

Weblogs and Their Effects on Writing Skills

Case Study Report
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Introduction

Web logs have been around for a number of years and are becoming increasingly popular with teachers (Selingo, 2004). Web logs are easily created and updateable websites that allow people to publish to the Internet instantly. They vary from serving as an online diary or journal that is updated once a day to being a collector of web content on a particular topic with potentially many entries in one day. Web logs tend to have many hyperlinks to other websites. They also allow feedback from readers (Richardson, 2003).

Web logs are appealing more to educators because of their many positive effects on students' learning. They offer collaboration by joining many readers and writers from diverse geographic, political, and socioeconomic groups in one place. This interaction among the learners can enhance literacy skills and increasing critical thinking. The instant publishing on web logs makes students more able and willing to read, write, and discuss about the world around them (Richardson, 2003).

Literature Review

Many students in our classrooms are unmotivated to read and write both for school and pleasure. When reading, they do not engage with the text. They can read the words on the page, but cannot say what those words mean. They write only for required writing assignments and find no interest in writing authentically. Kajder and Bull (2003) point out, "In a recent Carnegie Foundation study, de Lion reported that more than half of the ninth graders in the 35 largest cities in the United States are reading at or below a sixth-grade level" (p.32).

The challenge for educators is to not only ensure that students become fluent readers and writers, but that they also will make meaningful use of reading and writing in their daily lives. Students will participate more in literacy activities that allow them to interact and communicate. A web log does just this, and also encourages them to read, write, and converse more often. Web logs offer opportunities for authentic expression in the external world (Kajder & Bull, 2003).

Not only are web logs useful tools for enhancing reading comprehension, but they are also beneficial in improving students' writing skills and abilities. Web logs provide a multi-genre, multimedia writing space that engages and draws students into a different interaction with printed text. By providing struggling writers with creative and unique entrances into work with print and visual texts, web logs provide new options and possibilities. Students from all levels learn to write by writing (Kajder & Bull, 2003).

Web logs give students the opportunities for authentic self-expression with writing. They have become a forum of expression for students as young as the second grade level and in almost any subject. Selingo describes how students have written about how they solved a tough math problem, posted observations about their science experiments, or displayed their newest art projects in their classroom web log (2004).

Some teachers have integrated journal writing into their classroom web logs. Students from Emily Van Noy's seventh grade English/Language Arts classroom in Charlottesville, Virginia, enjoy using web logs as a personal journaling space. These students were asked to complete an exit survey after their initial web log posts. They were unified in their responses that they were drawn to writing in this new space. One student, Felisha offered, "it isn't boring—something different from paper and pencil" (Kajder & Bull, 2003, p.34). Students are writing more in their web logs because of the speed and ease of typing. One student referred to web logs as a place for "writing without writing" (p.34). According to past research, students are often blocked from writing by the intimidation of the blank page. Students do not have this problem when writing in web logs. As Eric wrote, "using a blog is more fun, and I think it doesn't cause a writer's block" (p.34).

Web logs are now becoming a space to publish students' work online. There are several advantages with online publishing. Because readers are invited to respond to the student-authored work, students are compelled to do their best work. They know they have a real audience to write to, and they may even have a collaborative environment where they can give and receive feedback (Kennedy, 2003). Jeff Golub, technology spokesperson for the National Council of Teachers of English and associate professor of English education at the University of South Florida, teaches future educators three central principles about encouraging student authorship: "Students will write when they have something to say, when they have an audience, and when they get feedback" (p.11). Teachers who have used web logs in their classrooms say that students put more thought and effort into their blog writing, knowing that parents and others may read their work on the Web. They want to make sure that not only their teacher, but others who read it, will think it is good enough (Selingo, 2004).

Methodology

This case study explores the use of weblogs in elementary classrooms, specifically two fifth grade classes. It was developed to determine whether weblogs can enhance and improve students' writing abilities.

The subjects used in this case study are two fifth grade classes who both use weblogs in their classrooms. They use weblogs as a daily log of class events. Each student takes turn recording the events and posting them into the weblog. These two classes were selected because they are both fifth grade classes, and they use weblogs similarly in their classrooms. The similarity of participants makes it more conducive for analyzing the blog entries written by the students.

This is a qualitative case study with content analysis as the analysis method. Data were collected by coding the students' blog entries. The coding was based on looking for evidence of high-quality writing. The amount of high-quality writing found will help determine the effectiveness of weblog use in the classroom. A total of twenty blog entries were coded, ten from each class. The blog entries were dated from 3/28/05 to 4/22/05. Each blog entry was about 1,000-2000 words long. The frequencies were totaled from each code, so as to better describe the data.

