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**“It’s more enjoyable but it doesn’t help you with your writing.”**

**The impact of ICT in task design on student self-efficacy and  
enjoyment in writing.**

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

of

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## **Abstract**

This thesis investigates the relationship between the inclusion of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) in the design of school-based writing tasks, and student self-efficacy and enjoyment in writing. It describes the development, execution and reflection of an action research intervention, which explores this relationship.

A case study methodology within an action research framework was adopted. Primarily the research was qualitative in nature, together with some quantitative data collection. The study was conducted with a class of Year 7 and 8 students and their teachers, from a full primary school in South Auckland.

Findings suggest that students themselves made a clear distinction between the writing they do outside of school, and that which they do for school purposes. They were reluctant to acknowledge the kinds of digital writing that is not exemplified as writing at school as 'real writing'. Although digital forms of writing were seen as enjoyable by these students, they did not see writing in this way as being helpful to their writing achievement, which they measured against formal, traditional assessment practices.

The implication of these findings for teachers is that an expanded view of literacy must be adopted and valued to include a multimodal, multiliteracies approach to literacy, to ensure students are equipped to participate effectively in the twenty-first century. Further, students themselves will also need to diversify their views of what constitutes writing, including validating for classroom purposes, the digital writing they do beyond the classroom.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

This introductory chapter describes the environment in which the research was undertaken, and outlines the rationale for and the development of the project. The guiding research questions and timeline for the study are also presented. Finally this chapter describes the organisation of the thesis document.

### **1.1 The Research Environment**

#### **1.1.1 School Description**

The research was undertaken at the school where I am one of two Deputy Principals. “Waimahia School” is a full primary school located in Manukau, Auckland, New Zealand. The school is relatively new, having opened in 2006, and caters for students from New Entrants (5 year olds) up to and including Year 8 students (13 year olds).

The composition of the students at the school during the time of its most recent Education Review Office report dated October 2011, showed that the roll comprised of New Zealand European/Pakeha (59%), Maori (18%), Pacific (6%), Indian (5%), African, (5%) Asian, (3%) other European (3%) and 1% other. The school began the 2012 school year with 320 students, increasing to 350 by the time the intervention that informs this thesis began. Seventeen classes were in operation, three of these being housed in relocatables as new classrooms waited to be built. The school roll is predicted to grow to approximately 520 students at capacity.

Waimahia School is ranked as a Decile 9 school, which makes it an exception in the wider South Auckland region, where many schools are low in decile ranking; of the 10 primary and intermediate schools within the same suburb, one ranks Decile 4, two Decile 3, five Decile 2 and two Decile 1. As Waimahia School has not yet reached capacity in terms of potential growth and buildings to accommodate this, there is a Ministry enforced enrolment zone, restricting enrolments to those living within the

designated area. Some students opt to move on to an Intermediate School at the conclusion of Year 6, many to ensure entry into a desired high school, though most choose to stay on until the conclusion of Year 8. Often new students enrol for their Year 7 and 8 schooling.

The school's two major charter curriculum foci in 2012 were writing and ICT. 2012 was the second year of a major focus to improve student achievement in writing which, like many other New Zealand schools, was low, and not at a level comparable to its traditional literacy counterpart, reading. Assistance from an external facilitator was employed to help to increase both teaching effectiveness and student achievement in writing in 2011 and 2012.

The school was also in its third and final year of involvement with a ministry funded ICT contract, within a cluster of five schools. For our cluster, the professional development focussed on promoting and increasing the use of ICT and Inquiry learning in classroom programmes, to improve student achievement.

The two focus areas of writing and ICT were generally considered separately by the school. The measure of success of the writing professional development hinged on improved student achievement, predominantly measured by e-Asttle scores, a New Zealand developed assessment tool designed to assess student progress in core curriculum areas including writing. An emphasis therefore was placed on teacher and student familiarity with the purposes and outcomes of this assessment tool. However the Principal reports that teacher confidence and competence in the teaching of writing have improved significantly and she anticipates the next step will be encouraging teachers to generalise their learning across all aspects of their writing teaching, including writing through ICT.

Teacher confidence and competence in successfully integrating digital technologies into classroom programmes have developed over the period of the school's involvement with the ICT contract. The extent to which ICTs are authentically utilised varies. A small number of teachers are beginning to teach through ICT rather than with ICT, though like many teachers, a significant number continue to teach the tool or use digital technologies to support traditional literacy practices.

### **1.1.2 Class Description**

Room 21, the Year 7/8 class with which I conducted my research, began Term 3, 2012 as a class of twenty-five students. Of these, nine were Year 7 and sixteen Year 8, with a gender breakdown of thirteen girls boys and twelve girls. Twenty-two students consented to be part of my research project; one student elected not to and two joined the class at the start of the data gathering period, after the consent process. The ethnicities represented were New Zealand European/Pakeha (10), Maori (4), Pacific (4), Indian (2), and other European (2).

The class was team-taught by two teachers. "Karen" worked part time and was responsible for the programme on Mondays and Tuesdays. On Fridays she assisted with literacy programmes throughout the school. Karen has a strong background in literacy teaching. She is trained in Reading Recovery and has been responsible for teaching many literacy enhancement groups at Waimahia School over recent years. Karen described herself as new to the world of ICT in terms of integrating it into her classroom programme.

"Jenny" taught the class for the remainder of the week. With a strong interest in ICT both personally and professionally, using digital technologies is a natural part of her teaching process. As a member of the school's Leadership Team, Jenny undertook associated duties on Mondays and Tuesdays. In 2012 she held responsibility for leading ICT and Inquiry learning.

As the intervention progressed, it became apparent that my work with Jenny was what would drive the intervention, as it was during the times that she was in control of the class programme that the eventual focus was planned for and delivered.

## **1.2 The Project Outline**

### **1.2.1 Rationale for the Study**

As a teacher, I have always had a strong passion for the teaching of writing. A personal interest in ICT both inside and outside of the work environment piqued my interest in the relationship between the two when I began my postgraduate study. Over the past four years my own views on the notion of literacy, and the impact this has had on how I view writing and ICT, have evolved considerably. Whilst previously I tended to separate the two, I now understand they are inextricably linked.

What constitutes literacy is changing rapidly and continuously, with a view of literacy as a social and cultural practice superseding previous traditional views of literacy. The pervasion of digital technologies has a significant influence on this changing view. Our students are growing up in a world where the use of digital technologies is an integral part of their everyday lives. Many digital technologies are available in schools, however they may not always be fully utilised as tools which support this changing view of literacy, or in ways they may be used in students' out-of-school lives.

In my own experience as a teacher and a school leader, and through observations of children in my personal life in their home settings, I have observed that the ways technologies are often utilised in the classroom do not necessarily match how they are being used by children in their out-of-school lives. I watch my friends' four-year-old confidently and competently interacting with an iPad, I read stories digitally composed at home by my ten-year-old niece and observe my seven-year-old nephew successfully navigate his way around my iPhone despite his never having seen used before. I have not often observed such practices occurring naturally within

my own work environment, a relatively new school well equipped with up-to-date digital equipment. As is typical in many classroom writing programmes, teaching practices are generally founded in traditional pedagogies. The manner in which digital equipment is utilised within classroom literacy programmes supports traditional practices as opposed to developing competence in the literacy practices of the twenty-first century. An examination of students' home practices and attitudes regarding writing, and comparing this to how they view the writing they engage in at school, may encourage digital technologies to be more authentically utilised in classroom writing programmes. In turn, student self-efficacy may be enhanced if they can make use of practices they functionally use in their out-of-school lives. To reach this ideal however, a pedagogical shift about what constitutes 'writing' may be required, as contemporary writing which embraces a multiliteracies approach involves much more than lines of text on a page.

Student achievement in writing is incongruously lower in New Zealand than its literacy counterpart, reading (Parr, 2010b.). In my experience many students find writing a challenge and have less belief in their own ability as writers, than they do as readers. It is also my experience that many students simply do not enjoy the writing they do at school. This could be because the way writing is currently taught does not capture and engage them. Therefore they may not feel good about the writing they do.

Self-efficacy is one's belief in their own ability to succeed in a particular situation. Not only can perceived self-efficacy directly affect one's choice of activities, but it can also affect how we cope and persist once an activity is undertaken, depending on the expectation one has of potential success. Self-efficacy increases when students feel confident and competent.

In terms of this project, it is presumed that a healthy self-efficacy is likely to have a positive impact on students' writing achievement. Many teachers have long advocated student ownership of writing through allowing student

choice of purpose/topic, and have actively tried to tap into student worlds by bringing their experiences and interests into the writing classroom to engage them meaningfully in their writing learning. Yet when crafting their writing, students are primarily still engaged in writing lines of handwritten text in a book to tell their stories. Out of school however, the writing they do by choice may be quite different, and possibly influenced by the increasing range of digitally mediated text forms.

The digital practices students may engage outside school are not necessarily reflected in the use of digital technologies in the classroom. While they are available for student use, digital technologies are often used in ways that support a traditional notion of literacy as opposed to broader, contemporary views. The opportunities afforded and potential to be gained by utilising digital technologies to engage students in the writing classroom, are not always realised.

Contemporary written communication outside of school is seldom delivered by text alone; digital texts are increasingly multimodal in nature and can incorporate colour, sound, image and video to effectively portray the author's message and purpose. All these modes are potentially utilised by students, often through social media, as they upload videos, attach pictures to texts, create avatars and add their voice to visual images or texts.

In my experience, the collaborative and participatory opportunities afforded and encouraged by digital technologies are rarely reflected in classroom programmes, with most writing still done by the individual, for a limited audience, most often the teacher. The social aspect that digital technologies potentially bring to writing could also enhance the motivation and engagement of students, through making connections and sharing ideas with a more diverse audience. Examples include working together in a google doc to encourage collaborative practice and learning, and writing

on a blog for a potentially worldwide audience, gaining valuable and diverse feedback and encouragement.

If it transpires that students perceive themselves to be better writers, and enjoy it more, when there is an opportunity to utilise digital technologies in some way as they possibly do outside of school, then teachers may be encouraged to adapt their approach to the teaching of writing to reflect this. This may be a difficult aim to achieve, with teachers under political and social pressure to continue to teach and assess writing in the traditional sense.

Drawing upon the above concerns and considerations, the research questions that guided the project are:

- To what extent are the home practices of students, in terms of digital technologies, comparable with the technologies used within the writing programme at school?
- What kind of relationships are there between student engagement in writing tasks and the incorporation of ICTs in task design?
- For this group of students, what kind of writing task appears to contribute positively to self efficacy in respect to writing?
- For this group of students, what kind of writing task appears to contribute positively to enjoyment in respect to writing?

In exploring these concepts, it was important for me to conduct my research in a manner that would benefit not only myself as a researcher, but also the school and students. As keen as I was to gain my Masters qualification, I was equally interested in making a difference within my own school.

The selection of a research method that would enable this was important to me. Working with a small sample size of one class had the potential for

a successful intervention to be replicated with other classes in the future. The opportunity for me as a researcher to work collaboratively with teachers and students was also an important consideration, and lead me towards a methodology that encouraged researcher participation as opposed to observation only. A case study methodology within an action research framework was most appropriate to reach these research goals.

### **1.2.2 Time frame and scope of the intervention**

Prior to the intervention beginning, required consents processes were followed, as outlined in the ensuing Methodology chapter. Initial questionnaire data was gathered at the end of the second school term, in early July 2012. The first focus group semi-structured interviews occurred in the first week of the third school term and, once the focus for the intervention had been determined, the planning and teaching for the first action research cycle began in the second week of the term.

The intervention continued throughout term three, with three major action cycles occurring in this time. In terms of classroom practice, this took the form of the students completing three individual posts on their classroom blog. Following the completion of each blog post, students, teachers and myself as the researcher, reflected on the activity in terms of the research foci on student enjoyment and self-efficacy in regard to writing tasks. In addition to this, and equally as important, we also concentrated on growing students skills as blog writers. When planning subsequent blogging tasks, reflections on these areas guided the way forward. Chapter 5, 'The Intervention', provides a narrative account of this journey.

In the final week, all consented students reflected on the project as a whole. Final semi-structured interviews were held with the focus groups, again providing deeper insight into the thinking of the students. Relevant questions from the initial questionnaires were again administered to consented students. A final reflection meeting with the key teacher was held in early October.

### **1.3 Overview of the Structure of the Thesis**

Chapter Two examines and presents a review of relevant literature pertaining to four main areas; the changing literacy landscape, the literacy worlds of today's students, current writing pedagogy, practice and challenges and finally literature on self-efficacy, motivation and engagement, particularly in relation to writing.

Chapter Three describes the methodology used, and explains the methods for data collection, and the rationale behind their selection. This includes reasons for electing to utilise an action research approach for the project.

Chapters Four, Five and Six present the findings of this project.

Chapter Four discusses the initial data which informed the selection of the context for the action research intervention. It outlines how the classroom blog was selected as the vehicle to explore the research questions driving the project.

Chapter Five presents as a narrative, the journey of the intervention across three action research cycles. It concludes with an illustration of the impact the intervention on one student.

Chapter Six further discusses and summarizes themes that emerged during the intervention. In particular it highlights the separation students themselves make between the writing they do for school purposes, and that which they do in their own time, and discusses the reasons for and implications of this finding.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter outlines the review of relevant literature that informed the considerations, focus and directions of this study. First I selected research and literature that presented a broad overview of the current literacy landscape, and focused especially on the common view of school based literacy practices. This is contrasted with a broader, more contemporary view of literacy. Within this latter view it was important to also consider the impact of digital technologies on literacy, and in turn, the effect on teaching and learning.

An investigation was then made into the growing concern that literacy practices students of today utilise outside of school differ from classroom literacy practices. Research which suggested ways to bridge any gaps between what occurred in the classroom versus students' home lives was also examined.

With the focus of my research centered on writing, recent theories of and pedagogical approaches to writing were researched and presented. I also enquired into the effect digital technologies were having on the practice of writing. Next I examined blogging as a writing format, as this became authentic platform for the classroom intervention and subsequent data gathering.

Finally I researched the concept of self-efficacy, and the effect this may have on students' motivation and engagement, particularly in relation to writing. The impact of feedback in relation to motivation and self-efficacy was also considered.

### **2.1. The Changing Literacy Landscape**

#### **2.1.1 What is Literacy?**

What it means to be literate has continuously evolved throughout history, never more so than in the current era. In the past the term 'literacy' was

seldom used other than in opposition to 'illiteracy, that is, not being able to communicate using the written word. Today however, literacy requires a more expansive definition. To contextualise the nature of my research, I explored this expanded concept of literacy, and how this term has changed over time.

