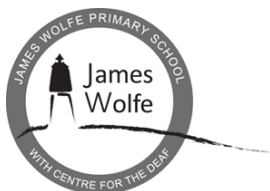# 2 | AN INVESTIGATION INTO HOW BLOGGING CAN BE USED TO IMPROVE WRITING ATTAINMENT IN YEAR 6

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2.1| INTRODUCTION

My initial research objective was to investigate how we could use blogging to improve writing attainment for children, particularly those identified as in receipt of Pupil Premium (PP). Having used blogging in an unsystematic way over the last academic year, I was keen to see how it could be incorporated into the children's writing process. My own experience had led me to believe that using the blog engaged children with the writing process as children were more motivated to publish a piece of writing that would be seen by a potentially wide audience and were interested in the feedback that they were receiving. In exploring current research I found that there have been a number of recent studies looking at the impact of blogging on children's learning. Whilst most are US based and focused on secondary or higher education, a 2012 research paper produced by The CFBT Education Trust, which looked at three Lambeth primary schools, concluded that blogging did have a positive impact on writing outcomes. The study describes blogging as contributing to progress in writing mainly through generating enthusiasm and motivation:

> *"In most classrooms, for most pupils, blogging resulted in pupils' increased engagement in writing, increased confidence in writing, greater awareness of audience, a greater sense of their 'voice' as a writer, greater awareness of their own writing and that of others, and an enhanced sense of belonging to a writing community."*(Barrs and Horrocks 2014)

Using the findings and recommendations of this study and drawing on what we already know about the power of feedback in learning (Hattie and Timperly 2007), I narrowed my focus to investigate how we could develop our use of commenting on the blog to move children on in their writing. The CFBT study found that writing on the blog was often of a personal and informal nature and the types of comments offered were generally more supportive. I was keen to explore how both myself as teacher and the Year 6 students themselves could embed the principles of structured feedback marking into their commenting.

The ethical dimensions of this action research project were considered. Although the work I was undertaking was very close to my normal classroom activity, there were differences mainly in the systematic nature of my approach to change-making in my class and with whom data and results were shared: anonymised data was to be shared with the action research group and would be discussed at an international conference in Nottingham. In addition, a professional journal article was to be written to disseminate my findings. I ensured that I had permissions from the Head teacher and the children were informed about my intentions and their consent was sought. All the participants were aware of the action research project and that the data collected would be anonymised to ensure confidentiality. Participants were told that their names would never be disclosed in any publication or presentation. No audio or video recordings were made. The blogs were all password protected and access available to password holders within the school

2.2 | METHODOLOGY: COLLECTION OF INFORMATION TO INFORM ACTION

In order to inform the action I was to undertake, I used an initial pre-project survey to ask Year 6 children about their engagement and perceptions of blogging. I then selected seven children identified as PP to further investigate how they used the blog, how they felt about blogging and their writing.

In the second autumn term I increased the amount children who were able to use the blog during class time by building into the learning sequence a weekly blogging session. The session would either involve redrafting a piece of writing that the children were working on, responding to an online writing challenge (such as the 100 Word Challenge), free writing or using the time to offer and respond to comments.

In response to feedback from the initial surveys and interviews, I set up a bi-weekly breakfast blogging club to provide children identified as PP with additional time to use the blogs.

Within each writing topic, I incorporated at least one lesson where the learning was focused on using specific criteria to evaluate their own, their peer's or anonymous pieces of writing with the outcome of providing constructive feedback to move the writer on. As part of the writing sequence children were asked to offer feedback on their peers' writing using a predetermined or negotiated success criteria. For three different writing topics I invited other relevant professionals (two poets and a local historian) to comment on the children's writing. One of these was a celebrity poet the children had seen performing and who, having read the children's poems on the blog, conducted a Skype session in which he offered each child verbal feedback. The children regularly participated in the 100 word challenge and were given feedback from other adults and children from the UK and beyond. Certain lessons were dedicated to giving or responding to feedback from these sources as well as other classes within our school and a partner school in another London borough. Every English lesson began with ten minutes of responding to feedback on their work, and at least once a week, this was on the blog. In the spring term I established blogging buddies, mixed ability partners, to help support lower achieving children in evaluating writing and devising effective feedback.