Participants

Participants included 20 students. Ten students came from Mr. Roemer's fifth grade class in the Tampa, Florida area, and ten students came from Ms. Sanborn's fifth grade class in the Omaha, Nebraska area. The students represented a random purposive sample because I purposely chose their fifth grade classes to study, but the students were chosen at random because I took the first ten blog entries of each class. An email was sent to each teacher requesting permission to use his/her classroom weblog for this case study. (See Appendix A) Permission was received.

Collecting Data

As earlier noted, coding was used to collect data from weblog entries. The codes pointed out evidence of high-quality writing exhibited by fifth grade students in two different elementary classrooms. The subjects were recruited through an email sent to their teachers. The email, appended to this report as Exhibit A, explained the purpose of this research and the intent to use the blog entries as data. The subjects were informed that their information will be used for the sole purpose of a collegiate assignment, and they were assured confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Data for this study was collected by exploring archived weblogs, therefore, existing communication evidence. The data were analyzed using a coding scheme. The codes were developed with the help of elementary school writing experts, Barbara Kirkness, fourth grade teacher and Denise Engebretsen, fifth grade teacher. The three of us collaborated and determined which codes should be used for the analysis. The codes were based on elements of writing. Writing needs to have certain components in order to be considered a well-written piece of work. The codes pointed out when high-quality writing was used in the weblog. Some of the codes even pointed out low-quality writing. The codes are divided into three categories: Content, Author's Craft, and Conventions. The codes and their meanings are as follows:

Codes	Meanings
Content Codes	Evidence of rich content
Concept	More complex, organized knowledge
Fact	Reality; truth
Description	Descriptive writing with adjectives/adverbs, figurative language
Vocabulary	Higher level vocabulary used
Analysis	Examine in detail
Inference	To conclude by reasoning by something known
Synthesis	Combine parts in order to form a whole; discover the big idea
Explanation	To give the meaning of
Prediction	To make a good guess
Transition	Transitional words are used to segue to the next section or thought
Author's Craft Codes	Evidence of strong writing skills
Voice	Author's influence is present
Imagination	Creative ideas or descriptions
Opinion	One's belief

Reflection	Contemplation; thoughtful idea
Expression	Showing of feeling
Convention Codes	Evidence of poor grammar and spelling
Grammar	Incorrect use of punctuation, syntax, semantics, etc.
Spelling	Misspelled words

Coding the blog entries proved to be a valid way in addressing the research questions. Because the codes were designed to find evidence of high-quality writing, the instrument measured what it was supposed to measure. The codes were also a reliable instrument because there was consistency with the instrument yielding the same results. One of the writing experts also coded the blog entries. The interrater was above 80 percent, therefore, this coding scheme is validated and appears reliable.

Findings

Evidence of Rich Content in Writing

Writing that is rich in content is full, detailed writing. The author thinks critically and thoroughly before and during the writing process. Evidence of these thought processes exude in their writing pieces. Below are two frequency tables and bar graphs that illustrate the findings of both fifth grade classes.

Table 1. Evidence of Rich Content in Mr. Roemer's Class

Mr. Roemer's Fifth	Grade Class
Content Codes	Frequency
Concept	6
Fact	3
Description	38
Vocabulary	8
Analysis	16
Inference	16
Synthesis	1
Explanation	31

