

## Publishing in the Blogosphere: Impacts on Students' Professional Writing

Jennifer N. Lancaster<sup>1</sup>, Kayla Peak<sup>2</sup> & Billy Jack Ray<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

---

**Purpose:** To determine if writing weekly blog posts with peer-editing will improve graduate students' professional writing skills, as well as their confidence in and attitudes toward their professional writing. **Methodology:** Students wrote 10 weekly blog posts on topics of their choice, using APA format and 2 cited peer-reviewed references. Weekly, they completed peer editing and received edits from the instructor before posting a final draft of the blog online. A rubric was used to evaluate changes in writing skills from the first to the final blog post. Additionally, a focus group discussion was completed at the end of the experience to evaluate students' attitudes and perceptions. **Findings:** Three of the 4 writing skills and the overall average rubric scores improved significantly from the first to the last blog post. Throughout the focus group discussion, a few themes surfaced including accountability for one's writing, exposure to a wide audience, improvement in writing skills, a sense of purpose/importance, and a better appreciation for the importance of good writing skills. **Practical Implications:** Blogging can have a profound impact on the writing skills, confidence, and attitudes of collegiate students. This is a unique approach to teaching professional writing and research skills in the collegiate setting.

---

**Keywords:** Blogs, peer-edit, social media, writing skills

### 1. Introduction

At higher education institutions, professionals agree that students do not possess the writing skills needed to communicate successfully as students or future professionals (Defazio et al., 2010). It is critical that students understand the value of quality written communication and that they are able to constructively evaluate their peers' writing (Defazio, et al., 2010).

---

<sup>1</sup> Kinesiology Department, Tarleton State University, Box T – 0370, Stephenville, TX 76402.  
Email: [jlancaster@tarleton.edu](mailto:jlancaster@tarleton.edu), Phone: (254) 968 – 9377, Fax: (254) 968 – 9831

<sup>2</sup> Kinesiology Department, Tarleton State University, Box T – 0370, Stephenville, TX 76402.

The ability to critique one's own writing is also a necessary skill to develop due to this reflection process being a method of teaching problem-solving for students within professional programs (McGuire et al., 2009). The writing deficiencies of collegiate students need to be addressed. Research has shown support for students writing for a real audience (Chen, 2013; Gunel et al., 2009; Magnifico, 2010; Wiggins, 2009). By visualizing an audience, writers are better able to frame their ideas and create direction for their writing (Berkenkotter, 1981; Flower and Hayes, 1980; Wiggins, 2009). Magnifico adds that individuals who choose to participate in writing – through blogs – appear to do so because of the interaction with an audience. Wiggins (2009) states, "The point of writing is to have something to say and to make a difference in saying it" (p. 29). In order to accomplish this goal, students need a real audience that includes more than a single instructor. Writing for a real audience encourages students to articulate ideas more clearly and deepen their own understanding of the material (Chen, 2013). Wiggins (2009) argues for real world writing that includes making both the audience and the purpose important to the successful development of writing skills in students. In the classroom setting, students do not view their writing as being impactful because the course instructor is the only person who will read their writing. The audience has been severely limited, and therefore, purpose is diminished too.

In their survey of high school and university faculty from various fields, Addison and McGee (2010) were surprised by the lack of emphasis on audience and purpose in writing assignments. Wiggins (1989) suggests the following criteria for creating writing tasks that are related to skills that students will need in the real world: engaging and purposeful, enabling, real problems, intellectually complex challenges rather than pieces or individual tasks, requires a superior end-product or presentation for a purpose and audience, and requires collaboration. The tendency for writing assignments is to focus on the specific writing skills rather than providing students with something that they feel is worth writing about (Wiggins, 2009). If the goal is to have students think and write with conviction, the assignment needs to provide a source of purpose. Consider that the careers of some professionals depend upon their ability to concisely write a proposal, report, or convincing perspective to a defined audience. Keeping a job can provide a clear motivation, but without the quality writing skills that consider purpose and audience, motivation might not be enough. By strengthening the focus of writing on a true audience and a convincing purpose, students will get feedback needed to develop stronger writing skills (Wiggins, 2009).

