Leveraging the Affordances of Educational Blogs to Teach Low-Achieving Students United States History

Meghan McGlinn Manfra and John K. Lee
North Carolina State University

In this qualitative case study we explored the experiences of low-achieving students responding to an educational blog. Our intention was to leverage the unique affordances of blogs to teach United States history concepts primarily by providing access to digital primary sources and facilitating on-line participation. Overall, our findings point to the positive potential of blogs to enhance instruction with low-achieving students. We found the integration of the educational blog provided an effective instructional format to differentiate content instruction and deliver “equity pedagogy.” In this study student participation increased, students engaged in historical work (although tentative), and the resources activated their prior knowledge. Rather than withholding Web 2.0 technologies from low-achieving students we encourage teachers to use them to meet the unique learning needs of all of their students. With thoughtful scaffolding, it appears teachers might be able to leverage the unique features of blog-based activities to improve student experiences.

Key Words: social studies, blog, Web 2.0, culturally relevant instruction, authentic intellectual work, U.S. history

Introduction

Educators recognize the potential for computer technology to positively enhance the learning experiences of at-risk or low-achieving students (Means, 1997). “The most frequently reported effects of computer use on at-risk students are in behavioral and attitudinal areas such as motivation, self-confidence, and self-discipline” (Teague, 2005, p. 2). Yet, teachers with low-achieving students most often use technology for drill and practice activities to teach basic skills (Becker, 2000, Hilton, 2005). Digital history (Lee, 2001) and emerging Web 2.0 technologies provide new pedagogical options for history teachers and their students (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009).

In this qualitative case study, we explored the experiences of low-achieving students responding to an educational blog. Our intention was to leverage the unique affordances of blogs to teach United States history concepts primarily by providing access to digital primary sources and facilitating on-line participation. We found that the integration of the educational blog provided an effective instructional format to differentiate content instruction and deliver “equity pedagogy” (Banks & Banks, 1995). The student participants in our study reported that the blogging activities activated their unique
learning styles, allowed them to work at their own pace, and made the content more accessible.

**Connections to Literature**

**Digital History**

Research has demonstrated that digital history resources can be effectively integrated into the classroom to help students construct knowledge, engage in disciplined inquiry, and make connections with content (Clarke & Lee, 2004; Friedman, 2005; Kelly, 2000; Lee, 2001; Lee & Calandra, 2003; Lee & Clarke, 2004; Lee & Molebash, 2004; Manfra, 2008; Manfra & Stoddard, 2008; Mason & Carter, 1999; McClurken & Slezak, 2006; McGlinn, 2007; Swan & Hofer, 2008; Tally, 1996; VanFossen & Shiveley, 2000; Warren, 2000). Digital primary sources, the foundation of digital history, provide access to archival content for teachers and their students (Hicks, Doolittle, Lee, 2004; Lee, 2002; McGlinn, et al, 2006). Digital libraries such as the Library of Congress’ American Memory and the National Archives have essentially “democratized” access to historical resources by making them available at a distance and by providing multiple perspectives on the past (Bolick, 2006). Current research, however, has demonstrated that accessibility alone does not translate into student learning outcomes; learning using digital historical resources requires new ways of thinking and understanding that involve online reading (Coiro & Dobler, 2007), visual thinking (Werner, 2004), and self-regulated learning (Greene, Bolick, & Robertson, 2010).

**Web 2.0 Technologies**

Even with the increasing number of authentic resources available on-line, teachers and schools have been slow to embrace internet-based resources for much more than didactic instruction, particularly ignoring new Web 2.0 technologies and their transformative potential (Dede, 2008). Defined as a collection of dynamic web-based resources that enable the construction and publication of text, audio, and video products within social networks, Web 2.0 technologies are seen as practical (Schrum & Solomon, 2007), inevitable (Thompson, 2007), and transformational (Brown, 2006). Bull (2006) argues that Web 2.0 resources allow students to more seamlessly create and present their work. A major appeal of Web 2.0 tools for adolescents according to Doering, Beach, and O’Brien (2007) is that these resources allow students to “easily compose multimodal texts for sharing with both local and worldwide audiences” (p. 41). Web 2.0 technologies focused on journaling (e.g. blogs), collaborative writing (e.g. wikis), and social networking (e.g. MySpace) enable students to interact around similar interests and provide opportunities for social interaction and new learning.

