

EXPLOITING THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF BLOGS TO OVERCOME GEOGRAPHIC ISOLATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the distinctiveness of the blog as a new kind of text and the capacity for blogs to connect and engage students in distinctively different ways. Web 2.0 provides many opportunities to connect otherwise geographically isolated people. Further, Web 2.0 texts, such as blogs, cultivate new techno-social communicative practices. To take advantage of blogs in rural educational settings, an understanding of the affordances of these new texts must inform English curriculum development and teaching. The paper discusses the ways in which blogs differ from other texts, and how opportunities for co-authorship may be used to overcome geographical isolation for students.

INTRODUCTION

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are commonplace for many young people in countries like Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America who engage in online communication, content creation and publication using social media spaces such as *Facebook* and *Twitter* alongside blogs and wikis (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2009, 2010; Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007; Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013; Ofcom, 2013; Taylor & Keeter, 2010). While these emerging spaces and texts appear new, their novelty is debated both in terms of the form in which they appear and communicative practices with which their users engage. According to Berners-Lee (in Laningham, 2006), the Internet has always enabled people to create content and connect with one another. However, changes in the underlying architecture of the Internet have facilitated the shift in *popular* usage from obtaining information to both producing and consuming information. Defining the precise differences between contemporary web-based spaces and the 'Internet of old' proves elusive (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008). Regardless, the changes to technology resulting in what O'Reilly termed *Web 2.0* (2005) provide the means for non-expert users to easily contribute self-created content, including media such as text, images and video (Eisenlauer & Hoffman, 2010), and allow for bi-directional communication to occur (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008). The emergence of blogs and other Web 2.0 texts and spaces have morphed the content consumers of Web 1.0 into content producers, inciting what Jenkins et al. refer to as a 'participatory culture' (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robinson, & Weigel, 2006; cf. Papacharissi, 2007; Wei, 2009). Web 2.0 also invites ... *new techno-social practices – practices which often blur the boundaries between the public and the private, the personal and the impersonal, as well as presence and absence* (Gillen & Merchant, 2013, p. 48). Web 2.0 texts and spaces have the capacity to connect geographically dispersed students and their peers whilst engaging them in generative, authentic activities.

Using technology to address the issue of geographic isolation for young people is a well-established tradition, with roots in study by correspondence as the principal means of education for some students as well as the channel to a broader range of curriculum for many others (Stevens, 1995). More recently, there has been a move towards adopting models of online distance education to increase curriculum offerings and deliver educational interventions, particularly in the United States of America (de la Varre, Keane, & Irvin, 2010). Another innovation, the connected classroom, uses video conferencing equipment in combination with screen sharing computer technology to synchronously teach multiple classes at different localities. Technology is also used in many creative ways by teachers to bring otherwise inaccessible resources and cultural institutions into rural

classrooms for geographically isolated students, using techniques such as simulating field trips with web-based resources (Lester, 2012). Research on blogging in educational contexts has largely focused on using blogs as a tool for reflection, collaboration and interactivity, specifically through the posting of text-based responses (Nobles, Dredger, & Gerheart, 2012; O'Byrne & Murrell, 2013). Significantly, the participatory capacity of Web 2.0 texts such as blogs provide new opportunities for young people to interact with a geographically dispersed audience and creates unique circumstances under which decentralised co-authorship of content might occur. However, to take advantage of this participatory capacity, an understanding of the affordances of new and emerging texts must inform curriculum development and teaching (Adlington & Hansford, 2009).

Blogs and other Web 2.0 texts display characteristics that set them apart from predecessor texts. In order for students to make best use of blogs to engage with geographically separated co-authors and audience members, their distinctive meaning-making features must be understood. Given the debate regarding the novelty of Web 2.0 spaces, the starting point for this discussion is the distinctiveness of Web 2.0 emerging texts. Are texts such as blogs truly 'new' or are they merely old texts in new environments or packaging? Merchant (2009) argues that people engage differently with Web 2.0, and offers four key features of engagement in these spaces: online presence (e.g., the development of an online profile or avatar), modification of personal space (e.g., the personalisation of a home page or creation of an on-screen avatar), user-generated content (e.g., posting to a blog or *Facebook*, creating and uploading videos to *YouTube*), and social participation (e.g., commenting on posts or other shared content). He clarifies the consumer-creator duality of Web 2.0 engagement but, as Merchant himself notes, the characterisation ... *fall[s] short of providing an account of the kinds of activities and practices involved, the new literacies that are mobilised, or the kinds of learning that occurs* in Web 2.0 spaces (Merchant, 2009, p. 109). It does not, for example, account for changes in the author-reader relation, the ways in which texts such as blogs are deployed in a non-linear fashion or the inclusion of multimedia resources. In this paper, the distinctive aspects of blogs will be explored in turn, and comment on the implications of these aspects for rural students using blogs to connect with other people at a geographical distance. To illustrate points and enrich the discussion the paper will draw upon the author's research on young children's blogs (the formal results of which will appear in forthcoming publications). As a starting point, however, an overview will be provided of research on blogs as a new form of text and highlight the ways in which blogs are indeed different from their predecessors.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF BLOGS

