they provide a lot of security, interactive features, and secure storage space.

Before deciding on any of the available platforms, the teacher needs to experiment with different blogs, and consider their ease of use according to the students' age, safety features, and technical support.

## CHAPTER 3

### **The Pilot Study**

#### **Methodology and Research Design**

This qualitative pilot study analyzed the process of using blogs in the EFL writing class. While conducting the study, I considered Jacob's (1988) guidelines for performing effective qualitative research, which are: Looking at variables in the natural setting, in which they were found, gathering detailed data, considering the interaction of the variables, while seeking a wide understanding of the entire situation. Students participated in two surveys, one related to their previous experience with blogs, and another one conducted at the end of the study which analyzed their perceptions after the use of blogs. Then, after receiving instructions on how to use blogs, students participated in a tutor blog, which I created using "edublogs" to reinforce the academic aspects of one of the units of our literature classes. This activity was graded and it was carried out for a period of two weeks, in which students worked in the computer class once a week and for the remaining time they worked at home. Students also, participated in a class blog, created using "blogger". The class blog was used as a social space for peers to be connected. Postings on this blog were encouraged but not mandatory, and they were not part of the grade. Finally, students learned how to create their own blogs. Data was collected on the use of the class blog on Blogger.com and the tutor blog on edublog.

Since the Literature lesson related to analyzing an article, at the end of the study, students took a written test to measure their understanding and critical thinking. Finally, my personal observation notebook recorded during the process was included as one of the data sources.



In order to inform my research I have read several educators experiences with using blogs to teach writing. These experiences support the use of blogs, but at the same time they refer to special aspects to be considered if the experience is to have successful results, With this research, I have described how using blogs to teach writing has both advantages and disadvantages that have to be taken into account during the process

### **Participants for the Pilot Study**

Nine, native-Spanish-speaking students from a bilingual school in Coastal Ecuador participated in the pilot study. Initially, there were 4 males and 6 females, between 11 and 12 years-old. They were eighth graders, whose English level was intermediate. This English Literature and Composition class met for two hours a day twice a week. The language of instruction was English.

### **Data Collection Procedure and Instruments**

#### **Pre- and Post Survey**

The pre-survey consisted in five multiple choice questions directed to find out how much students knew about blogs and how willing the students were to work with them. The Post-survey, included five open-ended questions related to the students' experience after using blogs. The questions were prepared based on the study done by Wu (1998). Data was gathered from the two surveys, one given at the beginning and another one at the end of this study; In addition to the surveys, students' postings on the tutor blog and class blog were analyzed as were written tests administered by the end of the lesson. Finally, I recorded my personal observations throughout the blogging project, as they related to the students' attitudes, reactions and accomplishments along the study.

### **The Setting of the Pilot Study**

The pilot study was carried out over a period of five sessions. The first session was held in the computer lab. The students completed the pre-survey, and participated in a class discussion about blogs and their importance. They received oral instructions about the purpose of the study, which was to have students write an informative paragraph that was both logical and coherent related to the topic of the reading: “The Mane Story”, which was an informative article about the manes of lions. That day, students were instructed to enter the blog to complete the first assignment that was intended to engage them with the topic, as they found sites with interesting facts about lions, and commented about them.

Our second session was in the classroom; I projected and read their postings, which served as the basis for our Literature class. In this session, I covered the academic aspects of the lesson- reading and analyzing the text in the book for coherence and logic.

In our third session, in the computer lab, students were asked to look for and add supporting details for the facts that their classmates had posted in the first assignment. In session four, students received instructions as to how they should write their informative paragraphs taking into account coherence and logic. At this stage they combined academic classroom instruction and information from their blog postings to write their paragraphs. During the last session, we analyzed and commented on the assignments. In addition I presented the class blog. This blog was used as a social space and the postings on it were not graded. Also, students took a written test, which included the academic aspects covered during the blogging sessions. They had one hour to complete the test. Finally, students completed the

post survey, as to obtain their impressions on the activities performed while using the blog.

During all blogging activities students were prompted to complete their assignments, as well as to comment on their classmates' assignments in order to promote a sense of community.

*Tutor Blog*

This is the type of blog created and controlled by the teacher. In order to create this blog, I used Edublogs from the platform (<http://edublogs.org>). I decided to use this platform because it is free, and easily accessible. It does not need to be installed on a school's server. It also has privacy features and training support both for teachers and students. Figure 3.1 shows the blog created for this study.

Figure 3.1. The Tutor Blog “Let’s Blog it”, used in the pilot study

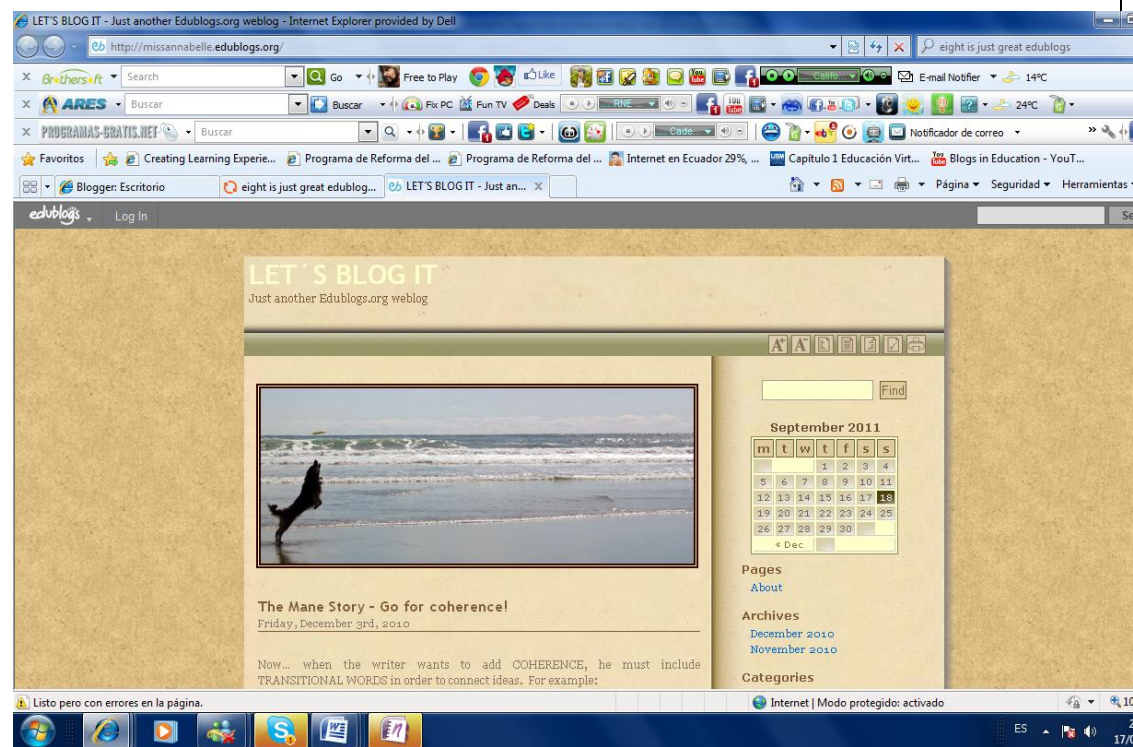


Figure 3.1 Tutor Blog. Retrieved from: <http://missannabelle.edublogs.org/>

*Class Blog*

This blog (see figure 3.2) was created with the purpose of providing students with a social space. The first posting was a prompt in which I asked them to write about their families’ activities for New Year’s Eve. After this, it was open for the students to write any comments related to school or personal activities.