Because users of Web 2.0 technologies create content in situ, the integration of these technologies for learning necessitates a shift in pedagogy to one that is more student-centered. According to Chris Dede (2008), “The classical view of knowledge, expertise, and learning” is dominated by curriculum standards/high stakes testing, “presentational/assimilative pedagogies,” and “students who have mastered large amounts of factual material” (p. 81). In contrast, Web 2.0 curriculum “includes considerable variation from one community to another,” as well as active learning pedagogies that “emphasize constructivist and situated teaching approaches,” and assessment “based on sophisticated performances showing students’ participation in peer review” (p. 81).
The flexible and constantly evolving nature of Web 2.0 content makes it difficult for teachers to predict the shape and form of student contributions. This requires a new standard for teaching in which the teacher guides and facilitates, rather than dictates, learning outcomes. According to Greenhow, Robelia, and Hughes (2009), “New standards emphasize the learner, his or her experiences and choices, and the cognitive, social, and cultural dimensions of how technology is used in various settings....To support and supervise students, teachers are expected to colearn, model, and facilitate the development of such[21st century] competencies” (p. 248). The successful integration of Web 2.0 technologies is connected to pedagogical strategies that are community-oriented, situational, and authentic.

Pedagogies for Emerging Technologies

Culturally relevant instruction. According to Ladson-Billings (2001), culturally relevant instruction in the social studies focuses on teaching social studies content in the context of social justice. Culturally relevant instruction embraces an equity pedagogy that provides students with a voice in the classroom (Banks & Banks, 1995). James Banks (1994) suggests that equity pedagogy is process driven and substantially distinct from traditional modes of instruction:

Equity pedagogy actively involves students in a process of knowledge construction and production. It challenges the idea of instruction as transmission of facts and the image of the teacher as a citadel of knowledge and students as passive recipients of knowledge. Equity pedagogy alters the traditional power relationship between teachers and students. Most importantly, it assumes an integral relationship between knowledge and reflective action. Equity pedagogy creates an environment in which students can acquire, interrogate, and produce knowledge and envision new possibilities for the use of that knowledge for societal change. (p. 153)

Extending these ideas in the context of citizenship preparation and social studies, Banks and Banks (1995) maintain that “helping students become reflective and active citizens of a democratic society is at the essence of our conception of equity pedagogy....An education for equity enables students not only to acquire basic skills but to use those skills to become effective agents for social change” (p. 152).

While little research has explicitly linked culturally relevant instruction in social studies to Web 2.0 technologies, it makes sense that Web 2.0 technologies, with their potential to put content creation in the hands of students, could change the focus of minority education beyond the acquisition of basic skills. For instance, Anand Marri (2005) explored the integration of culturally relevant instruction through the integration of Internet-based resources to provide multiple perspectives in the social studies classroom. The notion of a “multicultural democracy” was connected with “inquiry pedagogy” through the integration of web-based resources by Scott DeWitt (2003). Both researchers pointed to the manner in which the integration of technology supported equity pedagogy.

Teachers, who work with low-achieving students, unfortunately, are less likely to use technology to go beyond traditional modes of instruction. According to Becker (2000), there is a connection between class ability level and the types of computer-based assignments teachers give their students. He wrote, “For example, across all subjects, classes categorized as low-achieving used substantially more drill-and-practice exercises, whereas classes
categorized as high achieving used more spreadsheet/database and e-mail software” (p. 55). According to Hilton (2005), English language learners have qualitatively different experiences with computer technology in the classroom, than their English proficient peers, where “they [teachers] tend to use it [technology] in less, meaningful ways” (p. 218). This research collectively points to a digital divide separating low-achieving from higher achieving students in terms of their opportunities to experience equity pedagogy in school.

Authentic intellectual work. The framework of authentic intellectual work (e.g., Newmann & Wehlage, 1993) can provide a guiding pedagogical structure for integrating critical, multicultural issues into the social studies classroom Four standards for authentic instruction are outlined by Newmann, King, and Carmichael (2007): higher order thinking, deep knowledge, substantive conversation, and connections to the world beyond the classroom. According to their meta-analysis of research in this area, “Authentic instruction and assignments bring significant benefits to students from any racial, ethnic or socioeconomic group, or gender” and “the achievement gap between SES groups increased in schools with low levels of authentic instruction” (italics in original, p. 24).

Within the field of the social studies, previous research has demonstrated that students learn best when deep content knowledge is examined through disciplined inquiry on authentic historical problems (Scheurman & Newmann, 1998).