In their 1996 seminal work "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures," The New London Group introduced the pedagogical concept of 'multiliteracies', which stressed that the notion of literacy must extend beyond traditional approaches.

"What we might term 'mere literacy' remains centered on language only, and usually on a singular national form of language at that, which is conceived as a stable system based on rules such as mastering sound-letter correspondence. This is based on the assumption that we can discern and describe correct usage. Such a view of language will characteristically translate into a more or less authoritarian kind of pedagogy. A pedagogy of multiliteracies, by contrast, focuses on modes of representation much broader than language alone. These differ according to culture and context, and have specific cognitive, cultural and social effects" (p. 64).

The need to view literacy in a different way has been facilitated by technology, globalization and an increase in social, cultural and linguistic diversity, and intensified by constant and rapid changes within this diverse society. The New London Group discussed how understanding and negotiating these differences is central to making meaning in our working, public and private lives. To participate in, contribute to and accurately comprehend such a diverse world, a critical and reflective approach to texts must be adopted.

This requires an acknowledgment that texts themselves have also changed. As the New London Group argued, the range of multimodal text

forms associated with digital technologies also need to be taken into account in literacy pedagogy. Since the era of the illuminated manuscript, print-based literacy practices have been multimodal (Jewitt, 2005; Marsh & Singleton, 2009; Wyatt-Smith & Kimber, 2009). However today the incorporation of linguistic, visual, spatial, audio and gestural design into texts increases their complexity and reshapes the way we use language. In schools, one standard set of skills is no longer adequate to ensure meaning of these complex modes is attained. A multiliteracies approach enables students to understand, use and critically evaluate these multimodal text forms.

What constitutes literacy is always changing, therefore any definition is difficult to make. Snyder (2009) explained literacy “not as an unchanging set of basic skills but as a dynamic repertoire of social practices” (p. 19). She drew the analogy of learning to be literate to be “more like learning to play a musical instrument in an orchestra than the mechanical acquisition of reading and writing skills in a classroom” (p. 19). While according to Snyder (2009) this view of literacy is not widely held within general society, it is the one which informs my research project.

Freebody & Luke (1990), in their Four Resources Model, defined literacy in terms of a repertoire of capabilities. In today’s continuously evolving world, having such a repertoire is essential to enable students to participate effectively as global citizens. To be literate in this context requires students to break the code of texts, participate in and make meaning of texts, use texts functionally and to critically analyse and transform texts.

The constant shifts in what constitutes literacy in the twenty-first century are heavily influenced by digital technologies, which are continually changing the ways in which we communicate (Burnett, 2009; Kalatnizis, Cope & Fehring, 2002; Leu, 2000; Limbrick & Aikman, 2005, Marsh & Singleton, 2009). While literacy has always historically evolved according

to technology and purpose, the current concern is the constancy and exponential rate of change. (Anderson-Inman, 2009; Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear & Leu, 2008; Leu, 2000; Mishra, Koehler & Kereluik, 2009.)

Leu (2000) referred to this rapid and continuous state of change as deictic:

“In a world of rapidly changing technologies and new envisionments for their use, literacy appears to be increasingly deictic; it’s meaning is regularly redefined not by time and space, but by new technologies and the continuously changing envisionments they initiate for information and technology” (p. 745).

This means that the ways in which we read, write, view, listen, compose and communicate information is never static. As new technologies for literacies appear, even newer literacies are required to utilise them effectively and to their potential. The acquisition of literacy therefore requires the ability to constantly adapt to imminent changes regarding new social practices, skills, strategies, and dispositions (Coiro et.al., 2008; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro & Cammack, 2004).

Social skills developed through collaboration and networking are also fundamental to a contemporary view of literacy. Jenkins (2006) referred to this as a participatory culture, one which requires a wide range of social skills including negotiation, judgment, appropriation, multitasking, simulation and play. This also includes collaborating across a range of communities, and making sense of the diversity these communities present, including those we may not interact with on a personal level.

A multiliteracies approach to literacy does not, however, mark the demise of the need to develop traditional reading and writing skills and behaviours. Print remains an important communicative tool, and textual literacy will continue to be an essential skill for the twenty-first century. In the digital world, the ability to read and write has become more important,

through the increased need to acquire and communicate information. Changes to the ways we read and write require the competencies for literacy and learning to be adapted and expanded, as opposed to replaced (Carrington & Robinson, 2009; Gainer & Lapp, 2010; Gee & Hayes, 2011; Jenkins, 2006; Leu, 2000; Marsh & Singleton, 2009).

### **2.1.2 The New Zealand Context**

In the New Zealand educational context, the term 'literacy' is a relatively new one. Ministry of Education documents prior to the mid 1990s such as the English Curriculum Document (1994), focussed their aims on 'language' (Limbrick & Aikman, 2005), with the term 'literacy' occurring only once in this document, in a context that relates only to reading and writing.

More recently the term 'literacy' has been included more frequently across a range of policy documents and publications. The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) acknowledged the changes in literacy, stating that "understanding, using, and creating oral, written, and visual texts of increasing complexity is at the heart of English teaching and learning" (p. 18). However the recognition of pedagogical change is not as clear in other documents, such as in the *Effective Literacy Practice* handbooks (Ministry of Education, 2003, 2006) or The New Zealand Curriculum Reading and Writing Standards Years 1-8 (2009).

The teacher handbook *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 5-8* (Ministry of Education, 2006), provided the following as a definition of literacy:

"Literacy is the ability to understand, respond to, and use those forms of language that are required by society and valued by individuals and communities" (p. 18).

This publication also mentioned multimodal forms of communication and offered an acknowledgement of the need for a broader concept of literacy

beyond reading and writing. However the content of this handbook, and its companion *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 1-4* (Ministry of Education, 2006) primarily perpetuates a traditional view of the acquisition and teaching of literacy, as opposed to a twenty-first century notion.

More recent documents regarding literacy produced by the Ministry of Education do not appear to promote a twenty-first century viewpoint. What constitutes literacy is not clearly defined in either *The Literacy Learning Progressions* (2010) or *The New Zealand Curriculum Reading and Writing National Standards for years 1-8* (2009) despite both documents using the term constantly. What these documents stress, is that students' literacy expertise must enable them to meet the literacy demands across the curriculum. The lack of clarity about what literacy actually is, is not helpful for New Zealand teachers (Limbrick & Aikman, 2005).

Whilst Freebody and Luke's (1990) Four Resources Model is theoretically referenced in New Zealand Ministry documents such as *The New Zealand Curriculum Reading and Writing Standards Years 1-8* (2009), only three of the aspects of the model are included. Significantly missing is the pragmatic aspect of being able to use texts functionally; that is, what to do with a text here and now.

These guiding documents for New Zealand teachers appear to place the lens on conventional views of reading and writing, thus supporting a traditional view of literacy. This concurs with Jewitt's (2005) observation that much educational policy continues to promote a linguistic and linear view of literacy, despite the multimodal nature of today's texts.

During the time this research was conducted, the Ministry of Education, in a New Zealand Curriculum Update *Literacy Across the Curriculum* (2102), more specifically acknowledges the multimodality of both print and digital texts, and encourages teachers to give learners explicit literacy instruction and to provide opportunities for situated practice in all areas of learning

across the curriculum. Although this is a positive acknowledgment, it is likely that it will take some time for teachers to move beyond traditional, generic teaching of reading and writing, to fully embrace this.

#### **2.1.4 Challenges for Teachers**

One of the challenges for teachers in meeting the twenty-first century literacy needs of their students therefore, is that behind the current use of ICTs in our schools, lies a traditional pedagogy. Changing this mindset to reflect a pedagogy designed to meet the needs of the twenty-first century literacy learner requires dialogue between governments, communities and schools. (Ledesma, 2005; Limbrick & Aikman, 2005.) This is because the required shifts in pedagogy are “more dependent upon the creativity of educators and the vision of policy-makers than they are on the technological resources of hardware and software” (Merchant, 2009, p. 120).

Teachers are also challenged by the constant state of flux of the literacy landscape. The continuous re-visioning of literacy to incorporate new technologies requires many teachers to become more adept at engaging with the technologies themselves (Cervetti, Damico & Pearson, 2006). Effective professional development is necessary for teachers to feel confident and be competent in this area. Not only do they have to understand and utilize these literacies themselves, but also be able to teach and assess them in a way that complements as opposed to distracts from the current literacy practices students require (DeVoss, 2011). The balancing of old and new can create tension; “...literacy teachers are caught somewhere between the legacy of the past and the imperative to prepare children for the demands of the future” (Snyder 2009, p 19).

This is also evident when incorporating new technologies increasingly available for student use. How to utilise these technologies to support new literacy practices, as opposed to using them primarily to enhance the learning of traditional literacy skills, presents another challenge for

teachers (Merchant 2007; 2009). With the majority of the texts and other resources currently used to facilitate literacy learning remaining conventional, as opposed to reflecting the multimodality of texts utilized by students in their out-of-school lives, challenges for teachers are compounded (Adlington & Hansford, 2009).

Yet another challenge lies in successfully integrating new technologies in an authentic twenty-first century context, rather than teaching a specific technology or introducing a 'cool new tool' (Borsheim, Merritt & Reed, 2008). Often the teaching of technology and literacy occurs separately, as opposed to connecting the two (Grabill & Hicks, 2005). This is in contrast to the authentic and ubiquitous way many students utilize technologies in their own literacy worlds.

Teachers are also faced with the fact that often, especially with older students, their students have greater expertise with digital technologies than they themselves may have (Henderson, 2008). This may cause feelings of inadequacy for teachers. Conversely there is some debate over the extent to which students possess expertise. As with all areas of learning, students bring with them a range of digital literacy skills, abilities and experiences. Meeting the range of needs they possess creates yet another challenge for teachers (DeVoss, 2011).

However despite these challenges it is an exciting time to be an educator. As suggested by Lankshear & Knobel (2006) the challenges often relate more to our mindset than the technologies themselves. Jenkins (2006) encourages a paradigm shift which reshapes how we teach existing subjects, by adopting a new literacies approach across the board, as opposed to seeing new literacies as a separate 'subject' to add to an already crowded curriculum.

## **2.2 The Literacy Worlds of Today's Students**

### **2.2.1. The 'Digital Native' Perspective**

Students today are born into a distinctly digital world, and are consumers of a range of communicative artifacts from a young age (Adlington & Hansford, 2009). Prensky (2001) coined the phrase 'digital native' to describe today's students, whom he considers 'native speakers' of the digital language of modern computer technologies. This is in opposition to 'digital immigrants', those of us not born into this digitally defined world, but who have adopted the new technologies now available.

A distinction is frequently made between students' 'out-of-school' literacy practices, and the literacy practices supported within the school context. The ways in which students interact with and use digital technologies at home is often markedly different to how they are utilised in the classroom. Whereas the term 'digital divide' was once attributed to the 'haves and have nots' regarding technological access, there is a growing sense that a great divide also exists between the rich literacy practices students use at home as opposed to more traditional approaches to literacy still prevalent in schools (Henderson & Honan, 2008; Hudson, 2011). Henderson (2011) suggested that as the availability of more technologies increases, so does this new digital divide.

Although many adults, including teachers, spend an increasing amount of time engaged in digital practices, a void still exists between their understanding and use of new and emerging technologies, versus that of the 'digital native' (Adlington & Hansford, 2009; Honan 2012), whose ubiquitous use of technology is second nature. This apparent disparity is sometimes attributed to a lack of knowledge teachers hold about what literacy practices their students actually engage in outside school (Cervetti et.al, 2006; Henderson & Honan, 2008). Therefore the strengths and knowledge students seamlessly acquire in their out-of-school digital practices are often not acknowledged or utilised in the school setting (Henderson, 2011, Henderson & Honan, 2008; Honan 2012).

Compounding this, the continued focus on print-based literacy in classrooms often means students may leave a useful set of digital competencies and knowledge at the classroom door (Carrington & Robinson, 2009, Davidson, 2009). This traditional view is also reflected in teacher practice:

“While differences between in-school and out-of-school literacy practices is not a recent phenomenon, the more salient issue is that literacy instructional practices have only superficially changed through the introduction of new technologies and certainly have not changed in ways that might allow children to harness their out-of-school experiences or build on them in powerful ways” (Davidson 2009, p. 39).

To begin to bridge the gap that exists between the out-of-school literacy practices of students with what occurs in classrooms, the first step for teachers is to ask them about the kinds of activities they participate in away from school (Honan, 2012). How to incorporate these out-of-school interests and practices into literacy pedagogy and practice in the classroom is the next consideration. (Vasudevan, 2010). With current pedagogies strongly advocating building classroom learning around students' knowledge, interests and experiences, a close examination of the out-of-school practices of students could assist in developing a greater understanding of what they actually do, know and value (Henderson & Honan, 2008; Honan, 2012; Jewitt, 2008). This in turn may enhance the self-efficacy of the twenty-first century learner.

However instead of drawing on and positively exploiting student experiences, a narrow approach to the use of technologies tends to permeate classroom practice, which is often separated from literacy teaching and restricted to the teaching of specific technological skills (Henderson & Honan, 2008). The range of technologies utilised by students beyond computers (for example, gaming devices and

cellphones), and the ways in which students use technologies in their daily lives, tends to be ignored and even denigrated by some teachers (Henderson, 2011). Many literacy practices students choose to engage in outside the classroom are socially connected, as opposed to having a learning focus. Often the context of this social communication has a connection to popular culture, and this can also put these broader home literacy practices under a suspicious gaze in the eyes of some adults (Williams, 2005). Further, access to many tools and literacy practices students use outside the classroom such as cellphones and social networking, is usually restricted at school (Adlington & Hansford, 2009). The divide this creates is both physical and metaphorical.

It is therefore not surprising that students themselves appear to separate their home and school literacy practices. For example, they may hold the perception that the texts they create out of school do not constitute 'real writing' in comparison with the writing tasks they are asked to do at school. (Henderson & Honan, 2008; Williams, 2005.) This perception was highlighted in The National Commission of Writing (2008) report on Writing, Technology and Teens. In this report, Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith & Macgill found that whilst most teenagers were often engaged in creating texts outside of school, they did not consider electronic writing such as communication over the internet or text messaging, to be 'real' writing. They made a clear distinction between the writing they did for school and for their own communicative purposes.

However in a study of two young (aged almost 3 and 6.5 years) children's literacy practices at home during their internet searches for information, Davidson (2009) found that these children did not make a distinction between new digital literacies and traditional print-based text. Davidson suggests that this blurring should encourage teachers "to encompass the use of technologies in ways that do not create a divide between the old and new; allowing children to experience and use various technologies in ways that harness out-of-school literacy practices and provide instruction

that encompasses and adds to understandings of them in authentic ways” (p. 50).

