Tapping into Students’ Motivation: Lessons from Young Adolescents’ Blogs

As a young adolescent, I wrote hundreds of letters to friends, some who lived far enough away that I mailed the letters, some whom I saw daily at school. I always received letters in response, and those responses fed my desire to write again and again. The sheer volume of writing I did as a teenager is largely responsible for the fact that I find writing, especially first draft writing, almost easy. (Revision is another matter altogether.)

I also kept a journal off and on throughout junior high and high school, chronicling the normal ups and downs of being an adolescent. I was more apt to write in my journal when something was upsetting or frustrating (unrequited love, mostly), so the journal became embarrassing to reread once I became a settled adult. Nevertheless, journaling was another path I took to becoming a fluent writer. This ability to write fluently served me well in school, but I wrote more, and more passionately, for myself and for my friends than I ever wrote for school.

These days, adolescents have multiple methods of communicating with peers: instant messages, cell phones, email, and blogs. Blogs (short for weblogs) are online journals—a series of archived Internet postings, some of which contain hypertext links to websites and other blogs. Historically, blogs were a way to document one’s navigation of the Internet, filtering its content to highlight a particular area of interest. As blogging software and websites became more user-friendly for the general public, community blogs and personal blogs became more prevalent. Community blogs are similar to both electronic and print bulletin boards. Personal blogs are similar to journals, but they have additional features, like “comments” that allow for interaction between the journal writer and audience (Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004).

Blogging is very popular among young adolescents. As a language arts teacher educator, I have often wondered what the appeal of blogging is for them. I thought that if I could figure out what motivated young adolescents to write for themselves, it might give me some insight into how to design effective writing experiences in school. I could then help my preservice teachers understand students’ intrinsic motivation to write and enable them to craft writing lessons that capitalized on that motivation. By examining the literature and through reading and participating in the blogs of several young adolescents, I hoped to understand why young adolescents choose to write blogs. That understanding, I reasoned, would help me think about ways to make school writing more like self-sponsored writing.

Why Blog?

Young adolescents may be meeting some basic needs through blogging. Alderfer (1972), in a modification of Maslow’s “hierarchy of needs” theory (1954), posits that humans have existence needs, relatedness needs, and growth needs. Existence needs are satisfied when people have the material substances necessary to meet their physiological and safety needs. Relatedness needs are...
satisfied when people have relationships in which they can share their thoughts and feelings. Growth needs are satisfied when people are able to use their current capabilities as well as develop new talents.

Relatedness and growth needs can both be met through keeping a blog. The entries that people post on their blogs are often expressions of their thoughts and feelings about a variety of subjects: themselves, their families, their job, politics, their hobbies, other people, and so on. If they are regular bloggers, they often establish a following of readers, many of whom post comments on the blog entries. A survey of 19- to 60-year-old bloggers showed that their reasons for keeping a blog were to update their readers on their activities and whereabouts, to express their opinions and influence others, to seek others’ opinions and feedback, to “think by writing,” and to release emotional tension (Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004). Huffaker and Calvert (2005) found that young adolescents’ blogs often discuss their real-life personal relationships and that the authors tend to reveal part or all of their name, their age, and other contact information, such as their instant message identifying nickname, their email address, and links to their personal websites.

You might wonder why someone would want to document their private lives in such a public medium. Miller and Shepherd (2004) call it “mediated exhibitionism” and explain that because the posts are usually brief and frequent, they tend to convey a sense of immediacy that makes them seem intimate and spontaneous, and yet it is a highly mediated form of immediacy. They point out that, like cell phone conversations that take place in public spaces, blogs are another intersection of the public and the private. But when I posted this idea on my LiveJournal blog, one blogger responded, “There’s something about sharing your soul and your inner thoughts for all to read that makes you vulnerable and helps you to see things as they really are.” Sharing your self through writing does make you vulnerable.

Through the influence of the writing workshop model, having middle level students share their writing has become a common element of writing instruction. But, for many young adolescents, sharing their writing is a scary thing to do. Writing of almost any sort is revealing of who we are, and sharing it makes us vulnerable. Posting to the Web takes that face-to-face sharing to a wider audience, in one sense making the writer even more vulnerable, yet paradoxically it also makes the writer less exposed through the “safety” of digital distance. Even with digital distance, bloggers can meet their relatedness needs because they can receive feedback on their posts through commenting. They can also connect with others by reading their blogs and learning how their lives are both similar to and different from their own.

