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# Reflection and the Middle School Blogger: Do Blogs Support Reflective Practices?

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### **Abstract**

Research examined 12 randomly selected blogs from a population of 38 teacher-created, teaching-centered blogs to determine whether they were useful reflective devices for practicing middle school teachers. The amount and depth of reflective practice, as measured by a researcher-created rubric, was examined as well. Results indicated that all participants engaged in some level of reflective writing. However, the depth and level of reflection varied within and among the blogs. The results reported here are useful for framing future research on the efficacy of middle school teacher blogs.

### **Introduction**

In their simplest form, blogs can be thought of as electronic journals (Huffaker, 2004; Kennedy, 2003). According to Kennedy (2003), blogs are “part web site, part journal, part free-form writing spaces [that] have the potential to enhance writing and literacy skills while offering a uniquely stylized form of expression” (¶ 4). A simple user interface makes blogs an effective journaling medium for many educators, including those who lack strong computer skills (Lohnes, 2003). The use of blogs by teachers is a relatively new phenomenon. Only a handful of studies have been published supporting their effectiveness in educational settings (Tan, 2005). However, these studies do not address blog efficacy when used by middle school teachers to reflect about professional practice. In fact, while blogs are being used more in education, it remains unclear how teachers, including

middle school teachers, are using them.

## **Literature Review**

There is a dearth of research on the efficacy of blogs as reflective devices. However, a few recent studies suggest that blogs may promote reflective practice among educational users (Shoffner, 2005; Suzuki, 2004; Fiedler, 2003; West, Wright, & Graham, 2005). Research on the efficacy of reflection in electronic environments supports this potential use of blogs as well (Bonk, Cummings, Hara, Fischler, & Lee, 2000). According to Kennedy (2003), "...blogs combine the best elements of [technology, where] work is collected, edited, and assessed, with the immediacy of publishing for a virtual audience" (¶17). Written reflection has been noted in the literature as an effective method of thinking about practice (Calderhead, 1996; Palmer, 1998). Blogs, electronic written expression, are "especially effective at supporting...reflection...more so than other technologies would be" (West et al., 2005, p.1656).

While research on blogs as teacher reflective devices is scarce, research on other reflective practices in education is more plentiful (Bolton, 1999; Kirk, 2000; Redmond & Burger, 2004; Romano & Schwartz, 2005). Among the research on reflective practice, a number of studies consider preservice teachers and the use of electronic mediums for reflection. Preservice educators who participate in electronic asynchronous reflection groups report better understanding of the practice of teaching and of decision-making involved in the teaching experience ( Redmond & Burger, 2004; Romano & Schwartz, 2005) . Kirk's (2000) research provides insight into the types of topics that promote reflective thinking in an electronic environment, and Bolton (1999) defines the characteristics of reflective practitioners as "...educational trendsetters and teacher leaders" (p.193). Research on the efficacy of blogs in supporting reflective practice among inservice teachers, however, is lacking. Therefore, the results of this study should prove useful in framing further research in this area.

## **Methodology**

The study used a quantitative approach to address the following broad research question: Do blogs support written reflection when used by middle school teachers? The researchers were also interested in assessing the depth of reflection occurring within the written entries.

### *Participants*

As a part of a larger study of educational bloggers, the researchers conducted a

census to identify teacher-created, teacher-centered blogs. At the conclusion of the census in the spring of 2005, 49 teacher-created, teacher-centered middle school blogs were identified. Due to mortality, that number dropped to 38 (N=38) by the time the researchers began this project in late 2005. Using a random number table, the researchers randomly selected 12 blogs for analysis. A demographic profile for this group is displayed in Table 1.

Next, the researchers randomly selected six entries from each of the 12 blogs for analysis. Entries of a non-educational nature were excluded from the sample. Seventy-two narrative posts collected from the blogs were analyzed for evidence of reflective practice.

