

# MOTIVATION FOR WRITING THROUGH BLOGS

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## ABSTRACT

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Students are motivated to use technology to write. Using this idea, teachers can assimilate what the students are already doing through personal websites/blogs and classroom content with a meaningful audience. Students, no matter gender or ability level, need to see that writing is a vehicle to show individual thought on subjects, and that this is powerful. Technology, such as web logs, can provide one part of the answer, but educators should recognize that the key to conscientious writing among students is that the students need to be a more active part of the educational community. The aim of this study is to shed light on a range of student needs, and show that the differing or ranges in levels of motivation to write with consideration for an audience can be addressed through web logs. A very real audience is out “there,” the Internet, for students to use.



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## INTRODUCTION

What motivates students to write with careful consideration? As an English/Language Arts teacher I find this to be a struggle for not only myself, but many English teachers in general. “We estimate that up to 40 percent of students are not doing well in upper grades; of that proportion, most have motivation and/or attention issues” (Kelly, Neal 105). Is it the teacher’s responsibility to engage each and every extrinsic writing student by allowing them to choose what they would *like* to write about? Or, is it the English teacher’s responsibility to motivate students to write with careful consideration no matter the content or skill level? It is possible for a student, who may even struggle in reading and writing, to proofread their own paper, have another proofread their writing, and generally be conscious of audience; however, students are not motivated to do so. By contrast, students are willing to communicate to a designated audience of their peers, through instant/text messaging, and blogging. Students are motivated to use technology to write. Using this idea, teachers can assimilate what the students are already doing through personal websites/blogs and classroom content with a meaningful audience. Students do not find it to be the most important to be motivated to write conscientiously towards a specific subject, or motivated to perform well for a serious audience. As educators we need to give students writing motivation by framing assignments differently and giving students a “real” audience so that preparation can be made for their future writing as college students and professionals.

The majority of our students do not perceive themselves as part of an educational community. Educators and parents do not engage students or allow students to see their place/role in society. Good teachers can relate any subject/material to students, but the



students only take the material so far. Many students consider learning a chore that they do within the walls of the classroom. They write in the void of whatever a class may be studying and are not given the chance to realize that writing matters. Furthermore, the students are not motivated to write with the audience in mind because a single teacher is the audience for most assignments. Students must know to write with formality and precision because this allows for effective communication. They are not given the chance to create documentation for a large audience on a constant basis, with the idea of being precise in mind. Meaning that documents emerge from context, and students should be given the opportunity to be idea-driven based on whatever content they are reading/learning, while at the same time understanding that grammatical rules and formatting of a document is important for the intended audience. Many students do not understand that writing with rule-based precision amplifies what they are trying to say. If a teacher shows students a meaningful audience (the Internet), with a small amount of common-sense guidance for the sake of formality, safety, and etiquette, the students' writing will become more precise. The Internet provides multiple ways for students to understand the importance of precision and formality through peer-viewing and reviewing, distance learning, cross-curricular learning with other schools, and the more random compliments they may receive for the "good" writing they place on their blogs. The reason this is not happening is simply due to factors such as large class sizes, overloaded curricula, and the over-emphasis on literary analysis, etc. Students are rarely given the chance to constructively comment on peer writing and this contributes to the lack of understanding as to what is acceptable, formal writing. The Internet can provide



the audience and context, and a school district should support that this is considered an educational community.

The Internet is a world wide community that not enough English teachers are tapping in to. Web logs (blogs) can provide one way to get students to understand that there is an audience for them, and that their communication through words needs to be effective because their peers and the world are reading. Communal web communities/blogs can remedy student disengagement with academic writing.

### **Intention of Study**

It is not the intention of this study to empirically document student writing deficiencies. Also, it is not the intention of this study to suggest particular learning styles, though assumptions by readers on how to approach differing learning styles through motivation could be made. Instead, I intend to suggest curricular changes in order to motivate students and increase student awareness of more formal public writing in order to prepare students for college writing. Students, no matter gender or ability level, need to see that writing is a vehicle to show individual thought on subjects, and that this is powerful. Technology, such as web logs, can provide one part of the answer, but educators should recognize that the key to conscientious writing among students is that the students need to be a more active part of the educational community. The aim of this study is to shed light on a range of student needs, and show that the differing or ranges in levels of motivation to write with consideration for an audience can be addressed through web logs. A very real audience is out “there,” the Internet, for students to use. Motivating the media-centered student to write effectively can be accomplished through



giving a meaningful audience, and encouraging interaction among students. Again, the focus is to get students to be motivated to create in-depth writing, and to mindfully attend to correcting errors.



## MOTIVATION

As an English/Language Arts teacher it has been an ever-challenging goal to get students to write conscientiously in formal assignments that are meant to prepare them for college. In fact, this has been one of the top goals to have students conquer across the Language Arts curriculum for years; however, now we have the technology to bring forth a larger, more meaningful audience. Alvin M. Fountain (1940) wrote an article in *College English* entitled “The Problem of the Poorly Prepared Student” that lists numerous reasons on why college students are not performing well in college composition classes. These reasons consisted of ideas that do not sound much different than complaints made today. Too many students in the classroom, for example, has always been a problem for those who teach writing. Fountain called this trend of falling performance a disease that could be fought with remedial classes and individual conferencing.

“A principal of a small-town high school in the writer’s home state confesses that he is unable to get English teachers who will assign written work and then check it for errors. ‘It just takes more work than they are willing to put out—and more than teachers of other subjects have to do,’ he says” (Fountain 310).