Many students are increasingly disengaged with the traditional approaches to teaching literacy in schools (Honan, 2012). To connect with and engage their students, teachers must attempt to design authentic literacy learning tasks around the literacy activities students utilise outside of school. This is beneficial not only for engagement, but also in mitigating the tendency to teach the tool or the technology, as opposed to focusing the teaching on literacy practices. If teachers can design tasks and activities that allow for a similar level of natural integration of technologies and literacy practices that occurs in students’ out-of-school worlds, the learning may better prepare our students to be twenty-first century literate.

Research studies which investigate students’ home practices may assist in achieving this. Henderson & Honan (2008) investigated teachers’ assumptions about the digital literacy practices and the digital texts used at home by students from low socio-economic backgrounds. They examined what students described as their home digital literacy practices then compared these with what happened within the classroom. Their research was driven by “an uncomfortable hunch that deficit views of the digital practices engaged in by students at home were becoming as deeply entrenched in schooling as those that were once so taken-for-granted about print literacy practices” (p. 9). They found that the teachers involved generally underestimated students’ out-of-school access to computers and tended to ignore the use of other forms of technology in their home lives. They also found that computer related tasks were separated from other literacy learning, challenging notions of the integrated use of digital technologies in students’ out-of-school learning.

In a subsequent study, Henderson (2011) examined how teachers in two middle school classrooms used technologies, and how they approached the teaching of multiliteracies. She found similar disparities between the

everyday out-of-school practices of students and the practices teachers believed they needed to engage in. Her findings suggested that teachers' understandings of and assumptions about their students' experiences with technology, together with the restrictions of technologies available within schools, defined the approaches they adopted when using technologies in the classroom. This meant that digital practices in the classroom centered largely on the computer, as opposed to other digital technologies that students may utilise outside of school

In her review examining the understandings revealed through studies of primary literacy and digital technology Burnett (2009), concluded that there is a need for more research into investigating engagement with digital texts in primary classrooms. Most empirical research she commented, explores the use of technology in supporting the traditional literacy classroom, as opposed to exploring digital literacy. She also commented that qualitative research that captures student interactions with technology, and how they use and come to understand it is needed, to assist us in “not only understanding how children may be encouraged to use the affordances of digital texts but the possibilities that such texts engender within learning environments” (p. 32) To do this she suggested that “it may also be that children can be involved more extensively in the research process through sharing their own experiences in contributing to debates around the relationship of technology to literacy education” (p. 33).

### **2.2.2 Are All Digital Natives Equal?**

Although today's students are born into a digitally infused world, it cannot be presumed that their experiences and understandings regarding digital technologies are the same. Adlington & Hansford (2009) cautioned Prensky's (2001) notion that all students are one homogenous group of 'digital natives', and are therefore all native speakers of a common digital language of computers, video games and the Internet.

Bennett, Maton & Kervin (2008) also questioned Prensky's viewpoint, especially regarding the assumption that young people of the 'digital native' generation "possess sophisticated knowledge of and skills with information technologies" (p. 777). Instead they suggest that while a proportion of young people are skilled at using digital technologies, a significant other group do not have the same level of access or skills of the assumed 'digital native.' Their suggestion is that there may be just as much of a divide within this generation as between generations. Students bring to the classroom a diverse range of skills and experiences, therefore a presumption cannot be made that all students are equally as competent in terms of 'new literacies' (Henderson 2008; Henderson & Honan, 2008). As Bennett et. al. (2008) cautioned, "while technology is embedded in their lives, young people's use and skills are not uniform" (p. 783). Attention must be given not only to the technology, but also to the specific strategies that are required to read and write in digital form (Honan, 2102). Schools also have a responsibility promote the skills, knowledge, and ethical understandings in the digital landscape that encourage safety and promote effective use (Anderson-Inman, 2009).

Luckin, Clark, Graber, Logan, Mee & Oliver (2009) investigated the apparent differences between school and non-school engagement with Web 2.0 technologies. They found that learners took on a range of roles in their out-of-school practices such as researcher, collaborator, producer and publisher, however most tasks undertaken lacked sophistication. This was found to be due to a lack of technical knowledge. Learners could perform basic operations, however they had trouble in transferring their technical know-how into metacognitive know-how. It would seem that the role of the teacher and school in the development of this aspect is paramount. Luckin et. al. also found the perceptions the students had of genres such as the blog, were enhanced by teacher facilitation. This suggests that while students may use digital technologies more frequently outside of school than in the classroom, without guidance they may not be used to their potential.

A similar trend was found by Kennedy, Judd, Churchwood, Gray & Krause (2008) in terms of a 'digital divide' within a cohort, in their study of first-year university students' experiences with technology. They found that while some students had "embraced the tools of the 'Net Generation,'" (p. 117) this was not universal across their study sample, which showed considerable variance in patterns of technology use. Kennedy et. al. (2008) also stated that the basic core technology skills many young people possess do not necessarily translate into sophisticated use by default.

Kennedy et. al. (2008) acknowledged the potential of utilising technologies regularly used by young people, for educational purposes. But they also questioned if this is what students want. While the answer from their data appeared to be 'yes', they cautioned that students not overly competent may be lacking the experience to determine the value of the educational benefit of these technologies. Their study recommended further research into the adaption of students' 'living technologies' (such as cellphones) into 'learning technologies'.

Luckin et. al. (2009) commented that "learners are clearly motivated to use Web 2.0 technologies and there is evidence to suggest that teachers have an important role to play in assisting learners to make more sophisticated use of these technologies to support learning" (p. 101). They suggested that "greater teacher understanding of the deep levels of engagement these online facilities can provide for learners could translate into a higher level of critical engagement with information and communications technologies" (p. 101).

Whilst advocating the development of new ways of thinking regarding understanding and interacting with digital technologies at school, Luckin et. al. (2008) did not recommend directly incorporating students' out-of-school behaviours and activities into the classroom. Rather they recommended translating the practice of interest into a school context. To

illustrate this, they used the notion of tapping into student interest in photo sharing to create photo narratives in the classroom.

Luckin et. al. (2008) also acknowledged barriers to the incorporation of Web 2.0 tools, such as school cultures, safety and privacy issues, organisation and infrastructure, and traditional pedagogies. The development of a pedagogical model which supports connections across the learning spaces of home and school is recommended. The role of the teacher remains critical, but in more of a facilitating than directional role.

Selwyn (2009) is another who questioned the popular portrayal of the 'digital native.' He also rejected the notion that young people are naturally innate and talented users of digital technologies. Selwyn concurred with Luckin et. al. (2008) that "many young people's actual uses of digital technologies remain rather more limited in scope than the digital native rhetoric would suggest" (p. 372). He challenged the idea that young people's digital practices are collaborative and creative, suggesting instead that much of their internet use for example, is passive, through watching 'on demand' television or films. He presented the view that technology use is limited in breadth as much at home as it can be at school.

### **2.3 Putting the Lens on Writing**

At the heart of this research project is writing, therefore focussing specifically on this area of literacy is necessary. Although the complementary communicative mode to its counterpart reading, writing is also often considered the 'poor cousin.' Historically, reading has enjoyed more respect than writing. Yancey (2009) suggested that this is partly because "through reading, society could control its citizens, whereas through writing, citizens might exercise their own control" (p. 2). Today however, opportunities for anybody to be a writer abound. The traditional confines of publishing have been removed by the Internet, where anyone

with an internet connection can share their message anytime, and any place.

There is often a disparity in student achievement between reading and writing, with writing achievement falling below that of reading. Generally if a student is going to have a preference, it will be reading. Writing can be hard work, with the author being responsible for the generation and organization of ideas as opposed to being a consumer of the ideas of others, as with reading.

In her scoping report to the Ministry of Education, Parr (2010b) stated that in New Zealand, students are under-performing in writing. The evidence she drew upon showed that by the end of their schooling, students are two years behind where curriculum expectations would have them be. Parr suggested that this is concurrent with evidence from the United States. Achievement levels in reading do not reflect the same low levels, therefore there are implications for how writing is taught in New Zealand schools.

To fully understand the writing of today, this section first explores theories and pedagogical shifts across the past few decades, the subsequent changes to writing, and what now constitutes writing in the new literacies environment. A section on 'growing good writers' introduces the importance of task design and appropriate assessment practices. Finally the blog, a relatively recent writing 'genre' is examined, and the potential to encapsulate many aspects of the new literacy landscape through blogging, is explored.

### **2.3.1 Recent Theoretical and Pedagogical Shifts in the Teaching of Writing**

According to Parr (2010b), research regarding writing has lagged behind that of reading, and is relatively new and therefore limited. Over recent years, the teaching of writing has been influenced by a range of theoretical perspectives, with each particular discourse being influenced by the way

writing, or learning how to write, is conceptualized. These perspectives have also been interpreted differently by classroom teachers as they tried to make sense of the most effective way to deliver the writing curriculum, and have perpetuated confusion and a lack of confidence in the teaching of writing (Parr, 2010b).

Faigley (1986) identified three theoretical perspectives, namely the textual, the individual and the social. Exploring these perspectives gives context to the current research and teaching climate in writing. The textual perspective prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s, is based on the formalism of writing, and considered how different aspects of a text worked in conjunction with others. From this viewpoint the meaning of the text comes from the text itself, and a good piece of writing reflects accuracy and sound construction.

An individual perspective considers that writing should not be thought of as a product, but should be viewed as more of a cognitive process. Individual writers made conscious choices about what to write, and who to write for. With the focus on the process of composing, such as outlined in the model developed by Flower & Hayes (1981), writing is seen as a dynamic, meaning making process (Parr, 2010b). Text alone does not give meaning; rather meaning is constructed between writer and reader.

A social view of writing began to emerge in the late 1980s. As Parr (2010b) explained, “writers compose as members of a community whose discursive practices constrain the way they structure meaning” (p. 6). In this view, it is the interaction of ideas and thinking between the reader and the writer that determines meaning.

The perspectives outlined by Faigley are somewhat echoed by Hyland (2002). In his metaphorical framework, Hyland also identified three main approaches to writing; writer, text and reader oriented perspectives.

The first of these, the writer oriented perspective, focuses on the writer, and the processes used to create texts. At the heart of this perspective lies the notion that all writers have something to say, and that the process of developing this idea is as important as the final product. Within this view, Hyland identified two classroom approaches, the expressivist and the cognitive. The expressivist teacher considers the psychological climate (Kirby & Liner, 1988) and creates a non-threatening, positive classroom environment in which students express themselves through writing based largely on personal experience. Central to the cognitive approach is the recursive nature of the writing process, as opposed to a linear model. The process writing approach fits under this umbrella.

Hyland's (2002) text oriented perspective views text as a communication tool designed to achieve a specific purpose in a particular situation. Text as discourse considers the social significance of writing, with the writer presuming some extent of prior knowledge from the reader, and the reader presuming that the writer is intent on delivering a clear message through text. The writer's choice of genre is determined by context, function and consideration of audience. The teacher in this situation is working to encourage students to see how texts work as communication tools. Attention is given to grammar and language conventions, as is noticing the different ways texts are structured en route to achieving their purposes – all within an authentic context.

Hyland's (2002) third and final perspective, the reader oriented perspective, gives consideration not only for the cognitive processes of writing, but also for the interaction between the writer and the reader. "The process of writing involves creating a text that the writer assumes the reader will recognize and expect" (Hyland, 2008 pg. 103). As with Faigley's (1986) social view, communication is achieved by negotiation between participants, inviting input from both the writer and the reader.

The interactive and social dimensions of Hyland's reader oriented theory and Faigley's social perspective are paramount in today's digital world, and have intensified over the past decade. This is largely because of the constant changes in the definition of what constitutes writing and literacy. Literacy as social practice is not a generic set of skills, but the way it is acquired and applied across a range of 'communities' (Street, 2009). It is also an act of great complexity. With writing remaining an essential skill both inside and outside the classroom, it is critical that the changing contexts for writing be acknowledged (DeVoss 2011). Effective teaching remains critical in ensuring these skills develop within our students.

### **2.3.2 Growing Good Writers**

Teachers of writing have long advocated that to become an accomplished writer, a student must have ample opportunity to write; that the practice of writing itself provides the capacity for writing improvement. This view is supported by process writing advocates, such as Donald Graves (1994) and Lucy Calkins (1994), who also believe that developing writer must understand the writing processes they go through. Whilst critics of the process approach suggest that it values the end product less than the process the student goes through when crafting their writing, this is misinformed. Rather when followed as intended, the process approach brings a balance to product oriented pedagogies which placed a heavy focus on teaching grammar and style, often at the expense of ideas and content development (Davis & McGrail, 2011). Conversely, process writing puts the initial lens firmly on the development of ideas in an authentic context, and on the notions of purpose and audience, therefore making the end product more meaningful and relevant.

Becoming a good writer occurs over time (Davis & McGrail, 2011), as writers develop the necessary skills, strategies and attitudes. Skilled writers are strategists who carefully plan their writing, and monitor the writing process as they follow it. Significant time is also spent revising and editing (McArthur, Graham, & Fitzgerald, 2009). As they plan and write,

good writers are mindful of their purpose for writing. Equally as important is an awareness of audience. Writing is fueled socially and culturally as writers compose with their audience in mind. A skilled writer will anticipate “what the reader will assume, learn and infer” (Graham et. al. 2009, p. 4). Writing tasks designed to encourage young writers to consider the point of view of the reader when composing and revising will facilitate this sense of audience. If the primary audience is always the teacher or classmates, the imagining of an audience beyond this is a difficult concept for the young writer to appreciate (Davis & McGrail, 2011).

Good writers possess knowledge about writing, and use that knowledge effectively. Good writers also create their best content when they are knowledgeable about the topics they are writing about (Graves, 1994). To this end, Lovejoy (2009) suggested there is a place in classroom programmes for self-directed writing, providing “an opportunity for students to draw on their own resources, not only what they know and care about, but also how they may choose to say it” (p 80). A critical component of such writing is allowing students the freedom to choose topics which are meaningful and relevant to them, and to write about these topics within a framework they also select. Allowing students to exercise control over such aspects of the writing task increases engagement (Lovejoy, 2009) and can counter negative attitudes students may bring to writing (Bruning & Horn, 2000).