A blog is one of several texts that have emerged as part of Web 2.0. Characteristically, a blog is an online journal that contains entries, or posts, presented in reverse chronological order. Posts may include multimodal content, such as text, image, video and sound, as well as links to other posts within the blog and to other web-based spaces and artefacts outside of the blog. Blogs may link to other blogs, creating a networked community of blogs and bloggers, or *blogosphere* (Eisenlauer & Hoffman, 2010; Grieve, Biber, Friginal, & Nekrasova, 2010; Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, & Wright, 2004; Huffaker, 2006; Knobel & Lankshear, 2006).

Online texts usually reflect their paper-based generic predecessors (Herring, Scheidt, Wright, & Bonus, 2005) and blogs are no exception. Focusing on the subject matter of blog posts, many scholars argue that the blog is not a singular genre at all, and have identified sub-genres, such as the filter blog, personal journal and knowledge blog (Blood, 2000; Herring, et al., 2005; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Miller & Shepherd, 2004), as well as a variety of narrative genres (Eisenlauer & Hoffman, 2010) and journalistic expression by citizen journalists (Holt & Karlsson, 2014; Meraz, 2014). Herring et al. conclude that ... *blogs are neither unique nor reproduced entirely from offline genres, but rather constitute a hybrid genre that draws from multiple sources, including other Internet genres, such as the personal webpage* (2004, p. 2), noting the adaptability of purpose afforded by the blog's technological underpinnings. Miller and Shepherd (2004) note that blogs have several generic offline ancestors, including the log, anthology, clipping service, *Wunderkammer* and museum (for its catalogue function); the pamphlet, editorial and opining column (for its commentary function); the journal and diary (for its diary function).

Regardless, Miller and Shepherd determine the blog is unique in its rhetorical form, blending private and public details in order to define the self in a public way, reflecting the general trend since the 1990s to divulge and devour once-private information. Indeed, recent research captures the persistent merging of private and public spheres in online spaces; however, subtly new practices have emerged. Once-private information continues to be shared in public spheres by individuals such as tourist bloggers (Sun, Ryan, & Pan, 2014). However, other bloggers move back and forth between private and public spheres quite systematically, such as the *mummy bloggers* who seek to share intimate details of their lives at the same time as promoting commercial content for fiscal gain (Horrall, 2014). Still, other bloggers use blogs solely to promote public interests, such as small business owners who take advantage of the ease with which web publishing can occur via social media (He & Chen, 2014).

Tensions emerge when trying to simultaneously understand blogs from both past and future-oriented perspectives, as is the endeavour of studies of blog genre such as those discussed above. Such studies typically limit analysis to the alphabetic text found in blog posts and articulate 'newness' in terms of user purpose or genre. They acknowledge the existence of the unique features of blogs, such as reader interactivity, multimedia usage and new ways of navigating. However, they do not account for the ways in which these features provide new meaning making opportunities for authors and readers alike. It is necessary to acknowledge the blog's textual ancestors, but it is critical to locate this aspect within the larger textual milieu of the blog. While texts are never divorced from the tools with which they are created, to paint a complete picture of new texts we must place technology at the fore in order to fully understand their distinctiveness of representation and communication.