Figure 3.2. The class blog, used for this pilot study

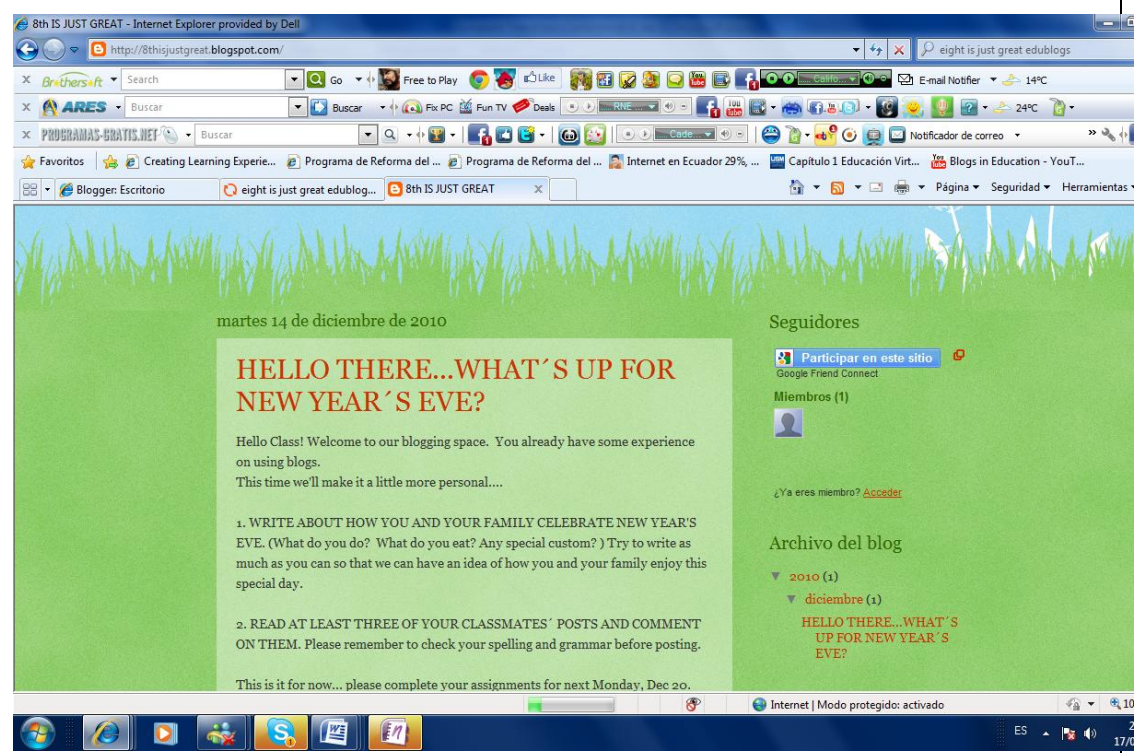


Figure 3.2. Class blog. Retrieved from: <http://8thisjustgreat.blogspot.com/>

*Individual Blogs*

These blogs are run by the individual learners (See figure 3.3). I instructed students on how to create their blogs. They were encouraged but not obligated to create one. Peers were encouraged to check their classmates’ blogs, and to respond to them.

Figure 3.3. Individual blog, created by a student according to his interests.

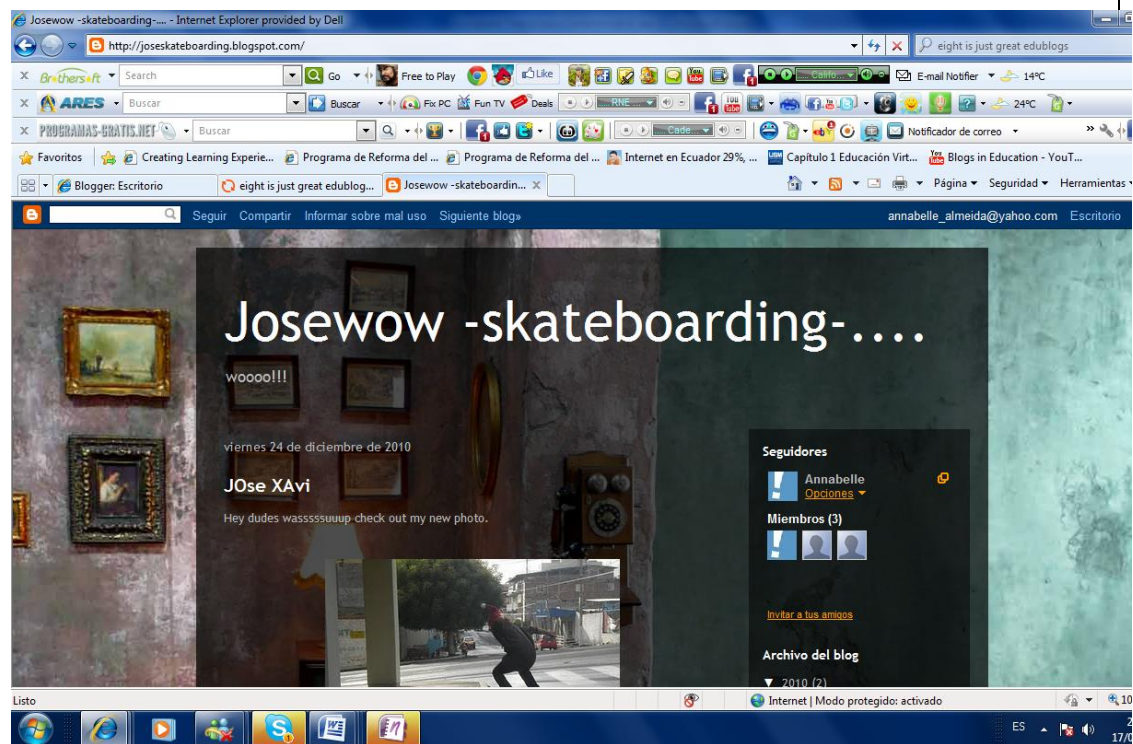


Figure 3.3. Individual blog. Retrieved from: <http://joseskateboarding.blogspot.com/>

### Results of the pilot study

First of all, as a result of the pre-blog survey, 6 students (60%) answered that they had heard about blogging, but they had no idea about how it worked, 2 students (20%) had never heard about it, and only one student (10%) had heard and tried out blogging in her previous school. It is important to notice that the student who answered that she has tried blogging before is new in the school; she had previously attended a bilingual school in Quito, Ecuador.

All of the students (100%) expressed their interest in learning about blogging. In fact, they were very excited and curious, especially because they loved the idea of writing using a computer and not pen and paper and of sharing their ideas on line.

Their comments reflect their positive attitude. For instance:

C. said: “I like working with blogs because the people can comment if they agree with me”,

L. mentioned: “Writing is boring, but when I use the blog I feel inspired and free to write”,

M. said: “It is fun, it doesn’t feel like homework.”

To the question of how they would feel about publishing their opinions on line. Only two students (20%) opposed the idea. M. wrote: “Maybe they are bad, making comments on my work”. On the other hand, N. agreed with the idea of writing online wrote: “It is useful, if you have a homework you can investigate there.”

Regarding the tutor blog activity this was a quite successful experience, since blogs were commented on by most of the students in all the assignments, as it is shown in the table below:

Table 3.1. Number of assignments completed and comments posted by students

Assignment	Number of students that completed the assignment	Percentage	Number of comments
1	8	88.8%	9
2	7	77.7%	10
3	9	100%	17
4	9	100%	9

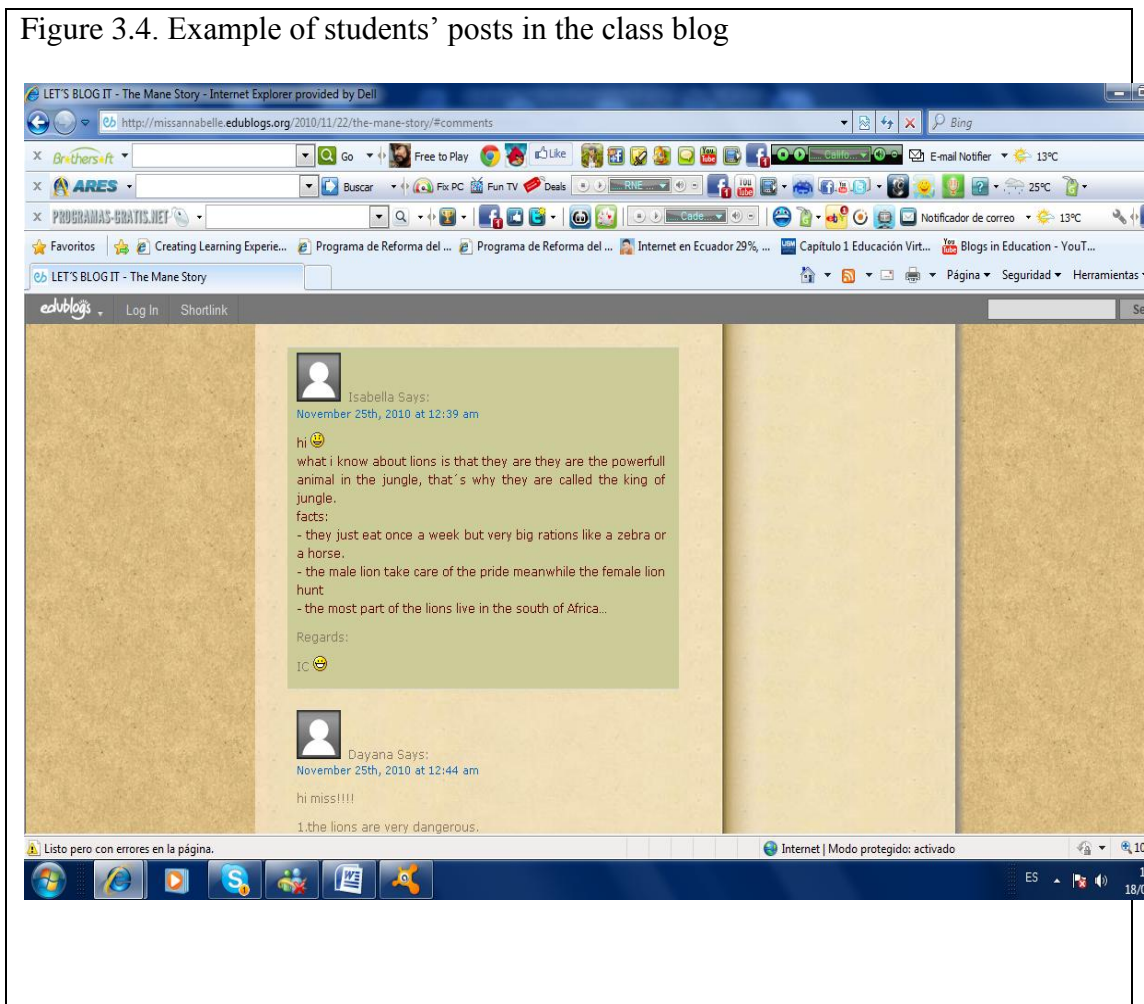
It appears that since posting on this blog represented a grade for the Literature and Composition class, the students were motivated to complete the assignments. For the first assignment, students who did not complete it presented the following excuses:

J. said: “My father did not pay the internet service at home.”, and

J2 said: “I didn’t copy the correct address, so I couldn’t enter the page.” ,  
 Two of the students’ assignments were very poor, since they posted the same day,  
 just before the class from their laptops. Therefore, this left only four students who  
 worked consciously and effectively.

The second assignment went better, even though only 7 students out of 9  
 completed it, and none of them posted links. They published interesting information  
 they found by exploring the web. Here are some examples of their posts:

Figure 3.4. Example of students’ posts in the class blog

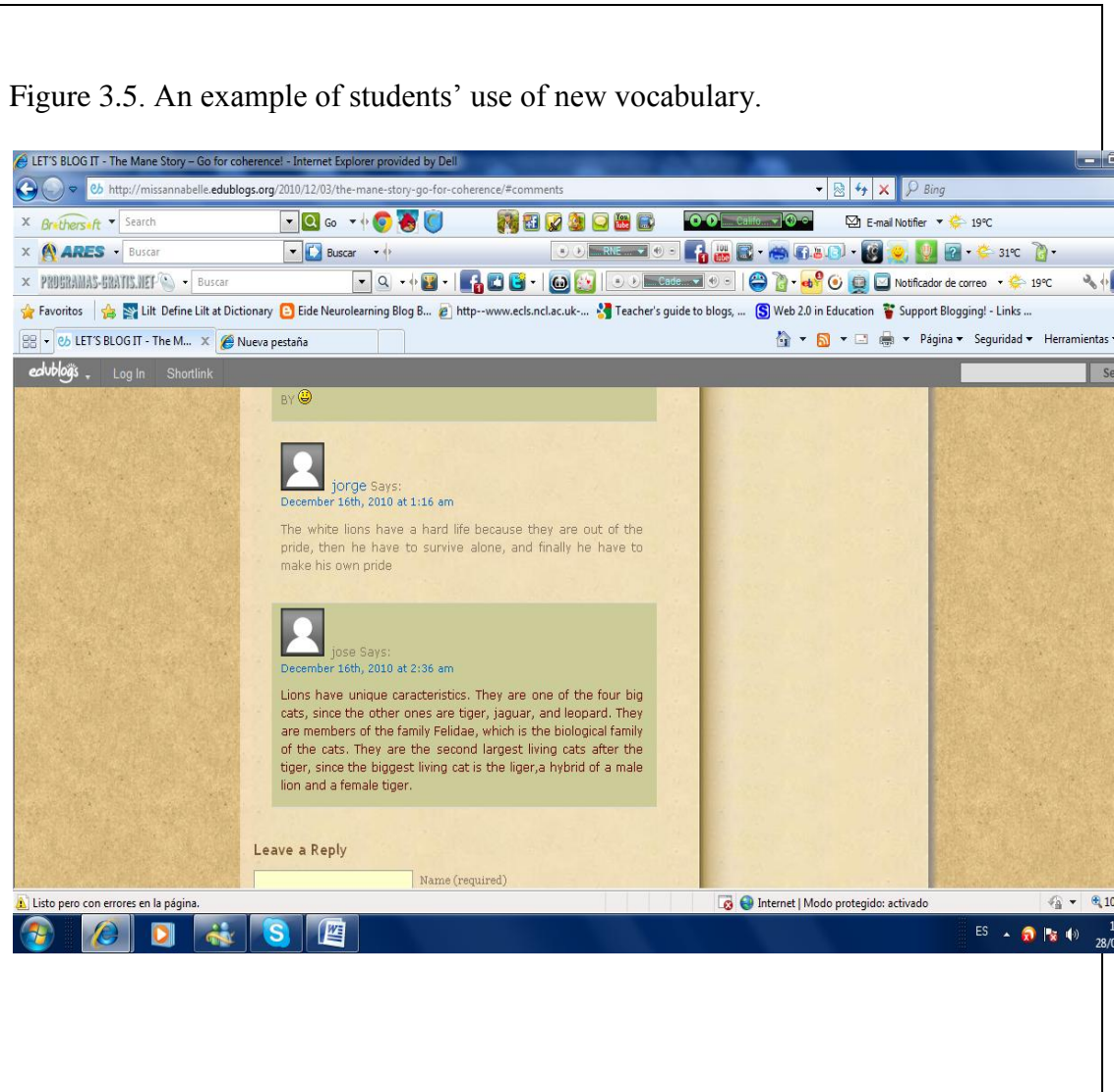


M. commented: It seemed to be an enriching experience for them., “The homework done like these are more cool”,

A. said: “It is useful to do it online because if you need to investigate, everything is there”, N. said “It was good to say my opinion.” Since this assignment

was used as an introduction to our literature class, it was very easy to start with the new topic because they were already hooked on it. They even acquired some new vocabulary words.

Figure 3.5 shows examples of students' use of new vocabulary.



Assignments three and four were completed by all students, probably because this would be the last chance for improving grades. In this case, students who had not completed some of their previous assignments used as a reference their classmates' posts and were able to do a good job, therefore showing evidence of peer review.



Some of the negative aspects of this blogging activity were: Most of the students used “emoticons” in their postings, which added informality, distracted students’ attention from the purpose of the assignment, and kept them from writing complete grammatical sentences, for instance, students would post a happy face instead of writing a closing sentence for a paragraph; they also included informal language, for example the expressions “cool” and “hey dudes” were repeatedly used in most of the postings; two students used upper and lower case letters combined without any reason, and when they were asked why they did so, one of the them answered: “Because it looks nice this way”. One student posted both in English and Spanish combined. This was because he searched for the information in Spanish and wrote it that way. When the student was questioned about this, he just answered: “I did not notice”, therefore he just typed, and never went back to check before submitting his comments.

In the sessions in the computer lab students got easily distracted by the web contents. For example, J. said: “Miss, just one second, let me see this, come and see hybrid animals.” This situation caught everyone’s attention for some minutes.

Some positive aspects were: By searching on the web, students were able to synthesize information. They were exposed to new vocabulary words related to the lesson’s topic, they also increased the quantity of writing in comparison to class production. In addition, students were able to use their classmates’ examples in order to develop their assignments.

In the test, which measured the academic aspects of the lesson that were explained in the classroom and supported by the blog activities, two students obtained a perfect score, six obtained good grades (a score of 18 over 20), and only one student reported a grade below the acceptable average (14 over 20). These

results indicate that the blogging activities definitely contributed to the students understanding of the lesson's objectives.

For the class blog, the results were disappointing since only three students (33.33%) posted a total of eight comments, and one was mine. Even though I insisted several times during class hours, students were not especially interested in this blogging activity. This could probably be related to the upcoming Christmas vacation time.

The postings in this blog were very informal, with no observation at all to the grammar or spelling rules. Here, students felt free to write the way they wanted. Again, this time, there was a lot of production but no observation of grammar conventions.

In the post blogging survey 100% of the students responded that it was easy to use blogs, and they also agreed that using blogs was a useful tool in the English Writing class. Here are some of their comments, which were representative of the whole group's perceptions:

A.: "I like blogging because I can share more things with my friends and with the teacher",

I.: "All the news that are important for you, you can share with other people"

D.: "If you don't have time in class, you can post your ideas".

55% percent of the students responded that what the part they found most difficult about the blogging activity was that they were afraid of making mistakes. 88% responded that they felt more comfortable blogging than writing on a paper: Here is a comment that reflected the group attitude.

M.: "Writing on a paper is boring".

Finally, only two students created their own blogs. One made a blog to present his skateboarding abilities, and the other one about his general interests, such as X-Box's latest games.