Method

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study schedule</th>
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<tr>
<td>Week</td>
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In this case study, we investigated the integration of an educational blog in two low-achieving U.S. history classes (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). We explicitly explored whether the blogging tool could support culturally relevant instruction that engaged students in authentic intellectual work. We worked with low-achieving and at-risk learners in two U.S. history classes taught by a veteran teacher, Mr. Jones (all names have been changed to pseudonyms). We alternated the class receiving the intervention, using the website, Edublogs over two curricular units the Progressive Era and the 1920s. Throughout the study we collected qualitative data including field notes, samples of student work, and semi-structured teacher and student interviews. The first week of our study was set aside for daily 90 minute baseline observations of the teacher and his students. Based on these observations, we developed a notion of what constituted “traditional instruction” in this classroom. During subsequent units of instruction we compared this traditional instruction to instruction that focused on the educational blogging tool. Table 1 outlines the schedule we followed in implementing this study. Since the teacher was required to follow the county schools pacing guide, this also dictated our research schedule. The Progressive Era was spread over five days and the 1920s, over three days. The traditional instruction included multimedia lecture using PowerPoint presentations, documentary films, and teacher lecture. In the two experimental units, the teacher was given broad latitude to plan the traditional learning activities. We encouraged him to teach as he normally would.
Week 1  |  March 16-20  |  NC SCOS 6 (Imperialism)  |  Traditional (Baseline observations)  |  Class #1 & 2
Week 2  |  March 23-27  |  NC SCOS Goal 7 (Progressive Era)  |  Edublog  |  Class #1
        |  |  |  Traditional  |  Class #2
Week 3  |  April 20-23  |  NC SCOS Goal 9 (The 1920s)  |  Traditional  |  Class #1
        |  |  |  Edublog  |  Class #2

* Dates based on “pacing guide”, Spring break was April 7-12, 2009.

Classroom context

This research study took place in a large suburban high school. The teacher, Mr. Jones, not only spent his entire 29 year career at this school, he also attended the same school as a student. He has a Master of Education (M.Ed.) degree and is a successful varsity football and basketball coach. In our interview, he described himself as similar to “Don Rickles” because of his humor and relationship with his students (June 2, 2009). His classroom technology included a mobile laptop cart, wireless Internet access, and a LCD projector. This equipment was donated by the SAS Institute as part of a previous collaborative project between the high school and the company.

Mr. Jones was recruited to participate in this study because he has a laptop cart and wireless Internet access in his classroom. He also had some experience integrating technology into his classes and worked mainly with low-achieving students. Previous to taking part in this study, Mr. Jones received formal training in his M.Ed. program related to the integration of technology in the social studies. He also participated in numerous training sessions with SAS in Schools. We did not provide him explicit training in the use of blogs or Edublogs prior to beginning the study.

The high school in which this study took place operated on a “block schedule” made up of four 90-minute periods. Mr. Jones taught three U. S. history classes: two labeled “academic” and one “honors.” [In addition to these classes the school also offered advanced placement (AP) and international baccalaureate (IB) U.S. history classes]. Our research focused on the two “academic” U.S. history classes Mr. Jones taught. These classes were made up predominately of junior and senior students ranging in age from 16-20. According to Mr. Jones, the majority of students were at-risk. He said in our interview:

There are a large number of kids who are in our special programs class…it’s amazing; out of those two classes I have one kid who has been charged with murder. [He] got caught breaking and entering – he’s in jail….You’ve got a lot of at-risk issues, especially poverty. I’ve had the spectrum –pregnancy, illnesses - just a lot of problems that center around poverty. (June 2, 2009)

The cumulative class average was 69% for class 1 and 78% for class 2 during the time of our research project. Figures 1 and 2 provide
more information about the demographics of the class.

According to the school district, the overall student population of the school in which this study took place included 0.5% America Indian, 0.9% Asian, 11.2% Hispanic, 48% African American, 36.2% White, and 3.2% multiracial students. We conducted this research study towards the end of the spring semester; so, according to Jones, the low enrollment numbers in each class, 20 and 14 respectively, pointed to the low retention rate of the students.

Figure 1

Classroom Demographics for Class 1

![Classroom demographics](image)

Figure 2

Classroom demographics for Class 2
**Traditional lecture format**

As we conducted our initial observations in the classes, we noted that Mr. Jones embraced a frontal-mode of instruction and a didactic pedagogy. Like many history teachers, he taught through exposure (Hicks, 2005). In the example below, Mr. Jones introduced a new goal from the state standards to his class:

Mr. Jones: We are going to talk about the Square Deal. Does anybody know what a square looks like?

Mary: I do!

Mr. Jones: Ok, what is each side of a square? Each side of a square is what?

Mary: A side

Mr. Jones: No – how many sides on a square? Each side has 90 degrees which means each side is what? Equal! That’s the word – that’s why he called it a “square deal.” He wanted people to be treated equally especially industrial workers. We are going to talk about a man named Taft who was his vice president. We are going to learn about trust busting – trust busting – breaking up the trusts – breaking up the monopolies. And then finally we are going to look at a Democratic pPresident named Woodrow Wilson, and he is going to have a program called New Freedom. This is the Progressive Era. What we want to do today is we want to introduce to you today. Now, did everybody get this down? (Classroom observation, March 20, 2009)

This example was representative of Mr. Jones’s style of teaching. He often used an open-ended questioning method during his lectures rather than calling on individual students or waiting for them to raise their hands. He repeated key words and embellished historical stories with details. He did a majority
of the talking in each 90 minute class. When students were watching a documentary, he stopped the video frequently to interject additional information or to encourage students to pay attention. He explained in the interview “These are the facts, you’ve got to learn them, we’ve got to work with it. Just like shooting free throws. And, then if I can get them to like me, then they will at least study” (6/2/09).