All narrative posts used in the research came from entries published to open access Internet blogs. Research of a non-intrusive nature that involves public records or that occurs in public spaces does not require informed consent (Anderson & Kanuka, 2003). The authors expanded the concept of public space to include Internet public newsgroups, chat rooms, and other virtual communities such as blogs. Because these spaces are generally open to all, informed consent was not necessary because the researcher had “no interaction or intervention with the participants,” and there was “no disclosure of private information” (Anderson & Kanuka, p. 69). Other experts (Frankel & Siang, 1999; King, 1996) support this assertion. Research reported in this study follows the tenets laid out by these experts. As such, it should be noted that the researchers made no effort to contact teacher bloggers or to collect personal information from any blog. Nor did any of the records analyzed in the research come from private, closed, or members-only blogs. As stated earlier, entries of a personal nature were not included in the study.

### *Instrumentation*

A researcher developed rubric was used in the study. Two technology experts within the instructional technology and teacher education fields assisted the researchers in establishing the content validity of the rubric. The rubric was developed to provide a method of assessing the quantity and quality of reflection displayed in each subject's writing sample. Not only was the number of reflective entries counted, but the researchers also used the rubric to determine the depth of reflection found within each entry. The rubric used a five point scoring system where a rating of four (4) indicated evidence of meta-reflection, ratings of three (3), two (2), or one (1) indicated decreasing levels of reflection, and a rating of zero (0) indicated no evidence of reflection (see Appendix A). Adding the scores together resulted in an overall reflective score for each subject. The highest possible reflective score was 24.

## Scoring

All written materials were carefully read and reread by the researchers (raters), and the depth of reflections was noted using the researcher developed assessment rubric. Both raters were former K -12 teachers with extensive technology integration experience. One previously taught elementary and middle school science, while the other taught high school social studies. Both had conducted research previously on the efficacy of teacher-created, teacher-centered blogs. Each rater scored the data set independently. After scoring the data, the two raters compared results and discussed their viewpoints to maximize agreement in scoring.

*Interrater agreement.* The Pearson product moment correlation was used to establish interrater agreement for the two raters. The computed Pearson correlation coefficient  $r$  for overall scores was 0.815, indicating a positive relationship between the scores reported by the two raters. This result was deemed sufficient for the purposes of this study.

## Results

### *Do Blogs Support Middle School Teachers' Reflective Practice?*

Data collected totaled 72 entries from 12 bloggers. Two raters analyzed each of the 72 entries, resulting in 144 individual scores. The total number of reflective entries found by rater one was 63 (mean = 2.14, SD = 1.26). The number reported by rater two was 56 (mean = 1.82, SD = 1.35) (see Table 2). Since the results were considered significantly and positively related, choosing either rater was deemed appropriate, but because rater two was a more conservative scorer, data analysis for this study was based on the results reported by rater two.

A majority (78%,  $n=56$ ) of individual entries demonstrated some level of reflective writing. Fifteen (21%) of these entries scored 1 on the 4-point rubric while 17 entries (24%) scored 2. Fourteen entries (19%) scored 3 and 10 (14%) scored 4 (indicating meta-reflection) on the 4-point rubric. However, 22% (16) of the entries contained no evidence of reflection (see Table 3). Appendix B contains examples from the research sample that fit each category on the rubric.

### *Depth of Reflection*

As stated previously, the highest possible reflective score (raw score) was 24. Individual scores for reflection ranged from a low of 2 to a high of 16. Mean (average) reflective scores for individual bloggers suggest that a low level of

reflection occurred within the entries. While a single blogger's average was below 1 on the scale, five averaged between 1 and 1.99 and five others ranged between 2 and 2.9. None of the bloggers averaged higher than 2.66. The group mean of 1.82 (SD = 1.35) also suggests a low level of reflective practice (see Table 4).

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this research was to determine the usefulness of teacher-created, teacher-centered blogs at the middle school level. In particular, we sought to determine whether blogs supported reflective practice among middle school educators. Results indicated that a majority of entries examined demonstrated some level of reflective writing. Evidence collected from the analysis indicated that all participants engaged in some level of reflective writing.

Another research purpose involved determining the depth of reflection occurring within the entries. Results revealed that the depth of reflection varied markedly between and within individual blogs. Of the 56 entries demonstrating evidence of reflective practice, a majority (57%) did not support higher levels of reflective practice. Only 24 of the 56 entries (43%) scored 3 or higher on the rubric (see Table 3). This finding may be a result of the small number of entries examined. Further research containing a larger number of entries would be recommended.