Prediction	3
Transition	3

Figure 1. Evidence of Rich Content in Mr. Roemer’s Class

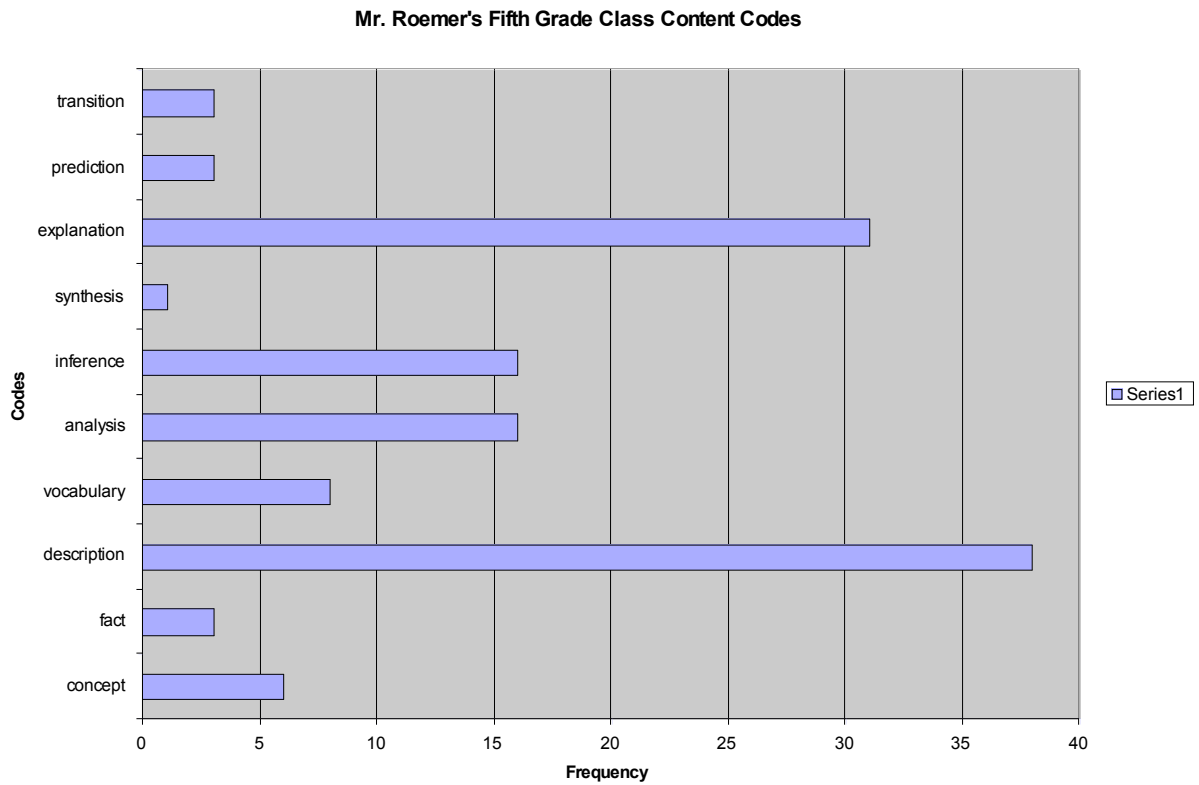
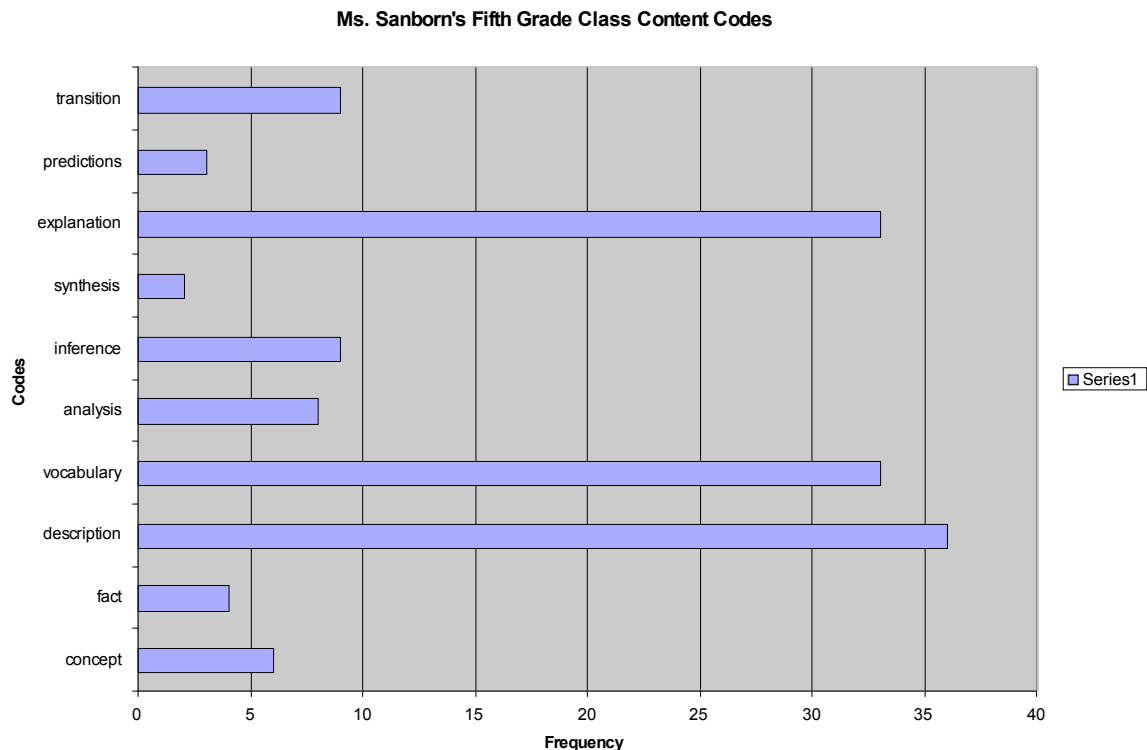


Table 2. Evidence of Rich Content in Ms. Sanborn’s Class

Ms. Sanborn’s Fifth	Grade Class
Content Codes	Frequency
Concept	6
Fact	4
Description	36
Vocabulary	33
Analysis	8
Inference	9