Based on the data we collected in our initial observations, we developed a working conceptualization of what “traditional” instruction looked like in his classroom (see Table 2). The most notable feature of Mr. Jones’s instructional style was his reliance on lecture. He peppered his lecture with visual aids and occasional rhetorical questions. In our analysis, we found that his approach allowed for limited student interaction. Notably, he regularly called on a small number of students. The limited interaction carried across into the observed dispositions of the students. Most students seemed to realize they were not going to be called on and appeared disengaged or asleep. Teacher feedback was limited to occasional informal assessment; although he reminded students to read their textbooks at home, he did not collect homework or give reading quizzes. Mr. Jones also consistently referenced the end of unit test, telling students to pay attention because this was “going to be on the test.” In our study, Mr. Jones continued to teach in his typical manner during the alternating “traditional” units of instruction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observed</th>
<th>Not observed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher centered lecture and call and response pedagogy</td>
<td>Classroom discussion or “substantive conversation” (Newmann &amp; Wehlage, 1993)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low time on task</td>
<td>Sustained engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration of teacher created PowerPoint presentations and documentary video clips</td>
<td>Consistent engagement in ancillary materials including visuals and text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Defensive” teacher stance (McNeil, 1988)</td>
<td>Constructivist, facilitative pedagogy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students inconsistently responded to lower-level questions</td>
<td>Participation from a range of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal, summative assessment</td>
<td>Formative assessment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teacher contextualized content in current events and personal anecdotes

Web 2.0-Blogging Tool

To design the Edublog activities, we chose two pedagogical frameworks that met new standards of instruction for Web 2.0 classrooms (e.g., Dede, 2008; Robelia, et al, 2009) and were appropriate for the context of the classroom. Specially, we designed the blog-oriented units to reflect best practices in culturally relevant instruction (Ladson-Billings, 2001) and authentic intellectual work (Newmann, King, & Carmichael, 2007). Culturally relevant instruction acknowledges student experiences and emphasizes the development of critical understandings. Given our interests in maintaining a culturally relevant focus in the instruction, we selected digital history resources supportive of an equity pedagogy. This included constructing authentic intellectual activities to actively engage students.

We chose Edublogs.org as the medium to deliver the Web 2.0-based instruction because it was free and accessible through the school’s web filtering software. We designed an Edublog site specifically for the classes, and created a series of thirteen blog entries (see digital history entries from 2009 in web-based references below). These entries included background texts, primary sources or links to sources, and prompts designed to encourage student interaction. The historical content for the blogging activities aligned with the North Carolina Standard Course of Study (NC SCOS) for Goal # 7, “The Progressive Era”, and Goal #9, “The 1920s,” and the curriculum guide produced by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2007). These guides included essential questions, objectives, and lists of factual content. With this content in mind, we searched digital archives and located primary and secondary sources to engage students in the construction of content knowledge and disciplined inquiry (Scheurman & Newmann, 1998). We explicitly sought culturally relevant digital resources (Ladson-Billings, 2001) reflecting a variety of perspectives about the past, especially African American history, and represented multiple modalities, including audio, text-based, and photographic historical evidence. Each entry was designed as a self-contained learning activity in which students were guided to explore digitized historical resources and to answer analyzing questions. Students were directed to respond to the questions posed in each blog entry by posting comments.

Data collection and analysis

The researchers acted as participant-observers offering some technical assistance to students and the teacher during the blog-based instruction. Qualitative data were collected daily, including field notes, audio and video recordings of classroom sessions, and student comments posted on the blog. Observations were conducted over the entire three-week period of the study. Upon completion of both units, the teacher and 10 randomly selected students took part in semi-structured interviews (see Appendices 1 and 2 for the interview protocols). These interviews were transcribed verbatim and used to triangulate the data collected from student comments on the blog, and the classroom observations (Glesne, 1999). Data were analyzed by identifying qualitative codes, or themes, and comparing across data sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
The findings that emerged from this inquiry are reported in case study form (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). In the classes using the Edublog tool, we noticed increased student participation as students engaged in historical work and devised their own strategies for working with the digital history materials. Despite some limitations, the findings suggested differences in student experiences and pointed to the potential for Web 2.0 instruction to meet the unique learning needs of low-achieving students.