When I started the blogging activities with my students, I thought about creating a community in which we could share ideas about the class's topics, and at the same time I thought about providing them with a space that they could feel their own. I was aware that the writing conventions would probably not be observed because, in my opinion, and as the results of the pilot study suggest, blog writing tends to foster informality to the writing process. In this vein, Fotos (2003) mentions:

Text produced with a computer is less likely to be written according to set rhetorical modes and the standards of formal written language than text produced by traditional means...it may fall short of the usual standards for the form and content of written work. (Fotos, 2003 p.74)

Students were able to produce, to post ideas that were both useful and interesting for the class discussion, but they were unable to take into account the writing rules, except for some assignments in the tutor blog, which were graded.

I see blogging as a productive activity that will enrich students' knowledge about a particular subject. It definitely provides lots of writing practice, as Bernstein (2004) mentioned, "Frequent writing improves writing, writing for an audience improves writing, writing that matters improves writing, and writing on a computer improves writing (p.74)." But, in my opinion, the main area of concern is "linguistics". Crystal (2001) raises specific questions: "Do the relaxed standards of e-mails augur the end of literacy and spelling as we know it? Will the Internet herald a new era of techno babble?" Maybe users adopt a specific way of communicating because they want to be identified as members of a community. Crystal (2001) also

refers to the term “*language variety*”, as: “a system of linguistic expression whose use is governed by situational factors.” This can be compared to the kind of language used by lawyers in the court. So this situation motivates the question: Should we, as educators, be opened to accept these kinds of changes? Most likely, we should accept that these changes are taking place, as Fotos (2003) suggests when she cites several experts in her book.

“... There is no single well-defined rhetorical structure, particularly when used for personal correspondence, chatting, or participation in discussion groups (Crystal 1995, 2001; Murray 1995, 2000). Numerous studies have established that e-mail discourse has features that combine both the spoken and the written mode of communication (Crystal, 2001; Heim, 1987; Kein, 1996; McIntyre & Wolff, 1998; Murray, 1995, 2000; Warschawer, 1996a, 1999 cited in Fotos, 2003 p. 109)

In fact, as this pilot study suggests, the writer tends to use many informalities, so, it is important to increase students awareness throughout the process that they are writing for an audience, which not only includes classmates, but also teachers.

Blogging in the EFL Writing class has been a nice and innovative experience, which, even though not a complete success, I consider has had more positive than negative aspects. It is just a matter of directing the activities as to comply with our curriculum objectives; in my case, I always worked together with the material in the students’ book, focusing on the objectives of the unit. Therefore, blogging assignments always follow a class session where we covered the aspects to be considered when blogging. For instance, we read a story and analyzed its content for logic and coherence, the same was done by students with the articles they found on line, for which they had to post their comments.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Methodology and Research Design**

Wilson (1997) refers to a type of research methodology, called qualitative case study research, which is based on the fundamental beliefs that events must be studied in natural settings, and that events cannot be understood unless one understands how they are perceived and interpreted by the people who participated in them. Therefore, participants' observation is used as the major data-collection device.

According to Bogdan and Biklen (1982) qualitative research must have the following characteristics: the natural setting is the data source and the researcher is the key data-collection instrument; it attempts primarily to describe and only secondarily to analyze. The concern is with process, as much as with product or outcome. Qualitative data is analyzed inductively, and finally, is essentially concerned with what things mean, that is, the why as well as the what.

My research was conducted using case study methodology, since it was based on reports obtained while working with a group of students in a natural setting, and it attempted to analyze the process as much as the product. In conducting the research I also considered Guba and Lincoln's (1981) methodological concerns, which relate to the need to set boundaries and find a focus to ensure that the process is credible, appropriate, consistent, confirmable, and neutral.

In the present study, I analyzed the process of using blogs in the EFL writing class. After students had received classroom instruction on how to use blogs, they were asked to sign into the class blog, which I designed using blogger. During the research, students received classroom instruction, and afterwards they were asked to complete certain activities posted in the blog. The study was conducted for a month,

in which students attended three classes per week. By the end of the study, students received a grade for the subject of Language Arts.

This study follows a pilot study done with a group of nine students for a period of fifteen days, who met twice a week. I decided to carry out this repeated study because it was necessary to make the observations for a longer period, with a more significant number of participants, and also to adjust and vary certain aspects of the research, such as some of the activities in the blogs. In this way I was became more informed about the potential as well as the constraints that using blogs in the EFL writing class represent.

In order to inform my research I have read some researchers' experiences with using blogs to teach writing, Wu (2004), Villas (2011), Shipka (2005), Selber (2004), Richardson (2009), Richardson (2008), Pascopella & Richardson (2009), Llaurillard (2002), Ikenberry (1999), Hunt (1993), Glogowski (2005), Glogowski (2007), Davis (2005), Crie (2006), Campbell (2004), Berstein (2004), Beach (2011), Beach, et.al. (2009), Abu Bakar & Ya'Acob (2009). They reported their experiences emphasizing that blogs constitute a valuable tool to get students engaged in the writing process as they improve their writing both in quantity and quality. Through this study I intended to demonstrate that using blogs to teach writing, improved students' writing quantity and quality. I also analyzed the process of using blogs, students perceptions of the blogging activities, and resources available to implement the use of blogs in high school ESL Writing classes in Ecuador.

### **Participants**

The second group of participants were twelve, native-Spanish-speaking students (seven boys, five girls, age range: 14-15 years) from a bilingual school in Coastal Ecuador. They were tenth graders, and their English level was high

intermediate according to SLEP test (Secondary Level English Proficiency Test).

They attended a Language Arts class that met for two hours a day three times a week.

**Data Collection Procedure and Instruments**

I used three types of data in order to answer the research questions of the present study: First, direct observation, during which I recorded my personal observations of the process as it related to the students’ attitudes, reactions, and accomplishments during the course of the study. Second, I analyzed the students’ blog postings, which I measured quantitatively, as to how many postings each student published, and qualitatively, by using a combination of Beach’s (2009) and West’s (2008) criteria (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1.

Grading criteria for qualitative analysis of blog postings

	Almost never (1pt)	Sometimes (2 pts)	Frequently (3 pts)	Always (4 pts)
Clearly formulates positions or opinions.				
Provides supporting evidence for positions or opinions				
Employs links to other sites				
Reformulates others’ materials or links in ones’ own words.				
Engage in comments to peers’ posts and reactions to those comments.				

A total of eight assignments were posted in the blog site, plus a final paper, which I used as a measuring instrument in terms of analyzing how much they had improved in their writing in terms of content and organization. In order to do this analysis I used the grading criteria in table 4.2.

Table 4.2

Rubric for evaluation of blogs' postings

	Unsatisfactory (1 pt)	Satisfactory (2 pts)	Excellent (3 pts)
Introduction	Does not capture the reader's interest. Does not clearly state the opinion statement.	Fairly engages the reader, although it includes opinion statement.	Includes attention grabbing opener and a clear opinion statement.
Supporting details	Reasons are vague and circular.	Includes reasons, but not all of them are supported with evidence.	Includes minimum three valid reasons that are supported by at least one piece of evidence.
Conclusion	Does not include a summary of reasons.	Summarizes reasons vaguely without leaving the reader with a final impression.	Restates the opinion and include a summary of reasons or calls to action.

Adapted from: "Persuasive paper: Content and organization Guidelines". Elements of Language, Third Course, Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 2001

**Design**

The study was carried out over a period of one month with three sessions per week, totaling 12 sessions. One of the original participants was dropped from the study because of absences and lack of assignment completion. Six sessions were held in the computer room, although I had planned eight sessions to be held there, but because of the room's availability, this was not possible.

During the first session we discussed the importance of using technological tools in the classroom, as I introduced the use of blogs, by presenting an interview with Kim Cavanaugh, educational technology specialist, who is the Technology



Coordinator and Web Design Instructor at Congress Middle School in Boynton Beach, Florida, author of the book *Dreamweaver 4* (2002). Cavanaugh explains about the origin of blogs and its development in society. He refers to blogs as a social phenomenon used commercially, personally, and also for educational purposes. He emphasizes that blogs create communities of learners who share and therefore learn from each another.

After this session, students were asked to enter the class blog 10A our voices (<http://10a-ourvoices.blogspot.com/>), where they read a welcome message and were asked to write about their impressions on starting the class blog activities. The following sessions included classroom instruction on writing a persuasive paper, combined with lab sessions on completing the class blog posts related to what we covered in the classroom. The essay topic was chosen in the class, and it was “Cloning Animals”. Classroom instruction included analyzing the audience, writing an introduction and thesis statement, providing reasons to support the thesis statement, providing support for the reasons, and writing a conclusion. During all blogging activities students were prompted to complete their assignments, as well as to comment on their classmates’ assignments in order to promote a sense of community.

## CHAPTER 5

### **Findings**

The students were required to complete ten assignments in the class blog, with the final purpose of writing a persuasive paper. The findings are presented in the following terms: number of students that completed the assignments, number of students that met deadlines, number of comments per assignment, qualitative analysis of the postings, and qualitative analysis of the final paper, also students' perceptions about the blogging process are included.