As stated, this is still a problem today, but with the use of technology students may be a part of an online educational community that they may interact within. Given the necessary understanding that they will be essentially performing for the world audience, and may get feedback from anyone, including their peers, the students will be motivated to write conscientiously with fewer errors and more idea-driven effort. This makes



grading student writing less time consuming. Of course, this does not come without guidance from the teacher. The teacher must remind the students about the targeted audience at hand, the fact that these blogs are facilitated by the school, and that the blogs are meant to contribute to and better the education community. The teacher plays a central role in *monitoring* the student blogs. Rules are necessary, and combined with the fact that so many view the Internet, the students will appreciate the importance of writing to the best of their abilities. This illuminates the central difference of blogging for educational purposes, and current blogging for personal use, and consequently will make personal youth blogging/writing more conscientious.

Students of the 1940's had different reasons for being in remedial classes than students of today, but what was not mentioned, however, was the students themselves and how they viewed education. With the information and media-saturated culture of today, it is easy to postulate what is taking hold of student motivation. Lack of training or mental capabilities are not the reasons for low functioning students in writing. A lack of conception of what it is to create an expressive document that impacts an audience comprises part of the problem. Students of today have opportunities to relate to multiple audiences, but their peers are most important. The Internet has given students a means to communicate to one another, and many students are communicating via the Internet, but many educators still are skeptical and do not see the benefit of this. Unlike post WWII, students have a means to reach the masses in a meaningful way, and educators are behind in facilitating this.

“Most studies of reading ignore the huge explosion of reading (not to mention writing) that has happened thanks to the rise of the Internet.

Millions of people spend much of their day staring at words on a



screen: browsing the Web, reading e-mail, chatting with friends, posting a new entry to one of those 8 million blogs....Part of the compensation for reading less is the fact that we are writing more (Johnson 183).

Although, according to Steven Johnson, “a specific historically crucial kind of reading has grown less common in this society: sitting down with a three-hundred-page book and following its argument or narrative without a great deal of distraction”(Johnson 185), we are reading as much as in the past. Because of technology, English/Language Arts teachers who typically assign novels, narratives, and non-fiction have the opportunity to walk the line between the trend of society and conventional curriculum mandates. English teachers can now give students a meaningful audience that will see their writing and personality through blogs. There is now a specific opportunity to connect high school academic writing and personality, while maintaining high writing standards through the inclusion of a larger, more meaningful audience.

It is well known that student performance has decreased dramatically across the curriculum and has been for years. There is a large amount of research done on different teaching and assessment techniques that can be used to motivate students in the classroom to get better grades. The problem is really not the high school students’ motivation to get the assignments done or get decent grades in general, but to effectively use good writing practices on their own time. There is no intrinsic commitment to write for an effect.

Ford, James and Larkin (1978) did research with portfolio assessment, and claim that this system is the end to sliding standards. “The most noticeable symptom of what is ailing composition programs is the paradox that the average student’s ability to write



drops lower every year, at the same time his or her grades get better every year” (Ford, James, Larkin 950). Among other implementations, individual states have adopted minimum standards to fight this trend.

Portfolio assessment is among many of the successful methods adopted to raise standards in writing, and although this cannot be the lone indicator or change that needs to be made to raise standards, online blogging is exactly what Ford, James, and Larkin had in mind. Blogging creates an online portfolio. Assessment of any type cannot show progress or sophistication within a developing writer when the writer does not have the motivation to adopt good methods to create a paper; however, a portfolio for all to see can help improve motivation among students to be progressive in their writing technique.

What boggles the minds of educators in high schools and colleges is that writing well with the intention of quality does not seem to be enough of a motivating factor for students to proofread and edit their own formal writing. Students are more motivated by the fact that a grade will be assigned, and that passage to the next level of school is essential. While this motivation is important to a certain extent, students must also consider and understand that writing well for a worthy audience makes for success. Motivation to write consciously in formal writing is often a defining factor between successful students and mediocre students in high school English/Language Arts classes. Self-motivation of high school students in any subject is a strong indicator of success, which may be a maturity issue, but it is no secret that high school students who have poor writing practices become college students with poor writing practices. The issue seems to be that many students know what they are supposed to do, and even create well-



developed ideas, but they just don't go the extra step to put it in writing effectively.

Placing an online portfolio can help to change this idea.



## NOT A NEW PROBLEM

Gilbert L. Bond's 1946 article in *College English*, "A Postwar Program for the Remedial-English Student" suggests that the need for remedial English classes in college is not a new problem. The Post World War II era found many veterans left with remedial English skills. Many of them left for war straight from high school, or for a multitude of other reasons just did not finish high school at all. Though there has been a change in why these remedial classes have been needed, the article clearly suggests what educators should do about the problem and predicts what will happen in the future: that it's just going to get worse...and it has. The author gives suggestions for the benefit of students, both in and out of armed services during that time period that universities can still use to create a remedial program. Bond gives seven suggestions total ranging from "a thorough review of grammar coupled with frequent, short, narrative themes," to, "select an instructor who is sympathetic with the remedial-English student and interested in his problems." The majority of the list could qualify today as being "good" suggestions for most universities, though many English/Language Arts facilitators have abandoned the rigid grammar lesson. However, web logs can *help* to combat poor grammar by allowing peer-to-peer editing and commenting, and class-editing with the use of electronic white boards or a computer lab. The students may take more consideration into what they are writing, and may feel it necessary to comb through their writing more carefully.