Synthesis	2
Explanation	33
Prediction	3
Transition	9

Figure 2. Evidence of Rich Content in Ms. Sanborn’s Class



The data analysis (frequency distribution as above) reveals that both fifth grade classes use description in their writing. This is the continual use of adjectives, adverbs, and figurative language. The students want their audience to have a mental image of what they are describing so that it makes more sense in the readers’ minds. For example, a student in Mr. Roemer’s class writes, “**All of a sudden a whole bunch of people came in, just like someone opened the floodgates**” (Roemer, W.B. and C.C., Log 3/30/05). The student wants his audience to see the rush of people coming in.

It is also clear that the two classes frequently use explanations in their blog writing. (See Figure 1 and Figure 2.) The students would like their readers to know exactly what they are talking about in their blog entries. For instance, if

a student is describing a typical activity that the class does during the school day, the student will go on to explain the intricate details of the activity. The writer wants to make sure that the readers have a good understanding of unfamiliar things they may be reading about for the first time.

Analysis and inference were also apparent in the weblog writings among both fifth grade classrooms. They were a little more noticeable in Mr. Roemer's class. The students use analysis and inference when they are trying to make more sense of a topic or concept. They express this critical thinking skill in their writing by looking closely at the information given to them (possibly by the teacher, book, etc.) and drawing conclusions about it. This is higher order thinking, and when a writer is able to convey these thought processes in his writing, then he is making the writing piece rich in content.

The use of advanced vocabulary in a student's writing piece is evidence of high-quality writing. When coding for advanced vocabulary, words were only highlighted if they were above fifth grade level. This was determined by the writing expert, Denise Engebretsen, because she is an experienced fifth grade writing teacher. Ms. Sanborn's students use sophisticated vocabulary often in their blog entries. Mr. Roemer's class used it considerably less. When a writer is able to use a sophisticated word in her writing and it makes sense, then she possesses skills of a high quality writer. For example, a student in Ms. Sanborn's class uses the following vocabulary words in her writing: ambitious, amazingly, precision, explicit, and mediocre. These are higher level words that an average fifth grader would not use in her writing.

The remaining content codes not discussed were evident in both classroom weblogs. However, there was a minimal amount of evidence. This concludes that fifth grade students do not use concepts, facts, synthesis, predictions, and transitions that often in their blog writing pieces. These do make writing more rich in content, but the students were still able to produce high-quality writing using description, explanations, analysis, inference, and vocabulary.

Evidence of Using Author's Craft

It is challenging for novice writers to have a strong author's craft. This refers to the author possessing remarkable writing skills that make the written piece come alive to the audience. However, it is evident that weblogs help writer's develop their author's craft. Below are two frequency tables and bar graphs confirming these conclusions.