Leveraging the data-based technology that is at the heart of Web 2.0 spaces and texts, blogs provide a range of tools with which the blogger may present content and elicit interaction with readers, and it is through these tools that three core points of difference arise between the blog and its textual predecessors. First, blogs provide an easy means to incorporate multimodal content, including video, image, text and sound (Eisenlauer & Hoffman, 2010). Second, blogs allow for a high degree of interaction between the author and the reader (or between readers) through the provision of interactive features, such as a reader commenting function (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008; Wei, 2009) and the ability to rate posts and interact with add-on gadgets. Finally, and perhaps most distinctively, blog authors *tag* posts to provide a means for the author and reader alike to sort and search blog posts. In short, the tag serves as both a label for the post and a hyperlink to other similarly labelled posts. In this, they tell the reader something about the post (or posts) *at the same time* as revealing something of the navigational structure of the blog.

Blogs and other Web 2.0 technologies provide new opportunities for rural students to engage with other people at a distance. However, it is important for teachers and students to bear in mind that using social media in online spaces does come with risks. Laird (2014) identifies four main concerns regarding the use of social media in schools; cyberbullying, personal privacy, the commercial interests of social media sites and the epistemological and educational implications of the ease at which information can be located online versus the need to develop knowledge and understanding in students (cf. Moreno, Egan, Bare, Young, & Cox, 2013). Each of these concerns needs to be acknowledged and addressed when using online spaces and texts, such as blogs. Educational jurisdictions and individual schools have policies that address these issues, and such policies should be the first port of call for educators who wish to use blogs in teaching and learning. However, it is recommended that educators consult subject matter available more broadly (e.g., Cybersmart, 2014; MediaSmarts, 2014, to keep abreast of changes and challenges in this rapidly evolving field).

Each of the three points of difference between blogs and their predecessors shine a light on the techno-mediated world of new texts, and provide the means for rural students to communicate in new ways, and with different people, that are independent of geographical location. They also prompt explicit teaching regarding each difference so that students can use them to create powerful texts. These points will be discussed in turn in the following sections.

Newness – author-reader relations

One of the most striking characteristics of screen-based media, and in Web 2.0 texts in particular, is the change in the relationship between author and reader. Such changes materialise in terms of

interactions, first between the reader and the content presented and second between the reader and the author of the content (including co-authorship). According to Kress (2004), the work of designing the interaction between reader and content, traditionally performed by the author, is increasingly the purvey of the reader. This shift in *authority* towards the reader (Kress, 2005) has occurred as texts have become dominated by images and presented on screens, providing non-linear reading experiences and choice to the reader. Kress (2004) finds that different modes of meaning and media for communication are governed by different *logics* of organization. He argues that alphabetic and paper-based texts are governed by the logic of time, as evidenced by their linearity, and image and screen-based texts are bound by the logic of space, as evidenced by their non-linear natures. Comparing alphabetic paper-based texts with those that include images, texts that include images require different kinds of work to read to those that are based on alphabetic print. For example, a novel asks the reader to *engage in the semiotic work of imagination, following the given order of words on the line but filling the relatively 'empty' words with the reader's meaning*, whereas a page of a text containing images and text boxes in various positions asks the reader ... to **design the order of the text for themselves** (Kress, 2004, p. 114, original emphasis). The reader may be invited to start the meaning making process with any item on the page, or may be directed by positioning of items and other textual objects, such as arrows. Regardless, meaning can be made following many different pathways that are *chosen* by the reader, not the author; a task, by comparison, that is implausibly difficult when reading a novel.

Shifting from paper to screen and alphabetic text to hypertext further emphasises changes to the author: reader relationship. Web-based texts downplay or remove clearly defined reading paths, even those that are predominantly alphabetic print. Additionally, contemporary web-based texts both embed content *from* other texts or spaces (e.g., YouTube videos) and include links *to* other texts or spaces, blurring the boundary of where one web-based text stops and another one starts. The lack of defined reading path and textual boundary places the task of reading design – the way in which the text might unfold, and where it might end – squarely with the consumer, *not* the constructor. The deployment of Web 2.0 database technology in texts such as blogs takes a further step by allowing pieces of content to be rearranged by the reader (the mechanics of which will be discussed in *Newness - tagging* below).

Whilst shifting the locus of control in terms of reading design to the reader, the movements from print to image, page to screen and hypertext to database, and consequent changes to the interactions between reader and content, still place the locus of control of *content creation* on the author. The reader can make choices about what and how to read in increasingly sophisticated ways, but, just like books, the relationship is still largely one-way; the content of the website (and choices that can be made) are still very much curtailed by the author. Blogs and other Web 2.0 texts have the capacity to change *who is doing the writing*, significantly altering the author: reader relationship.