In the summer term, the children's writing was assessed to measure progress. All children completed a post intervention survey and the same seven children were interviewed to explore changes in blogging habits and perceptions.

2.3 | ACTION/RESULTS

The initial data showed that many children were enthusiastic about blogging and wanted to use the blogs more for writing. At home, blogging was the third most popular online activity after gaming and watching videos. 42% enjoyed writing and 75% felt that more time on the blogs at school would help them with their writing.

The initial interviews with the seven PP children revealed that they all felt blogging would help them get better at writing but that they were unable to blog much at home due lack of computers or internet connection. When asked how the blog could help them with their writing, four main themes appeared:

- Choice
- Audience
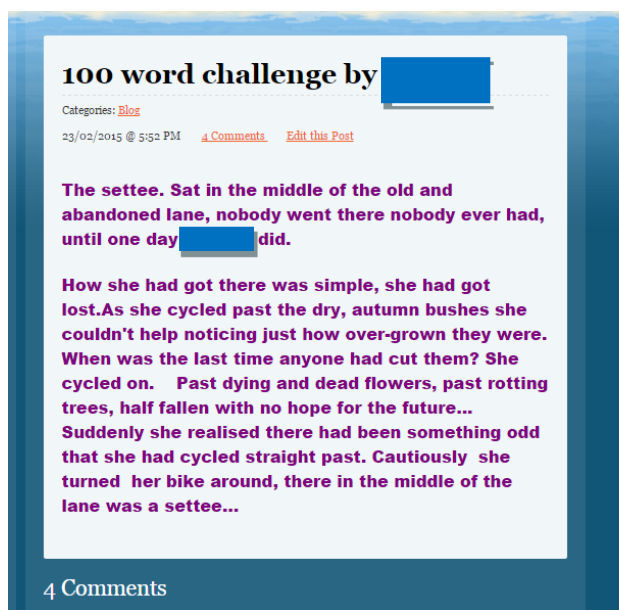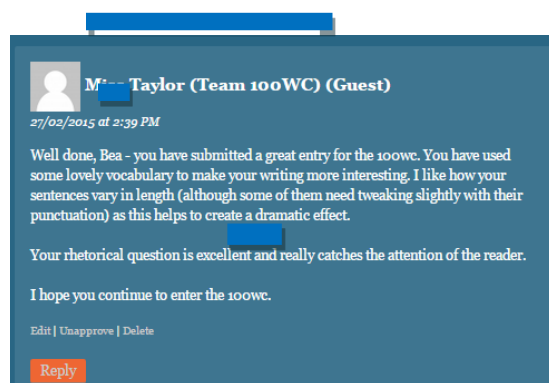- Sharing of ideas
- Mode of writing

FIG. 1 AND 2 FEEDBACK FROM THE 100 WORD CHALLENGE TEAM OF VOLUNTEERS

The children discussed the enjoyment of being able to write anything they liked, being able to share their writing with their friends, receiving constructive feedback, looking at other people's writing for ideas and not having to write with a pencil. I have used

> *"People who are good at writing – you can see what they wrote and see their ideas." Frankie*
> *"Reading other people's to give me ideas." Sam*

> *It's like you are sharing it with your friends as well as the teachers. Teachers comment as well as we comment. It's sometimes nice to hear about what they are doing. You can magpie other people's ideas and see how other people write it and how you write it and compare. You can catch up on work you have missed." Aliyah*

> *"Be more confident to let other people see what you are writing." Jordan*

Six of the seven children felt that constructive feedback on the blogs had already been helpful for their writing:

> *"I enjoy getting ones that say I've done good work and ones which say I could do better because if I follow them my writing will improve." Estelle*

> *"I kinda like the negative comments more because it makes you feel it's not the best you can do." Alfie*

> *"Ones that give you feedback and tell you what to work on and ones that are positive – they make you feel happy." Martha*

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FIG. 3 FEEDBACK FROM A
LOCAL POET

If all the world paper my version

Categories: Blog

08/10/2014 @ 9:23 AM   1 Comment   Edit this Post

If all the world were paper
I would create me with a pencil
Draw on clothes that will suit me
Design a job that I want

If all the world were paper
I could make exstinct animals alive
By origami
Make carnivores in a zoo
So they eat dead herbivories

1 Comment

(Guest)

06/11/2014 at 3:26 PM

I like the idea of drawing yourself and designing your own world! I wonder if you could write more about this, expand on the idea of what job you would have, what clothing you'd have to wear for that job, etc.