**Findings**

**Increased Student Participation**

The activities in the Edublog class necessitated new roles for the students and the teacher. During the blogging activities every student worked with a laptop. Rather than stand at the front of the room, Mr. Jones circulated throughout the room, pausing to help individual students. The classroom was very quiet as students worked at their own pace to complete the blogging activities and posted their responses for classmates to read. The number of student voices represented by comments on the Edublog increased compared to our observations of student involvement in the more traditional classroom instruction. Table 3 provides a snapshot of student comments in both the Edublog and traditional activities from Class 1. When students worked on the Edublog activities, they were more likely to contribute their ideas than in the traditional class. In the Edublog activities, students contributed by writing their ideas as comments to the blog posts. In the traditional activities, students contributed by verbally answering questions posed by Mr. Jones. In the Edublog activities, on average, 11 of the 20 students contributed ideas in writing on the blog. In contrast, in the traditional activities only five of the 20 students on average verbally offered their ideas in the class.

### Table 3

**Class 1: Student Participation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Edublog Unit*</th>
<th>Traditional unit**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allan</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillary</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaiah</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonya</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yolanda</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andy</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Notes:

* Participation in Edublog activity included posting a response to the blogs using the comment feature.

** Participation in the traditional classroom instruction including answering a teacher prompted question or asking a content-based question.

The quality of participation also was different for the two activities. Whereas the blogging activities encouraged students to analyze primary sources and thus activated higher levels of thinking, traditional instruction focused on more basic factual recall. The following is an example of a low level verbal exchange during a traditional activity from Class 1:

Mr. Jones: (Referring to a handout.) Look at the first paragraph. There is a term I need for you to learn. Ricky pay attention! (Reading) “Nowhere was the psychology of consumption…” I want you to understand that - “the psychology of consumption” – you need to know that phrase because it comes out of the 20s. If I say the word ‘psychology’ what pops into your head?
Isaiah: therapist

Jones: Therapy, what else? What part of the body?

Mary: your mind

Jones: the brain. This has to do with the mind – what you are thinking. What does consumption mean?

Jones: What are you doing with that fruit cup that you are eating? (Students laugh) It’s called consumption! Now put the two words together….

Allan: Trying to figure out was the better deal. No?

Jones: No? What is the 20s synonymous with? Consumption! We begin to become a nation of consumers and we begin to feel good about ourselves based on what we could buy. (Classroom observation, April 21, 2009)

This example is representative of the call and response method Mr. Jones used. He directed students to particular terms and concepts but they often struggled to answer his questions. Mr. Jones ultimately gave students the correct answers. This type of participation differed from the comments posted on the blog. Although students did not engage in the highest levels of historical thinking in their blog comments - activities such as sourcing and corroborating - they summarized documents and made some initial inferential claims. Below, we provide more details about the qualitative aspects of the students’ participation during the blogging activities.

**Historical Work**

Student comments posted in the Edublog activities represented a range of sophistication and accuracy. In the first activity, for instance, students were assigned the following historical problem: “You are a muckraker assigned to investigate conditions in the tenement houses of NYC. What are the conditions like for people living there? What suggestions do you have for reform?” (Edublog post, March 22, 2009). A series of four primary sources (two images and two text-based excerpts) for students to examine followed this post. They also were directed to find one to two additional resources to support their responses. Overall, 15 students posted comments (three of these were posted “off-line” as students typed their responses in a word document and printed them out). The comments ranged from 25 to 134 words, with an average of 76 words per student comment. Representative of the comments students posted, Lee wrote: “The conditions in the cities are poor. People live the worst often being cramped and dirty. The city planner and the city boss should enforce (sic) laws that protect the people” (Edublog comment, March 23, 2009).

We noted that synthesis of primary and secondary sources was lacking in most student comments across the days spent on this activity. In the fourth activity, for example, students were prompted: “President Teddy Roosevelt was one of the most well-known Progressive presidents. Research his presidency and make a connection to a contemporary issue(s)” (Edublog post, March 26, 2009). Students were given a list of four websites featuring secondary source information about Roosevelt. Rather than synthesize these resources, many of the students appeared to have summarized information from outside websites to respond to the prompt.

Students were more likely to respond when the blog posts featured just one text-based resource or a closely connected bundle of images. In response to the Harlem Renaissance...
Using Prior Experiences and Knowledge

When students were asked about their strategies for completing the Edublog activities, they indicated that they followed a linear path, similar to reading a textbook. According to Ann:

Ann: We read and then we answered the question based upon the reading.

Interviewer: How did you work through it?

Ann: Just read going down, didn’t read the questions first, depended what came first…

(Interview, March 6, 2009).

Students said they used prior knowledge derived from home and from school experiences outside of social studies to answer the questions. In describing how he and his partner answered the questions about jazz, Casey said:

Casey: Well we kind of knew that Jazz was a form of pain and suffering...that they would express it in music already. Jazz is very expressive, but then we just looked over the links you gave us.

Interviewer: How did you already know that?