Blogs invite co-authorship of the reader with the author through the use of a number of resources, including ratings and commenting. A rating system allows readers to rate the quality of a post. Rating systems are added by the author to the blog and include numerical ratings, such as a star rating out of five stars, and qualitative ratings, such as the funny-interesting-cool rating added to the blog in Figure 1 below.

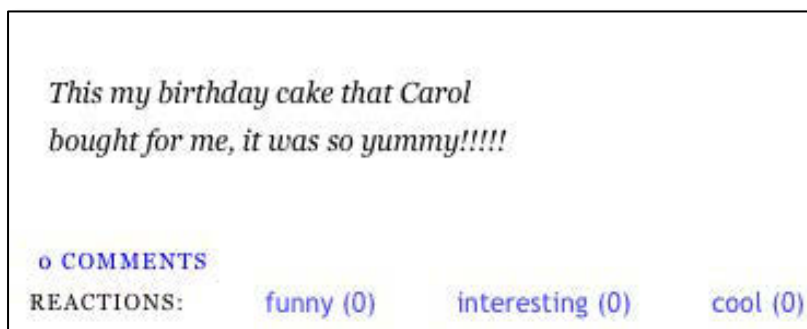


Figure 1: Rating system on a post (Yvopinkypie, 2009)

The commenting resource allows readers to comment on posts. Both the reader(s) and author may post comments and the comments themselves become part of the text of the post to be read and further commented upon. As such, the readers become co-authors. The very inclusion of a commenting resource acts as a passive invitation for readers to engage in co-authorship, and it is common for commenters to discuss or critique the subject of the post. However, the blog author might also actively invite reader-commenters to co-author. This can be seen in the post *Snow White*, whereby the author invites the readers to *write the end of the story as a comment* (Figure 2). The story endings, as provided by the readers as co-authors, are seen in Figure 3.

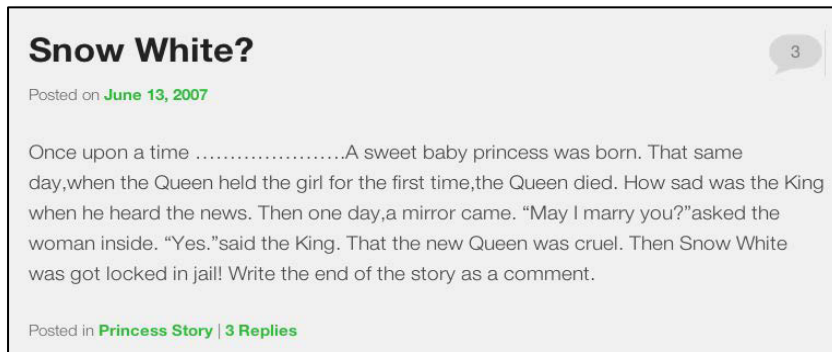


Figure 2: *Snow White*, post that invites readers to co-author and end the story in the comments (Yin, 2014)



Figure 3: Endings to *Snow White*, provided as comments from two readers (Yin, 2014)

Implications for rural students

Blogs break down geographical barriers and, like other web-based texts, have the capacity to reach a global audience. Rural student bloggers may be writing for readers another room, another district or even another country. Further, the capacity of blogs to promote two-way interaction and engagement for authors and readers alike is particularly valuable for students in rural or geographically isolated environments. Students from different schools can be assigned to the same blog as co-authors, each with the capacity to post, or they might visit each other's blogs and engage in dialogue and debate

through commenting. Students might co-author narratives as seen in Figures 2 and 3 above, or collaborate on other types of text for different purposes. Further, people and organisations of note, such as professional authors, scientists and museums, also maintain blogs (e.g., <http://australianmuseum.net.au/news-blogs>). Many of these blogs include commenting which allows rural students to interact with people and resources located at a geographical distance; providing new access to the kinds of rich experiences previously afforded only to people living in urban areas.

One measure of the success of a blog, or any text for that matter, is that the intended audience reads it. Indeed, in an ever-updating text such as a blog, it is desirable for readers to regularly return and become 'followers' who engage with new content on a regular basis. Many factors impact on blog readers' intentions regarding reading and participation, but the promotion of contact between the author and reader, particularly through the inclusion of posts that solicit feedback through comments, is especially useful for stimulating reader interest and engagement (Ahuja & Medury, 2010). Student bloggers will improve the volume of readership and rate of reader return to their blogs by ensuring they include commenting and actively seek engagement and feedback from their audience.