Findings reported in Table 5.1 show that assignments were completed in an average of 85.41%. This percentage was affected, in part, because at the beginning of the study 12 students were participating, but two of them had been grounded by their parents so they were not permitted to access the web for any reason, even though I insisted in personal interviews with their parents, only one of the two grounded students were permitted to continue in the study, but under my supervision in the school, therefore she was not able to navigate the web or write comments properly because the time we had available in the computer lab was limited.

Table 5.1

Number of Assignments Completed in the Blog

Description of Assignments	Number of students that completed the assignment	Percentage
1.Perception of Blogging.	11	91.66%
2.Video watching and comments	11	91.66%
3.Taking a stand	9	75.00%
4.Taking a stand 2 (reasons' analysis)	10	83.33%
5.My Thesis statement	11	91.66%
6.Three reasons	10	83.33%
7.Supporting my reasons	9	75.00%
8. Final paper	11	91.66%

In my first post I published the objectives of the project and asked the students' perceptions about blogging. This assignment was completed by 11 students (91.66%). Here are their comments, which were quite positive.

The reasons the students gave for posting were positive, though varied:

H. said, "I like blogging because I can write whatever I want.",

R.: "I can use words that I read to write.",

M: "it is better than writing in the classroom.",

L.: "writing with pen and paper is boring, blogging is better."

For the second assignment students had to watch the video "How they cloned Dolly the sheep" at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39BbcZVCx8I>, and post their comments explaining the process in their own words, this activity was completed by 11 students (91.66%).

In assignment 3 students had to suggest some links to read or watch, so that they could get more understanding on the cloning process, and begin shaping their point of view, in favor or against, after watching or reading they had to take a stand and post it. This is a list of the sites suggested by students in their posts:

S., said: in nacional tv chanel 5 the saturday 8:30 will pass a program about cloning wil all the dudes abuot cloning is a programs called "futuro incierto" it tacks many about cloning [sic]

P., suggested: Here is a link for everyone who wants to look the pros and cros about clonning animals [sic]

<http://www.catalogs.com/info/gadgets/animal-cloning-pros-and-cons.html>

O., posted: Cloned animals is 'no greater safety risk' :

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RA-DWkWI3CA>

V.: the benefits and issues with cloning

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gUSRNGIz18s>

this video is not like others but it tells the truth and that is all that matters

R.: Cloned animals are safe to eat <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yfd3cJwccTY>

A.: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s2NSXUpSDvA>

this is a top 15 of cloned animals: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJ9Syd3GqQc>

I suggested the following sites for essays reading:

<http://www.123helpme.com/view.asp?id=23038>

<http://www.123helpme.com/view.asp?id=18713>

<http://www.123helpme.com/view.asp?id=38326>

This assignment was completed by 9 students (75%).

In assignment 4, students exchange ideas that could support their position on the subject matter, it was completed by 10 students (83.33%); assignment 5 was about posting the thesis statement, it was accomplished by 11 students (91,66%); in assignment 6, students had to post 3 reasons why they agreed or disagreed with cloning of animals, it was completed by 10 students (83.33%); assignment 7 was about supporting the reasons presented in the previous assignment, completed by 9

students (75%); finally, the last assignment was posting the final paper, it was done by 11 students (91.66%).

Table 5.2 shows that despite the students’ belief that blogging was a good idea, there is still a gap between what they believed and their actions since only 71,58% of the assignment were posted on time. Students only met the deadline for the first two assignments, but as we advanced in length and complexity of the activities, the postings were not completed in a timely fashion. For instance, Activity 3 was done on time only by 6 out of 9 students. Activity 4 was completed on time by 5 out of 10 students, activity 5 was done timely by 8 out of 11 students, activity 6 was done on time by 7 out of 10 students, activity 7 was done by 6 out of 9 students, and activity 8 was done on time by 9 out of 11 students. For several occasions I had to remind students that their postings represented a grade for the subject of Writing.

Table 5.2

Assignments and meeting of deadlines

Description of Assignments	Number of students that completed the assignment	Ss met deadlines
1.Perception of Blogging.	11	11
2.Video watching and comments	11	11
3.Taking a stand	9	6
4.Taking a stand 2 (reasons’ analysis)	10	5
5.My Thesis statement	11	8
6.Three reasons	10	7
7.Supporting my reasons	9	6
8. Final paper	11	9

Some of their excuses for not posting on time were because of technical difficulties, or lack of knowledge about problem-solving:

B. said: “I posted, but it wouldn’t go, I don’t know what happened.”,

Table 5.3 shows that, through the study, students posted links, comments and responses to their classmates, but as the study advanced, the number of postings decreased. Assignments 1 to 4 averaged 20 postings per activity, but then the number decreased to 15 postings in Assignment 5; 17 postings in Assignment 6; 9 postings for Assignment 7 and the same number for Assignment 8.

Table 5.3.

Number of comments per assignment

Description of Assignments	Number of students that completed the assignment	Number of postings
1. Perception of Blogging.	11	20
2. Video watching and comments	11	16
3. Taking a stand	9	25
4. Taking a stand 2 (reasons’ analysis)	10	20
5. My Thesis statement	11	15
6. Three reasons	10	17
7. Supporting my reasons	9	9
8. Final paper	11	9

Table 5.4 reflects the quality of the students’ postings. 6 students were able to clearly formulate their positions and opinions, 2 frequently did it, 2 sometimes, and 2 almost never. 6 students always provided supporting evidence from the web for their opinions, 2 frequently, 2 sometimes, and 1 never. 6 students employed links to other sites when posting, 2 frequently, 1 sometimes, and 3 never. 8 students reformulated

others' materials in their own words, 1 frequently, 2 sometimes, and 1 almost never.

10 students always commented on their classmates' posts, 1 frequently, and 1 never.

Table 5.4

Qualitative Analysis of Blog Assignments

	Almost never (1pt)	Sometimes (2 pts)	Frequently (3 pts)	Always (4 pts)
Clearly formulates positions or opinions.	2 student	2 students	2 students	6 students
Provides supporting evidence for positions or opinions	1 student	2 students	2 students	6 students
Employs links to other sites	3 students	1 student	2 students	6 students
Reformulates others' materials or links in ones' own words.	1 student	2 students	1 student	8 students
Engage in comments to peers' posts and reactions to those comments.	1 student		1 students	10 students

Table 5.5 accounts for the analysis of the final paper, which was evaluated taking into account if students included all the parts of a persuasive essay: introduction with a clear thesis statement, two body paragraphs properly supported with evidence, and a conclusion that clearly summarizes the main points presented, as detailed in the grading rubric (See Table 5.5). In order to establish inter-rater reliability, two colleagues who are also English teachers, one of them a native speaker, graded the students' papers, and the average of the three raters is recorded in Table 5.5. The results indicate that 8 students were able to write an excellent introduction, which included attention grabbing opener and a clear opinion statement, 2 fairly engaged the reader with their introduction, and 2 did not

capture the reader’s interest. 7 students included a minimum of three valid reasons that were supported by at least one piece of evidence, 3 included reasons, but not all of them were supported with evidence, and 2 presented vague and circular reasons. In the conclusion section, 7 students restated the opinion and included a summary of reasons or calls to action, 3 students summarized the reasons vaguely, and 2 students did not include a summary of reasons. One of the students shown in the unsatisfactory column was the dropout student.

Table 5.5. Qualitative Analysis Final Paper

	Unsatisfactory	Number Students	Satisfactory	Number Students	Excellent	Number Students
Introduction	Does not capture the reader’s interest. Does not clearly state the opinion statement.	2	Fairly engages the reader, although it includes opinion statement.	2	Includes attention grabbing opener and a clear opinion statement.	8
Supporting details	Reasons are vague and circular.	2	Includes reasons, but not all of them are supported with evidence.	3	Includes minimum three valid reasons that are supported by at least one piece of evidence.	7
Conclusion	Does not include a summary of reasons.	2	Summarizes reasons vaguely without leaving the reader with a final impression.	3	Restates the opinion and include a summary of reasons or calls to action.	7

Adapted from: Holt, Reinehart & Winston. (2001). *Elements of language, First course.*

**Discussion**

The results of this study support the findings presented by several researchers such as Richardson, 2010; Beach, 2009; Davis, 2005; Ganley, 2004; Glogowski, 2005 and others indicating that the use of blogs improves students’ writing in several



ways. I worked with these students for a period of nine months last year, and for three months up to the date of this study this year, and they have been doing different writing tasks in the classroom and as homework, therefore I can make comparisons between the way they normally write in their pen and paper assignments and the changes that I saw after they worked with the blog.