Casey: My grandfather is a big fan of Jazz. He used to listen to it a lot. And I’d go to his house in the summer and I would listen to it. (Interview, May 6, 2009)

In addition to connecting the material to prior knowledge from outside of school, students relied on in-school experiences. Although his conceptual understanding seemed vague, Phil reported his prior knowledge of Langston Hughes, “In my English class and in songs –
they will just mention his name. We read a couple of poems by Langston Hughes. I just think everybody, well most people, know about him. I don’t know where you learn it’” (Interview, May 6, 2009).

Context Clues

When working with less familiar historical resources, the students relied on context clues including the historic time and setting to analyze primary sources. This was particularly true when they analyzed historical images, such as Harlem Renaissance art work. When recounting his analysis of the painting Builders (by Jacob Lawrence) Casey said:

The first thing that came to me in this one, because we were studying the [Harlem] Renaissance and about the north at the time, I thought this was a middle class black family that maybe had moved to Harlem not too long ago and they were just strolling through the neighborhood. And I see other black people working. So I guess this assumes life in the North was pretty good for what you can get back then. (Interview, May 6, 2009)

In this post, Casey used his knowledge of neighborhoods as a context to craft a response.

Like Casey, many of the students we interviewed tended to create a narrative to explain the historic significance of the primary sources included in the blogging activities. In an interview session, Ann and Dena explained that they felt like the questions simply were asking for their opinion:

Ann: The questions were based upon how we felt about the situation — not necessarily a standard answer — based upon our opinion. It is different from just giving a standard answer – made me feel like they were caring about what I like.

Dena: It is important to give your opinion — you don’t have to read every single word to get an answer — it is just what you think about it. (Interview, May 6, 2009)

When comparing the Edublog activities to traditional classroom instruction activities, the students seemed to feel there was more personal relevance to the answers they posted on the blog.

Ease of Use

Students generally reported the Edublog site as easy to use and accessible; they had no difficulties navigating the site and using the blogging tool. Over the course of the study, however, we found that multiple users logging into the site at one time often resulted in an error message that the site was temporarily unavailable. So, after our initial experiences working with class 1, we asked class 2 to work in partners.

At the end of the study, the students reported that they found the information in the learning activities to be very informative about the past and they favored the activities that included historic photographs or images. For instance, Kai (an English language learner) said, “The pictures can tell more specific information in there” (Interview, May 6, 2009). Kai and Phil also liked the ability to work at their own pace:

Kai: It [the Edublog] gives more specific information. Is easy to understand and quicker.

Phil: Yeah, you can go at your pace. You don’t have to keep up with everybody or if
you are going too fast you can just keep going because you work until you’re done.

Kai: It is easier for me to do it by myself because I am slow and some people are fast and easier to understand. (Interview, May 6, 2009)

Instances of Presentism

One common pattern we observed in the data was students frequent use of contemporary contexts when presenting their analysis. Historians refer to this sort of analysis as presentism or the situating of analysis of the past in the context of the present (Fischer, 1970). Jane and Alicia, for instance, posted the following comments regarding Langston Hughes’s poem, I too sing America. “This poem that he wrote was saying that this period of time they didn’t accept you as a person of color. But as time goes on people will start to recognize [you] as a beautiful person on the inside” (Edublog comments, April 22, 2009). They explained their interpretation in more detail during our interview.

Jane: He was talking about…

Alicia (interrupting): That they shouldn’t be ashamed to be who they are.

Jane: your color…it doesn’t matter what you are. You shouldn’t be ashamed.

Alicia: When they said they send him to the kitchen every time company comes

Jane: and he says, ‘but I laugh and I eat well’

Alicia: and grow strong…they will look back at how they treated him and they will be ashamed at how they treated him.

Jane: That’s just how it is. When you treat somebody wrong you feel ashamed because like, ‘dang I shouldn’t be treating somebody like this.’

Alicia: When they grew up to be that way. And they look back at it and find a real way and they [realize] they treated him bad. Because some people grew up to learn that way - to be racist. (Interview, May 6, 2009)

The students had been asked to read a Langston Hughes’ poem and respond to this prompt. “What was his message for the reader? How does his poem give us insight into race relations during his time?” (Edublog post, April 22, 2009). In their analysis of the poem, Jane and Alicia recounted the poem, highlighting key phrases. They discussed the racism Hughes was addressing without putting the poem in its proper historical context. Rather, they contemporized the poem and created a narrative of interpersonal and ethical relationships (e.g. “When you treat somebody wrong you feel ashamed”). In his interview, Kai remarked that the poem was difficult to interpret because of the genre, noting it wasn’t as clear as some of the other, more concrete, visual resources.