Bond's article shows an early look at the need for a growing population of students to boost their writing skills for success in the college realm. Today, writing proficiency is still being carefully analyzed because many students in high school do not see the need for writing with consideration, and therefore students are not motivated to be



correct and concise in their writing. The serious equation revealed during this post WW II article is that, “The proficiency of the [college] freshman in English could be raised through effective co-operation between the universities and the high-school teacher of any given state, which could eventually eliminate the need for remedial English” (Bond 469). If students can establish blogs in high school, creating an online portfolio that shows progression in writing, a college writing teacher is given the opportunity to see the writers’ strengths and weaknesses upon review. Subsequent teachers on any level have the opportunity to see a writing student’s progression if blogs are established. The connections made between high schools and universities can help share information, guidance, and understanding of what it takes to be a college-level writer. A blog can show colleges the skill of a writer quickly and easily. Knowing this, a high school student can remain informed of what is expected as a college writer. Now, more colleges use blogs for writing assignments, and a high school teacher should show students what good college writers are capable of accomplishing through words.

This is happening today, yet the elimination of remedial course work in college English has not occurred, and when it has occurred, it has been because of budget decreases. More interaction among high schools and universities can be had online because links can be made to college blogs about writing. This was an article written because veterans were going to college after serving years over seas, during which they were exposed to little or no practice in writing. Although the reasons for remedial classes have changed, the necessity for them can be decreased through high school student blogging.



This increasing need for remedial classes on every level starting in high school has been a trend for quite some time, but what about the students who just don't care? They are what we would consider capable students in lower classes just because they didn't want the workload. I have heard many students say they didn't want to be in a higher-level, honors class simply because of the workload. The motivation is obviously lacking, and even gender orientation has something to do with this trend. Pajares and Giovanni's article, "Gender Differences in Writing Motivation and Achievement of Middle School Students: A Function of Gender Orientation?" found that, "the answer to the question posed in the title of this article is that it is indeed likely that many gender differences in writing motivation and achievement of middle school students may be a function of gender orientation rather than gender" (Pajares, Giovanni 376). Teachers try to appeal to both genders as many times as possible during an academic year, but students can comprehend the fact that not everything taught will be perfectly gender balanced at all times. Blogging on gender-biased topics encourages idea generation within the same sex, and of course among the sexes. A topic that may be slanted toward one sex or the other can be analyzed and evaluated online with more comfort because the topic is thought about, written, and commented upon outside the classroom.

It must be said that contrary to what may be thought, a student can get average grades in an English/Language Arts class without being well motivated, and consequently be considered a "good" writer. Any teacher in any discipline has many ways to evaluate a student. A student can lean on other types of evaluations in a class to get around the necessity of being motivated for a formal writing assignment, though many educators agree it should be a necessity in the minds of said student. Tests and quizzes on literature



readings are an example of other evaluations that are considered by English/Language teachers that can be placed on blogs. Student quizzes and tests can be individualized through blogging by allowing students to use the Internet to find answers, and then link them which others may then read, creating a sense of community.



## PAST REMEDIES TO GET RESULTS

Obviously during the Post World War II era, Gilbert Bond had the foresight to predict the downward trend of writing students. Gail Tompkins' more recent article, "Struggling Readers are Struggling Writers, Too" discusses the intervention practices used at the junior high school level. This article follows a group of 24 seventh grade students through a Ms. Bollin's reading class. The students needed extra help in reading and writing for a number of reasons. Interestingly, the students' ideas of what their writing was like, and how much writing they actually had done in their pasts was much different than what early tests in the class showed. The methods used were the focus of the article, and did not single any one student out of the group. Of course, the outcome was that intervention works:

"The idea of instructional scaffolding is not new and MS. Bollin recognized that because her students were novice writers, they would require a great deal of support. She demonstrated writing strategies and processes and she wrote many compositions collaboratively with students" (Tompkins 190).

This does not seem out of the ordinary considering the younger age of the students. This notion of collaboration naturally comes with the use on the Internet and web logs. Using writing web logs is the ultimate intervention. Access can be had by parents, intervention specialists, teachers, other peers, etc. Interestingly, peers become part of the intervention, and as long as rules are set by the teacher about good/thoughtful commenting practices, poor writers can gain a wealth of meaningful intervention by those who mean the most to them.



Kelly and Neal's article, "Delivering the Promise of Academic Success Through Late Intervention" in *Reading and Writing Quarterly* explains that intervention is never too late. Kelly and Neal's article effectively shows how to incorporate intervention among low functioning students, and these concepts can be expanded because of technology. Though this article focuses on reading, it is obvious to see the correlation between reading and writing competency. The idea of late intervention is to identify and tutor to bring the student up to date with their peers. To implement intervention, the decision has to be made on whether or not the material covered and used in the intervention will immediately have an effect on the student in order for that student to get "caught up." "We estimate that up to 40 percent of students are not doing well in upper grades; of that proportion, most have motivation and/or attention issues" (Kelly, Neal 105). They go on to say that these lacking learners do not have focus or drive when it comes to school studies. In other words, these students are not applying themselves. According to the authors, these students need to strengthen their, "general classroom practice" (Kelly, Neal 105). General classroom practices mean something much more when blogging is involved. The classroom time is expanded because many students will blog on their own time, and because they have the Internet at their disposal they have the opportunity to come across much more information and reference material that is held within the walls of the school. The students should be exposed to modeling and demonstrations, and they should be given new insight into what happens to be appropriate practices. This is why the *teacher* should have a running blog for students to view. Also, the students should receive appropriate feedback. "The Impact of Teacher Written Feedback on Individual Writers" by Fiona Hyland investigates how even



feedback from a teacher about writing has a tremendous effect on student motivation. It is suggested that the, “feedback situation has great potential for miscommunication and misunderstanding (Hyland 255). The given feedback on writing for an individual can be extended to those other than the teacher essentially “clearing up” any miscommunication on comment might have.