Growth needs might be met through blogging as well. As the software has become easier to use, people find they can easily learn the programs they need to start and keep a blog. Once they’ve started, they begin to learn how to add “bells and whistles” to their blog: link lists, counters, blogrolls, icons, chatterboxes, and trackbacking. Growth needs are also met through the frequent writing that can occur on a blog. Some bloggers post frequent, very short posts that perhaps don’t stretch their writing skills. However, many bloggers post short personal essays that take only a few minutes to read, but still allow them to develop their thoughts on a topic.

**Kairos**

Kairos is the occasion of writing, the historical context in which the writing occurs, the conventions of writing expected in the context, and the manner of delivery that a particular audience expects. Almost all “real-world” writing (as well as other forms of communication, including talk) happens within a specific context that includes a reason for the writing and a real or imagined au-
Writing, like speaking, is a social act that differs according to the situation in which it occurs. Quintilian says in his *Institutes of Oratory*:

> It makes a great difference, too, whether we speak in a public or private place, in one that is populous or unfrequented in a foreign city or in our own, in a camp or in the forum; each of these places requires its own peculiar form and style of eloquence; as even in other affairs of life, the same mode of proceeding is not equally suitable in the forum, the senate, the Campus Martius, the theatre, and in our own houses; and many things, which are not reprehensible in their own nature, and are sometimes absolutely necessary, are counted unseemly if done in any other place than where custom authorizes (Book 11, chapter 1, sentence 47).

While Quintilian might not approve of cell phone conversations in the airport about what medications we’re currently taking, or of blogging about our personal trials and triumphs, writers of blogs define their kairos in ways that do take into account their context, their audience, and their purpose for writing. The conventions of blogging are flexible, allowing for myriad purposes, topics, and writing styles. When Viegas (2005) looked into the issue of bloggers’ expectations of privacy and accountability, she found that “blogging is a world in flux where social norms, most of them self-imposed, are starting to emerge” (unpaged).

**Six Adolescents and Their Blogs**

My interest in blogs was precipitated by a 2004 Christmas letter from the Winston family—a lively conversational exchange written by the Winstons’ son and daughter that reflected not only the good humor and love their family shares, but also these young adolescents’ ability to write with voice and audience awareness beyond their years. In the letter, Daniel, the Winstons’ son, mentioned writing frequently on his “Xanga,” which turned out to be a blogging community.

I began my exploration of young adolescents’ blogs by reading Daniel’s blog, and then I used his blogroll (the list of blogs he reads) to find other young adolescents’ blogs. I also used search features of the Xanga website to find people who expressed an interest in writing. By looking at their profiles, I could determine if the blog authors were between the ages of 13–18, my target age group.

I settled on six blogs to read on a regular basis. Over the many weeks that I read their blogs, I posted questions there about why they blog, and they responded on my blog. In some cases, we also carried on a conversation by email. As I grew to know them, I was able to compare their stated reasons for blogging with the actual content of their blogs. I have charted the content, format, commenting frequency, and motivation for each (see Table 1) and profiled each blogger.

**Katie**

When I asked Katie why she kept a blog, she said, “It’s my own little energy release I guess. My friends can look at what’s going on and excuse me for anything I’ve said. That and I like messing around with the format and stuff.” She mostly writes about current events in her personal life such as church and school activities. Her blog entries during the months I was reading them revolved around her need to quit a dance club called the Kilties, rumors that the Kilties leader is spreading about her reasons for quitting, and the fact that she had been “kicked out” by her mother and is now living with her dad. Comments from friends are supportive, but not in-depth. When I asked her if it bothers her that she often gets no responses to her blog entries, she said, “I like writing even if nobody reads it.”

**Melissa**

Melissa’s blog is active, with new posts every three or four days. Many of her posts are about activities with friends and at church. When I asked Melissa why she kept a blog, she wrote [all spellings and punctuation, including ellipses, are reproduced exactly as they were in the original]:

> i'm not really sure why i have a blog ... .i started it in Nov. of last year because alot of my friends had it and i thought it would be a good way to keep in contact with them. . .i also met a girl on the internet from NC and that is one way that i keep up with her . . . through her i have met others from there. . . about the comments. . . .yeah it helps when i get alot of comments because at least it tells me that people are
coming by my site... i mean if they didn't what would be the point of havin it? i just recently started gettin alot of comments like up to 10 at the most... usually i get like 1 or 2 possible... but comments are that big of a part... to me havin the blog is a way to just let everything out... share how my day has been what i'm going through... ya never know who could come by your site when your havin a problem and have the best help in the world but you have no idea who they are or where there from... so thats the reason i keep a blog... friends, help, and just release.

Melissa's blog gets a high volume of comments and she urges her readers to comment, specifically urging them to break a previous record of 17 comments on a post. She also periodically changes her format and the title of her blog.