Discussion

The findings point to the potential for blog-based instruction to meet the unique learning needs of at-risk students. We noted that the Edublog instructional activities provided opportunities for students to exercise their voice in the classroom, facilitating an equity pedagogy (Banks & Banks, 1995). During traditional instruction students rarely had opportunities for participation with only a handful of students responding to the teacher’s open-ended questions. In the Edublog activities, students consistently posted comments to the blogs and
responded to the prompts. The Edublog activities also indicated the use of such instruction has the potential to meet the unique learning needs of students, offering opportunities for more authentic learning. In the more traditional classroom, the dominant learning modes were auditory and visual. Students were expected to pay attention to oral lectures or documentary films and were rarely required to participate, take notes or hand in written work. The Edublog activities enabled students to work at their own pace and provided access to a variety of primary sources, including images. Evidence from the student comments and interview responses suggested that these resources provided students a more concrete and engaging environment for learning about the past, particularly for under-performing students and English language learners. Mr. Jones’s teaching transitioned from a defensive pedagogy during the traditional activities to a more facilitative pedagogy during the Edublog activities. This shift in pedagogy emerged in part as a result of the inclusion of culturally relevant resources and authentic intellectual work that provided opportunities for active learning.

New Role: From Defensive Teaching to Facilitative

Mr. Jones normally embraced a defensive teaching strategy, perhaps as a consequence of a highly structured, centrally organized school curriculum (McNeil, 1988). He, like other teachers, faced the tension between preparing students for the end of course test and teaching them life lessons. In an interview he explained:

And then a lot of times you wake up [and ask yourself] “What do they really need to know about U. S. history?” I try to do some other things in class. We have some fun. [I’m] Trying to teach life lessons in U. S. history. I think history is one of the best subjects that can be taught in. They have to learn these facts to get ready for the test. But I also try to teach these other things. (Interview, June 2, 2009)

Mr. Jones favored storytelling. He often inserted anecdotes from his own experiences or minutiae from history to illustrate an ethical issue or offer social commentary. Often, he resorted to teaching by exposure (Hicks, 2005, p. 44) which led to simplification and fragmentation of the curriculum in his classroom. His pedagogy aimed for “content coverage through the pedagogy of telling the tale of the past” (Hicks, 2005, p.41). Throughout our observations, we noted that Mr. Jones would talk the entire 90 minutes, rarely eliciting active student involvement.

When we integrated the Edublog assignments into his classroom, there was a marked change in the dominant voice in the classroom. During the Edublog activities students posted their comments giving rise to an on-line voice. Although sometimes inconsistent and brief, these comments represented far more classroom participation and individual intellectual work than we had observed previously. According to Greenhow, Robelia, and Hughes (2009), Web 2.0 instruction brings standards that:

...emphasize the learner, his or her experiences and choices, and the cognitive, social, and cultural dimensions of how technology is used in various settings....To support and supervise students, teachers are expected to colearn, model, and facilitate the development of such[21st century] competencies. (p. 248)

This appeared to be the case in Mr. Jones’s classroom as he shifted from a frontal mode of
instruction to more facilitative during the Edublog activities.

Culturally Relevant Instruction and Equity Pedagogy

Most illustrative of the shift observed in Mr. Jones’s class from the traditional to the Edublog integrated classes, was the expansion of student voice. James Banks and Cherry Banks (1995) describe instruction where student voices are encouraged as a characteristic of equity pedagogy. The Edublog instructional activities provided more opportunities for students to construct knowledge as they tried out new ideas and explored the history content. Hannah, for example, explored a couple of possibilities in her response to a question related to presidents Roosevelt, Taft and Wilson:

I think that those three presidents could kind of help with the war that is going on today, and not help. They could help because they have been president before, and they know what to do when it comes to foreign affairs because there where wars going on when they were all presidents. But on the other hand I don’t think that they could because now we have all new technology, and they wouldn’t know what and how to deal with it. (Edublog comment, March 26, 2009)

In her response, Hannah described her emerging knowledge and demonstrated her awareness of the complexity of current issues. The blog seemed to offer her a space to respond in ways she had not during traditional instruction.

In the Edublog activities, students also expressed their opinions about issues related to oppression; a characteristic central to equity pedagogy. Hillary wrote the following about the 1910s Women’s Suffrage movement:

I believe it took so long for women to get the right to vote; is because men thought most women were happy being their property and taking care of children. Over a large period of time women had no right to voice their opinion on anything. Which showed no chance to share with their husbands or other family member [s] how they really felt [about] being [the] property of a man. Also knowing that when they divorced them they have nothing no land, money, and sometimes no rights to the children. (Edublog comment, March 27, 2009)

Here, Hillary expressed her opinion and explored the perspectives of women at the turn of the twentieth century. Her classmates similarly expressed their views, although most of the comments were short, through the blog in ways they had not previously in Mr. Jones’s traditional, lecture-based class.