Newness - tagging

Tagging is a defining feature of blogs and other Web 2.0 texts. Tags, as hyperlinks, maintain an organisational function across entire blogs, allowing the user to move between posts. Tags concurrently perform a foreshadowing (or signalling) of content function, by providing snippets of information regarding the content of posts and combinations of posts, as well as the means to reposition posts in new contexts for new readings. An understanding of the unique functionality of tagging is needed in order for student bloggers to take full advantage of the blog as a means to communicate with audiences at a distance. The task at hand, then, is to understand the nature of these functions, and begin to account for the novel meaning making opportunities that tags bring to blogs as a whole.

A comparison of tags with their predecessor, the hyperlink, sheds light on the uniqueness of tagging. Up until recently, most websites were founded upon a file and folder system – the internet-based and mediated technology of the time, and *static* websites continue to adhere to this technology. Users move from one page to the next by clicking on a hyperlink. Navigation from one page in a website via a hyperlink to the next is limited by this technology, such that it is not possible to simultaneously visit two webpages via one hyperlink (cf. Djonov, 2005). Even though the Internet is often thought of as non-linear, it is not entirely free from linearity; hyperlink options presented on static webpages are restricted by navigational design, and clicking a hyperlink on a webpage results in lineal movement to one and only one new webpage. The capacity for the user to make successive decisions when moving between multiple webpages creates a sense of non-linear progression through a website, resulting in what Djonov more accurately describes as the traditional website's *multilinear nature* (2008, p. 223).

Blogs, contemporary webpages and other online texts continue to use hyperlinks for navigation. However, database technology allows hyperlinks to connect pieces of texts (e.g., blog posts) in different ways, pushing new texts beyond the bounds of multilinear navigation through, for example, the use of tags. Many Web 2.0 technologies and environments incorporate tags, which are used to label or categorise items contained within the environment so that items may be sorted and searched. *Twitter*, a popular social media service, is well known for its use of *hashtags* through which the plethora of *Twitter* microposts, or *tweets*, may be searched. Users add a hashtag to their tweets ... *to label the meaning they express ... [and] ... mark [their] discourse so that it can be found by others* (Zappavigna, 2012, p. 1), resulting in what Zappavigna calls *searchable talk* (2012, p. 1). A blog author tags posts in a similar fashion; the hyperlink tag (also known as a 'label' or 'category') is displayed at the top or bottom of the post. Clicking one post's tag triggers a search of the entire blog, resulting in a display of all *co-tagged* posts (i.e., those that use the same tag) in chronological order on one composite page. From a navigational perspective, clicking a hyperlink tag on one post results in simultaneous movement to *multiple* other posts. This starkly contrasts with clicking hyperlinks on a traditional webpage, which results in movement to one and *only one* new webpage, as mentioned above.

As an example, the mock blog in Figure 4 below includes two posts, titled *Alice's artistic side* and *video*. The figure depicts typical post anatomy: from top to bottom, each post includes the post date, title, the post content or 'body', the post author and time, a link to comments and tags (in this case the tags are identified as 'labels'). The post titled *Alice's artistic side* is *poly-tagged* (i.e., includes more than one tag) with two tags: 'art' and 'Alice'. Clicking on 'art' re-presents the two posts from the entire blog co-tagged with 'art' on one new page (*Alice's artistic side* and *video*). Both tags tell the reader something about the post; that is about Alice, and that it includes art (or, perhaps, information about art).