Nice work!

Edit | Unapprove | Delete

FEEDBACK ON THE
CHILDREN'S BLOG POSTS
WAS ALSO RECEIVED
FROM A CELEBRITY
CHILDREN'S POET VIA
SKYPE

By the summer term, following two terms of regular blogging, attainment data showed that the class achieved 100% level 4 and above in their writing, compared with 85% in school and 87% nationally in the previous year. 57% achieved level 5 and above, compared with 44% in school and 33% nationally in the previous year. Over the course of the year, the class achieved an average of 3.4 points of progress in writing which is considered good. Of the nine children registered as Pupil Premium, all scored 2 or more points of progress, six of these achieved 4 points, which is above the class average.

Post intervention interviews revealed that although all seven the children had not increased the amount that they used the blog at home, they felt that blogging in school had helped them improve their writing. Commenting was mentioned by all children as helpful. Children also cited being able to look at other people's writing for ideas and the ability to edit easily.

"I like to hear other people's constructive criticism of my writing for things that I can improve… ' Nina

"I feel worse about it the first time but better the second time because I can check and edit and see if I have missed any words. It is easier to edit my writing on the blog than in my book. Comments from you and from other people like Mrs Muller were good" Alfie

"I used to rush all my writing and now I take my time. It's taught me how to write interesting pieces of writing that people enjoy. I liked getting comments. It was good to see a real poet look at your writing and give you ideas" Martha

"I can use better words now. I can write more. I can think of ideas more quickly. I can see what other people write and see if I can use the same style"Jasmin

The research clearly shows that blogging has a positive impact on writing attainment, as well as children's enjoyment and confidence in writing. A second cycle would provide the opportunity to investigate in more depth what kinds of peer and adult feedback contribute to writing attainment and how their impact relates to initial writing ability. I anticipate that expanding this project across the Key Stage willhelp us understand how children's meta-learning can be developed to have a more meaningful impact on writing outcomes.

The research would also benefit from a second cycle not only as a comparative with another cohort, but to facilitate a more successful intervention drawing on the operational insight gained in this initial delivery. These insights are outlined in the recommendations that follow.

FIG. 4 FEEDBACK FROM A LOCAL HISTORIAN

2.4 | CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This project goes someway to show how classroom blogging can be a valuable tool in longer writing sequences where structured feedback and repeated editing contribute towards children achieving a high quality published outcome.

The impact and success of using blogs in this way is dependent upon a number of variables.

The Piano

Categories: Blog

02/06/2015 @ 4:54 PM   1 Comment   Edit this Post

As I enter the lonely, dusty, empty attic, the room starts to fill with shadows. Slowly walking up to the grand old piano, I can smell the ruins of the burning out candle. I carry on walking on the noisy floorboards I now could see a faint outline of the piano. Bending my fingers back, I start getting ready to play the sweet melody. There I am sitting at the grand the piano keys ready to play.

I play the piano and I am quickly pulled into the past. I feel a cold, precious, and fragile hand touch mine. My mother! her hand is as smooth as silk. She plays the piano with me I remember the lovely smell of her perfume. But as quickly as she arrived, Suddenly she is gone.

I thought I heard a familiar noise - BANG!

Suddenly as I lift my foot to the piano an old, familiar ache draws down my leg as I'm yet again haunted by 1939, the death of my bother. I remember like it was yesterday standing behind the remains of the old brick house, hearing the ear piercing, deafening sound. I am in the war. I peer out of the hole and saw a rotten body. I give a signal to my bother to run the opposite way and as we run. Something terrible happened...