Along with these considerations an affirmation of success needs to be apparent, and of course appropriate materials should be used. In fact, as Monica Taylor covers in her article, “Using Collateral Material to Improve Writing Performance,” building a library of materials for struggling students can be a drawn out process, but can be accomplished over time, and then monitored for use (Taylor). The Internet provides information beyond a gathered library, and when combined with the resource text of the high school, the students are armed to be more successful in their idea generation. They are enabled to go beyond the conventional classroom to formulate their own ideas on a topic. The added collaboration and interaction with others focusing on the same topic on the Internet provides students, who may not normally speak up in a classroom, a chance to give opinion.

Also, although James W. Ney does not seem to be a strong proponent for error analysis, the concept of error analysis could be beneficial for students if there is a balance of error analysis and aspects of language and writing students do control effectively. These same concepts of appropriate materials, writing analyses, and affirmations of successes are being, or should be, used with all students, yet a large number of students lack the key, the extra step, in motivation, that being, to be as precise as possible in



school work, especially when writing formal papers. The combination of the above, and the use of blogs can effectively insert the extra motivation students lack.

As the above asserts, strengthening classroom practices is easier said than done in today's society. Luttrell and Parker argue, "That they [students] are a media-driven group who prefer movies, television and playing video games" (Luttrell, Parker 235). The article, "High School Students' Literacy Practices and Identities, and the Figured World of School" investigates how literacy and identity interact. The article cited Dorothy Holland stating that the figurative world that students think they are recruited into is formed from their every day routines/activities and their daily literacies. The article seems to be saying that high school students will read and write on topics of their choice, and actually apply what is learned in class to their own writing and reading. It is no surprise that students are drawn to what they can more easily relate. It can be assumed that when the topics or literature that a student comes into contact with is from a teacher, the topic that has been required for them to learn is not something they can ingest academically for the sake of learning. This is part of the problem. At what point can we expect students to learn something and understand that what they are learning, or writing, is for the benefit of their whole educational being? The answer is actually quite simple: a good teacher can relate any piece of information or material to a mass group of students, and by using blogs students are given the audience and interaction to formulate their own ideas and identities as learners.



## SUCCESSFUL STUDENTS AND MOTIVATION

Figuring motivation practices and going the extra step for effectiveness in writing must be a two-sided study. Dwelling on what is wrong with students cannot be the only way to go about learning why students do not take writing more seriously. Consideration must be given to the side of students that are motivated and are successful. In Potter, McCormick, and Busching's goal theory research article, "Academic and Life Goals: Insight from Adolescent Writers," there is focus based on that in order to understand motivation, one must understand the success stories of the goal-oriented student. It is not surprising to find that the students surveyed in this research found that, "writing motivation was heavily influenced by the extent to which they perceived they were encouraged to write authentic personal texts whose messages were respected by caring teachers" (Potter, et al.). The article gives many examples of students who articulate many aspects of good writing, such as: what the reader can learn about the writer; how the message is crafted; the writers' views of teachers' expectations; liking or disliking assignments, and so on. Only one student out of the nineteen students surveyed said that he "liked it neat." The article gave very thorough arguments about social issues and educational practices that successful students and teachers must overcome, or gain awareness of, to be good writers. The strategies applied to create a piece of writing, and the vehicle that writing is to actually reach a student personally is important. These students will be excited by the individualism of blogging. They will be the catalysts for inspiring others within the community. They have the necessary motivation to write conscientiously and in turn craft the discussions among students.



Tony Silva and John G. Nicholls' article, "College Students as Writing Theorists: Goals and Beliefs about the Causes of Success" mentions that successful college students can have goals that derive from the idea that, "effective writing depends on systematic approaches, hard work, and conformity to traditional authority" (Silva, Nicholls 281). The authors do deal with what they call, "surface-level conventions and clear organization of writing" (Silva, Nicholls 283). They came to the conclusion that this was a narrowly focused goal, and was not associated with an intrinsic commitment to learning and success, though it very well may need to be. This is understandable considering the authors' focus is on what a successful college student actually is. A successful student does not need to have "surface-level" conventions as a focus in order to have success. These students already understand the importance of this concept. This research wants to separate the absolute success stories, or those who have error free papers, with those who may have good ideas, but do not take the time to have precision on the surface level. Blogging can help to meld the error-free student lacking ideas with the idea driven student unmotivated to put the effort into creating an effective piece of writing with a minimal amount of grammatical errors.

### **Question for the Students: What is Motivation in Writing?**

What in today's society could be taking practices in expression and technique out of writing among students? Recently, I have asked my own students, informally, about what motivation they have to be precise in their own formal writing assignments. The groans about writing I received came from differing sized groups in each of the six classes I asked. Comments ranged from the students, but it was apparent that in every class there was a group that willingly admitted to not caring about at least one, or some of



the writing assignments. I do fight the same battles that the above studies have researched. I am obviously interested in finding out if there could be a way to better student writing, so not only will the ideas be on target, but the precision will be applied so that there might be even more pride in a final product.