Lipstein & Renninger (2007) stated that when students are interested in a particular subject they are more likely to “be attentive to, set goals for, and have effective learning strategies for working within that subject matter” (p. 113). When writing on topics of interest, students have more to discuss, and their writing is likely to be more focused and relevant to the topic. Furthermore, according to Lipstein & Renninger, if the topic is of individual interest, the student is likely to improve the quantity and quality of their writing.

Drawing on personal experiences and interests and finding the significance in them helps students to believe they have something worthwhile to say (Loane, 2010). Familiarity with the topic also enhances student voice (Lovejoy, 2009). Lovejoy also purports that when students choose their topic and write for different purposes and audiences, they learn to see that language is not always as rigid as more formal writing tasks demonstrate.

The successful development of good writers hinges on the quality of the actual writing experiences or tasks. Bruning & Horn (2000) stated that this is heavily reliant on how teachers use writing in their classrooms. It is up to teachers to develop writing tasks that are both challenging and foster engagement and motivation. If a narrow view of writing that does not allow for the exploration of wider social and communication scopes pervades, interest and relevance for the student writer may wane. Yet, as suggested by Bruning & Horn (2000), “school writing often takes place under conditions that are artificial, at least from the students’ perspective” (p. 30). They recommended designing writing tasks that are authentic and utilised for real purposes, as opposed to writing activities which simply develop literacy skills whose future use is unspecified.

Yet it remains that in many classrooms, evaluative considerations are often the driving force in task selection and design, with “assigned writing and writing on tests taking precedence over writing to share knowledge, points of view and feelings” (Bruning & Horn, 2000, p. 34). It is a reality for many literacy teachers that a tension exists between what they genuinely believe is best for improving student writing, and the political and institutional pressures to ensure students are equipped to score well in measurable assessments (Lovejoy, 2009). In most schools, current assessment practices remain traditional, and narrow the view of ‘what counts’ as literacy and writing (Englert, Mariage & Dunsmore, 2006). The current focus of writing assessment is mastering “widely used processes

in order to create a product that conforms to recognizable standards” (Peterson, Botelho, Jang & Kerekes, 2006, p. 29).

For a twenty-first century multiliteracies approach to assessment to be adopted, a wider view which considers the social contexts in which the writing is created will be necessary. Within this, assessment practices which align with contemporary digital texts must therefore be developed (Hansford & Adlington, 2008).

### **2.3.3 Digital writing IS different**

“Writing today is not what it was yesterday. New technologies and new job tasks have changed the meaning of what it means to write and write well. Our educational institutions know they must review what constitutes effective instructional practice to ensure that writing curricula and instructional methods support writing excellence, incorporate technology, and engage and motivate students at all ages.”

Lenhart et. al., 2008, p3

Digital writing came into being with the advent of word processing and desktop publishing; a new way to record ideas and convey messages with the added support of image, layout and design. However today digital writing extends far beyond this, and is more accurately defined by the scope of the audience it can reach, and by the impact of connectivity. The connectivity afforded by the Internet means that through digital technologies, messages can be spread far and wide. Students can connect with a vast range of social and cultural groups, and therefore need to develop the literacy skills necessary to communicate effectively in this diverse, global environment. This includes making meaning in a range of domain-specific contexts.

Additionally digital writing today has surpassed the capabilities of word processing, and is now rich with multimodal content. Communicating multimodally means that writing is far more than text on a page; it combines with video, audio, image, symbol and layout to convey its message. With the portability of personal devices we can publish, distribute, collaborate, interact and remix using image, word, sound and motion with ease, as we make meaning from the interdependence of these elements in the wider context (DeVoss, 2011, Merchant, 2007).

The out-of-school writing of young people frequently reflects this multimodality, as they upload videos, attach pictures to texts, create avatars and add their voice to visual images or texts to portray their messages and fulfill their purposes. Lawrence Lessig (2005, as cited in Lankshear & Knobel, 2008) referred to the change digital technologies bring to the traditional notion of writing as 'remix,' and identified the different perspectives young people have of contemporary writing:

“When you say the word writing, for those of us over 15, our conception of writing is writing with text... But if you think about the ways kids under 15 using digital technology think about writing - you know, writing with text is just one way to write, and not even the most interesting way to write. The more interesting ways are increasingly to use images and sound and video to express ideas” (p. 107).

The scope this affords our young writers does not necessarily make writing an 'easier' task, however. Despite many individual tasks becoming easier, the wide range of options available to assist in conveying a message actually makes writing more complex (DeVoss, 2011). To ensure students are equipped for these complexities, today's writing classrooms need to look beyond seeing writing as a solitary act, with a student sitting at a desk with a pencil writing on a piece of paper, turning the focus beyond traditional forms in textual English. Instead teachers need to

expose their students to the types of writing they meet and use out of school, incorporating explicit teaching of new forms of writing, with the social purposes, structures and grammar of these 'text types' at the forefront. (Hansford & Adlington 2008). Students will be more readily engaged if the multimodal environment they are accustomed to using outside the classroom is reflected at school.

However, to restate a recurring theme of this review, simply growing up with digital technologies at their fingertips does not necessarily equate to all students being able to utilise these technologies effectively, thoughtfully and ethically as they write. As Hansford & Adlington (2008) pointed out, "students often appear to be highly proficient with digital technologies, seemingly able to juggle multiple tasks at one time. On the surface this may seem the case, however there are aspects of multimodal design that need careful scrutiny, and explicit teaching is needed of the more subtle design elements" (p63). They recommended that this is an area that both teachers and researchers need to explore.

It is the role of the teacher to assist students to become competent digital writers, irrespective of the skills and experiences they bring to school (DeVoss, 2011). The teaching of writing needs to adapt to achieve this. Hansford & Adlington (2009) suggested teachers call upon their knowledge of conventional texts, and identify the commonalities between these and contemporary texts, to acknowledge the necessary expanded view of writing.

Grabill & Hicks (2005) implored teachers to make a pedagogical shift away from that which exists in many current writing classrooms, where the technologies available to students are not fully utilised as they are simply used within an old pedagogy. Instead of teaching writing *with* computers/digital technologies, Grabill & Hicks advocated the teaching of writing in new social spaces that allow students to write *through* ICTs into a broader

rhetorical situation. They also encouraged the teacher to become part of that process:

“If teachers of writing expect to intervene usefully to help their students with their writing processes, they have to engage in students’ production and encourage them to engage with others, all of which is now mostly computer-mediated and networked. In other words if we want to teach writing or help students how to write more effectively, then we have to see writing in the same way as they do and be with them where they write. Networks are classrooms. Digital writing is socially situated in a collaborative, recursive and responsive space in which teachers must participate with their students” (Grabill & Hicks 2005, p. 306).

Along with the ‘how’ of digital writing, the ‘why’ must also be explored with students (DeVoss 2011). An understanding of purpose and audience remains a critical focus of writing in the digital domain. The wide audience that is available to students as they embark on their digital writing journey can be difficult to comprehend. Yancey (2004) suggested a new model for writing or composing, which develops their skills as “members of the writing public” (p. 311).

Hansford & Adlington (2008) acknowledged that writing tasks designed by good teachers make links with students’ prior knowledge. They also said that “much school writing focuses on purpose and audience, where students are rarely asked to write an authentic piece for an authentic audience” (p. 62). The suggestion was made that digital spaces such as blogs can foster powerful writing “that will interest and challenge students into writing effective pieces for significant purposes” (p. 62).

#### **2.3.4 The Blog**

A blog is a webpage which contains a series of archived posts, generally in reverse-chronological order (MacBride & Leuhmann, 2008). Blog posts

can tell the author's story not only with text but also provide the platform for the integration of multimodal components (Hansford & Adlington, 2008). When used to its potential, blogging in the classroom can promote interactivity and collaboration, encourage peer support, increase student and teacher relationships, provide opportunities to give and receive feedback, and expand learning beyond the walls of the classroom. (Ferdig & Trammell 2004, MacBride & Leuhmann, 2008.) A blog also has the potential to bring outside literacy practices into the classroom (Davis & McGrail, 2011).

Blogs imply conversation and for these conversations to occur beyond that of student and teacher, there requires a redefinition of the teacher's role, to one of facilitator as opposed to being the director of learning (Leu & Kinzer 2000, Luckin et. al., 2009). Teachers also require conceptual knowledge of the possibilities of the use of the blog (Duffy & Bruns 2006). Visiting other classroom blogs, modeling blogging for students and setting up their own blog can all assist teachers in providing a good environment for blogging in the classroom (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004).

The tools available within the Web 2.0 world provide an environment conducive to a student driven, social learning approach to literacy and learning (Duffy & Bruns 2006, Leu & Kinzer, 2000, Weigel & Gardner, 2009). This includes fostering the skills necessary to collaborate successfully, through teacher modeling and guidance. (Duffy & Bruns 2006, Matthews 2009). For new 'texts' such as the blog, it is also important for teachers to assist students to identify what makes them work well, in order for them to compose effectively in this online environment (Hansford & Adlington, 2008).

There are many options for utilising blogs in the school setting, depending on the goal set for them and their target audience (Arena & Jefferson 2008, Mounts, Eberle & Foyle, 2006). The class blog is one option, and can be described as a joint effort between students and teachers, best

used collaboratively, both inside and outside of the classroom (de Almeida Soares, 2008). While there is significant literature espousing the value of blogs as collaborative spaces for students, there appears to be a lack of empirical research specifically around classroom blogs (MacBride & Luehmann 2008, Halic 2009). Therefore it is difficult to determine if the potential of this blog type is being realised. What evidence there is largely comes from the middle to secondary sector with little to show what is actually happening with blogging, in the primary school setting (McGrail & Davis, 2011).

In their 2011 study into examining the influence of blogging in supporting writing and literacy development, McGrail & Davis worked for a year with a class of 5th-grade students. At the beginning of their intervention, the researchers found that although the students felt confident about writing, they had a weak sense of audience, and if they were writing for anyone, it was primarily for their teacher. Within their intervention, active engagement with the audience was fostered via the comment feature, and through sharing other blog postings. Both activities enabled students to see their expanded audience as real people, as opposed to an abstract concept.

The increased awareness of audience began to come through in the style of the blog posts, where a sense of community and belonging, and a caring for their readers, began to emerge. A greater sense of participation also became evident, and the researchers commented that the student bloggers began to feel a sense of empowerment and motivation. This was enhanced by the comments and suggestions made on their postings.

The teacher also noted an increase in the confidence and motivation levels of students, and in their independence. She also believed that the students felt more empowered and able to see writing as a more authentic activity.

Post intervention, researchers observed an increased sense of agency within the students. Students themselves commented on the sense of freedom and enjoyment the self-selection of topics afforded them. The aforementioned increases in student motivation and engagement were reported to have encouraged students to take more risks and experiment with a wider range of topic areas. Content and ideas were enhanced when students wrote about topics that required them to take a stance. This also led to a heightened sense of ownership and empowerment. The positive outcomes from this research highlight the potential of the classroom blog for exploring the foci of this project.

## **2.4 Self-Efficacy, Motivation and Engagement**

### **2.4.1 What is Self-Efficacy?**

In the context of this study, which is concerned with the impact of task design on student self-efficacy in writing, understanding what self-efficacy is, is critical. Self-efficacy is one's belief in one's own ability to succeed in a particular situation. Our belief in how we think we are going to perform directly affects how we actually do perform (Jinks & Lorschach, 2003). Perceived self-efficacy can directly affect our choice of activities, and how we cope and persist once an activity has been undertaken. Motivation, effort and achievement are also influenced (Ministry of Education, 2006; Schunk, 2003; Schunk & Meece, 2005).

“Efficacy expectations determine how much effort people will expend and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences. The stronger the perceived self-efficacy, the more active the efforts” (Bandura, 1978 p. 141).

Schunk (2003) stated that sources of self-efficacy information include personal accomplishments, observations, social persuasion, and physiological indicators. With personal achievements, success will logically raise self-efficacy, and failure lower it. Often students will measure their own success against that of peers they consider to be comparably

able. Self-efficacy is also enhanced by feedback from others, for example teachers, parents and peers. However if success does not follow, this reinforcement from others will not necessarily sustain a positive self-efficacy.

The learning environment also affects self-efficacy, and symbiotically self-efficacy has an effect on the learning environment. A group of learners with a high self-efficacy, who embrace a task and envisage success will in turn create a positive environment. Conversely, if task success is not perceived and self-efficacy is low, the environment may be disruptive and not conducive to learning (Schunk, 2003). Similarly learners are more likely to engage with activities that they perceive will engender success, and avoid tasks that may have negative outcomes (Schunk & Meece, 2005).

A positive self-efficacy increases the likelihood of success, however success will not occur without existing skills and knowledge to complete the task (Schunk 2003; Schunk & Meece, 2005). A challenge for teachers is “to facilitate optimism in students while ensuring they have the skills to be successful” (Pajares 2003, p. 76).

Usher & Pajares (2008) presented mastery experience (the interpreted result from previous attainments) and vicarious experience (comparing themselves to others through observation) as two major sources of a positive self-efficacy. They also considered the verbal and social persuasions that students receive from others from encouragement can boost their confidence and in turn their self-efficacy. Usher & Pajares (2008) also stated that self-efficacy beliefs are informed by emotional and psychological states.

#### **2.4.2 Engagement and Motivation**

A child’s sense of self-efficacy also affects their motivation and engagement. (Ministry of Education, 2006). Pajares, Johnson & Usher (2007) considered self-efficacy beliefs to be the foundation for motivation,

well-being and personal accomplishment: “This is because unless people believe that their actions can produce the outcomes they desire, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties” (p. 105).

Student engagement can be difficult to define, but we know it when we see it, and can recognize when it is missing (Zyngier, 2008). At school, engagement can mean many things (Ministry of Education, 2010), however in this context engagement is referring to a situation where a student remains on-task for the duration of an activity because they are enjoying it. Parsons & Taylor (2011) explained that there is a range of categories of engagement including academic, cognitive, intellectual, behavioral and emotional. It is not clear if a student needs to be operating across all domains of engagement to learn effectively.

The Ministry of Education (2010) listed several factors that may impact positively on student engagement. These included the intrinsic nature of the task to the student, the way in which the learning task is approached, and the nature and extent of the teacher’s feedback to the student.

According to Linnenbrink & Pintrich (2003), students who have positive and relatively high self-efficacy beliefs are more likely to be engaged in their learning in terms of their behaviour, cognition, and motivation. Teachers aspire to have motivational engagement from their students; they want students to “be engaged in the content or tasks in terms of their interest, value, and affect... to show some personal interest in the material and to think it is important and worthwhile to learn” (Linnenbrink & Pintrich 2003, p. 125).