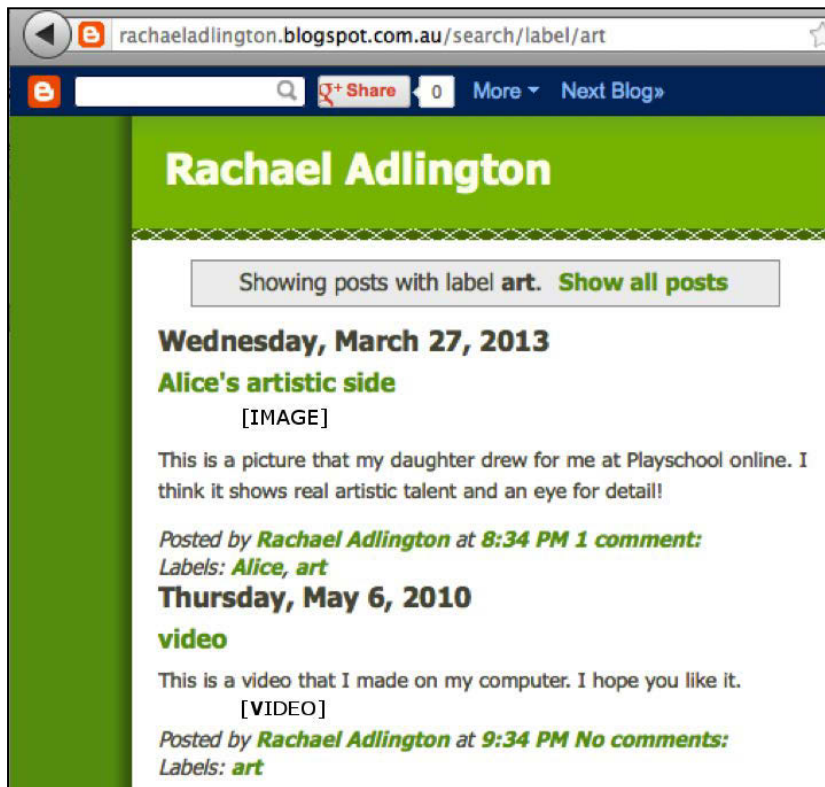


Figure 4: Composite blog page showing two posts tagged with 'art' (images removed for brevity)

Figure 5, below, provides a graphical representation of the ways in which posts may be tagged, searched and re-gathered for reading. In this representation, the blog contains three posts presented in chronological order in the column to the left of the figure. Each post includes one or two tags. The three columns to the right of the 'reader search' are the result of clicking on each of the three tags respectively, as indicated at the top of each column.