**Whitney**

Whitney said she blogs to talk to her friends and to learn what's going on in their lives. She also said that she has two guy friends who don't try to read it, which presumably makes it safe for her to discuss them in her blog entries. She follows a regular format for reporting on her school life: happenings before school, during each period at school, the bus ride home, and after-school happenings. On weekends, she reports on the highs and lows of her days. She also posts the titles of movies she is watching, music she is listening to, and uses the blog to indulge her current obsession with a particular pop boy band. Commenting is infrequent, but she has several friends from school whose blogs she regularly reads.

**Daniel**

Daniel's stated reasons for blogging were fully developed. He enjoys writing and uses his blog and his post on other sites to practice writing about "mundane stuff happening in my life and if others read it, then that means I've done some decent writing." He also uses his blog and sites like Critique Circle to post short stories and get feedback from readers, though on the blog, most posts have only one or two comments. He welcomes critique.

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**Table 1. Comparison of motivation and content of six student bloggers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Katie</th>
<th>Melissa</th>
<th>Whitney</th>
<th>Daniel</th>
<th>Jon</th>
<th>Sean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Format</td>
<td>Frequent changes to background, fonts, organization.</td>
<td>Changes background, title, and colors frequently.</td>
<td>Changes colors and background frequently. Adds small gifs to enhance her message and scrolling icon marquee.</td>
<td>Changes format occasionally.</td>
<td>Changed format to reflect Harvard colors until admission decision date arrives.</td>
<td>No detectable changes in format. Stopped posting indefinitely.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments</td>
<td>One or two comments on most posts.</td>
<td>High volume and readers who request her to update.</td>
<td>Low volume of comments.</td>
<td>Most posts have one or two comments.</td>
<td>Most posts have comments and some make requests that he update.</td>
<td>High volume of comments including from girlfriend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motives</td>
<td>Communicate with friends and get their forgiveness.</td>
<td>Communicate with friends, share feelings.</td>
<td>Communicate with friends.</td>
<td>Get responses and communicate with friends.</td>
<td>Communicate with friends; write about his feelings.</td>
<td>Validation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Voices from the Middle, Volume 14 Number 2, December 2006*
of not only his stories, but also his thoughts, wanting to know if there are "holes" in his "deep thoughts." The blog allows him to connect with friends and share things he likes, such as song lyrics, scripture quotes, and books. A recent post was about character and how, unlike factors such as looks, where we're born, who our parents are, etc., we control our character by controlling our actions. In the post, he quoted a passage from C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* in which Lewis theorizes about how we become heavenly creatures or hellish creatures by virtue of the choices we make in life.

Jon

Jon was a high school senior applying to Ivy League schools. When I asked Jon why he keeps a blog, he wrote:

I keep my blog as a way of communicating with my school friends after school (although I use AIM more specifically for that purpose). My main reason for keeping the blog is because it affords me a place where I can write what I feel at the moment (rather than the customary essays at school that are largely non-subjective). I also enjoy the few "xanga friendships" I have made. I have truly found a lot of interesting people on Blogrings. I love to learn from friends that come from diverse backgrounds and have different perspectives.

In later posts, Jon wrote about the trials of being in drama club and in *My Fair Lady* in particular, especially his feelings about the director. He also posted his SAT essay, the prompt for the essay, the score he got on it (10 out of 12), and his feelings about the score. Jon's posts usually have several comments each, which are supportive, yet brief.

Sean

Sean's blog was especially intriguing in that shortly after I started reading it, he stopped posting, ever. Through a series of emails back and forth with Sean, he explained to me what blogging had been for him and why he had stopped:

So I stopped blogging because I knew it was ruining my life. What I mean by that is that it just made me too susceptible to insecurity and dependence on that source of approval in my life. I had decided to make positive changes in my life with regards to the way I present myself and how I deal with people and how I act in general. I decided that I really didn't need xanga [personal website platform] anymore so I got rid of it.

The only problem is that I am very animalistic and my primal urges got the better of me again; I just couldn't help myself. Subtly, perhaps subconsciously, I asked for people to contact me, to talk to me, to validate my existence. [...] I stopped (ugh) blogging because I was confessing my problems to an invisible audience without coming to terms with them first. [...] I don't really know why young people keep blogs. Sorry to say, most of them aren't as smart as me. Why I got sucked into it, I have no idea. I can only speak for myself.

I do know that "young people" these days (especially ones who keep/have a xanga or especially "mySpace") are all petty, weak, shallow and stupid individuals with low self esteem and need validation just as bad as I do. However, since they are so stupid they are not as aware of their subconscious motives as I am. Quite sad, really.