Furthermore, when I asked my own students about their motivation for creating an effective paper, there was really not a definitive answer. Many talked about time restraints, or that they just do not know how to be insightful; and even printer problems were brought to the discussion. Of course, all of these excuses would be limited by blogging. I asked them about the difference between the words “to, two, and too,” and found that they could decipher, as a class, the difference between these homophones. I followed this by asking why the misuse of these homophones was prevalent in many of the papers I graded. I have discussed and re-discussed these words, but I still get many students using them incorrectly in formal writing. Why does this happen? They could not answer this question. This is just one example of the students knowing exactly what the problem may be, but not doing anything about it when a formal paper is assigned. Another example of lacking in conscientious writing many teachers seem to be correcting is why the pronoun “I” is not capitalized in student papers every time. I suspect quick Internet-speak that does not seem to use the same conventions as formal writing is the cause of this. There seems to be a lack of differentiation between differing modes of writing. Since blogging is an extension of the classroom environment, in theory these misuses would be eliminated.

In “Autonomy and Motivation A Literature Review,” Leslie Dickinson argues that learners active in their own learning (autonomy) have increased motivation to learn.



According to Dickinson, motivation is intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is seen in those who are interested in learning for their own sake. Obviously, extrinsic motivation is to learn for some sort of reward. The author asks the question: “What scope is there for influencing motivation in individuals?” (Dickinson 166) She paraphrases DeCharm saying, “motivation can be enhanced through encouraging learners to exert personal control over their learning and to take responsibility for it” (Dickinson 166). Personal control of ideas and even individual personality through blog design is given to each student. Their online portfolio is for the world to see, and their effort is apparent almost immediately to the reader. Knowing the audience is meaningful and large a student will consider topics more carefully with depth. Cognitive motivation is referred to in the article as being, “concerned with what learners are prepared to learn—the topic, and how much effort they [students] are prepared to exert in order to learn it” (Dickinson 168).

Johnson quotes Carmi Schooler:

“The complexity of an individual’s environment is defined by its stimulus and demand characteristics. The more diverse the stimuli, the greater the number of decisions required, the greater the number of consideration to be taken into account in making these decisions...such an environment rewards cognitive efforts, individuals should be motivated to develop their intellectual capacities and to generalize the resulting cognitive processes to other situations” (Johnson 146).

When considering the popularity of MySpace.com, teachers should understand the importance of the Internet as an “environment” combined with the classroom. These “forces working together create an environment likely to enhance problem-solving skills” (Johnson 146). Personalized space online where appearance is important to users and the



decision-making processes involved with blogging can correlate with writing practices make for higher cognitive efforts. The students may be motivated to create idea-driven writing because of the media-driven environment attached to the classroom.

To develop the motivation to write Roger Bruning and Christy Horn in the appropriately titled, “Developing Motivation to Write,” say that a teacher’s own conception of writing is an important aspect to establish motivation in a classroom. One must take into consideration the difficulties and challenges of writing, nurture functional beliefs about writing, use authentic writing tasks, provide a supportive context for writing, and create a positive emotional environment for writing. These can be applied by a teacher to enhance student writing. Once applied it is up to the students, but will they go that extra step to create a near-error-free piece of writing? As long as the facilitator of the blogging community sets the positive, emotional environment and makes it known that all students need to respect their peers, a student can be comfortable in attacking the difficulties and challenges of writing (online).

Linda Miller Cleary, in her article “Affect and Cognition in the Writing Processes of Eleventh Graders: A Study of Concentration and Motivation” investigates what goes wrong for developing writers in regards to motivation. She maintains that students who struggled desperately with writing are students who do not perceive success as probable. Cleary gives many social issues related to race and dialect that are factors in diminishing to motivation in general. She clearly states that students who have teachers breaking the parts of writing down to manageable parts created successful students. Proofreading and editing are a part of any teacher’s writing process, so finding the reason for the simple errors within students’ writing who could be above average and higher in a writing class



is still an issue needing a resolution. However, class editing, and using blog commenting functions can prove beneficial to the students in need.



## CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The biggest problem in schools, especially those not on the east or west coast, is that the learning community is not as defined as it should be, and is behind in regards to technology. The school district I work within is part of an affluent suburban community. The two high schools are safe, and the majority of students are “well-off” from a socio-economical standpoint. This mentality of keeping the students away from the dangers of society is, of course, an admirable aspect of the school district. However, this over-protective mentality hinders the educational community that could be had using the Internet.

The Internet could become a part of the learning community that is our school district and advance motivation within students to write with effective results. Our Internet is not the complete Internet because it is filtered through a subscription service. Bess is a filter that does not allow students to access certain Internet sites based on content. Key words such as: personals, web page hosting, pornography, and web communities come up when one is blocked by Bess. Granted, pornography and even personals could get students into what the high school learning community would deem inappropriate, but Bess does not block everything as I found out (see Object of Study-Bess).

The fact that students are prohibited from seeing certain aspects of the Internet is not a new idea. Obviously, there are many places considered inappropriate for the high school setting as they should be, but students, on a regular basis in my high school, are hindered by Bess when doing research. The fact that web communities, or blogs, are taken out of the searchable regions of the Internet keep students away from a wealth of



knowledge. Of course, not all blogs are appropriate for the high school setting, but the idea of an educational web community of blogs for students to be a part of is important. Allowing students to be contributors in an educational fashion to the Internet and the ever-growing information and knowledge on the Internet is a learning opportunity for every student no matter the ability level or gender. Because the students are prohibited to see web communities, I am unable to create a web community for my students that can be seen and added to by true outside sources. A technology administrator in my school explained to me that

“Secure Computing Corporation is the company that owns Bess, and they are constantly working to protect our students from inappropriate material by reviewing these new sites. Also, our more inventive students work diligently to find loopholes that will allow them to get around Bess; which makes internet filtering a full time job.

One last important thing to note is that the filtering is only here within the district. The students can go anywhere they want to from home. Many parents are not fully aware of the type of material that is available on the internet which puts our students at great risk of viewing inappropriate material” (O’Shea).