Findings suggest that blogs have the potential to be effective reflective devices when used by middle school teachers. The majority of blogs examined in this study function as a place where teachers can write about and reflect on events occurring in their classrooms. However, only 10 out of 72 (13.8 %) entries demonstrate what Rodger (2002) referred to as a disposition for critically questioning what is going on in the classrooms (see Table 3). As Rodger argues, this particular disposition is critical if teachers are to successfully integrate theory into practice. It remains unclear whether blogs can promote higher levels of reflective practice among middle school teachers. Further research is needed to address this issue.

While blogs can be used to support written reflection, data reported in this study do not demonstrate that blogs are used exclusively for this purpose. Reflective practice appears to be only one of several reasons why middle school teachers blog. This finding is supported by previous research conducted by the authors (Ray & Hocutt, 2006). That blogs are used for a variety of purposes may also account for the low reflective scores reported here.

## **Conclusions**

The results of this study give insight into the efficacy of blogs when used by middle school educators. These results demonstrate the potential usefulness of blogs in promoting reflective practice with practicing teachers. However, results do not demonstrate that blogs are being utilized effectively for reflective purposes. This conclusion suggests multiple avenues for future research. For example, research examining exemplary middle school teacher bloggers who do engage in frequent and deep reflection would be useful. Understanding the process in which these bloggers employ and why they use their blogs to support reflective practice would be illuminating. Research to support Bolton's (1999) contention that reflective teaching practitioners are leaders and trendsetters would be beneficial as well.

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**Table 1**

***Demographic Profile for the Research Sample***

<p><i>Gender/Sex:</i></p> <p>Female = 9 Male = 3</p>	<p><i>Courses Taught*:</i></p> <p>Mathematics = 4 Language Arts = 4 Science = 2 Social Studies = 2 Unknown/Indeterminate = 2</p>
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**Table 2**

***Score Frequencies by Rater***

Score	Frequency	
	Rater One	Rater Two
0	10	16
1	13	15
2	15	17
3	25	14
4	9	10

**Table 3**

***Percentages of Reflective Results***

Rubric Scores	Frequency	Percent of Reflective Entries (n = 56)	Percent of Total Entries (n = 72)
4	10	18%	13.8%
3	14	25%	19.4%
2	17	30%	23.6%
1	15	27%	20.8%
0	16	--	22.2%

*Note: Scores ranged from a low of 0, representing no reflection, to a high of 4 representing meta-reflection.*

**Table 4**

***Raw Scores and Descriptive Statistics by Blogger***

Blogger	Entry	Score (x/24)	Blogger	Entry	Score (x/24)	Blogger	Entry	Score (x/24)
1	1	2	5	1	2	9	1	0
	2	1		2	1		2	1
	3	1		3	3		3	3
	4	1		4	1		4	3
	5	3		5	2		5	1
	6	4		6	1		6	3
	Score	12		Score	10		Score	11
	Mean	2		Mean	1.66		Mean	1.83
	SD	1.265		SD	1.17		SD	1.33
2	1	3	6	1	3	10	1	4
	2	1		2	1		2	0
	3	3		3	0		3	1
	4	2		4	2		4	4
	5	0		5	0		5	0
	6	3		6	1		6	3