Schunk & Meece (2005) highlighted the importance of considering what students value in attaining engagement; “Learners will engage with activities they believe are important or which have desired outcomes” (p. 75). If an activity is valued, students may engage with it even if they do not feel particularly efficacious about doing so.

Martin & Dowson (2009) suggested that facilitating student connection to a task or activity engages students in learning. This includes setting appropriately challenging tasks which students consider important and meaningful, and “utilizing material that arouses curiosity and is interesting to young people” (Martin & Dowson, 2009, p. 345)

It is also important to again acknowledge student individuality; what motivates and engages one student or group of students, may not work for another. The Ministry of Education (2010) reminded us of how critical it is to take time to get to know the group of learners we are working with, and to design a variety of tasks utilising a range of teaching approaches in an attempt to engage the range of students that we interact with.

The Ministry of Education (2010) also encouraged the development of relevant and purposeful tasks, and the incorporation of student interests into tasks to engage them. Because today’s students frequently choose to interact digital technologies, it therefore appears logical to design tasks and activities which exploit their interests in such technologies. The motivation provided by technology provides the three components identified by William Glasser (1986, as cited by Wolsey & Grisham, 2006) as being essential for students to become engaged in learning; choice, power and belonging.

### **2.4.3 Self-Efficacy, and Engagement and Motivation in Writing**

In specific relation to writing, Pajares et. al. (2007) cited several research studies into self-efficacy beliefs which concluded that writing self-efficacy and writing performance are related. Writing self-efficacy, they stated, is a mediator between previous and subsequent writing achievement.

A sense of competence is critical to being a motivated writer (Boscolo & Gelati, 2007, Bruning & Horn, 2000). Boscolo & Gelati (2007) considered the relationship between self-perception of competence and their

involvement as bidirectional - "A student is unlikely to be involved in writing if he or she is not self efficacious; in the same way, feeling competent about writing makes a student more willing to write" (p. 205).

Calkins (1994) encouraged teachers to look not only at the 'work' students produce at writing time, but also at whether they are engaged with the task. Authenticity of task has long been advocated by teachers as a way of connecting with and engaging students. Hiebert, as cited in Boscolo & Gelati (2007), stated an authentic literacy task is one that involves students in "immediate uses of literacy for enjoyment and communication" (p. 206). Levels of student engagement will increase when writing tasks are considered meaningful (Bruning & Horn, 2000). Boscolo & Gelati (2007) also stressed the social dimension of writing as important when engaging young writers, which "does not mean only emphasizing communication; writing is also a social activity because we can share, discuss and comment on it with others" (Boscolo & Gelati 2007, p. 207).

Feeling confident and competent encourages the 'can-do attitude' that skilled writers possess (Graham et.al., 2009). This translates into self-motivation, and the desire and ability to set and meet challenging writing goals. As previously suggested, student ownership of topic has a large influence over both student self-efficacy and enjoyment.

What encouraged students to write was one area explored in the National Commission on Writing's 2008 report on *Writing Technology and Teens*. While the teens in this survey generally enjoyed writing, they enjoyed the writing they did for personal reasons more than the writing they did for school. For teens in this sample, the assignment or task did not necessarily affect their enthusiasm for writing, although those who enjoyed creative writing at school were more likely to enjoy writing 'a great deal.'

What did affect the enjoyment of the writing assignment, was the opportunity to self-select the topic. The message from students was if they had to expend time and energy on a task, they wanted it to relate to them and their interests. Sharing their writing with an audience was also a motivating factor for these students; this included publishing in print and on the Internet.

Knowing that being a competent writer would have a positive impact on their futures was also a motivating factor in students wanting to engage in writing at school. Some saw it as a 'necessary evil'; or in the participants' words:

Teen 1: "It's like eating vegetables"

Teen 2: "It's good for you but you don't want to do it"

Lenhart et.al. 2008, p.64

For this group of students, technology was not necessarily a motivator for writing at school. Typically they drafted by hand and used computers to make their writing presentable, although it was not clear if there was an option for the drafting to be done digitally. The digital writing they preferred was communicative, such as texting or instant messaging outside of school. But even for social and personal writing, the technology served as more of a 'hook' or a means to facilitate their social lives and express themselves, as opposed to a desire to use the technology.

In another survey, The National Literacy Trust (2009) compiled data from 3000 young people in an online survey, with the objective of finding out young peoples' views on technology and writing in regard to enjoyment, engagement, how they rated themselves as writers, and the role of technology in writing. They found that technology-based methods such as text and instant messaging were used most frequently to write by this sample, though these students struggled to see writing in this manner as 'real writing.' This is even though the survey showed technologies such as

blogging and social networking provided many writing opportunities for these young people.

The study also found that students who wrote on a blog and/or social networking sites appeared to enjoy writing more, and wrote more frequently, than those who did not. They also held more positive attitudes towards writing. The caution was given however, that students who engage in such as blog writing may do so because they already enjoy writing and therefore are simply finding different ways to express this enjoyment.

#### **2.4.4 The Power of Effective Feedback**

Feedback is defined by Duijnhouwer, Prins & Stokking (2012) as “an instructional practice indicated as enhancing both students’ skills and motivation” (p 171). In the context of this study, it is the effect of feedback in relation to motivation and self-efficacy that is important to consider, as opposed to the effect on performance and achievement, though it is acknowledged that these two areas are inextricably linked. Duijnhouwer et. al. (2012) stated that self-efficacy beliefs are open to change by a single episode of feedback.

Effective feedback has one of the most powerful influences on student learning (Clarke, Timperley & Hattie, 2001). Providing feedback is not the sole domain of the teacher. Feedback from peers, for example, empowers students. The exchange of feedback from student to student may occur more freely than between teacher and student (Clarke, 2005).

Feedback does not always have to be critical or constructive. In terms of writing, sometimes an acknowledgement that their writing is to be read by an audience beyond just the teacher is both motivating and affirming for students. In the aforementioned National Commission on Writing report on *Writing Technology and Teens* (2008), students enjoyed writing for an audience they would preferably get feedback from - for this group of

students, feedback was a critical motivator. This included feedback not just from teachers, but from peers, friends and parents. It mattered that someone was interested in reading what they had to say.

The online environment supports a social constructivist perspective, one which places the focus on the interdependence of social and individual processes in the co-construction of knowledge (Palinscar, 1998). Within this environment, the scope exists for students to gain feedback on their writing from a large and diverse audience. The option for students to publish their own content using Web 2.0 tools, allows others to provide feedback, particularly in social networking spaces (Wright, 2010). Feedback gained through the sharing, discussion and commenting that occurs in this context can encourage motivation and engagement, and in turn, enhance self-efficacy.

In the age of efficiency however, Nicholls (2012) stated that feedback through numerical assessment and technical calculation has been made easier, and may increase the emphasis on grades above the reward of good learning in the eyes of teachers, students and their families. Personal, human feedback by way of conversations about learning, couples with student reflection on their learning are critical.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

The changing face of the literacy landscape necessitates teachers reflect on their own pedagogy and practice, to ensure writing tasks are authentic, useful and engaging for the twenty-first century student. Research into the out-of-school digital habits of their students is necessary to gain a better understanding of the literacy practices students are using as part of their everyday lives. Monitoring the effect of subsequent transferral of this information into classroom writing programmes may assist in raising student self-efficacy and enjoyment in regard to writing. It is this rationale that guided the planning phase of ensuing action research project, which is detailed in subsequent chapters.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This chapter first describes the theoretical rationale that informs the research undertaken for this project. This is followed by an explanation of both the case study as a methodology, and an action research framework, and outlines why these were chosen for this research project.

An explanation of the various data gathering methods employed, and the reasons for their selection, follows. Finally the ethical considerations in terms of the consent process, confidentiality and mitigation of potential harm to participants, are outlined.

### 3.1 Theoretical Rationale and Methodological Approach

The theoretical perspective from which this research was approached was sociocultural, as I viewed the acquisition of learning as occurring from being part of a community. This concurs with an interpretivist view of knowledge as being co-constructed and dependent on the way each person perceives the world. Adopting an interpretivist approach acknowledges the researcher as a real-life participant and practitioner in the research (McNiff, 2002). Methodological procedures in an interpretivist paradigm are generally qualitative (although quantitative approaches are not dismissed), and include case studies. Interpretivist data gathering methods highlight the voice of the individual, and include semi-structured and unstructured interviews, and participant observation.

The epistemology and ontology of this research are influenced through holding a situated view of learning - that knowledge is shared across tools, technologies, and social situations, which humans construct via their cultures, to allow them to work together. In this way, knowledge and meaning have their basis in the collective experiences people have in and of the world. This view is possible when the researcher works alongside research participants, and research findings develop through interaction.

To undertake this research, I utilized a case study methodology within an action research framework. I was interested in a collaborative research project, which explored the ideas and reflections of myself as researcher, the teachers I worked with and, equally as importantly, the student participants.

An action research model was favoured because unlike research methods which position the researcher away from the environment of exploration, action research allows the researcher to be part of the process. This location was particularly attractive for me as a researcher conducting the research within my own school. While I was keen to gain my Masters degree, I was also interested in making a difference within my own school environment.

Educational research does not deal with 'objects', as may be the case with scientific research. Qualitative research allows for the human element to be explored, and because I was interested in student and teacher perspectives, a qualitative approach was favoured. Relating to writing specifically, qualitative research practices allow the researcher to explore writing as social practice. Adopting this approach also allowed me to remove possible barriers between the contexts of home and school when investigating students' writing beliefs and practices. Reporting on observations and interactions under a qualitative umbrella can occur in a descriptive manner. This, according to Schultz (2006), makes the research more accessible to educators and leads to the suggestion that a qualitative methodology is more likely to affect changes in practice.

Schultz (2006) also considers qualitative methods to be "particularly suited to capturing the new directions that literacy, technology and learning are moving in our new digital age" (p. 369). Schultz comments that qualitative researchers have already deepened our understandings of literacy and the roles it plays in our lives. Considering the focus and nature of this project, a qualitative approach was therefore appropriate. Whilst most data was

qualitatively gathered, elements of quantitative data via questionnaire were collected, contributing to a mixed method approach to data gathering.

The intention of this research was to work with teachers to identify an appropriate intervention arising from information that emerged from initial data gathered via questionnaire and semi-structured focus group interviews. Further qualitative data was collected across a ten week period. Student, teacher and researcher reflections occurred regularly and also formed part of the data. Two further semi-structured interviews with student focus groups occurred towards the middle and end of the intervention. As appropriate, on average once a week, writing lessons were informally observed, and relevant data extracted from video recordings of these lessons, based on my research questions.

As will be outlined further on, some incidental data was collected from tools of normal classroom practice, such as student self-assessments and teacher-based rubric assessments.

### **3.1.1 The Case Study**

Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2007) define a case study as “an instance in action” (p 253), with the single instance being bounded, such as a child, a class or a school. This research was centered on a single class of students and their teachers.

It was critical for this project to enable student voice to be heard, and working closely with a small group allowed this. It was also important that as researcher, I could be involved with rather than being removed from the participants. Case studies allow for researchers to work within real contexts, to explore and observe the human aspects of a situation. With the research focused more on ideas than statistics, case studies allow for an analytical as opposed to numerical approach to data gathering (Cohen et. al., 2007). I was predominately interested in exploring attitudes and

feelings, therefore an approach which investigated participants' reactions to experiences and situations was more helpful than one which focused on statistical data.

A case study is an in-depth account of what occurs within a distinct group, (Menter et. al 2011), therefore it was well suited to this project. An action research model worked well within this methodology, as a chronological narrative and description of events relevant to the case allowed the story of the intervention to be told.

### **3.1.2 Action Research**

Research, defined by Mutch (2005) is “a purposeful and systematic activity designed to answer questions, solve problems, illuminate situations, and add to our knowledge” (p. 26). The distinguishable focus of educational research is that it puts this lens on people, places and processes related to teaching and learning; educational research has as its purpose “the improvement of teaching and learning systems and practices for the betterment of all concerned and society at large” (Mutch, 2005 p. 18).

Action research is a self-reflective systematic enquiry, the outcome of which is to enable those undertaking the research to better understand or improve aspects of their own practice. Because the approach to action research is largely qualitative, it is an appropriate approach to use in education circles. Action research is recursive in nature, reflective in process and ongoing. When an action research approach is adopted, it is expected that “those involved will be researching a particular situation with the intention of taking action that will make a difference - that is, will bring about change or improvement” (Cardno 2003, p. 1).

Generally action research projects are small and situational. Cardno (2003) describes the purpose of action research as being focussed on a specific issue or area, as opposed to trying to solve the problems of the

world. This, she says, keeps the project manageable, and allows for the practical findings that arise to be shared with other practitioners.

Practitioner collaboration is a feature of action research, as educators work together to improve their practice and outcomes for students. The participation of teachers, who should find the process directly useful, is paramount in the process. "Action research is practical and relevant to classroom teachers, since it allows them direct access to research findings" (Mertler 2012, p. 21). The action research model was also attractive for this project because it enabled researcher involvement as part of the collaborative process. Working together enriched the process for both teacher participants and myself as researcher. Additionally, participating as a researcher enabled me to gain a greater insight into students' perspectives. I had a strong interest the students' conceptions and voices, as opposed to my interpretation of their perspectives. As supported by an interpretivist paradigm, I share the opinion of Collins (2006), that "a view of the child as an active agent capable of contributing to his or her own subjectivity" (p. 166). Being a 'sideline teacher' during lessons and participating in formal and informal discussions with students greatly enhanced my understanding of data gathered, as it was strongly contextualised.

McNiff (2011) describes action research as open ended, and focussed on a developing idea as opposed to having a fixed hypotheses. This was certainly true for the nature of my research. Having the opportunity to plan an action research intervention based around the initial data gathered, meant that the focus was meaningful and relevant to this group of learners, as opposed to being predetermined based on what I thought I might find.

In action research, constant reflection and evaluation are critical to ensure that what the researcher/practitioner is doing is actually affecting change. Reflective processes are a strong feature of the culture Waimahia School.

Therefore a methodology that capitalised on this was an excellent fit for the research environment and participants, both staff and students.

Action research methodology features spiraling cycles which researchers move through as they reflect upon and refine their practice. It involves a cyclical process of planning, acting, developing and reflecting (Mertler, 2012). McNiff (2011) offers a description of the basic action research process. The first part of the process is a review of current practice. From here an aspect for improvement is identified, and a way forward conceived. This plan is then trialled and reflected on by all collaborators. Necessary modifications are made and the 'action' is continued taking these into account. A further evaluation of this modified action is undertaken, and the process continues until the collaborators are satisfied that the identified aspect has been suitably improved. However the nature of action research does mean that sometimes the process does not always go as planned. The twists and turns that often eventuate as part of this research process are very much a part of the experience.