Table 3. Evidence of Author's Craft in Mr. Roemer's Class

Mr. Roemer's Fifth	Grade Class
Author's Craft Codes	Frequency

Voice	104
Imagination	50
Opinion	58
Reflection	31
Expression	47

Figure 3. Evidence of Author’s Craft in Mr. Roemer’s Class

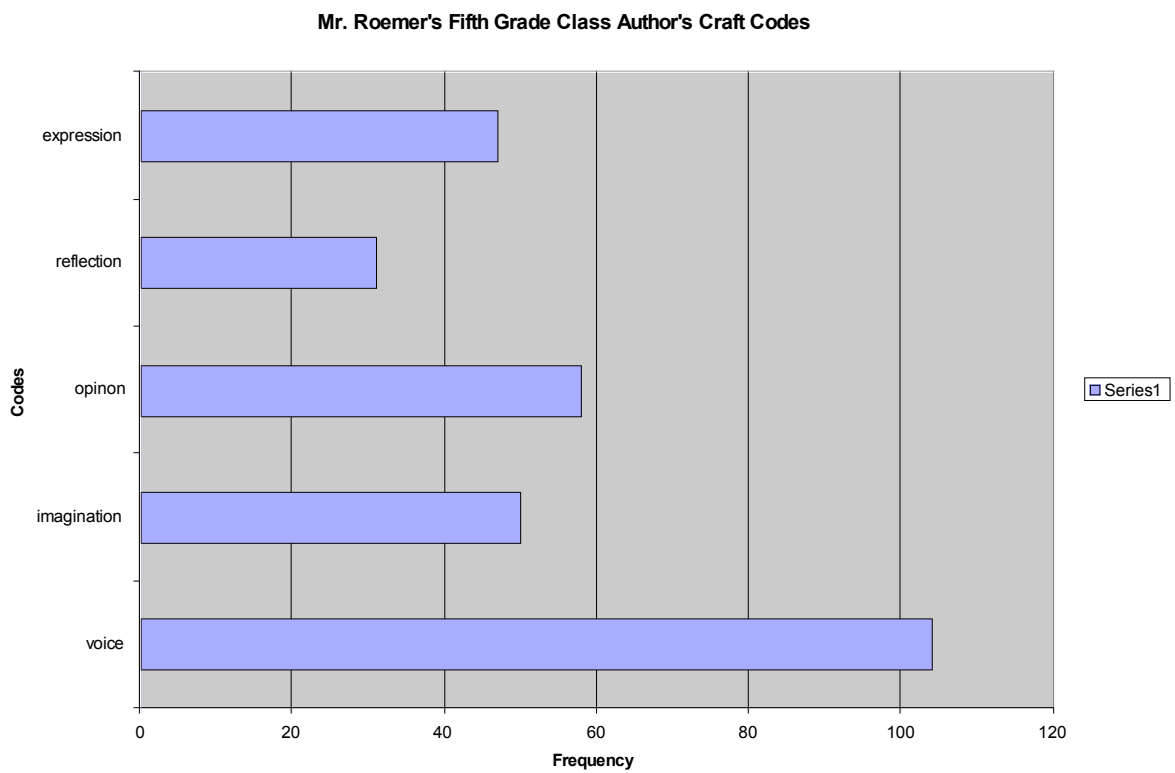
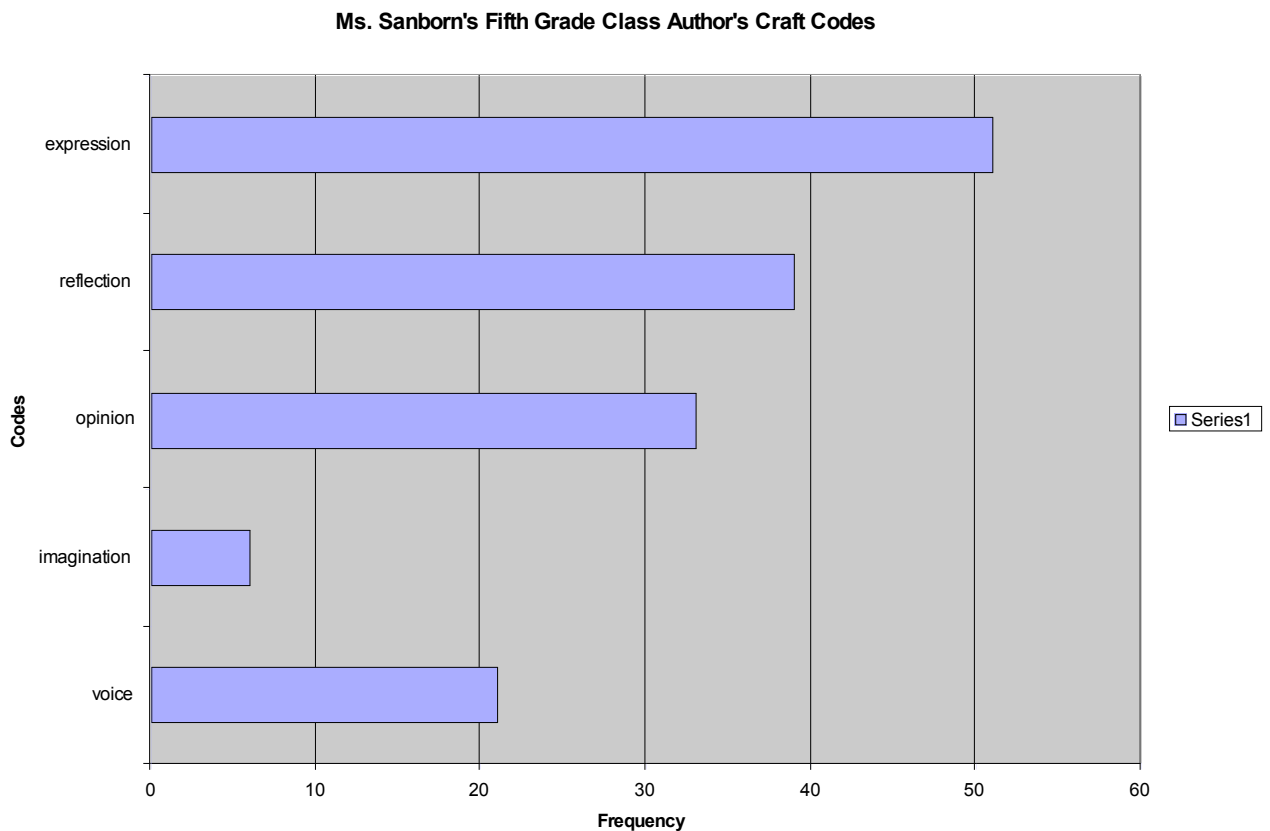