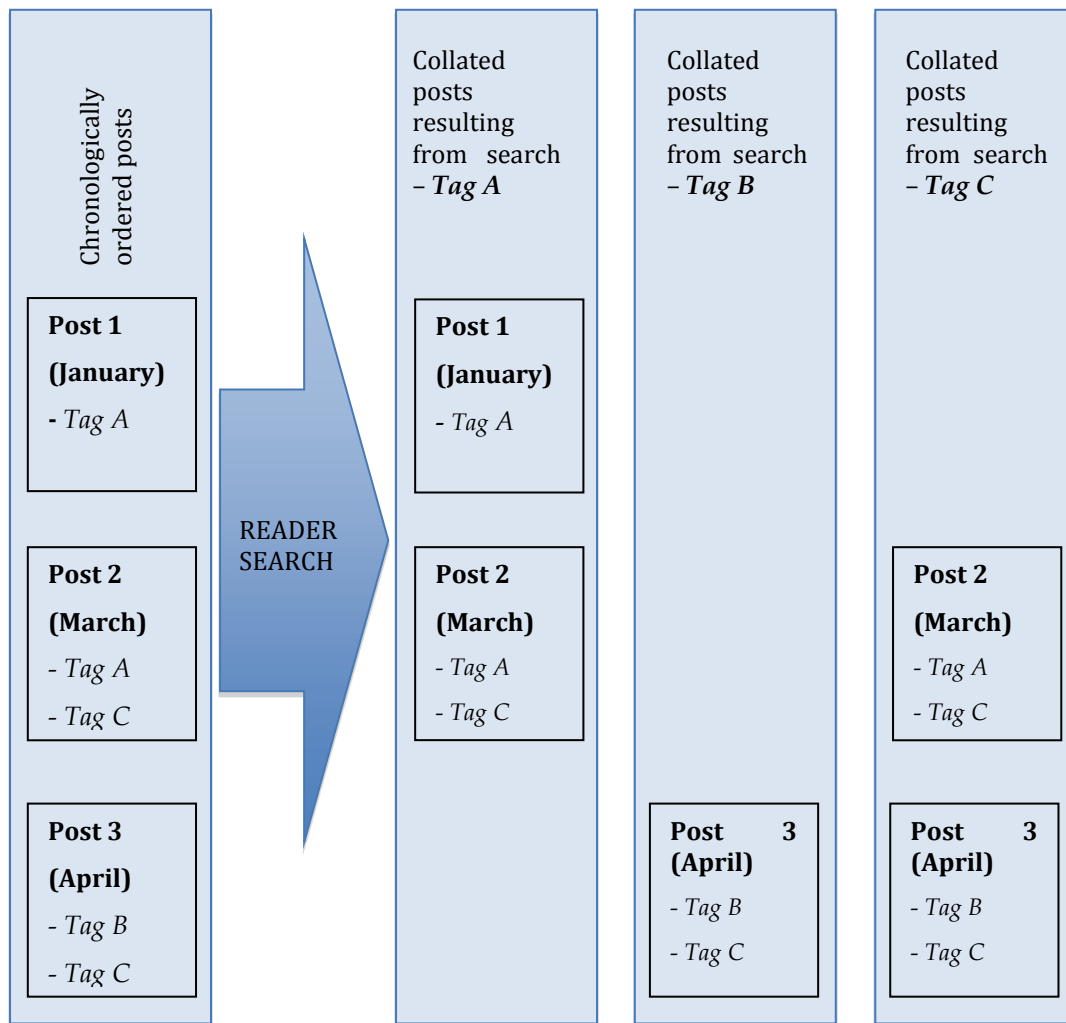


Figure 5: *Graphical representation of post tagging, searching and regathering*

My analysis of young children’s blogs (Adlington & Unsworth, forthcoming) determines that tags can provide a range of additional information about a post or cluster of posts. First, tags can summarise the content of a post or tell the reader about the genre of the post or the materials contained within. For example, the tag ‘school’ is a very concise summary of a post that recounts an event at school. The tag ‘recipes’ tells the reader that the post is a recipe, and the tag ‘photos’ tells the reader the post contains a photo or photos.

Second, tags can relate clusters of posts to one another in a similar fashion to items in an anthology or chapters in a book. For example, the posts tagged with ‘recipes’ each contain a recipe. Clicking on the ‘recipes’ tag of any one of the posts presents all recipes posts in chronological order on one page. Posts may be tagged a second time by the author to indicate the kind of recipe; a ‘recipes’ post may also be tagged ‘soup’. The two tags ‘recipes’ and ‘soup’ relate to one another (as well as to the post), as the latter provides more specific detail on the former. A cluster of posts might also form chapters in a story. For instance, the cluster tagged with ‘CIRE’ contains a story of the same name written in two chapters. In this example, the chronological display of posts is particularly important to maintain the readability of the clustered narrative.

Finally, tags may provide new information that is not otherwise contained within the post. In these cases, tags provide information that qualifies circumstances of time, place, cause or condition (following Halliday’s inter-clausal enhancement relations, Halliday, 1994). A tag might, for instance, tell the reader where or when the events described in the post occurred. This kind of additional information might even reside in a different post in a co-tagged cluster. Consider, for example, a

cluster of posts tagged with 'holiday'. One post might describe an event that occurred during the holiday, but another co-tagged post might reveal where the holiday was.

Implications for rural students

As blog authors, students must develop an understanding of the meaning making capacity of tags in order to create both easy to negotiate and powerful texts for their readers. Importantly, the ease with which a blog (and other online texts) may be used impacts on the likely adoption of the blog by the reader (Koenig & Schlaegel, 2014). Further, factors such as organization of content and adoption of navigation devices impact on the usability of such texts (Djonov, 2008). A blog always maintains a chronological display of posts, however it becomes unwieldy for the reader to navigate as the number of posts increases. Tags provide the means to group posts according to subject, genre or media contained within, easing navigation through the blog for the reader.

But, tags can do so much more than simply organise posts. They can provide additional information about the post, create meaningful links to other posts and define clusters of posts that work in combination with one another to tell a story or come together to create a textual whole. Just as the novice author of narrative texts must learn how to craft a good story, so too must the novice blogger learn how to wield the meaning making devices at his or her disposal (such as tags) to craft a good blog. Student authors who are geographically separated from their readers need to take special care that they create well-crafted blogs to maintain audience engagement. This is particularly important when the readership of the blog is unknown to the author, as the bond between author and reader under such circumstances is perhaps weaker than when the author and reader are known to one another.