Predators and “inappropriate” comments are the reason Bess is necessary according to my district’s technology director. My response to this is that our students lack Internet responsibility and awareness is needed. Our elementary students use the Internet as an encyclopedia, so our students do not understand that the Internet can be as dangerous the world around us.

An example of this lack of Internet responsibility comes with the recent controversies dealing with MySpace.com. Students are placing large amounts of



personal information on MySpace.com without worry for what can happen. After asking my own students: Who looks at your MySpace.com accounts? Their first responses as a whole was, “our friends.” They did not realize collectively that the world views their accounts.

A study was done in Australia in 2001 where 238 students in grades seven through ten were surveyed. 27% that regularly use MySpace said they were contacted by what they thought could be a child predator. More distressing is the fact that 23% had been worried about their own safety, but told no one (Johnson 38-39). Many young people even trusted those whom they had never met. This shows that students do not take into consideration the responsibility to report the dangers of the Internet. They have not been trained, as they would to cross the street, that they need to consider consequences before an action.

Taylor Behl from Richmond, Virginia is one of the many unfortunate cases in which learned Internet responsibility could have changed the outcome. New to the college scene, Behl was murdered by a thirty-eight year old man she met through MySpace. The man was known for loitering around college campuses hoping to meet young women (MissingExploited.com).

Many, however, who have been taught Internet responsibility see the potential audience at hand given the Internet. The blog function within MySpace is being used by the high school aged student. They take into consideration the MySpace Terms of Use. “Please choose carefully the information you post on MySpace.com and that you provide for other members... You are solely responsible for the content you publish or display” (MySpace.com). The site clearly lists inappropriate information that could endanger



users. The Internet in general and sites like MySpace.com are being used by the students who lack the motivation to write with consideration in English/Language Arts classes, yet schools are not considering the audience that the Internet provides. Students can be assigned a blog that they can personalize/take ownership of, and use it for educational purposes. This offers the students a way to think and write about the topics of the day on their own time, and relate the topics in their own manner for a true audience. Motivation to write with full consideration of the audience, no matter the ability level or gender, will increase.

If students are not trained to view the Internet as a place with potential dangers and are held from using it as an educational tool, how are they to differentiate what is educational and appropriate on the Internet? With early training and lighter filtering techniques, such as individual login accounts, students may start becoming part of the educational community of the Internet. For my suburban school district, this would motivate students to write conscientiously as the world would be their audience



## **OBJECTS OF STUDY:**

### **Bess**

Dr. Allan November of November Learning has created an option for educators to monitor what is placed on student blogs with community blog software. This is a better method, but not advertised widely in the Ohio area. By signing on to an account with November Learning, a teacher may create a learning community for the students. This gives the teacher the power that Bess takes away. “Students are permitted to participate within their educator’s Community, provided that an educator is continuously administrating the site” (November Learning). Is the teacher becoming the filter? Yes. However, BESS does not give the option to the educator at all. November’s website goes on to make sure to inform that: “November Learning is not responsible or liable for anything posted or information exchanged within your Community. The educator agrees to communicate and participate at the educator’s own risk” (November Learning). As with most technology advancements in educations, many teachers are unwilling to take the time to learn what the new technology can do for their students. As an example, many teachers in my high school do not have their own websites, and are unwilling to learn even though it is free and simple to do. We have a template-based website subscription, and every teacher in the district should have a website for their students and the parents. I will be using November’s software if my school district does not allow me to use the free and readily available blogging software on the Internet.

I found that even though filtering is a “full time job” according to our technology administration, BESS did not filter everything. I found that most blocked sites were labeled as “personals” or containing “sexual content” and “lingerie”. Sites that seem



harmless such as Reunion.com are blocked. Of course, MySpace.com was blocked continuously. I found that a site called Homosexuals Anonymous was blocked. It seemed odd that a site meant to listen and help “persons in conflict with homosexual feelings” was blocked, but an un-blocked site boasted a t-shirt that said “Homosexuals are Gay”.

What I found to be un-blocked is far more interesting considering BESS is supposed to be filtering. Sites on assault rifles and guns in general were not blocked. One site called Officeguns.com boasted that the guns made out of everyday office materials, “can cause major damage on people, pets, and property.” This site included assembly directions also.

As the Internet has many places deemed dangerous for student eyes, web communities for educational purposes have the potential to get students motivated to write effectively with expression.

### **Student Blogs**

Maria Lourdes Angala, TL from the DC Area Writing Project, posted this story about teens and blogging

"My students were hesitant writers when they started out with me during the first days of the school year. They could not even start writing a poem or a story with a given topic. It was a struggle for them to write. I also noticed that their vocabulary is very limited to simple words. ... But technology opens new opportunities for helping children to learn the rudiments of grammar and composition, while encouraging them to share their work to each other and to the whole world. Then an idea integrating this into my curriculum dawned to me. The publishing of my students' works through our class website and our school website positively motivates them to write better each time..." (Angala)



Teachers are coming to understand that technology is a means to motivate students educationally. Teachers like Angela are finding the correct way to get students to write effectively with a personal voice. The following samples of student blog postings and subsequent comments have been found to provide a look at how teachers, students, and parents view blogs.

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the address bar displaying [http://classblogmeister.com/blog.php?blogger\\_id=6680](http://classblogmeister.com/blog.php?blogger_id=6680). The browser's menu bar includes 'File', 'Edit', 'View', 'Favorites', 'Tools', and 'Help'. The toolbar contains various icons for navigation and search.