Table 4. Evidence of Author’s Craft in Ms.Sanborn’s Class

Ms. Sanborn’s Fifth	Grade Class
Author’s Craft Codes	Frequency
Voice	21
Imagination	6
Opinion	33

Reflection	39
Expression	51

Figure 4. Evidence of Author’s Craft in Ms. Sanborn’s Class



The data (frequency distribution as above) clearly shows that these fifth grade students have developed an author’s voice, especially in Mr. Roemer’s class. There were more examples of the students expressing their author’s voice than any other component of high-quality writing. In my own experience as an elementary teacher, it is difficult for students to express their voice in writing. Using their voice, is putting their own influence into their writing. It’s as if the authors are speaking to the readers, but not directly, instead indirectly through paper and pencil or even through a computer screen as in weblogs. An author who has a strong voice will allow his personality to shine through his writing. It will grab the readers’ attention and hold them in wanting to read even more. A student in Mr. Roemer’s class uses his author’s voice to describe how the school day is going.

If this day gets any slower then the world will stop rotating and give the sun a break from it's dumb daily work. I'm kidding, but this day is going so slow that a turtle could pass by it in a race! (Roemer, K.P. and A.H., Log 3/28/05).

The writer's humorous personality radiates in this passage. The author uses figurative language to help the readers identify with his feelings about this slow day.

These fifth grade writers enjoy sharing their personal opinions in their blog entries. They want to express their thoughts and ideas about particular topics. They want their audience to understand and possibly identify with their feelings. This component of high-quality writing is apparent in both fifth grade classes. (See Figure 3 and Figure 4.) They both include their opinions often throughout their writing, and for the most part, they offered support for these opinions. Support is needed for an opinion to hold strength in the eyes of the reader.

The weblog entries were also full of expression. The writers used expression to convey their feelings and emotions to the audience. They included exclamation marks, bolded or italicized words, or words in all capital letters. The writers will use these marks to send a message to their readers about how they are feeling. Elementary students tend to incorporate expression into their writing because it is fairly simple. Furthermore, these fifth graders included it in their blog entries because they knew they had an audience who would tune in more to expressive writing.

Imagination is a writing skill used most often by Mr. Roemer's class. There was a lack of imagination used in the weblogs of Ms. Sanborn's class. This is most likely due to the fact that imagination is challenging to incorporate into one's writing piece. Mr. Roemer's students did an amazing job of "painting a picture" in the minds of the readers. His students wanted their readers to see an image of what they were describing. They also included fictitious ideas and concepts that made the writing more creative. For example, a student makes his writing more exciting by writing, **"Ahhh! S.S is turning into an evil goblin! He attacked the PBs that didn't have all of their homework in!"** (Roemer, M.N. and S.S., Log 4/11/05).

Conventions Codes

Conventions used in writing refer to a student using correct grammar and punctuation. As a fourth grade teacher, I notice that elementary students tend to have many grammatical and spelling errors in their paper written pieces. This is because they are still learning the grammatical rules of writing, as well as improving the skills they have just acquired. These weblog entries by both

classes seem to contain many grammatical and spelling errors as well. The data collected from both classes is listed below.

Table 5. Evidence of Conventional Errors in Mr. Roemer’s Class

Mr. Roemer’s Fifth	Grade Class
Conventions Codes	Frequency
Grammar	83
Spelling	66