He is shot to the ground by a Russian soldier. Trembling, I drag him by his hands back to the shelter of the wall where we started. I pull him up into my arms. As I cradle him, broken, my uniform soaks green to blood-red. My blood boils in rage as he whispers his last words. I stand there thinking I'm next. I could see the Russian waiting there for me. Suddenly I hear a bomb go off, the noise was getting nearer to me. Terrified I run to the next wall and I get there safely.

All of a sudden I was brought back to the present by my grandson circling the piano playing with my ancient, precious hobby horse. As he pros up the hobby horse and slowly climbs on to the stall and looks and me without saying a word we look right into

FIG.5 PEER FEEDBACK

1 Comment

yasmin and amina (Guest)

12/06/2015

*well done summer i loved how you used commas in a list and how you made your pace quicken. You really helped create a picture in our minds.
-> Now try and make sure EVERY sentence makes sense and i recommend you try and make the paragraphs flow onto one another like before you began the part about the war try and talk more about the scene

Edit | Unapprove | Delete

Reply

Technology and hardware

Many of our blogging sessions were impeded by difficulties with Wi-Fi connectivity and problems with laptops. We found that our chosen platform (kidblog.org) was not well supported by IPads which limited us to laptops only. Occasionally the laptops would take time to turn on, were not sufficiently charged or were missing; ubiquitous problems which made relying on their usage for a lesson not always possible. Recurring issues of this nature in our school made many teachers reluctant to take up blogging as a component within the weekly writing sequence.

Time

Writing on the blogs often requires more time due to setting up, retrieving lost work, managing the issues identified above and children's underdeveloped computing / typing skills. Maintaining a commitment to the blogging routine meant that children's computing and typing skills improved; many of the children learnt how to resolve technical problems independently. However, with the constraints of the curriculum, at times using the blogs was not realistic and it was necessary to sacrifice sessions and focus only on selected writing projects. Time is also required by the teacher and others to comment on the children's writing which may be in addition to the expected feedback marking in school workbooks. It was found that approving posts within the lesson not only made efficient use of time but also offered the opportunity to instantly share and discuss on the interactive whiteboard writing in process or published pieces.

Feedback

Integral to the successes of this project was the development of children's ability to evaluate a piece of writing and offer feedback that would effectively move the writer on to their next steps. This varied from child to child according to their own writing ability and meta-learning.

Discrete teaching around this, differentiated scaffolding to support comment writing and careful pairing of blogging buddies, were some strategies used to help develop this. In addition, seeking the right kind of feedback from outside sources proved to be highly valuable in motivating the children. Pairing with other schools sometimes resulted in informal comments without informed constructive feedback. More successful was the engagement of professional partners who not only provided an exciting audience but who offered insightful feedback.

Recommendations

1. Healthy technical infrastructure with sufficient availability of laptops and Wi-Fi for children to use a laptop for a minimum of one hour each week.
2. Commitment to using the laptops as part of the writing sequence where whole pieces of passages of the children's writing can be published as drafts, commented on and then repeatedly edited.
3. Development of computing skills to enable children to use the blog successfully, retrieve files and manage their online safety.
4. Discrete teaching around how to evaluate writing against criteria and what makes an effective feedback comments.
5. Commitment to time for responding to feedback regularly.
6. Use of class time to instantly share and discuss on the interactive whiteboard writing in process or published pieces.
7. Partner with outside agencies or professionals (such as authors) who can inspire the children and who have the time and understanding to offer effective feedback
8. Use of existing programmes such as the 100 Word Challenge and opportunities for free writing.
9. Establish supportive blogging buddies who work together on discussing writing and composing feedback.
10. Provision of additional time in school for children who are unable to access the blog at home.
11. Realistic expectations in terms of time available for blogging in class and time required by teachers and others for commenting.

2.5 | REFERENCES

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Useful Links

Kidblog - free platform for class blogs: www.kidblog.org

Edublogger- blog with news and support for educational bloggers: https://www.theedublogger.com/

The 100 Word Challenge - weekly online competition with entries from around the world and an online community of teacher commenters: http://100wc.net/