And, if you haven't noticed (sic) I absolutely Love writing. I literally write essays in my spare time (not joking), so I really can't give you reasonable advice on writing assignments for normal schoolchildren, since I am (thankfully) not one of them. I suppose the stock answer would be to give them writing assignments on stuff that relates to their lives. As in: somehow connect the literature to their own lives. [...] The last post on Sean's blog says, "I love you, Krista." In an email to Sean, I wondered if he had stopped blogging because he was getting attention from a real-life girlfriend instead of getting it from virtual admirers online.

I applaud your brilliant deduction regarding my decision to cease blogging (wince) once I got a girlfriend (I hadn't even thought about it, and I overanalyze EVERYTHING). Yes, now that I think about it, it is a very good explanation for my decision... at least in part. You see... if you go back to the very first entry ever, you'll see that I hated ex-anga's even then. I
grudgingly and reluctantly got one so I had a way of commenting on my friend's xanga. I started to get really (read: excessively) into it. My actual, conscious decision to nix my...er...web log (whew) was, as I said, because it was ruining my life. I suppose, subconsciously I no longer needed the validation that I believed ex-anga provided since I started getting REAL validation from an external source.

Motives for Blogging

So why do young adolescents keep blogs? Communicating with friends and strangers allowed these six teens to have their relatedness needs met through writing their blogs and getting comments from readers. “Having an audience for one’s writing also provides recognition of self and by self” (McClay, 2005, p. 91). They make their mark upon the world, and leave their footprints on the sand of the Internet.

Young adolescents grow as writers when they write their blogs, and their technology skills also grow as they manipulate the look of their blogs, update the features they include, and troubleshoot problems. Clearly, bloggers meet some of their growth needs through their use of blogs.

Because posts are automatically archived, a history of a writer’s texts is available for analysis. As bloggers reread past posts, they can, in some sense, see an archive of their past selves, have a dialogue with past selves.

While young adolescents’ identities are notoriously shifting and developing, their writings allow these young people to regard their younger selves as they move into the next stage of their lives. (McClay, 2005, p. 93)

This is surely the case for Sean, who has not deleted his blog, but has left it online as a reminder to himself, however embarrassing, of his past self, the self that needed too much affirmation from others.

These six young adolescents’ blogs are shaped by the space and time within which they were created—what Bakhtin called a “chronotope” (1981).

A Quintilian-esque sense of kairos might see their texts as inappropriate, but in the space and time in which these adolescents find themselves, their texts are perfectly situated. They are organic, growing from the technology they understand and continue to master, from their desire to write, their

SIDETRIP: GETTING UP TO SPEED ON THE INFORMATION HIGHWAY

The Internet has changed the way we work, communicate, and live. Young people tend to know a great deal about advances on the Internet, how to use this massive resource, and how to share with one another. If you’re feeling that your knowledge comes from “back in the day,” here are some resources for you:

We’ve Got Blog: Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture (2002, Perseus) is a collection of essays that examine the ways in which people use blogs and how these blogs impact human interaction.

Not everyone is thrilled with the rapid spread of blogs. Several newspapers and TV news shows have commented on the use of blogs by students. There is concern that students are telling too much about their personal life and that this may cause them harm in the future.

To search and find blogs on just about any subject, try visiting www.blogwise.com. Specific blogs of interest to teachers focus on National Board Certification (www.teachermagazine.org), setting up a teacher blog (edublogs.org), and teaching English language learners (iteslj.org/links/tesl/weblogs). Sites that your middle school students probably know are myspace.com and facebook.com.

Soon you’ll be able to access the best blogs that are subsequently published as books. According to BBC news (October, 2005), the Blooker Prize will recognize achievements in this new area. For a listing of awardees, see www.lulubloookerprize.com.

—Douglas Fisher
need to communicate with others (especially peers), and their need to understand themselves as growing, changing, thinking people.

**Tapping into Middle Level Students’ Motivation to Write**

When I think about Alderfer’s (1972) needs theory and the kind of writing that these young adolescents post to their blogs, it seems possible to make school writing more like self-sponsored writing. Emig (1971), in her groundbreaking research, found that her participants spent much more time planning, drafting, and revising their self-sponsored writing than they did with their school-assigned writing. School writing, according to Alan Purves, is “an unnatural act. School instruction in writing prepares students not to be writers in the grand sense of the term, but functional writers, writing against the clock, meeting deadlines, preparing viable drafts, committing words to paper in order to get a job done” (1992, p. xii).