Blogging might be one avenue that could potentially help students to improve their writing skills by providing them with a real audience and a sense of purpose. In the process of writing blogs and responding to other blogs, students are given global access to an audience and to feedback, can engage in multi-directional discussion to better comprehend peers' perspectives, and can contemplate their own writing abilities (Ellison and Wu, 2008; Powell et al., 2012). The process of blogging helps students learn how to be analytical (Oravec, 2002), and for some students, blogging can be a way to influence practice within their chosen future profession (Powell et al., 2012). One study found that using blogs instead of paper and pencil writing for a journal resulted in more improvement of writing skills and less anxiety about writing (Lin et al., 2014). The same study found improvements in students attitudes towards writing, but these improvements were the same as those for students using blogs and students using paper and pencil journals. Additional research has demonstrated positive outcomes for various aspects of blogging. For instance, blogs get students more engaged in reading, writing with more meaning, and producing a better quality assignment (Richardson, 2005). In one study, researchers found that blogging allowed students to interpret, analyze, and elaborate on concepts (Anderson et al., 2006). Hashemi and Najafi (2011) concluded that blogging in an Iran English Language class provided students with choice, genuine experience, real purpose, and self-confidence. In another study in Taiwanese university English courses, results also supported blogging for enhanced writing and speaking, as well as for improved self-confidence and increased motivation for writing and reading in English (Wang, 2012). By adding blogging to a course's format, Marsden and Piggot-Irvine (2012) found that students reported writing more for the course simply because they are using blogs. These studies demonstrate the academic potential that exists in the blogging process. The purpose of the current study is to determine if writing weekly blog posts with peer-editing will improve graduate students' professional writing skills, as well as their confidence in and attitudes toward their professional writing.

## **2. Participants**

Twelve students within a single graduate level kinesiology course were asked to participate in the study, and all signed consent forms to be included. The ages of students ranged from 22 to 37 years (mean 25.5, median/mode 24) and included 7 males and 5 females.

### 3. Methodology

For this study, blogs were chosen as the writing medium because it allowed weekly practice of creating a new professional writing. Blogs also provided a real audience and a sense of purpose for the sharing of information. The utilization of shared Google documents, a class discussion board, or private classroom blog would limit the audience and therefore, the purpose of student writings. Blogger was the blogging platform used for this project because students could be given access as a contributor. This gave students the ability to post and edit their own blogs, while blocking them from making changes to blogs posted by any other person. Students could also easily see the number of views each of their posts had received. As instructors, we were able to have administrator rights that allowed us to edit any blog or to remove any blog or comment if it was deemed necessary. Having the different levels of access was beneficial for the classroom environment. Students were asked to write weekly blog posts on topics of their choice. When writing these blogs, students were required to use APA style and to include at least two peer-reviewed references. The word count was limited, forcing students to truly focus on the point they wanted to make. The first draft of the blog was then exchanged with a peer, who suggested edits and provided feedback. After peer-editing, students made corrections and sent the blog to the instructor who made a second round of edits. Instructor feedback was sent back to both the author and peer-editor so that both students saw the comments.

Students made final adjustments and then posted their blog on the kinesiology department blog site. Finally, students were required to send a tweet with a link to their blog, encouraging people to read their blog. Writing samples were collected from the first blog assignment and the final blog assignment to evaluate the quality. A blind investigator used a rubric developed for writing intensive coursework at the university to evaluate the first and final blog assignments. The rubric specifically evaluated the purpose, organization, writing standards, and rhetorical awareness of the students' writing on a scale of 1 to 5. Blogs were printed out and mixed randomly so that the first and last blogs were not grouped together. The investigator did not know which blogs were from each category. Then rubric scores were analyzed using correlated t-tests to compare the scores of the first blogs with the scores of the final blogs. Additionally, focus group discussions were facilitated by an investigator other than the course instructor during the final class of the semester. The focus groups were divided into two groups of 6 with both groups receiving the same questions for discussion.

The discussion groups were recorded (audio only), and the audio recording was then transcribed so that coding for this basic qualitative study could be performed.

#### 4. Findings

All rubric scores for writing skills were analyzed using correlated t-tests. With a significance level of 0.05, 3 of the 4 writing skills improved significantly from the first to the last blog post. Purpose was the only individual writing skill that did not show significant improvement ( $p = 0.13$ ). The overall average score on the writing skills rubric also significantly improved from the first to the last blog. A summary of these findings is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Comparison of Writing Skills on First and Last Blogs**

Skill	Mean Score First Blog	Mean Score Final Blog	Significance
Purpose	2.8333	3.4167	0.130
Organization	2.5833	3.2500	0.025
Writing Standards	3.3333	3.9167	0.003
Rhetorical Awareness	3.0000	3.8333	0.002
Overall Rubric Average	2.9375	3.6042	0.007

In Table 2, several findings from the focus group of 12 participants are presented. Students reported that completing blogs helped improve writing skills (11), increased creativity (2), and improved research skills (1). All 12 participants reported that confidence in their writing skills improved over the course of the semester. When discussing an increase in confidence, students related this to connecting their writing with their current profession, producing a better quality of writing, seeing that other people were reading their blogs, completing the peer-editing process, and going through the weekly repetition of the writing process.