	<b>Score</b>	<b>12</b>		<b>Score</b>	<b>7</b>		<b>Score</b>	<b>12</b>
	<b>Mean</b>	<b>2</b>		<b>Mean</b>	<b>1.16</b>		<b>Mean</b>	<b>2</b>
	<b>SD</b>	<b>1.265</b>		<b>SD</b>	<b>1.17</b>		<b>SD</b>	<b>1.9</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>
	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>		<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>		<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>
	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>		<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>		<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>		<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>		<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>
	<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>		<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>		<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>
	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>		<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>		<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>
	<b>Score</b>	<b>9</b>		<b>Score</b>	<b>11</b>		<b>Score</b>	<b>15</b>
	<b>Mean</b>	<b>1.5</b>		<b>Mean</b>	<b>1.83</b>		<b>Mean</b>	<b>2.5</b>
	<b>SD</b>	<b>0.84</b>		<b>SD</b>	<b>2.04</b>		<b>SD</b>	<b>1.76</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>
	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>		<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>		<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>		<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>		<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>
	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>		<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>		<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>
	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>		<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>		<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>
	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>		<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>		<b>6</b>	<b>0</b>
	<b>Score</b>	<b>16</b>		<b>Score</b>	<b>14</b>		<b>Score</b>	<b>2</b>
	<b>Mean</b>	<b>2.66</b>		<b>Mean</b>	<b>2.33</b>		<b>Mean</b>	<b>0.33</b>
	<b>SD</b>	<b>0.82</b>		<b>SD</b>	<b>1.033</b>		<b>SD</b>	<b>0.82</b>

*Group mean = 1.82, SD = 1.35*

*Note. Some members of the sample taught more than one subject.*

## Appendix A

Reflection Assessment  
 Blog/Blogger Research ID:  
 Grade Level: MIDDLE  
 Content Area:

Reflective Practice	0	1	2	3	4
The educational blogger demonstrates elements of reflective practice within the selected entry .	There is no evidence of reflective practice within the entry.	The educational blogger reflects on his/her work and improvement but does not provide examples within the entry.	The educational blogger demonstrates an ability to reflect on his/her work but example(s) provided are minimal.	The educational blogger demonstrates an ability to reflect on his/her work. Concrete examples are provided. There is some evidence of meta-cognition within the entry.	The educational blogger demonstrates exemplary evidence of a range of meta-reflective practices and provides examples within the entry.
SCORE ___/4 Scorer _____					

### Appendix B

Examples for each category of reflective practice on the rubric:

**Four (4) Points :** *The educational blogger demonstrates exemplary evidence of a range of meta-reflective practices and provides examples within the entry.*

How do we get kids to work towards quality rather than just completion? I struggled with this for a long time, and this year I finally really and truly get it:

## AUDIENCE and REFLECTION.

The journey started with a PowerPoint presentation to the class. After each group presented, I asked the audience to share each presentation's strengths and areas that needed improvement. It was slow going at first; I had to remind them time and again that their critiques had to be specific so the presenters would know what to repeat and what to avoid in another situation. I did this process several more times with various pieces of work. My kids developed better on task behavior, became more likely to use the rubric while they were working, and my students' comments were more specific. Better yet, more students were completing projects, and the projects themselves were of higher quality. The only thing I was not happy with was presentation skills; though the kids would point out lack of eye contact, volume, etc. in their critiques, I didn't see the same sort of improvement as in the projects themselves. With the last presentation I had kids work with their partners to score each presentation with the rubric...The kids filled out the rubrics, made comments, then we shared our thoughts in discussions. As a result, I saw more kids actively working on volume, eye contact, enthusiasm, etc. They have become very good evaluators...We've developed a common understanding of what makes quality work, and the kids are judging solely on the work and not [on] who the presenter is. If we don't present something we've done in class, they always want to know why. It is a process.

I did A LOT of modeling, demonstrating the appropriate way to give praise and make suggestions. If a student made a particularly insightful/interesting/appropriate comment, I'd point to their comment as the type we were looking for. I ALWAYS start with the positive, no matter how dreadful the presentation is; we found good things to say about students with one slide out of the required eight, incomplete work, etc. There is always strength, a place to start, and while I had to connect the dots for them at first, they've gotten really good at doing it themselves. Of course, they still really enjoy pointing out the flaws....BUT, they do it in a[n] objective, supportive manner. I wonder if they zero in on the negatives so easily because that's what they've seen modeled for them by their teachers through the years?

As I've thought all of this over today I've realized how important it is to teach kids to become their own evaluators. They came in so dependent on me to tell them what was good and what needed improvement. If I am \*really\* going to teach them, I need to teach them to evaluate themselves and hold themselves to high standards. In the end, it's not about me, it's about them learning how to recognize and work for quality...for themselves.