Figure 5. Evidence of Conventional Errors in Mr. Roemer’s Class

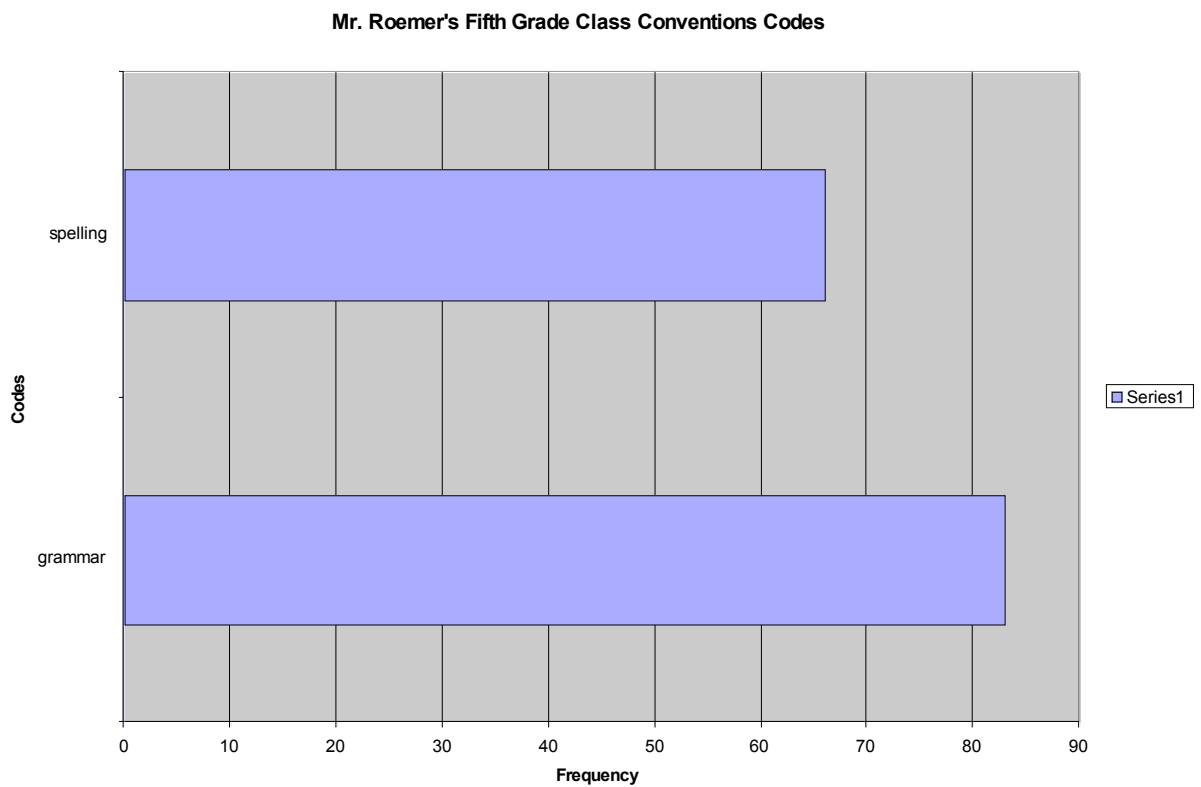
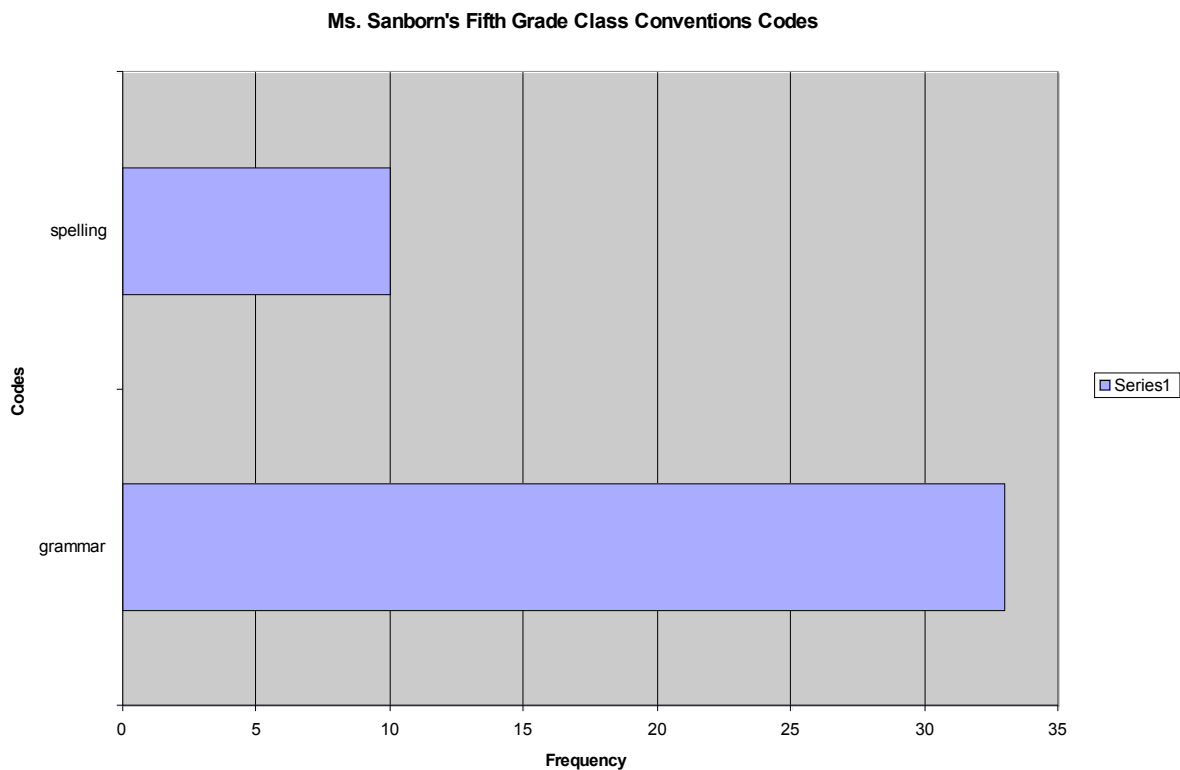