Newness – multimedia

In describing the distinctiveness of blogs and discussing the implications for students who create them, it is important to acknowledge the increasingly multimodal nature of the resources and artefacts often incorporated into these texts. Put simply, a mode is a resource for representing meaning, such as image, alphabetic text, speech and sound. Modes of representation are realised by way of a medium of dissemination or communication. A multimodal text, therefore, is one that utilizes more than one mode. Kress argues that communication is *always and inevitably multimodal* (2005, p. 5), even when one mode appears to dominate or stand alone. For example, text on a page isn't just speech or thought written down. It is also, for example, a choice of font and layout. However, the prominent 'coupling' of alphabetic text and book is under challenge by the image and screen (Kress, 2005). Further, while the increasing dominance of image commenced well before the Internet, witnessed on billboards and in textbooks alike (Lemke, 1998), the use of digital media to create texts has dramatically increased the capacity for meaning makers to combine more modes to represent meaning, foregrounding multimodality in representation and increasing the prevalence of multimodality in Web 2.0 texts.

Bloggers upload and incorporate a range of meaning making resources in their posts, including alphabetic text, still and moving graphics, video and sound (Herring, 2010). Bloggers also draw upon multimedia content that is hosted in online spaces outside of their own blogs, often (but not exclusively) created by other people. Direct links to multimedia content on sharing sites such as youtube.com and flickr.com enable videos and images to be *embedded* or displayed directly in posts. The popularity of linking to such sites is reported in a study by Cha, Pérez and Haddadi (2012). They present a table of the 15 most frequently linked websites in blog posts, in which youtube.com, photobucket.com, flickr.com and imageshack.us hold the top four positions. Indeed, links to these multimedia content sharing sites (n=534,321) accounted for approximately two-thirds of the total number of links (n=762,614) in the list.

Aside from adding multimedia content to posts, bloggers also display multimedia content in the blog surrounds. To do this, bloggers place multimedia content in the blog header at the top of the blog and make use of a range of *gadgets* that reside in the margins of the blog, to one side of the posts that are displayed in the centre of the screen. My analysis of the blogs of young children (Adlington & Unsworth, forthcoming) reveals that these authors include a range of gadgets displaying text- and

image-based content. Text-based gadgets displayed (among other things) information about the author, links (e.g., to other blogs and recent or most popular posts), rss feeds, visitor counters and calendars. Image-based gadgets included slideshows of photos and YouTube videos, avatar images of the author and pets, and weather displays.

Implications for rural students

Multimedia in blogs is as commonplace as alphabetic text, and the inclusion of multimodal meaning making resources in blogs provide both food for thought and entertainment (Stocker & Tochttertman, 2008). Offering interesting and entertaining content helps create an attractive blog for readers (Huang, Chou, & Lin, 2008; Stocker & Tochttertman, 2008) which in turn impacts positively on reader intent for participation (Koenig & Schlaegel, 2014). Further, the common inclusion of multimedia in blogs suggests that it is almost a standard and expected element of the medium; in other words, blogs that do not include multimedia content might be perceived as inferior or less potent as a text. It is therefore highly desirable for young bloggers to include multimedia content in their blogs, created by themselves and others.

The young authors in my study utilized a wide variety of multimedia, but it is important to note that the authors also displayed varying degrees of proficiency within these skill-sets. Arguably, the child who utilized 14 different gadgets is expert at embedding gadgets, but perhaps not so expert at making design decisions. One extremely prolific blogger, who maintains four different blogs including one that spans four years and hundreds of posts, admits in a later post that she does not know how to add links. Still many other bloggers are limited in their use of images, or do not include video. Students come to the classroom with varying blogging experience and expertise, including those without any knowledge of blogs at all. With this in mind, teachers should actively seek to determine the knowledge and expertise of their students. Teachers will then be equipped to both capitalise on student knowledge and understanding, and provide opportunities for all students to learn about and with online texts such as blogs.

CONCLUSION

Blogs as an online text provide unique opportunities for rural students to engage with people who are geographically separated from them. Rural bloggers can reach a global audience as easily as their urban counterparts, and can co-author with other students and members of the wider community at a distance. Blogs authored by other people also create opportunities for rural students to avail themselves of experts who are located in other areas, such as cities or even overseas.

The blog as an emerging form of text incorporates the affordances of Web 2.0, and rural and urban students alike run the risk of creating less than ideal texts if they do not avail themselves of the gamut of blog features. The judicious deployment of commenting and tagging, as well as the embedding of multimedia resources, are key to engaging blog followers as both readers and co-creators of blogs. Teachers need to ensure that their student bloggers understand the ways in which tags can be used to both organize and provide additional content to posts to maximise blog readability. Students also need to engage their audience by promoting co-authorship through commenting and including multimedia content. In this way, the potential for blogs to connect and engage rural students in meaningful ways with geographically dispersed others can be realised.

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