## **3.2 Data Collection Methods**

### **3.2.1 The Questionnaire**

To provide baseline information regarding key areas of my research, I elected to administer two questionnaires to student participants. The questionnaire is a common quantitative data gathering tool which allows for the collection of survey information. Surveys in the form of a questionnaire allow the data to be gathered without researcher presence (Cohen et. al, 2007). Subsequently data can be easily represented numerically, which in turn enables relatively straightforward analysis.

The two questionnaires, created using google forms and administered online, were entitled *Finding Out About Home and School Writing/ICT Practices* (Appendix E) and *Finding Out About Attitude and Self Efficacy in Regard to Writing* (Appendix F). The purpose of the former questionnaire was to gain insights into the kinds of literacy practices students were

typically engaging with outside of the classroom setting. In the second questionnaire, attitudes towards writing and feelings about themselves as writers were explored with students. Relevant questions that allowed for comparative data to be gathered were posed again at the end of the intervention. The process followed in conducting and analysing the questionnaires is outlined in Chapter Four.

### **3.2.2 The Semi-Structured Focus Group Interview**

The interview is “a social, interpersonal encounter, not merely a data collection exercise” (Cohen et. al., 2007, p. 361). A well constructed interview allows insight to be gained into attitudes and perceptions. In the education context, data carefully elicited from an interview method and triangulated with that gathered through other methods, provides the quality, trustworthy data a researcher desires. A primary strength of any interview is the ability to add richness to other data collected by canvassing the human element.

Interviews are often favoured in qualitative research because of the flexibility they afford. With a semi-structured interview, the interviewer is looking for common themes, guided by a set of key questions presented in an open ended fashion (Mutch, 2005). While the researcher enters the interview with specific objectives in mind, the interviewee does have some negotiating power. The interviewer’s aim is to “explicate the interviewee’s understanding of the research topic” (Menter et. al., 2011, p. 129). Choosing a semi-structured approach promotes free interaction and offers opportunities for clarification between both parties (Bishop, 1997).

Semi-structured interviews provide a balance between structure and openness (Gillham, 2005). They enable the researcher to fully explain their purpose, and allow the participant to question and clarify both the intent and questions asked. The participant can provide data that may not otherwise have emerged with quantitative methods. Semi-structured interviews are particularly useful in education, especially when gathering

data from children. They are not required to read questions as they may need to do in a questionnaire situation, and may easily clarify if they do not understand. Similarly, the interviewer can follow up to ensure child responses are accurately understood.

For this project, I elected to gather data through the semi-structured interview with two small randomly selected student focus groups of five students each. The random selection was generated via the List Randomizer option on [www.random.org](http://www.random.org). Student names were recorded alphabetically and then digitally randomized into a list. The first five names formed the first group, the next five the second group. Fortuitously, the groups were well balanced in terms of gender and class level classification.

Group interviews were favoured over individual interviews as it is considered that being part of a group lowers participants' anxiety and provides a more comfortable setting for discussion to occur. Also, particularly with students, a group setting creates a greater elaboration of ideas (Heary & Hennessy, 2006).

In the early phase of the project, the data gathered from the interviews proved invaluable in clarifying and contextualising the information gathered from the questionnaires. It also provided the foundation for determining the focus and direction of the intervention.

A list of questions for the semi-structured interviews had been prepared prior to the gathering of data, however these were refined and added to following the completion of the questionnaires by students (Appendix G). Whilst the questions were largely followed as written, as often occurs with a semi-structured interview, additional questions that delved more deeply into areas such as current blogging practices of students, were posed as more information became evident. This allowed for further relevant

information to be gathered and used in planning the direction of the project.

In addition to the initial interviews, I met with the focus groups twice more during the data gathering phase. Questions asked were largely based around the focus of my research. I also asked questions designed to gain further student insight into the actions planned for the intervention, beyond what arose from written student reflections.

### **3.2.3 Classroom Observations**

Before beginning the intervention, I had anticipated that classroom observations would form part of the data used for the project. However instead of looking for a specific focus in lessons I observed, (such as indicators of enjoyment) I video recorded the lessons for future reference, and took note of relevant information from listening to the lessons when doing my own reflecting. This allowed me to have a more participatory role in the lessons, as is afforded by an action research model. During the data gathering process, I collected data in this manner from six writing lessons, each of fifteen to twenty minutes' duration.

### **3.2.4 Reflective Journals**

A reflective journal is a collection of notes, observations, thoughts and other relevant information built up over a period of time. In an action research project, regular reflection is important for the researcher as it assists critical analysis of data and informs next steps. It also assists in making the “messiness of the research process visible for the researcher” (Ortlipp, 2008, p. 704). For students, opportunities to reflect via a journal can provide what Hubbs & Brand (2005) refer to as a paper mirror: “By providing a means for sharing student reflections, coupled with instructor feedback resulting in ongoing dialogue, the paper mirror can provide the instructor and students valuable information about students' progression and development” (p 70).

### **The Student Reflective Journal**

Student voice was critical to the development of the proposed intervention, as the research was clearly focused on student enjoyment of writing tasks, and student self-efficacy, neither of which can be accurately observed.

Students may appear to be enjoying a task and may seem to feel proud of their results, however unless we allow time for reflection, their true feelings and opinions may remain unknown.

Following the completion of each writing task, students were guided through a reflective process. This occurred for all writing tasks, not only those directly related to the planned intervention. This allowed for some comparison to be made between writing tasks developed specifically for the project, and those occurred as part of the term's regular programme.

The development of a digital reflection space for students was considered, but with pressure already on computer availability, student reflections would take longer this way, and would not be able to be completed simultaneously. Instead a pen and paper option was preferred, with students being provided with a book to record their handwritten reflections in.

To assist with their reflections and ensure their relevance to the research foci, a series of prompts to guide students through this process were developed (Appendix H). Though the prompts were not intended to be restrictive, students often limited their comments to these areas. This in turn assisted with the collation and comparison of responses, especially as students reflected not only on the tasks designed for the intervention, but all writing tasks they completed in the classroom during that period.

### **The Teacher Reflective Journal**

Teacher reflections were recorded digitally in a cumulative 'Google Doc' which was accessible to both myself and the teacher. While I had anticipated that the reflective journal would be easy for teachers to

manage, teachers are very busy people. To ensure that reflections occurred, I modified my initial expectation that teachers would self reflect as necessary, and suggested reflections occurred at the completion of each writing task. I also created some guiding prompts to ensure reflections related to the areas of research focus.

Although it was not planned, one teacher, Jenny, became the driving force behind the intervention, as discussed in the Chapter One. Jenny and I met and reflected regularly therefore, and, with her permission, I voice recorded our discussions. These reflective conversations provided additional rich data, often of greater value than the written reflections.

### **The Researcher Reflective Journal**

Researcher reflective journals are important both from a product perspective, in that they provide a record of what has occurred, and from process point of view, as they allow the researcher to regularly reflect on the what, the why, and the where to next.

My reflective journal began as a vehicle for me to record a chronological account of classroom visits, discussions with teachers and students. Regular personal reflection on these events was critical to the development of the research intervention. Recordings were made digitally, and formed the basis of my Intervention chapter, which is largely a reflective chronology of the action research process undertaken.

### **3.2.5 Classroom Assessment Tools**

Two classroom assessment tools were utilised to enrich information collected through planned data gathering methods. The first were student self-assessment checklists, often used as part of normal reflective process at Waimahia School. The checklist descriptors originate from success criteria collaboratively developed by teacher and students during learning, and inform a list for students to reflect upon as they write, and again at the conclusion of the task.

The second assessment tool that proved useful was a Blog Assessment Rubric developed collaboratively with Jenny. Although its main purpose was to track the learning of the students in terms of blogging competency, it was also useful in identifying skills to be taught for subsequent lessons. This had a flow on effect for the foci of the research project.

### **3.3 Ethical Considerations**

#### **3.3.1 The Consent Process**

When planning to undertake the completion of this project as a Masters thesis, it was my strong desire to develop a project that would be of benefit not just to myself as a learner and researcher, but also to the wider education community. Because I would be abdicating my role as Deputy Principal for the best part of a year, I was very keen to be able to give back to my own school in particular, by conducting my research in my own work environment.

I first determined if it were ethically acceptable to conduct my research within my own school. On gaining confirmation, I approached my principal to elicit her support. I then 'sounded out' the teachers who may be interested in working on this project. My rationale for 'shoulder tapping' was based on the year level they were teaching, and the experience they had with literacy and ICT. Following their encouraging reactions, the formal consent process began.

Consent was requested and given by the Principal and teachers before the students were approached. (Appendices A and B) To ensure that students were well informed, I met them as a group and read through their consent letter, (Appendix C) answering any questions. I also went through the parent/guardian consent letter (Appendix D) with them and encouraged students to discuss their potential involvement in the project with their parents. Through the consent letters, students and parents/guardians were offered a time to meet with me if necessary, however no

one chose to do so. Three students who had been absent for the first meeting met with me later in the week and I followed the same process as I had done with the larger group. Consent was received from 22/23 students and their parents/guardians.

### **3.3.2 Confidentiality**

To ensure that both teacher and student participants were unable to be identified, pseudonyms were generated for all involved. Both the school name and class number have also been changed to ensure anonymity. While it is available in the public domain, the actual address of the class blog used as the vehicle for this intervention has not been included in this thesis. Where work samples from the blog have been included, pseudonyms have also been used to replace the names as they appear on the actual blog.

Any information gathered from student participants has not been shared beyond the teachers involved, and the school Principal. Participants were informed before consenting that data gathered would be used in my thesis report, and that this Masters thesis will be widely available via the Research Commons digital repository at the University of Waikato.

### **3.3.3 Potential Harm to Participants**

Although teachers were asked to collaboratively plan an intervention with me, this was not in addition to their current planning, but as part of it, to avoid any additional workload. With both writing and ICT targeted professional development foci at Waimahia School this year, this project was particularly relevant for the teachers.

Reflective practice was already a part of the culture of the school, therefore keeping a reflective journal was not seen as additional work for teachers or students. Where necessary I provided release for teachers to complete their reflections. Student participants were asked to comment

only on writing tasks not teaching style or personal feelings about their teachers, to protect the teachers and prevent comparisons.

As the project intervention formed part of the everyday writing programme, student learning was in no way compromised. Conversely, as was the intention of the intervention, it was enriched by the process.

As a member of the school's leadership team, it was essential that both teacher and student participants saw me as a researcher not as the Deputy Principal for the duration of this project. This was important to avoid any feelings of compulsion to be involved, or discomfort in wanting to withdraw. As it transpired, neither of these were issues.

## CHAPTER FOUR: EXPLORING AN AUTHENTIC PLATFORM

This chapter outlines the identification of the classroom blog as the authentic platform within the writing programme, that would investigate the areas of interest in a meaningful and effective way. To begin this process of identification, and to investigate the initial research questions, an analysis of students' current writing and ICT practices, both within and beyond the classroom was necessary. Data regarding student self-efficacy and writing was also collected. This initial data gathering occurred by way of student questionnaires and semi-structured focus group interviews. Once blogging was identified as the vehicle for the research project, an in-depth analysis of the classroom blog pre-intervention, was undertaken.

### 4.1 The Initial Questionnaires

The initial Student Questionnaires entitled *Finding Out About Home and School Writing/ICT Practices* (Appendix E) and *Finding Out About Attitude and Self Efficacy in Regard to Writing* (Appendix F) were created digitally using Google Forms, and were completed by students online. To ensure the forms operated as anticipated, to gauge the appropriateness of the questions, and to determine timing, the questionnaires were trialed with a small number of students (eight) from a parallel class. This resulted in minor adjustments to formatting. Data collected from these students was destroyed as it was not relevant to the research itself and was not part of the consent process.

Before the questionnaires were administered to consenting students from Room 21, students were familiarized with each questionnaire in small groups to ensure they were comfortable with the format and process, and that questions were clearly understood. Students completed the questionnaires without difficulty over a three-day period.

Student responses were directly recorded online, therefore collation of the data was able to be quickly and accurately digitally generated. Of the

findings that emerged from the questionnaires, the most relevant and interesting are reported on.

#### **4.1.1 Questionnaire One - *Finding Out About Home and School Writing/ICT Practices***

The data from Questionnaire One showed a variance between the kinds of writing students did at home and school. Differences were also noted in the ways and frequency in which students interacted with various digital technologies in these two settings.

First, the use of a desktop or laptop computer at home was very high, with just one student of the twenty-two not using one. Of the twenty-one students who did use a computer at home, twenty students did so at least once a week, with fifteen of these students making daily use of a computer. In terms of writing on a computer at home, nineteen students indicated that they wrote on a computer for homework. Whilst no one did this daily, thirteen students wrote using a computer for homework at least weekly. However, writing for fun on a computer at home did not appear as prevalent. For example, while fifteen of students said they wrote for fun on a computer at home, the frequency with which they did so was generally not high. Two students said they did so daily, thirteen students at least once a week and two students at least once a month. Eight of the students who said they wrote for fun on a computer at home answered that they did so *hardly ever*.

Students were also asked about their social networking usage at home. Sixteen students indicated that they wrote on social networking sites either daily or at least once a week. While interacting on social networking sites can involve a range of modes, for example, adding videos and pictures, a large amount of the communication on these sites was done with text. Similarly, fifteen students indicated that they used instant messaging daily or weekly. I noted that this was considerably higher than indications of 'writing for fun' on the computer at home, and considered two possible

reasons for this. The first was that the students did not regard this form of textual communication as 'writing.' The second was that either writing of this nature was done using personal devices, or that when they thought about writing on a computer, they were not thinking about when they used social networking for example.

When asked about school computer usage, all students questioned said they used computers at school. Most students (fifteen) stated their usage as at least once a week, with four students indicating daily use, and a further three students indicating that they used one only at least once a month. This contrasts with their home use, where the frequency of computer usage was considerably higher.

Students were also asked about their use of cellphones and other mobile devices such as tablets and iPods. It was not surprising that student use of mobile devices at schools was non-existent, as school policy dictated they be handed in before the commencement of the school day. Out of school however, the use of these devices was high. Twenty-one of the twenty-two students used a cellphone at home, eighteen at least weekly, and ten of these students were using their cellphones daily. Similarly seventeen students in the sample used an iPod touch or similar device, with ten students using one daily. Students indicated that texting was also something they did regularly; nineteen students sent text messages at home, with nine doing so daily and six at least weekly.