To analyze the results of this study, I will consider the research questions proposed:

First, does the use of blogs in the EFL Writing class improve the quantity of students' writing? I consider that after using blogs, my students were able to write significantly more than when writing the traditional way in the classroom. In fact, students increased the amount of writing, especially compared to students who in classroom activities did not write extensively. In my opinion, this was due to the following reasons:

- Students' involvement with the topic: Activities in the blog were designed as to permit students get involved with the topic. First, they participated in discussions oriented to understand what cloning of animals consisted on; then, they exchanged ideas so that they could decide whether to support or not the topic, in this process they had to post links to videos, readings, or to any type of informative sources, also they had to exchange ideas and defend their points of view, therefore students were able to build up their knowledge based on their own readings, and on their classmates' opinions and comments, resulting in the acquisition of further knowledge and deep understanding.
- Students wrote for an audience and received feedback: By publishing their writing, students were able to write for an audience (the teacher and

classmates) who read and provided timely feedback, this encouraged reflection which in turn made them more productive writers.

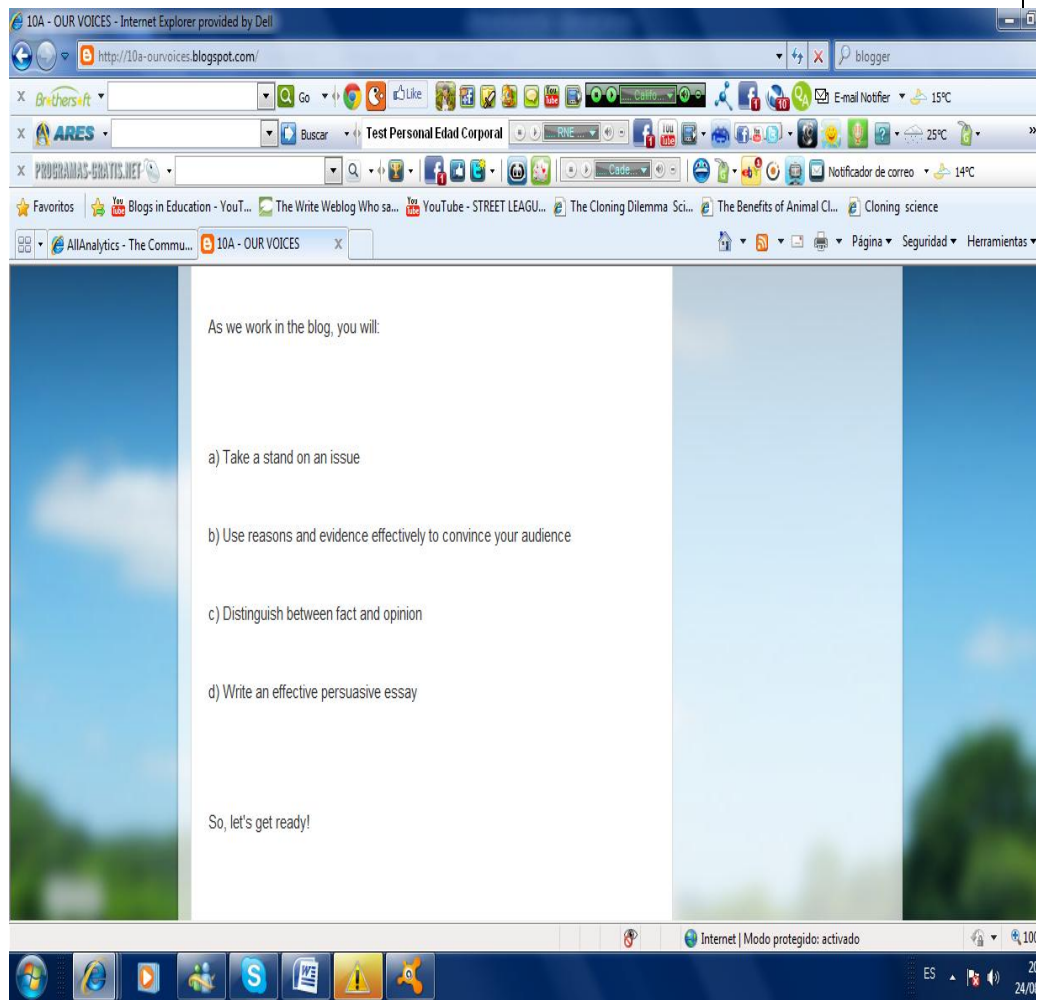
- Students selected the topic: In the second study students selected the topic: “Cloning of animals”, which was chosen from a list of three suggested topics: Cloning of animals, euthanasia, and death penalty. The fact that they were able to choose a topic of their interest promoted their sense of investigation, as compared to the pilot study where the topic I used came from a unit in the Literature book, “The Mane story”, which really did not add interest to the study. I consider that since the Web is so rich in information, when working with blogs it is better to present options prepared by the teacher, oriented to the purpose of the activity, and let the students choose the topic of their interest. This will help them have a positive attitude toward the writing activity.
- Posting was mandatory: Posting in the pilot study was not mandatory, students were encouraged to do it, but they knew that they were going to receive a grade only based on the final product, the paragraph writing. In the second study, I decided to grade the process as well as the final product, therefore it was mandatory that students posted their opinions, suggested websites, and responded to their classmates. The more they posted, the more they shaped their opinion about the topic, thus resulting in more ideas to write in their final papers.
- Students’ age: Another factor worth considering is students’ age. The pilot study was done with eighth graders, 12 year-old students who most of the time limited their posts, and did not really carry on an interaction or discussion, as opposed to the second group, who were tenth graders, 14 year-

old students who were capable of defending their positions with clear arguments. Here it is important to notice that both groups had the same English level, according to the Secondary Level English Proficiency Test, high intermediate.

- Objectives: It is important that students know what is expected from them by the end of the activity. In the pilot study, I did not post the objectives of the activity, I just explained orally in the class. In the second study, I posted a list of objectives (See fig 5.1), so from the beginning the students had a clear idea of what they were expected to accomplish.
- The design of assignments: Posting assignments that promote students' participation is key to maintain the students' interest. Assignments in the pilot study only asked students to look for information and post it, but with the second group, I was careful to post assignments that promoted students reading, analyzing and responding to their classmates, these responses generated more comments, on which students were able to build their knowledge, which they would finally use in writing their papers.
- Teacher's active participation: In the second study, I was not only an observer, but I actively participated in the process, by posting my comments, providing examples, guidance and suggestions to students in all the activities, thus they perceived me as a part of their blogging community.

The above-mentioned factors contributed to students building their knowledge and generating more ideas to be written in their final papers.

Figure 5.1 List of objectives for the blogging research project.



Second, Does the use of blogs in the EFL Writing class improve the quality of students' writing?, In relation to this question, I have the following observations:

Both in the pilot study and in the second study, it was difficult for students to observe grammar and spelling conventions, especially when they engaged in responding to their classmates' comments, they tended to use language, which included abbreviations, sarcasm, emoticons, and other elements of pop-culture, therefore reaffirming what West (2008), Krause(2006), and Fotos,(2003) found, when they referred to a shift in language style reflecting a hybrid of school and

popular culture discourses. I constantly had to remind students not to use such informalities, but apparently, writing on a computer and in a non threatening environment, home, seemed to make them feel at ease, therefore confirming Fotos (2003) observations when she stated that students communicating by electronic means use "...features that combine both the spoken and the written mode of communication". As I stated, individuals in both studies used informalities in language, but more the second group than the first group, probably because the second group had a chance to do more extensive writing and exchanged ideas and opinions in depth, in contrast with the first group, which basically used the blog as a means of completing the assignments, and not as a source of communication and opinions exchange. I consider the use of informalities in written language is inappropriate because it keeps students from writing grammatically complete sentences or to express complete thoughts in writing. Here I present three examples of informal use of language:

A. posted, "THiS PaGe iS pErFeCt To KnOw hOw to Do iT ..... ★★★★★....", of course this is not a grammatically correct sentence, in addition, letters are upper and lower case, and the stars I suppose represent that she likes it very much.

S.: "😊.The lion is a carnivore and a hunter..., here I suppose the happy face represents the paragraph introduction.

P.: when u think writing is easy it would be easy cause u r having optimism in what u r doing! :s :), in this case, the student just decided to use letters instead of complete words, and at the end, an emoticon to finish the sentence.

Probably a way to decrease informalities in writing using blogs could be to open the blog to a wider audience that includes authorities in the topic, students and teachers from other schools, but having analyzed these examples, I

wonder if educators should be prepared to accept these changes in writing in the future, or we need to multiply our efforts in order to promote students' use of the correct grammatical conventions? My students write journals (pen and paper) for their Language Arts class, and they use emoticons! This could be subject of another study.

Another observation regarding quality of writing is that students in both groups sometimes copied and pasted information from the web, although they have been warned not to do it, plagiarism is always a temptation for students, especially in our society where little value is given to authorship. I think that one of the ways to avoid this problem is to have students consciously realize that they are acting incorrectly.