Table 6. Evidence of Conventional Errors in Ms. Sanborn’s Class

Ms. Sanborn’s	Grade Class
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Fifth	
Conventions Codes	Frequency
Grammar	33
Spelling	10

Figure 6. Evidence of Conventional Errors in Ms. Sanborn’s Class



I chose these two weblogs to code because the teachers stated that they do not edit the mistakes of the students. They leave it just how the students typed it. They want the audience to read the authentic work of the students, not the version corrected by the teacher. There were more grammatical mistakes than spelling mistakes in both classes. (See Figure 5 and Figure 6.) Grammar includes punctuation, semantics, and syntax. Some of these concepts such as semantics and syntax are difficult for elementary age children to grasp. They usually do not fully understand how to use it correctly until middle school or high school age. Therefore, that could account for the large number of grammatical mistakes.

Mr. Roemer's class tended to have more misspelled words than Ms. Sanborn's class. His students seemed to rush when they were typing the words because they had simple typing errors. There seem to be a lack of proofreading in both classes. If the students were to edit their writing, then there would have been less spelling mistakes.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine if weblogs enhance the writing skills and abilities of elementary students. According to the literature review, weblogs do have a positive effect on reading, writing, and critical thinking skills (Richardson, 2003). More educators are using weblogs in their classrooms for the purpose of improving the writing skills of their students. Teachers notice that students enjoy writing on the blogs. The writing is longer and contains evidence of deeper thinking because the students either respond to other peers' writing or they are continuing discussions started in class (Kadjer and Bull, 2003).

My findings suggest that weblogs do improve students' writing skills and abilities. From the two classroom weblogs that I analyzed, there is an ample amount of evidence of both rich content and author's craft. The students include descriptions, explanations, analyses, inferences, and vocabulary in their blog entries. They want their audience to understand exactly what they are describing. They desire them to have a clear picture in their minds. They use critical thinking to make the writing deeper and more logical, and they enhance it by adding advanced vocabulary.

These students also included a considerable amount of voice, opinions, expression, and imagination. It is evident that these writers want to keep their readers interested and engaged in their writing. They want their audience to enjoy their written work and continue reading it. They even desire their readers to become a part of their writing piece. They make the readers feel as if they are in the particular setting they are describing.

On the other hand, the data shows that weblogs do not improve the students' use of writing conventions. Both classes included a large amount of grammatical and spelling errors. The reason for this could be that the students are eager to finish their writing and get it published online for everyone to see and read. Therefore, they rush or don't proofread and leave many conventional errors. Another reason is that these are just fifth grade students who have not yet accomplished the craft of using conventions correctly. This is an ability that is fully developed with age and experience. Therefore, it only seems natural to find grammatical and spelling mistakes within their blog entries. It cannot be expected of them to have perfect writing at this age. Regardless of the conventional errors, these students exhibited high-quality

writing. At this age, it is more important to include rich content and elements of author's craft.

Due to the evidence found in the data analysis, it seems reasonable to conclude that weblogs can enhance elementary students' writing skills and abilities. The students are aware that their written work is published online for the whole world to see, and this becomes an effective motivator. They realize that anyone can read their writing, especially their parents, other family, and friends. The presence of a real audience encourages them to produce high-quality work. The students also like the idea that their work will be published instantly. This is rewarding for them. They understand that all their hard work and effort is worth the end results.

While this study has some interesting findings, more research would have to be done to draw a final conclusion in regards to weblogs enhancing writing skills. These two fifth grade classes that were studied represent a small sample of all the elementary students who use weblogs in their classrooms. Demographics also need to be taken into consideration. Different ethnicities and school locations can have an effect on the data results. With time, even more educators will use weblogs in their classrooms, and then we will be able to have even more answers to these research questions.

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Appendix

Exhibit A

Dear _____,

I came across your blog on schoolblogs.com. I am interested in how you have your students use this web log. I am writing a research paper for a class in my master's program in Ed. Technology. I am trying to find out if using web logs in the classroom will enhance literacy and critical thinking skills. I wanted to see if it would be okay if I used some of your class blogs for my data collection. The research paper will not be published so you will not have to get permission from the students' parents to be discussed in my paper. It is only for a class grade. Let me know what you think. Maybe we could talk through email. My email is mlh124@hotmail.com Thank you so much. Talk to you soon.

Sincerely,

Miranda