Data from the questionnaire also showed that cellphones were used by many students to capture and record still and moving images during their out-of-school lives (sixteen of the twenty-two). Conversely at school, the unavailability of these devices saw students using digital cameras for this purpose. Cameras were used infrequently at home, with those students who used them in this setting doing so *hardly ever*. At school the average frequency of digital camera usage was at least once a month.

The responses recorded regarding blogging suggested that students in the research sample were somewhat experienced with this practice. While the frequency of blogging was not high, it appeared that students regularly wrote on a blog, especially at school. All students said that they wrote on a blog at school, however most did so infrequently.

The apparent familiarity students had with blogging led in part to the decision to base the intervention around the classroom blog. However as will be discussed, consequent information indicated that a narrow view was held by students in terms of what blog writing entailed. The actual experience students had with blogging was significantly less than the initial questionnaire data suggested.

In summary, the students made use of a more diverse range of digital devices away from school. At school they were denied the use of devices that they most regularly used, such as iPods and cellphones. More specific information regarding their home and school ICT and writing practices emerged from the focus group semi-structured interviews.

#### **4.1.2 Questionnaire Two - *Finding Out About Attitude and Self Efficacy in Regard to Writing***

This questionnaire was designed to explore broad themes around how students viewed writing in terms of enjoyment, and how they saw themselves as writers, including their perceptions of their ability.

When asked about enjoyment of writing at school, the sample was spread. Over half of the students either enjoyed writing *quite a lot* (eight students), or *heaps* (four students). This was an encouraging starting point, as my perception had been that this figure might be lower. In discussing this with the class teachers, they felt that with the school being in its second year of targeted professional development in writing, students were beginning to feel that they were making progress in this curriculum area and therefore would be feeling better about taking part in writing activities.

Fewer students (five) indicated that they enjoyed writing at home, with seven students responding with *not a lot* and a further ten students liking writing at home only *a little*. In reference to previous comments regarding student perceptions of what constitutes writing at home, the assumption is made here that students are referring to writing in the traditional sense. Further to this, there were varied views on whether the kinds of writing done at home and school were different, with the majority finding *a little* difference. While it was not clear at this stage of the data gathering process, as the project progressed, this was another indication as the project progressed, that the students were thinking of school-defined writing when considering the writing they did at home.

It was heartening to find that none of the students considered themselves to be *bad* at writing; that said, none ranked themselves as *very good* either. The majority of the students (twelve) rated themselves as *good* at writing, with the remaining ten students considering themselves to be *OK* writers. Generally the students thought less of themselves as writers than what they regarded their teachers' and/or parents' perceptions of their writing abilities to be. Students were also reluctant to view themselves as being much better at writing than others in the class.

The questionnaire also invited responses in regard to student perception of writing tasks at school. Half of the sample indicated they only enjoyed the writing tasks at school *a little*. However eight students enjoyed them *quite a lot* and two students enjoyed them *heaps*. The majority of students acknowledged that the writing tasks they did at school made them better writers, although seven students felt they only made them *a little* better.

Students were also asked about how much they enjoyed writing on paper, and writing with digital technologies. While many students enjoyed writing on paper, (eleven *quite a lot* and five *heaps*) a much stronger enjoyment

for writing emerged when using digital technologies. Ten students enjoyed writing this way *heaps* and a further eleven students liked it *quite a lot*.

This information provided useful baseline data before moving forward into the focus group semi-structured interviews. It also provided me with reassurance that the questions I had created for the interviews were relevant.

## **4.2 The Initial Focus Group Semi-Structured Interviews**

As outlined in Chapter Three, to further investigate themes from the initial questionnaire and to assist with the development of the intervention, two randomly selected groups of five students were invited to take part in semi-structured interviews. The list of questions had been formulated for these interviews before the administration of the questionnaires, although as anticipated, the data from the questionnaires suggested some adaptations and/or additions to this initial set of questions. An example of this was asking students to reflect upon specific examples of the writing tasks that they had completed so far during the year. In addition, interesting information about blogging emerged from the questionnaire data, which I wanted to explore further with a view to utilising this in my intervention. I therefore also developed some questions around this topic (Appendix G).

### **4.2.1 Further Clarifying Home and School Practices**

Following the questionnaire, I was interested in the perceptions students held about the differences between writing they did at home and at school, especially in terms of it being harder or easier, more or less fun, or more or less important. This was in an attempt to gain further insight into what kind of writing was enjoyable for them.

Again the students' definition of writing was of interest. Student responses indicated that when talking about writing at home, they were either thinking about times they chose to write in the traditional sense of their own

volition, or of writing they needed to complete as part of homework tasks. There was no indication that they were thinking of writing using digital devices other than a computer, or writing they did for social networking on the computer, for example.

There was a strong sense that the writing at home was easier than the writing at school. Reasons for this included having no time restraints, an absence of teacher expectations and having the choice to write about whatever they wanted. For them, this made writing more fun:

*(At home) "You don't have the time limit, you've got all afternoon or all morning instead like at school you've got 30 minutes to do it or something like that."*

*Laura FG1*

*"When you're at home you're in a relaxing place like you can just sit there and think like there's no distractions."*

*Karly FG2*

*(At school) "It has to be to the teacher's standard because she'll have success criteria, but when you're doing it at home you don't have to do any of that stuff so it's a lot easier."*

*Jacob FG1*

One student had mentioned computer use as a reason for why writing was more enjoyable at home. Although the initial questionnaire had shown that all students used a computer at school quite regularly, this indicated that computer use for writing at school was not the norm; using a computer for writing was something students saw as a home opportunity.

Sam reflected that writing at home was enjoyable, but questioned its importance:

*"I reckon it's more fun at home, but is that really important?"*

*Sam FG2*

There was agreement from all students who spoke about the importance of writing, that the writing they did at school was more important. To them, the stakes were higher and they were accountable for it:

*"... at school I guess we're expected to do that but like in homework it is important, but it's not as important as the curriculum that we do at school."*

*"Yeah like the writing samples."*

*Thomas and Karly FG2*

*"I think that the one at school is more important than the one at home, cos the one in school, ... it has time limits, and it comes in your report, but the one at home doesn't."*

*Rosie FG1*

In a further investigation of the types of digital technologies used at home and school, and the various ways they were used, the differences were marked. A major theme was freedom, especially in terms of computer and internet use:

*"Well, at school, when you're using the computer, at school it's like..."*

*"Fifteen minutes each..."*

*"Yeah, you have a time limit, but when you're at home you can just go on the computer and just sit there and do whatever you want..."*

*“Yeah it’s like restrictions to the school rules, like at home you can just go on any random website as long as it’s up to your parents’ restrictions, but at school there’s different policies on what you use.”*

*Jacob and Jody, FG1*

*“(At School) If we’re going on the computer we’re either assigned to do stuff or we’re only allowed on certain websites like Superclubs and stuff, whereas when we’re at home some of us would be on Facebook or social networking sites and stuff like that.”*

*Karly FG2*

The students were then asked about any differences in the types of digital technologies they used at home and at school, and the ways in which they used them. Confirming questionnaire data, cellphones, iPods and iPads were regularly used at home, but not at school. As mentioned earlier, school policy meant personal devices such as cellphones and iPods had to be handed in at the school office during school time. The rationale for this is centered on safety and security, though the school’s ultimate goal is for such devices to be used as part of the classroom programme, and plans are in place to facilitate this.

Jacob found the whole business of having to hand his phone in at school quite amusing. He compared this policy to how this would look at home:

*“...it’s good that you can bring a mobile to school and then hand it in and then have it back, but like... at home you don’t have to do that, like as soon as you get home you don’t have to put it in a bag, and put it there for the day and then “Oh I’m going back out and get my phone”, it’s a lot easier.”*

*Jacob FG1*

All focus group students had their own personal device, and most used them daily, for more than just texting. They were often used for researching, gaming and capturing digital images.

*“You can use it for searching and stuff”*

*Jacob, FG1*

*“... the phones these days you can go on the Internet on them and stuff... You play games on them as well”*

*Karly FG2*

*“I take it with me if I need to take pictures or anything”*

*Danny FG2*

As these devices are not able to be used at school, students are forced to leave behind a diverse and well-practiced set of skills that have the potential to be used to their advantage in the classroom. However although restrictive, the students in the focus groups justified their perceived rationale behind the rules for not allowing these devices in the classroom. Jody summed up their views:

*“At school you don’t necessarily always get what you want, like you have to learn at school. If everyone had their phone out texting at school then you wouldn’t really be learning.”*

*Jody FG1*

This highlights an emerging view that would permeate this research; that the ways in which technologies are used outside the classroom are not seen as ‘schoolish,’ or as promoting learning, by the students. However Jody did suggest a compromise that could allow the use of personal devices in the classroom:

*“It would be easier if we had it next to us and stuff, but only like for school purposes. Instead of texting and stuff, like using Safari.”*

*Jody FG1*

Resulting from the questionnaires and interviews, important ideas emerged in terms of the possible research foci of this project. One was to incorporate more of students’ out-of-school digital practices, which they clearly enjoyed, into school writing tasks, in an attempt to create a greater synergy between the two. Designing tasks that encouraged interactivity through better use of the computers at school during writing time appeared to be a logical first step. However the consideration of personal devices, and the lack of availability of these at school, meant the use of them was not an option.

#### **4.2.2 Enjoyment of Writing Tasks**

It was important to glean more information regarding the enjoyment of writing tasks specifically. This was because the purpose of the proposed intervention was largely focused on designing tasks to enhance both enjoyment and student self-efficacy, especially regarding how they felt about the writing they created as part of that task.

In a pre-intervention discussion with teachers, some of the writing tasks students had already completed during the year were identified and used as examples when facilitating discussions with the focus groups. Two favourite tasks that emerged were regular warm-up writing activities. The first of these was Rocket Writing, which Jenny explains below:

*“The rationale behind Rocket Writing is a quick warm up to get kids in the writing frame of mind. It’s quick so that they don’t really have time to over-think things and they are focused on the ideas rather than surface features.”*

Rocket involves students being given a topic or picture as motivation, and having three minutes to generate and record their ideas. Most produce a short paragraph in their writing books. Students are then invited to share their writing with the class, with students voting for the piece they consider the best. The 'winner' may then choose to publish their Rocket Writing on the class blog.

One of the reasons this task was enjoyed by students was because a broad topic allowed them the freedom to choose what to write, which in turn made them feel they could be more imaginative, original and creative.

*"... you can write whatever you want ... you don't have to write what anybody else wants to happen next so you all have different opinions."*

*Jacob FG1*

Interestingly, the invitation to have their work published on the blog if they 'won' did not arise as a reason for enjoying this writing task. It can therefore be assumed that the lure of a digital experience did not affect their enjoyment of this task.

The second warm-up task that students identified as enjoyable was 'Aniboom' writing. This task is so named for the derivation of some of the clips used for this task. Students would watch a teacher-selected animated clip which was stopped part way through. They then wrote for a short time, predicting what was going to happen next. Following this, the rest of the clip was viewed. The opportunity to be imaginative was one of the reasons they enjoyed this task:

*"...it kind of like gives you an idea, but then you kind of get to express what you're feeling. Like ... do your topics and stuff like*

*that, what you think's gonna happen so you can use your imagination as well."*

*Karly FG2*

This task had the added draw-cards of the visual and the digital. Having the combination of the two appeared to assist in the development of students' ideas, by creating a clear picture in their heads:

*"It's more enjoying (sic) when you watch something on YouTube and then you have to write about it. It's just better than a teacher talking about it. I think it's just because you know, we're kids and we like going on the Internet and stuff."*

*Jody FG1*

*"... if you're actually watching the video you kind of get the picture in your head whereas in a book it might have like the small pictures but it kind of doesn't give you enough information about it whereas if you watched the movie you've got a clear picture in your head."*

*Karly FG2*

With both of these warm-up tasks, the opportunity to share was relished by many, as Jacob stated:

*"I feel more enjoyment in writing now that we've started the Rocket Writing and the Aniboom stuff because you share your ideas instead of just writing them in a book and then leaving them there."*

*Jacob FG1*

Another writing task that many students had enjoyed was designing their own 'App.' This was a paper-based task, which was appreciated mainly because of the relevance the topic had to student interests. Along with this was the inclusion of a visual design aspect in the task. The combination of these two modes on paper made the task more enjoyable than just writing

alone. The 'App Designs' were published and displayed in the classroom. Given that students enjoyed opportunities to share their writing, I wondered if the fact it was not confined to their draft writing books also affected how students viewed this writing.

Considering my own previous experience of the writing opportunities students typically enjoy, it was not surprising that many students spoke of really enjoying opportunities to free write. Free-writing appeared to appeal for its lack of structure and expectation, along with the obvious freedom to choose:

*"... because that's when we really get to choose what we wanna write."*

*"Yeah it's a bit like home."*

*"Yeah it's just a time for us to use our imagination and write what we wanna write about instead of having been assigned something."*

*Karly and Sam FG2*

Although two students said they sometimes enjoyed tasks designed around a particular purpose such as explaining or persuading, most students cited these tasks as the ones they did not enjoy. Having to write to a particular purpose was restrictive for some students. Others found it difficult to know what to write in a more structured task.

A recently assigned writing task was to write a persuasive speech. Despite being able to write this at home, which was emerging as a preference for school-based tasks, this was a task that was generally not being relished by the focus group interviewees. Often this was because they found it difficult to write on an assigned topic, or for a given purpose.

*"I don't like it because I don't know what to do. For persuading. I don't know what topic to do.... I know how to do it I just don't know what topic to choose."*

*Emma FG2*

It was interesting that Emma found it difficult to choose a topic and generate ideas for a task with a given purpose such as speech writing, but had no problem getting started when it came to free writing. She had earlier said she enjoyed the creative side of writing, such as poetry and other writing forms with a descriptive purpose, and chose to write poems at home. When given the choice to free write at school, she simply chose a different purpose, and that made selecting a topic easier for her. This theme of wanting more choice over what they were writing came through in many student interviewees' responses, although not always in direct response to a particular question.

It had been my prediction that students would suggest writing with digital technologies as a positive influence on enjoyment in writing. However it transpired that there was little writing on the computer occurring at school, and therefore students were perhaps not considering it an option. In referring to improving the homework task of speech-writing, Jacob suggested writing it on the computer.

*Using a computer (would make it more enjoyable) because you're typing and it's easy and it doesn't take as long and your hands don't get sore just typing away on the computer.*

*Jacob FG1*

Interestingly, when I asked the teachers if students were allowed to write their speeches directly onto the computer, they said it had not been discussed. It may be that Jacob just presumed he could not word-process his speech because it was a school task, even though he was completing it at home. That said, many of the speeches were delivered from cue

cards which had been word processed. As would emerge later on, much of the 'writing' students did on the computer at school was the publication of handwritten drafts. This suggests that perhaps the habit of publishing school tasks on the computer may have carried over from school to home.