I also noticed that in both groups, students often turned to the most popular search sites, such as Google, Ask or Yahoo. The pilot study group did not carry on an extensive research, they posted whatever they could find at first glance, but the second group, being previously warned about this and having received indications as to choose trustable sites, were more inquiring and selective with the information they posted.

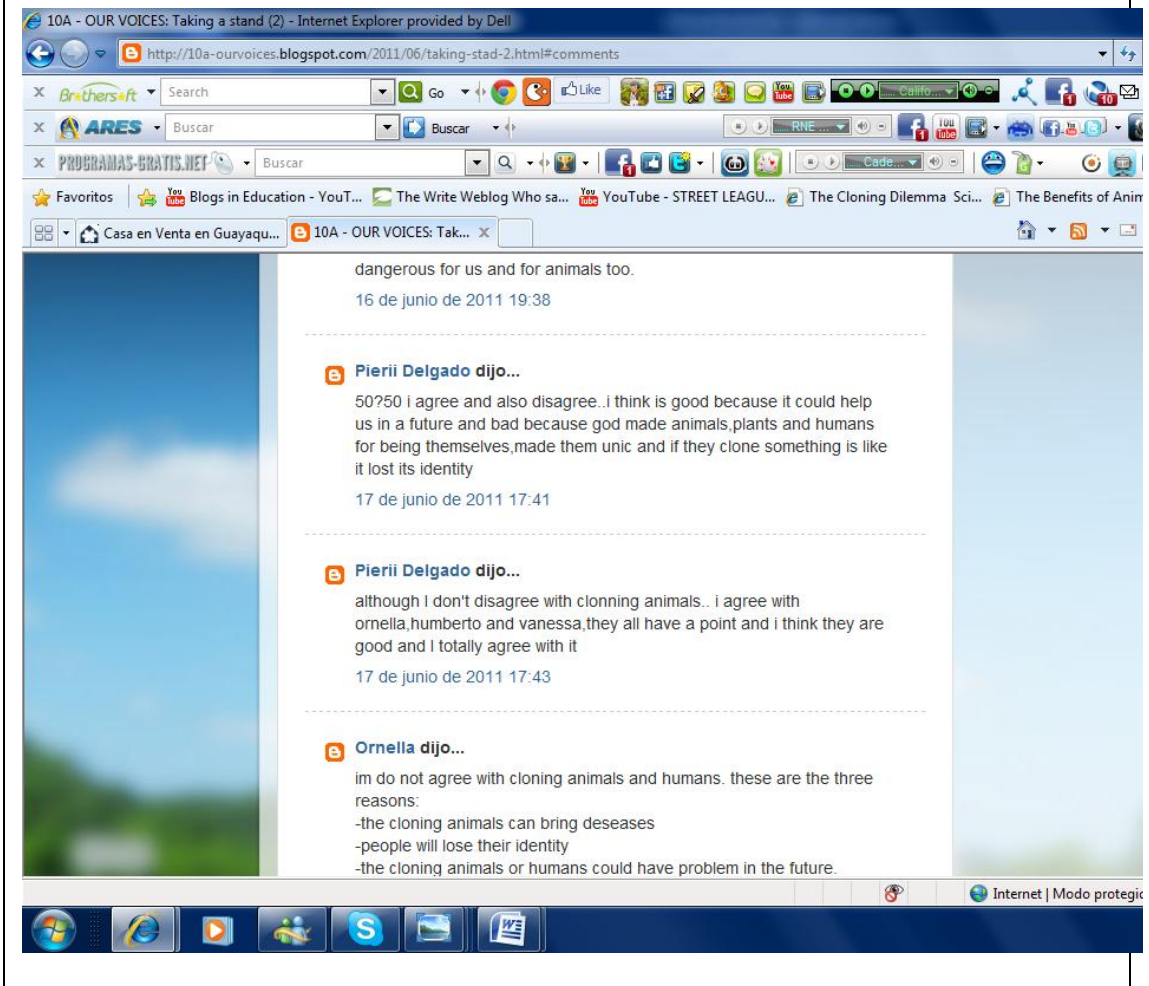
Also, two students accessed information in Spanish, this resulted in writing difficulties in the first activity, which was explaining the cloning process because they had to use some technical words to explain which they were not familiarized with. A possible solution for this issue may be to have students do all the blogging activities in the school with the teacher's direct supervision, although it is not practical. In fact, this is one of the risks of working with the web, since students are free to access the sites, they may do it in Spanish because it is their native language so they feel at ease, but the problem comes the moment they have to write their

postings since they will lose valuable time trying to translate terminology that is unknown for them.

Furthermore, as the blogging activities developed, students acquired new vocabulary from the readings, so they started to use these new words when writing their posts, but still communicated in an informal register (see Figure 5.2).

When writing the final papers, I noticed that the first two papers that were posted in the blog included grammar and spelling mistakes and also informal register, thus I asked students to write the final documents using Microsoft Word and send it to my e-mail address. This measure was effective, and by the end of the study an average of 7 students were able to write a paper that included an excellent introduction, supporting details, and conclusion, 3 wrote satisfactorily and 2 unsatisfactorily, therefore it is demonstrated that blogs do improve the quality of students writing.

Figure 5.2 Examples of students' postings and informalities in language use



Students were asked why they did not observe grammar and spelling conventions when writing their posts, here are two representative comments:

O. said, "When blogging I feel I can write whatever I want."

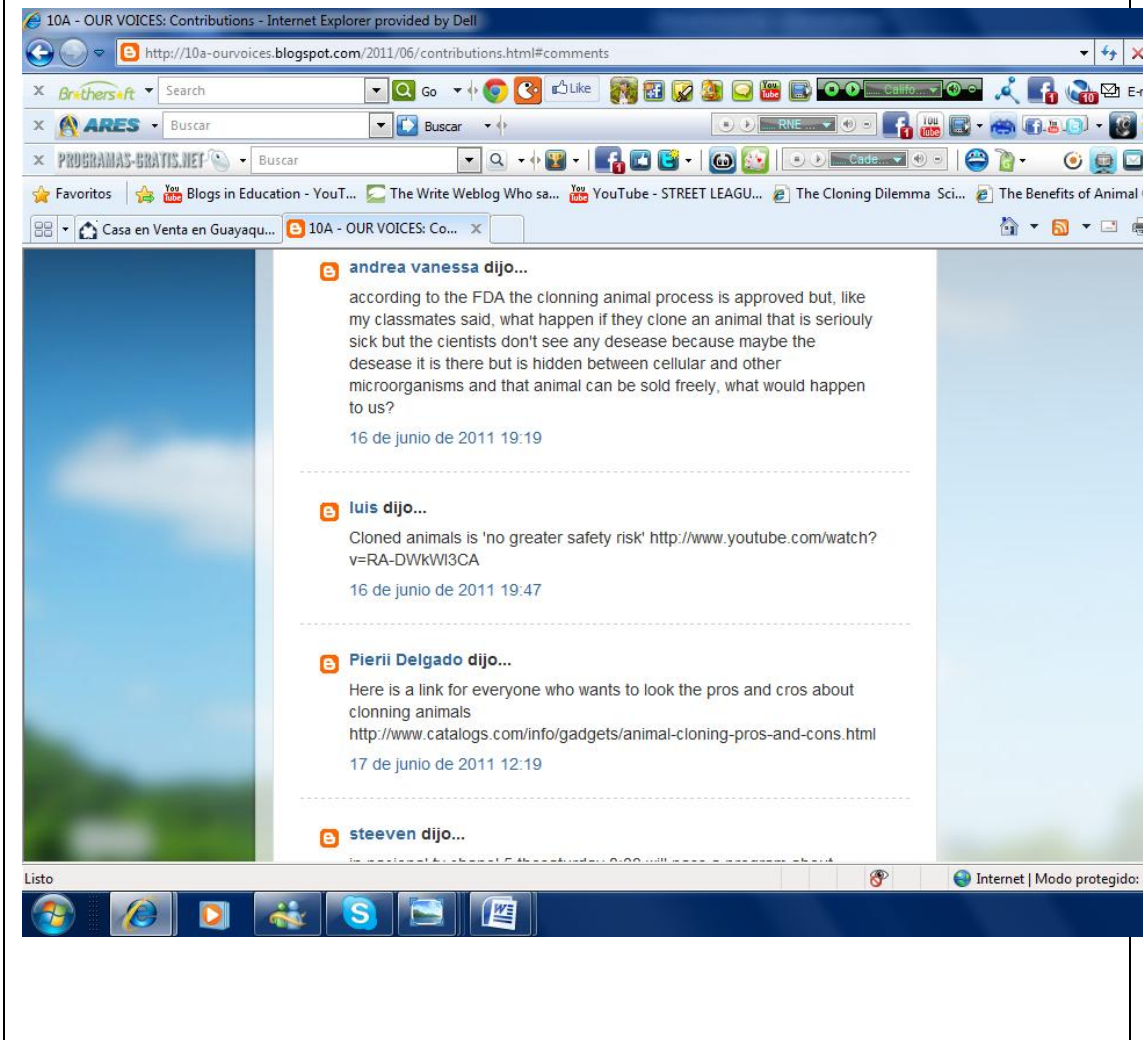
P.said, "No one is going to correct my errors, I just want them to understand my opinion."