The main content area features a post titled "Two more things on MySpace" dated 05/8, with the subtitle "Another Posting About Myspace". The post text reads: "Two jobs to complete for this blog activity:" followed by two numbered tasks:

1. React to this Adult view of Myspace. React to some specifics which are included in the article. Also, comment on the two boxes included which purport to be good protection ideas for adults(parents) and for students.
2. In a separate blog entry, write a letter to parents telling them why it is OK for you to use Myspace, if you have a Myspace or if you think it /S OK. Otherwise, your letter to parents should tell them why you don't have a Myspace or why they shouldn't allow their kids to have one. The letter is not to your parents, it is to parents of high school students. Use paragraphs, proper punctuation and good grammar! Use MS Word, if you need help with spelling and grammar, then paste it into your blog!

Below the tasks, the post is dated "Post by May 17th 10:00PM." and includes a link "Article posted # May 8, 2006 at 07:04 AM: edit • comment • Reads 788".

The sidebar on the left contains two sections: "Teacher Entries" and "Student Entries". The "Teacher Entries" section lists a single entry: "5/8 Two more things on MySpace" with a link "List 5, 10, all". The "Student Entries" section lists multiple entries with dates, titles, and initials (e.g., "6/5 Finals LW", "6/1 Beach Party KT", "5/21 Letter to Parents SK", "5/20 Adults vs. MySpace SK", "5/17 Adult view reaction RM", "5/17 Why One Should be Able to Have a MySpace LM", "5/17 MySpace Phenomenon LM", "5/17 Dear Parents DL", "5/17 Myspace Views DL", "5/17 Myspace (one more time) ED", "5/17 My space (again) ED", "5/17 Letter to HS Parents LW", "5/17 perps on myspace CB", "5/17 Just another article- not the whole story LW", "5/17 My Horse Show Endeavors CS", "5/17 Letter to Parents KT", "5/16 Myspace Letter PL", "5/16 Adult Perspective on MySpace CS", "5/16 Letter to Parents about MySpace RM", "5/16 The Myspace Phenomenon PL", "5/16 Reaction to the Adult view of Myspace MC", "5/16 Reaction to the Adult view of Myspace AT").

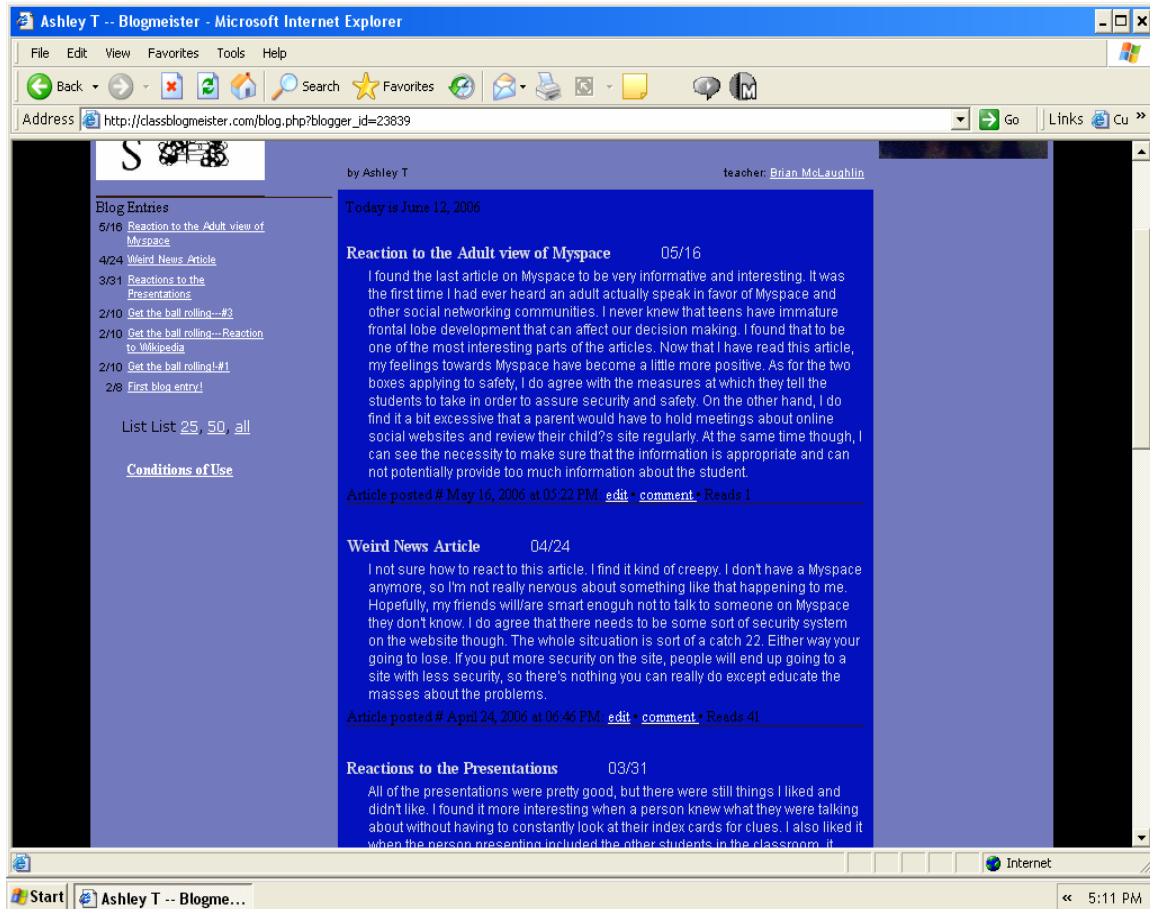
The right sidebar, titled "My Students", lists a long list of names: Amanda H, Ashley T, BreAnna W, Candice B, Chandni B, Christina H, Colin S, Cortney C, Devin F, Donald L, Elana A, Elisa D, Hannah R, John C, Joseph R, Kayla H, Kelly T, Kimberly H, Lawrence W, Lindsay W, Logan M, Megan M, Michael C, Molly L, Nataliya N, Nitasha K, Paul L, Rachael W, Roger M, Sakib K, Salman F, Sindhoori N, and Victoria B.