**Table 2: Focus Group Responses**

Questions	Responses
In what ways has completing blogs impacted your writing?	Improved writing skills (11)
	Increased creativity (2)
	Improved research skills (1)
Explain how your confidence in your writing skills has changed since the first of the semester.	Improved Confidence (12)
	• Applied in current profession [saw connection] (5)
	• Better quality writing (6)
	• Exposure/number of views (2)
	• Peer-editing (2)
• Weekly repetition of process (2)	
In what ways has your perception of professional writing changed throughout the semester?	Different methods but the way you write is key (6)
	Important to be able to write well (2)
	Didn't think that I could write professionally, now I think I can do it well, confident after this experience (1)
In what ways can completing weekly blogs impact you as a future professional?	Networking/sharing ideas (7)
	Gain new knowledge/resources (3)
	Learned time management (3)
	Learned about myself (2)
Would you recommend the continued use of weekly blogs for this course? Please explain your thoughts.	Yes (12)
	Weekly practice/process (6)
	Exposure (3)
	Length to write and read (4)

Students reported that they viewed professional writing in a different way. They gained an understanding of how various methods of writing can be impactful within their professions, but it is always the way that you write that is key. Through blogging, students also realized how to network, share ideas, and gain new resources. All 12 student participants reported that they would recommend the continued use of blogs for this course, indicating that the weekly process, exposure to an audience, and length of writing and reading were all benefits.

## 5. Discussion/Practical Implications

During this study, the editing process was where more challenges presented. Students were using email to send drafts back and forth with each other and the instructor. This can create confusion. It is highly suggested to use Google documents – or something similar – for online collaboration with the editing process. As the course was taught again, this change has been implemented with satisfaction among both students and the instructor.

This study examined the writing skills of students at the beginning and end of a semester of blogging experiences. When evaluating the first and last blogs, scores from the writing rubric showed significant improvements in 3 of the 4 writing skills as well as the overall average rubric scores, which is supported by the findings of Lin et al. (2014). Lin et al. (2014) found that collegiate students who participated in blogging, as compared to paper and pencil methods, had significantly better writing quality at the end of the semester long experience. These findings are an important addition to the literature due to the limited studies evaluating writing skills specifically. The improvement of writing skills in this study could be the result of various factors related to the blogging experience. Studies have already shown that having a real audience (Chen, 2013; Gunel et al., 2009; Magnifico, 2010; Wiggins, 2009) and a purpose (Wiggins, 2009) impacts writing. Blogging provides both an audience and a purpose for students. Additionally, peer editing was utilized and could also provide an improvement in writing skills (Yang and Wu, 2011). By repeating the writing and editing process weekly, students were given the opportunity to practice the skills as well. It would be useful for further studies to evaluate the weekly blog process, comparing peer-editing and no peer-editing as a part of blogging. During the current study, it was noteworthy that the only writing skill not showing significant improvement was purpose. This was possibly due to the use of blogging as the means of writing. Blogs provide a real-world audience (Powell et al., 2012) and purpose (Hashemiand Najafi, 2011) for the students, which may have resulted in students having a better sense of purpose from the beginning. Additionally, students chose their own topics, which could also provide purpose.

In this study, the confidence and attitudes of students were also addressed during the focus group discussions. All participants indicated an increase in the confidence of their writing skills, and all but one student directly indicated that they believed their writing skills had improved as well. Confidence and belief in one's skills will lead a person to continue utilizing that skill, which means continued practice and further development. When asked how completing weekly blogs impacted writing skills, one student responded, "It helped me to make sure that what I was writing was of good quality so that I would not be embarrassed when other people read it. I was more careful with what I would write just because I knew that anybody could google it." Other students made similar comments about accountability due to the exposure of having your writing accessible to the world.

This is supported by the findings of other studies (Chen, 2013; Richardson, 2005; Wiggins, 2009) concluding that having a real audience will improve the quality of writing and encourage students to have a stronger understanding of their content. During the focus group, students offered specific ways in which their writing and research skills had improved. Skills included setting up ideas better, focusing only on pertinent details, catching their own mistakes when writing, and dissecting information from articles better. Several students also mentioned getting better at being more precise and getting their point across more quickly. "In today's technological world, people want the point, and they don't need any extra. Instead of elaborating on a twenty page research paper, you had to be smart on your word selection." During a class session, one student stated, "The limited word count is difficult. I am used to making one or two points in a long paper and filling the rest of it with fluff. Now I cannot use any fluff."