Authentic Intellectual Work

We were concerned with the relatively low level of intellectual work produced by students in the Edublog activities. When we asked Mr. Jones his impressions of their level of work, he felt it reflected students’ poor literacy skills.

Jones: I found out that for a lot of kids if you put a discussion question on the end of a test they don’t answer it. They won’t write it - they can’t write. So you have the same problem there [as on the Edublog] especially in the academic classes like first period. You can see the grammar and the incomplete sentences…something they could work on so I could see where that [Edublog] could help in that area.

Interviewer: Should we assume they weren’t that engaged?
Jones: Not necessarily. We could go back to their literacy/English skills which is kind of hard to gauge sometimes. (Interview, June 2, 2009)

Although more students participated in the Edublog activities than in traditional instruction, students seemed to have taken the path of least resistance (Milson, 2002) when posting comments to the blog. Rather than analyze each primary and secondary source closely and referring to the historical evidence, they posted just one or two sentences or pasted text from other websites. Perhaps with more direct instruction, intervention, and encouragement we could have prompted students to move toward more intellectual work. Our findings suggest that the activities need to have an appropriate level of academic and intellectual support to permit and encourage students as they construct their knowledge. Teachers must act as facilitators (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009). Our findings also point to the need for explicit scaffolding (Brush & Saye, 2002; Saye & Brush, 1999, 2005) to engage students in the social and intellectual tasks Web 2.0 technology affords, such as interacting with peers on-line and developing deep conceptual knowledge through primary source analysis.

Based on the student course averages, our observations, and the teacher’s feedback, it was clear that the majority of students in Mr. Jones’s classes were not successful at traditional school-based tasks. Research has pointed to the positive effects of technology on at-risk students’ attitudes towards school work (see Teague, 2005). The comparatively higher level of participation in the Edublog activities suggests that teachers of at-risk students might effectively utilize blogs for learning. Students like Kai and Phil, for example, might find the Edublog appealing because it enables them to work at their own pace.

Our research leads to new questions regarding differences between traditional and blog-based instruction in relation to content knowledge acquisition. Future studies might examine student outcomes through pre- and post-test data in addition to the observation and interview data we collected. Limitations of this current study include our inability to quantitatively measure student learning. We relied heavily on student oral and written participation to reveal student understanding of the historical content. We found that student interviews offered an opportunity to extend the collection of data on student learning. When interviewed after the blogging activities, some students offered content-rich explanations that were more comprehensive and detailed than the written comments they posted to the blog. In future studies, researchers could make use of cognitive interviews to extend data collection on learning outcomes. We also suggest development of a strategy for measuring changes in student historical thinking as a result of working through the blog activities.

We found it difficult to maintain parallel experiences for students in the two classes over the course of the two units. This was due to the county schools’ pacing guide that dictated the curriculum. It was due further to network limitations that led us to make the decision to have students work in pairs in class 2. We felt it was important, as participant observers, to remain flexible in regard to the needs of the participating teacher and the realities of the classroom (Glesne, 1999) even when these made it difficult to compare across the classes. For this study our analysis focused on the qualitative differences among the students in each class between the traditional unit and the experimental unit. Future studies might attempt to make comparisons using quasi-experimental methods.
to determine the impact of the different teaching styles on student learning of the same content.

Conclusion

Overall, our findings point to the potential of blogs to enhance instruction with low-achieving students. Rather than withholding these technologies from at-risk learners, we encourage teachers to use them to meet the unique learning needs of their students. In this case, the integration of blogging into the U.S. history classroom differentiated instruction and facilitated on-line class participation. It also demonstrated that, far from replacing the teacher, Web 2.0 technologies, such as blogs, challenge teachers to take on new roles in the classroom. Rather than pursue more traditional forms of instruction, such as lecture, teachers who use the more distributive learning setting provided by a blog could facilitate equity pedagogy in their classrooms.

The breadth of the standardized U.S. history curriculum in our state makes it difficult to justify spending a prolonged amount of time engaging in the type of deep content knowledge formation and disciplined inquiry recommended by Newmann and Whelage (1993). However, when students are given the opportunity to work on-line at their own pace, with a variety of engaging historical materials, they are more active and more likely to participate in classroom instruction. With thoughtful scaffolding (Brush & Saye, 2002), it appears the teacher could leverage the unique features of blog-based activities to improve student experiences.

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ABOUT AUTHOR

**Meghan McGlinn Manfra** is an assistant professor in the College of Education at North Carolina State University. Her research focuses on the integration of technology in the social studies classroom and the professional development of teachers. She can be contacted at: [Meghan_manfra@ncsu.edu](mailto:Meghan_manfra@ncsu.edu)

**John Lee** is an associate professor in the College of Education at North Carolina State University. His research is focused on digital history and new literacies. For more please see: [http://www4.ncsu.edu/~jklee/](http://www4.ncsu.edu/~jklee/).