S.: "I don't have to repeat if I have errors."

Finally, writing quality was also positively affected because as students responded to each other's postings, they were able to reflect critically on the topic (see Figure 4.3), in consequence showing deep thinking and understanding.



Figure 5.3. Example of students' reflections



Third, what are students' perceptions about blogging? At the beginning of the study, only two students had a clear idea of what blogging is and had entered a blog at least once. This was an advantage in my research because all the others felt natural curiosity towards the blogging activity. As soon as I started the blog, students responded enthusiastically by posting links and comments. But, to my surprise, as the study advanced, posting decreased. Even though I had created a space where students shared their opinions about the subject, and I knew that they felt comfortable writing there, for some reason, gradually the comments were less for each activity. In my opinion, this situation occurred because as students adopted a

position toward the topic, their doubts decreased, turning the activity into an individual one, with the principal objective of supporting their own particular thoughts. In this vein, as I was an active participant in the blog, I always posted comments to encourage students to keep posting and keep the conversations going on, but as the task of writing the final paper approached, postings started to decrease. Probably time was an important factor in this respect, since students were given deadlines for each activity, maybe it would have been better to assign just one date for presenting the final paper and not individual dates for each activity, then they could have worked on their own pace, some more slowly and some faster than others. By setting dates for each assignment I think I even kept some students from doing further research motivated by their own curiosity. Finally, it is worth mentioning that three months after having completed the blogging activity, students asked me to start on another blog. This students' attitude reflects their willingness to work with blogs and it also shows that they recognize its benefits.

Fourth, how can the process of using blogs as a tool for high school EFL writing classes be described? I can describe the process as one of continual improvement, which gives students a sense of authorship, since after adopting a position toward the topic, their capacity of giving feedback to comments and therefore maintaining a continuous opinions exchange positions them in the role, not just of passive readers, but of active writers.

Blogs constitute a useful alternative for writing teachers, but at the same time, as they are a new educational tool in Ecuador, students must count on proper guidance, if the experience is to be successful, therefore the teacher must employ a lot of time and effort in carefully planning the activities and providing timely feedback. Blogs are easy to set up and posts are simple to comment on. The process

my students employed when using blogs was simple. First, they read the instructions on their assignments, then they had to take time to read the suggested sites or to watch the videos, after that, they posted their comments, and finally they replied to some of their classmates' postings. Conversations in the posts were written directly without writing drafts before posting, although occasionally students consulted online dictionaries when necessary. The blogging process as used by my students seems to be an effective way of generating ideas and getting everybody interested in the writing topic.

Regarding the individual blogs, which students in the first group created, students in the second group were not asked to do it, because of time availability, since the area director in the school only allowed a month to carry on this research, I did not want to create anxiety in students, I preferred them to concentrate only in the class blog.

Finally, what resources are available for teaching blogging to EFL students, and how can they be used? , as it relates to the present study which was done in a private school, students were allowed to use the computer lab with internet access to do their work. Access was restricted in terms of time, since students could only use the lab on a fixed schedule, and not all internet sites were available due to school policies, but thanks to the students economic situation, all of them were able to access the blog site at home, therefore performing the activities to keep the blog going. On the other hand, regarding software, there are some free blogging platforms that can be used, such as blogger, Edublogs, and Wordpress, among others, this study used blogger.

It is my perception, that in the Ecuadorian school system, information literacy is perceived just as the students learning to use the basic computer programs, such as

Word, Excel, or PowerPoint, but computers are not yet seen as educational tools that can be used to develop the curricular content, therefore there are not many resources available, for instance, the low number of computers in the school, restricted access, poor teacher training and incentives. Also, some schools prohibit students from bringing their laptops, cell phones, or other technological devices to schools because these might be stolen or damaged and the school will not be held responsible. I have analyzed my perspective in relation to private schools, but in public schools the situation might be different, this could be subject of another study.

### **Teaching Implications**

In the era of the Read/Write Web, teachers must realize that being literate does not only involve learning how to read and write. Although, obviously these abilities are central to any kind of learning, being literate in the twenty-first century involves being able to work collaboratively with other students, teachers, authors, and researchers from outside the classroom in order to build knowledge that will no longer be limited to within the walls of the classroom but will be expanded through the web to millions of other users, therefore, students, teachers and parents are left with a totally new concept of writing in this multimedia society. Writing involves many different genres. For example, students can write formal texts, they may combine text and videos, or text and digital photographs, and in all these ways they will be able to show the knowledge they have acquired and make it available to extended audiences.

This writing concept brings important implications to teaching practice. First, teachers must accept that it is no longer the school and the teachers who possess the whole content of instruction; since there are one trillion pages already in the Web and more content both new and old will continue to come online (Alpert & Hajaj,

2008). Second, proper guidance is necessary, teachers must invest time and effort to get involved with Web 2.0 tools, that is we must get involved with the tools, become active members in blogs, and other applications, and not limit ourselves to traditional methods, only in this way we are going to be capable of graduating students who are critical readers able to participate and contribute to social networks. Third, to accept these changes involves reconsidering the content of the curriculum in a way that fosters the use of new technologies. Fourth, teachers must accept that students are no longer just consumers of information, but they have become active contributors that can provide important content to the lessons, and in this vein teachers must design activities that promote students becoming contributors, activities that promote their critical thinking and most important of all give them enough time to fulfill the assignments. Finally, and perhaps the most important teaching implication is the challenge to the traditional role of teachers in the classroom, who now must assume the role of facilitators.

In this vein, Richardson (2010) redefines the meaning of teaching. First, he says teachers will have to see themselves as connectors, not only of content but of people. Second, teachers must become content creators as they need to get involved with the technologies in order to teach them effectively. Third, they need to become true collaborators with their students, this is they need to see themselves more as learners along with their students. Fourth, teachers must think of themselves as coaches in order to model the skills needed to be successful and to motivate students to develop their own ways of learning. Finally, teachers who use the Web 2.0 tools need to see themselves as change agents. Teachers must convince themselves that these tools represent the future of education and dare to move from more traditional

teaching methods in the way they must try to include colleagues in order to form a growing community of educators interested in promoting future changes.

### **Suggestions for further study**

The results of the present study, which was conducted in a middle to upper class private school, suggest that further research might be helpful in determining whether students' writing improves at different ages. For instance, applying the same blogging activities among eighth and tenth graders. Also, the time of the study could be extended so that the phase of gathering information, reading and analyzing would be longer, therefore students might be able to gather new and interesting data to be used in their final papers or they may abandon the project. In addition, a special study could be done in order to determine what motivates students not to respect grammar conventions when using blogs, and how might this be avoided. Finally, I suggest a repeat study with most of the blogging being carried out in school so that the researcher is aware of all students' reactions to the process.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this study prove that the use of blogs in the EFL writing class improve students' quantity of writing considerably. When blogging, students are able to access lots of information, which they read, analyze and critically comment on, so that they are able to use it in their final work. Blogs also improve students' writing quality, but only under close supervision, because blogs are primarily a social tool, the student's natural tendency is to write informally, but with proper guidance students can improve their writing in form and style.

Students view the blogging project as an innovative, creative and productive activity, which they enjoyed doing, despite of the lack of resources, such as time availability in the computer lab, or limited access to websites in school.

It is the teachers' responsibilities to make activities interactive and motivating, and also to promote the use of this tool in other areas of the curriculum.

### **Reflections**

Before starting this project, I had not had any experience with weblogs, but I chose to do the research on the topic of blogs, because I had read about using blogs in education. I started with a pilot study of fifteen days with 9 students, which was not really meant to be a pilot study, but as it concluded, not enough information was gathered to analyze the results, therefore I carried out a study for a month period with a group of 12 different students.

In general, students responded enthusiastically to the project. This made me feel happy, and encouraged about continuing to plan the activities for the blog, which really requires time. The school supervisor offered all her support so that I was able to modify the planned activities to be included in the blog and still accomplish the curricular goals.

By carrying out this research study, I have realized that one of the reasons students do not get involved in writing in traditional school settings is because nobody writes that way anymore, even teachers, executives, and journalists, are now using social networks for a variety of communication purposes. In consequence, how can we expect our students to respond enthusiastically to traditional writing tasks, when there is a world of information and ideas that they may access but are not allowed to?

I recognize that my blog is not the best one, but I am satisfied that my students and I have experienced blogging and have discovered the many benefits of using blogs as a tool to generate ideas and to improve writing.

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