Though I agree with Purves about the “unnaturalness” of some school writing, functional writing isn’t all bad. And the goals of functional writing (e.g., clarity, fluency, use of standard conventions, meeting deadlines) could be met through writing that students find motivating and engaging, which might lessen the chance of teaching our students to fear and loathe writing.

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If using blogs in the classroom is not possible, we can still incorporate the inherent motivation to write blogs into classroom writing experiences where students’ own purposes dominate and where personal goals—not a grade—get them writing and keep them going. The main features of blogging that can be incorporated into many school writing experiences are the following:

- Blog topics are self-chosen.
- Blog posts are short and of rough-draft quality.
- Blog posts receive peer response.
- Blog posts are responded to quickly, though not immediately.
- Blogs often involve frequent changes of fonts, backgrounds, and other design features, which adds an element of “fun.”

If teachers ask for more frequent, shorter, and rough-draft quality writing, then the pressure for “correctness” is lessened, which enhances students’ writing fluency. Getting response from peers in peer response groups gives students a faster turnaround for response and validation from their social equals, especially in terms of the content of their writing. Students can be encouraged to use graphics, fonts, and backgrounds to support or enhance the content of their writing. Giving students some measure of choice increases motivation as well, so even if the teacher needs to have students learn a particular form or genre, students can be given latitude in terms of topic. A persuasive piece of writing, for example, could take the form of an op-ed piece, a letter to the editor, a book review, a movie review, a blog posting, and so on. Students learn the basics of persuasive writing and then choose what kind of writing they want to work on.

Students’ need to develop relationships with others and their willingness to write on topics of their own choosing are factors we can use in teaching. Many students choose to write on their own, and the conditions under which they write can be replicated, if imperfectly, in the classroom. After all, our goal is to foster lifelong learners, people who write and think because they want to—in school and beyond. We can learn from bloggers like Sean and Katie how to make classroom writing match more closely the conditions, topics, and exigencies of self-sponsored writing. Young adolescents do need validation, as Sean tells us, and writing, if we keep the conditions safe and motivating, can validate our middle level students.

References


Sylvia Read currently teaches language arts methods at Utah State University. Before moving to higher education, she enjoyed teaching 2nd graders and 6th graders in Illinois and Utah.

**English Education Programs Meet NCATE and NCTE Teacher Preparation Guidelines**

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) has adopted the NCTE guidelines, now called program standards, for undergraduate programs for teacher education in English Language Arts for middle/junior and senior high schools. These program standards were derived from NCTE's *Guidelines for the Preparation of Teachers of English Language Arts*. Institutions seeking NCATE accreditation are required to submit program review documents showing how their programs meet the NCTE program standards. The Council's program review process is carried out by over 100 reviewers. All are members of NCTE and CEE (Conference on English Education) who have attended program review training workshops. The NCTE review program is directed by Charles Duke, Appalachian State University, with Sandra E. Gibbs at NCATE headquarters. Since our last listing, the 29 institutions below have submitted program review documents that show their English education programs to be nationally recognized by the NCTE/NCATE Program Standards. Institutions that are “nationally recognized” by NCATE will be listed on our website and will be updated periodically. Go to: http://www.ncte.org/prog/ncate/

For more information on NCTE's participation in the program review process write to Sandra E. Gibbs, Senior Program Officer, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801-1096.

**Colorado**: Metropolitan State College of Denver; **District of Columbia**: George Washington University, Trinity College; **Illinois**: McKendree College-Lebanon, Saint Xavier University-Chicago, Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, Wheaton College (Baccalaureate); **Maryland**: Salisbury University (Baccalaureate/Master's); **Massachusetts**: Bridgewater State College (Baccalaureate), Fitchburg State College, Salem State College (MAT/Baccalaureate); **Michigan**: Concordia University-Ann Arbor; **New Jersey**: Monmouth University-West Long Branch (Baccalaureate/Master's), Rider College-Lawrenceville; **New York**: Brooklyn College (Baccalaureate/Master's), Nyack College; **Ohio**: Capital University-Columbus, Walsh University-North Canton (Baccalaureate/Postbaccalaureate); **Oklahoma**: Oklahoma State University-Stillwater; **Pennsylvania**: California State University of Pennsylvania (Baccalaureate/Postbaccalaureate/Master's), East Stroudsburg University, Mansfield University, Marywood University-Scranton (Baccalaureate/Postbaccalaureate); **South Carolina**: Coastal Carolina University-Conway, Furman University-Columbia, Presbyterian College-Columbia; **Texas**: Lamar University-Beaumont; **Virginia**: Marymount University-Arlington (Baccalaureate); **West Virginia**: Concord University-Athens.