**Three (3) Points :** *The educational blogger demonstrates an ability to reflect on his/her work. Concrete examples are provided. There is some evidence of meta-*

*cognition within the entry).*

We share a school building with an elementary school. The kids are pretty wild, very loud in the halls, very disruptive. I frequently see teachers walking classes down the halls with the kids shouting, pushing and shoving, and not listening to anything the teacher says. In this school, as in most [city] schools, the children are expected to walk in quiet (silent) double lines down the halls. You can debate the reasonableness of this, but it is the culture of the schools here, something every [city] teacher deals with daily. So, it is alarming to see children acting crazy in the hallways - today I even had to ask a group to quiet down since my children were taking a quiz. The teacher with that class wasn't doing anything, just walking along behind them! I don't like correcting the students from the other school, particularly when they're with a teacher, but in this case the noise really was disturbing my students.

I understand and sympathize when a teacher has a really difficult class and is having trouble with the kids. I've been through it all myself, at the school where I used to teach. But the key is not to give up. I never, never stopped expecting the students to behave and telling them that! You have to try - and these children are little ones, 7, 8 years old. I see these classes out of control in the hallways, and I think to myself: all you have to do is walk them back to where they came from and start over, and do that consistently until they understand that you mean what you say. The kids are so young, I imagine it wouldn't take more than a few times practicing walking quietly before they'd get the picture. Sure, it's no fun for the teacher, and it stinks for those kids who've been doing it right all along, but the bottom line is that in the long run, it's to the teacher's benefit and the benefit of ALL the children to have a safe and orderly school and respect for adults' authority.

***Two (2) Points:*** *The educational blogger demonstrates an ability to reflect on his/her work but example(s) provided are minimal.*

Good days can happen.

My kids were great today. Attentive, participative and cooperative. Well, they were great until 2:35, when, after summoning their focus to look good for a pop-in visit by my principal and reading coach, they collapsed into a heap of chit-chat. But I was pretty okay with that. The only problem is, I don't know why they were so good!!! Except for our weekly P.E., which I worry was at the core of their good work, I'm going to try and recreate today as best as I can tomorrow.

Even days like today have a dark underbelly. Generally, when the whole class is

doing well, problem individuals rise to the surface in spectacular form. F---, my Michael Jackson star, wrote "My life is worthless." on a piece of paper in response to a conversation where I asked him to produce work that he can be proud of. M---, who I have given enormous leeway to in an effort to get him to buy in to my class, is completely losing it, refusing to do work, refusing to not call out, refusing to sit in his seat! I know he's dealing with huge issues (mom in jail, moved to new school, dad had stroke, grandma-figure died this month) but there's only so much I can let him get away with before the other kids start to complain and imitate.

**One (1) point** : *The educational blogger reflects on his/her work and improvement but does not provide examples within the entry.*

So let's see what I have accomplished in the past 5 or so hours...emptied (almost) all of my stuff out of the student work desk, but have a bit further to go. My problem is that I stop to read things and lose my "drive". LOL, school hasn't even started yet so I'm not going to worry about it too much. Found 14 calculators with no identifiable marks on them that I have collected through the years--almost a class set. One is a TI-83. It doesn't work, but it probably just needs new batteries. I did put my computer decorations up--those are the critters that sit on top of my iMac. Two plastic rats, a plastic donkey, one stuffed kitty, and an adorable stuffed mouse with cheese. No, I don't have a fondness for rodents. :---)

**Zero (0) points** : *There is no evidence of reflective practice within the entry.*

After insisting that I've lost all his homework for this quarter, that I've been unduly hard on her son because I haven't made more than three make-up packets and now she wants to pull him out of my class because I'm demanding a revision of a very shoddily written paper plus he's a genius and how could I stifle his creativity by asking him to - stand back now - proofread his work or put his name on it plus he yells out in class and needs to release his energy by strolling around the room at random you just don't understand his highly intelligent needs Mrs. X yeah yeah sure I want to say you've never run a classroom in your freakin' life have you lady you've got no clue that your kid's lying (hear me I said lying ) about the homework so much easier to blame the teacher but of course I don't answer.

*NOTE: With the exception of Entry 1 and Entry 2, which were edited to remove identifying information, these entries have not been edited by the authors.*

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