This improvement in writing skills adds to the findings of Richardson (2005). Students mentioned how blogs allowed for more creativity, and one student made the following comment. "Rather than getting bogged down by one large entry [paper] where I would have to commit to one writing style weeks on end, I kind of got to reinvent how I introduced the subject, and it allowed for a lot more creativity." Instead of having one big product that is edited several times, the blogs provided students with multiple opportunities to create something new. Cycling through the writing process from beginning to end on multiple occasions – even in a shortened format – requires students to engage at higher levels of thinking repeatedly. In the focus group, half of the participants indicated a change in their perception of what professional writing was.

They realized the impact that shorter, concise writings can make within their career fields if they write in the correct, professional manner. Students also realized the power of connecting with other professionals and sharing accurate knowledge through the use of blogs. These findings are supported by Lin et al. (2014), who found that blogging is a way to improve students' attitudes towards writing. Throughout the focus group discussion, a few themes continued to surface no matter what the question was. These themes included accountability for one's writing, exposure to a wide audience, improvement in writing skills, a sense of purpose and importance, and a better understanding and appreciation for the importance of good writing skills for a professional. In conclusion, blogging can have a profound impact on the writing skills, confidence, and attitudes of collegiate students.



Once the weight of a lengthy research paper was removed and an audience was given, students took interest in writing, found purpose in their topics, and began to improve their writing skills while actually enjoying the process.

## References

- Addison, J., & McGee, S.J. (2010). Writing in high school/writing in college: Research trends and future directions. *College Composition and Communication*, 62(1), 147-179.
- Anderson, K., Rohrer, M., Taylor, T., & Trimarco, R. (2006). Content analysis final report: Evidence of learning in blogs. [Online] Available: <http://tmiketaylor.files.wordpress.com/2008/02/690-learningblogs.pdf> (December 15, 2014)
- Berkenkotter, C. (1981). Understanding a writer's awareness of audience. *College Composition and Communication*, 32(4), 388-391.
- Chen, Y.C. (2013). Writing an argument to a real audience: Alternative ways to motivate students in writing about science. *Teaching Science*, 59(4), 8-12.
- Defazio, J., Jones, J., Tennant, F., & Hook, S.A. (2010). Academic literacy: The importance and impact of writing across the curriculum – a case study. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 10(2), 34-47.
- Ellison, N.B., & Wu, Y. (2008). Blogging in the classroom: A preliminary exploration of student attitudes and impact on comprehension. *Journal of Educational Multimedia and Hypermedia*, 17(1), 99-122.
- Flower, L., & Hayes, J.R. (1980). The cognition of discovery: Defining a rhetorical problem. *College Composition and Communication*, 31(1), 21-32.
- Gunel, M., Hand, B., & McDermott, M.A. (2009). Writing for different audiences: Effects on high-school students' conceptual understanding of biology. *Learning and Instruction*, 19(4), 354-367.
- Hashemi, M., & Najafi, V. (2011). Using blogs in English language writing classes. *International Journal of Academic Research*, 3(4), 599-604.
- Lin, M.H., Li, J., Hung, P.Y., & Huang, H. (2014). Blogging a journal: Changing students' writing skills and perceptions. *ELT Journal*, 68(4), 422-431.
- Magnifico, A.M. (2010). Writing for whom? Cognition, motivation, and a writer's audience. *Educational Psychologist*, 45(3), 167-184.
- Marsden, N., & Piggot-Irvine, E. (2012). Using blogging and laptop computers to improve writing skills on a vocational training course. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 28(1), 30-47.
- McGuire, L., Lay, K., & Peters, J. (2009). Pedagogy of reflective writing in professional Education. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 9(1), 93-107.
- Oravec, J.A. (2002). Bookmarking the world: Weblog applications in education. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 45(7), 616-621.
- Powell, D.A., Jacob, C.J., & Chapman, B.J. (2012). Using blogs and new media in academic practice: Potential roles in research, teaching, learning, and extension. *Innovative Higher Education*, 37(4), 271-282.
- Richardson, W. (2005). New Jersey high school learns the ABC's of blogging. [Online] Available: [http://www.thejournal.com/articles/17306\\_2](http://www.thejournal.com/articles/17306_2) (December 15, 2014)

- Wang, C.H. (2012). College students' responses to a class blog in English grammar courses. *The International Journal of Technology, Knowledge and Society*, 7(5), 29-46.
- Wiggins, G. (1989). A true test: Toward more authentic and equitable assessment. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 70(9), 703-713.
- Wiggins, G. (2009). Real world writing: Making purpose and audience matter. *English Journal*, 98(5), 29-37.
- Yang, Y., & Wu, S. (2011). A collective case study of online interaction patterns in textrevisions. *Educational Technology & Society*, 14(2), 1-15.