The browser's status bar at the bottom shows the page title "Brian M -- Blogmei..." and the time "5:10 PM".

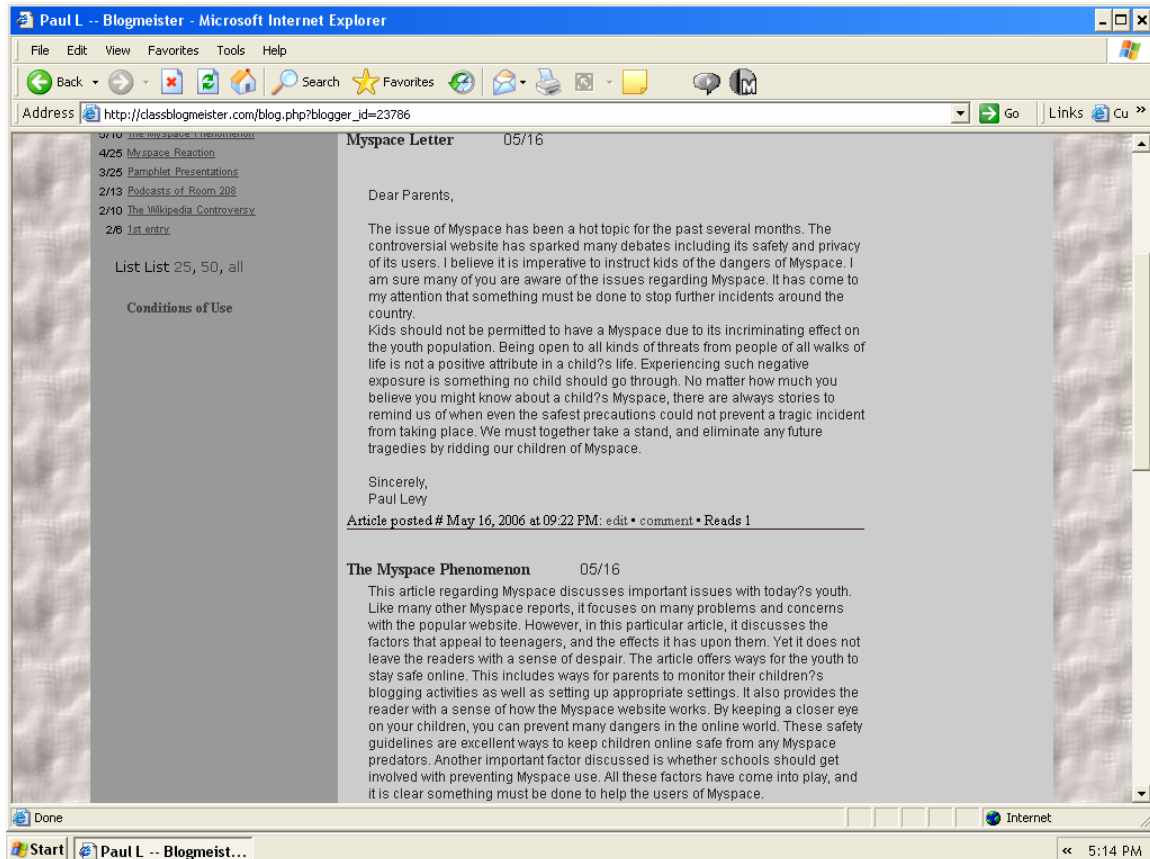
The above assignment by Brian McLaughlin shows that connections can be made through the opinions of the “adult world” by students. The assignment happens to be



about the MySpace.com safety issues.







The above samples of student responses to Mr. McLaughlin's writing assignment are generally error free and have a specific voice. The personalization of style within each blog themselves are also key factors in motivation for effective writing.

### Implementation

A recent article on eSchool News Online quoted: "Kids are getting excited and engaged in literacy through blogging, commenting, and sharing ideas online, said Wesley Fryer... There is an excitement that comes from writing for a real, authentic audience instead of a circular file seen only by the teacher" (eSchool News). Most of the teachers quoted in the article happened to be from east coast schools.

Middle American education must become actively involved in engaging students to write.

A teacher does not engage students to write effectively when the audience is not



meaningful. There will always be the students who write well no matter the topic, or setting. Many students do not see the point in writing with consideration now, but higher education and in the world of work demands it. Educators must not fall behind in showing the importance through writing for the world audience.



## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

It is important to understand the needs of students as a teacher, whether those needs may be socially or mentally constructed. Careful consideration in writing, and the underlying motivation issues that correspond seem to be something that many teachers have expressed as a problem. Hopefully, this situated study can serve as a call that will allow teachers/readers who struggle with getting writers to be conscientious with ideas and precise with grammar some insight so that the final product of their writers can be effective. The writers' correct ideas in a piece are important, but having motivation to go the extra step with writing precisely should be something that writers-in-training should want to care about. If we give the students a true audience this can happen. Blogs can be used safely if we instill in students Internet responsibility, and show them the importance of writing for the global audience. The means, methods, and technology are obviously here. Teachers need to fight to give students the audience that matters.



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