#### **4.2.3 Gauging Success**

When the focus group students were asked about how successful they felt at the completion of a writing task, there was a degree of uncertainty as to how to gauge how successful they were. Some students commented on teacher reactions to their writing to ascertain their degree of success, although there was a feeling that teacher comments in their books did not always help them:

*"... if you get a positive comment from the teacher after you get yours hand(ed) back and then she says, "Oh yeah, this was nice", and then you're like that's cool."*

*Thomas FG2*

*"They sometimes write a comment at the bottom"*

*"Yeah, like if you hand in your writing then you will most probably get a comment if they've got the chance to look at it, otherwise you're just a little bit shaky around it"*

*"Otherwise it's just like a 'well done' or something"*

*Jody and Laura FG1*

Many students interviewed were guided by their own intuitive feelings to determine success, and appeared to feel more successful when they were in control of their ideas:

*“... sometimes you get a feeling like it’s good and then you’re like yeah, I think that’s pretty good*

*Thomas FG2*

*”Sometimes when you get a good idea you know that it will be good, like if you get a good idea and put it in, then you feel more confident about it.”*

*“Yeah if you’ve got an idea that relates to you in some way.”*

*Jody and Laura FG1*

*“... the person you’re trying to please is yourself, like you want to make yourself feel proud of your own work and stuff.”*

*Karly FG2*

As discussed earlier, sharing and getting reactions from peers was welcomed and appreciated by the students. If they intuitively felt they had done well, they enjoyed sharing in each others’ writing. Often this helped them to gauge how successful they had been:

*“... if I’ve got something in my writing that I really like, then I will share it”*

*Laura FG1*

*“If we share ... with like our friends like in a little group and they’re like, wow that was amazing and stuff, that makes you feel pretty good.”*

*Karly FG2*

It was evident from student comments that both feedback and feedforward were important to them. This was in terms of feeling good about the writing they had completed, feeling positive about moving forward into the next

task, and making them a better writer. This is reflected in the following discussion by Focus Group Two students:

*“I like it (feedback) because then you know what to do next time, how to make it better.”*

*“Yeah like you can add on and add on.”*

*“... and hopefully get better next time if you get like feedforward and stuff.”*

*“...I don't really like getting like really good writing (comments) because I always want the people to tell me what I could do better next time. So if you've got really good writing, you've got nothing bad to say about it, so you don't really know where to go.”*

*“Yeah it's OK if they tell you it's good, but you want something that's not good so you know what to do next time.”*

*Emma and Sam FG2*

#### **4.2.4 Pre-Intervention Blog Writing and Perceptions**

The final area further explored with the focus groups was student perceptions of blogging. This was to confirm the appropriateness of blog writing as a focus for the ensuing intervention, and to gather more baseline data around the students' current blogging behaviours.

When asked about the purpose of a blog, particularly their class blog, student responses indicated that they had a developing understanding of the interactive potential of a blog, though their concept of audience appeared to be limited to those close to them:

*"I think (people write on a blog) to interact with people"*

*Sam FG2*

*"...if you share something with your class and you want to share it with other people you can put it on the blog so other classes can see it"*

*Emma FG2*

*"Sharing with family, cos like you can't always show them what you're doing"*

*Jody FG1*

As mentioned previously however, the information from the initial questionnaire regarding blog use at home proved to be somewhat of a red herring. Rather than engage in the writing of actual blog posts at home, it transpired that if students logged into the blog, it was primarily to read others' posts, as opposed to create a post of their own. The few who did 'write' on a blog at home were generally adding the occasional comment to fellow students' posts.

*"I have a look at people's pictures not just in our room but in other rooms, and you just comment on it."*

*Sam FG2*

As will be outlined further on, the extent of the students' blogging at school was basically restricted to publishing previously hand-drafted writing. One student, Rosie, had created a blog for the sharing of a Science Fair project (with teacher guidance and encouragement), but had not carried this individual blogging on beyond that purpose. The students in both focus groups were aware of one classmate who had her own blog, and some had visited it, but their collective experience with blogging was generally

restricted to their own class blog, and the other class blogs of Waimahia School.

### **4.3 Blogging as the Driving Force**

It has been previously discussed that the purpose of gathering this initial data was primarily to identify an aspect of the classroom programme to provide an authentic platform for an action research intervention, which would ultimately assist with answering the project's research questions. Data from the questionnaires and focus group interviews had provided some insight into the home and school writing and ICT practices of this group of students. Interest now turned to investigating whether the inclusion of ICT in a writing task would enhance the students' enjoyment and self-efficacy in regard to writing.

Selecting blog writing as the writing task was appropriate for a number of reasons. In wanting to investigate the impact of the inclusion of digital technologies into writing tasks, increased computer use for writing appeared to be a logical starting point. Although students used computers regularly in both their home and school lives, and enjoyed doing so, there was currently little opportunity at school for students to compose directly onto the computer. Also, while it was not at this stage possible to include the use of the personal devices regularly used by students in their out-of-school lives, blogging provided an authentic platform to incorporate some of the modalities that students used on these devices, such as audio, video and photographs, into their writing.

Other reasons for selecting blog writing addressed aspects of what students had suggested may impact positively on their self-efficacy. The first of these was the potential for feedback. Blogging could reach a wider audience, potentially worldwide. The comment feature on a blog also provided an authentic way for students to both receive and give feedback.

Finally writing on topics of personal appeal and passion is at the heart of authentic blog writing. Because these students had identified free writing and making their own choices as central to their enjoyment of writing, blogging therefore seemed to provide the perfect platform to positively exploit this.

On reflection, what I had not anticipated was the variance in my interpretation of the initial data in regard to the students experience with blogging, and what that translated into, in practice. However this actually turned out to be in our favour. As will be examined in the narrative chapter which outlines the actual intervention, the new learning itself in terms of to blogging and the associated ICT skills, also enhanced the students' writing enjoyment and self-efficacy. In the next section, I therefore turn to consider the classroom blog.

#### **4.3.1 The Classroom Blog Pre-Intervention**

Room 21's class blog was established at the beginning of the school year. The purpose for it was initially as a communication tool between home and school. This was to replace three-weekly paper "class newsletters" that previously had celebrated learning and events which occurred within the class. Transferring this communication to a digital environment was appropriate because of the learning for both teachers and students as part of Waimahia School's involvement in the ICT contract. In a pre-intervention discussion, the teachers identified sharing with parents exciting things the class was doing at school, publishing on a bigger wall and developing a portfolio of student work as the purposes for their class blog.

The locus of control for the blog was firmly placed with the teacher. This was largely because blogging was new to most students, who would need to be lead through the purpose and process in order to write on the blog independently. This was also a contributing factor to the decision not to establish individual student blogs at this stage of the school's blogging

journey. It was also decided at a whole school level that student posts were not to be directly published to the blog, but rather would be saved for the classroom teacher to check as the final 'editor' before going live. The rationale for this was to prevent inappropriate posts and those lacking accuracy from being published.

In Room 21 the blog was established and designed by Jenny as she had considerable experience with blogging both in the school setting and personally. As illustrated in Figure 4.1 below, the blog featured a Homepage and six other tabs - Our Website, Our Teachers, Homework, Photo A Day, Timetable and Events and Learning Links. For the purposes of this intervention the Home page, where student posts were recorded, was the page of focus.



**Fig 4.1 Class Blog Header**

Despite the teachers' best intentions, and at their own admission, the number and quality of entries on the blog at the time the intervention began had not met their initial expectations and intentions. This is particularly true of Jenny's ultimate goals. In a pre-intervention discussion the teachers identified some barriers to the development of the blog, including the challenge of having two teachers in the classroom in terms of classroom management and time constraints.

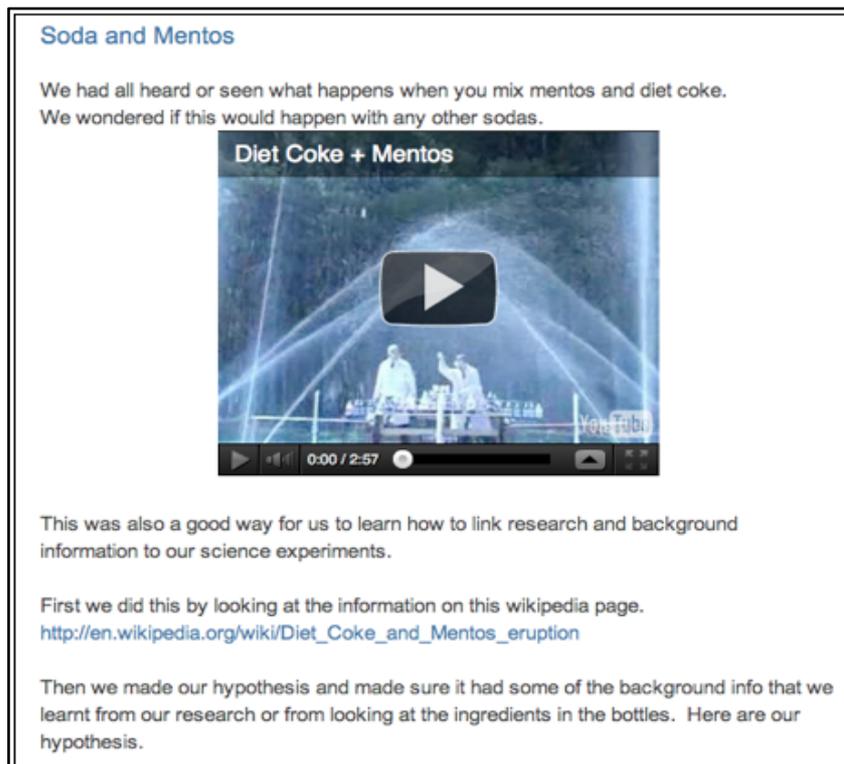
When asked how they would ideally like to see blogging operate in the classroom, aspirations were higher than what was currently being realised. Jenny wanted the students to be self motivated, and to want to use the blog from both school and at home. She wondered if students thought they

were not allowed to write on the blog at home, despite being shown how to login in for this purpose, and being given some homework tasks that would encourage this. While she would have liked students to create individual blogs, their current skill levels combined with security restrictions and logistics within the school ICT infrastructure meant this was not yet a viable option.

To mitigate this last point to some extent, a tagging system was established for the class blog whereby a post written by a particular student, or relating to a student, was tagged with their name and appeared on the right hand side of the main blog page. This also allowed the teacher to see who was blogging, and who had not been featured on the blog.

Prior to the intervention beginning, the class blog contained 62 posts, created by both Jenny and individual students. Of these posts, 28 were created by Jenny, and 24 by students. Many of the teacher-created posts were largely fulfilling the school objective of sharing learning and experiences/activities from the class programme with families; the posts appeared to have been written with this audience in mind.

An example of this was a post explaining a science activity that students had been involved in (Figure 4.2). The teacher chronicled the event, including uploading a clip and a link that was used as part of the teaching, and digital photographs of students displaying their hypotheses. A video of the actual experiment also featured. The post was rounded off with teacher-recorded reflective comments from students about the outcome of the experiments.



**Fig 4.2 Teacher Created Blog Post 1**

The posts Jenny created were excellent examples of how to use the ‘blog genre’ to meet the current purpose of the blog. Along with this, the elements Jenny included in her posts provided inspiring models for students to replicate. Utilising a quality blog post as a model to assist students to with developing their blog writing skills was a teaching approach we were keen to incorporate in our impending intervention.

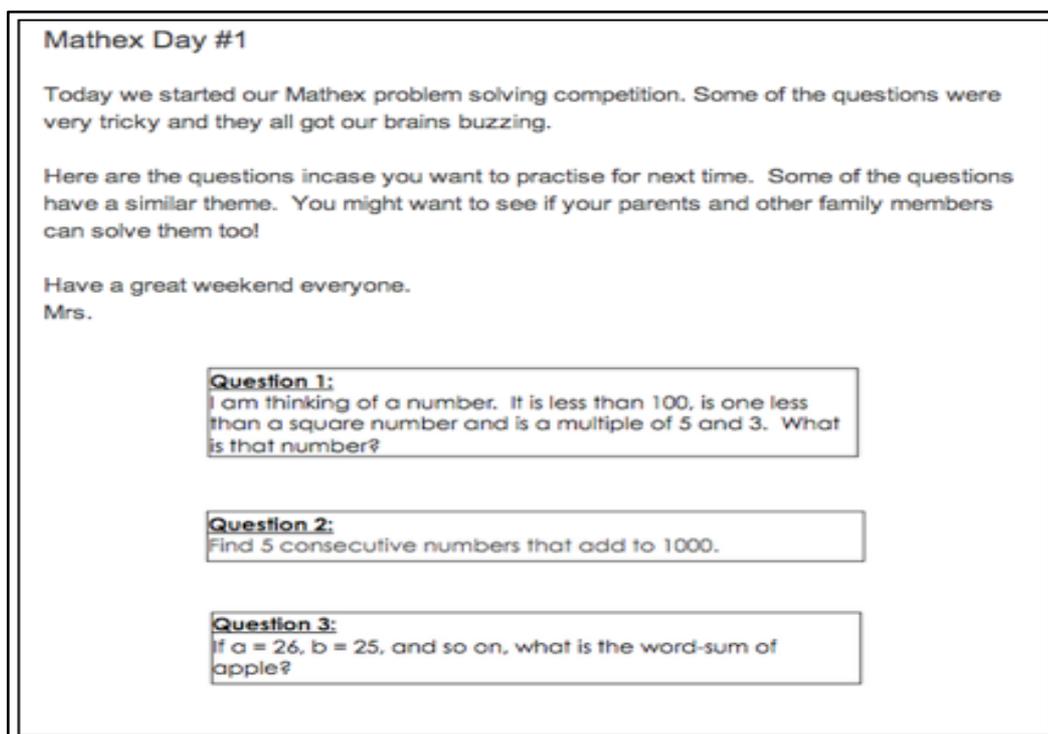
The above post was referred when Jody discussed their class blog:

*“... it’s usually just the teacher putting on pictures and just writing about them, like we did this soda and mentos and took photos and that and she put them on the blog and put a little bit about it. (I think she did it) to make our class look more interesting and not boring. I think she just did it at home in her spare time”*

*Jody FG1*

This was an interesting comment as it suggested that perhaps this was an enjoyable activity which some would choose to do at home.

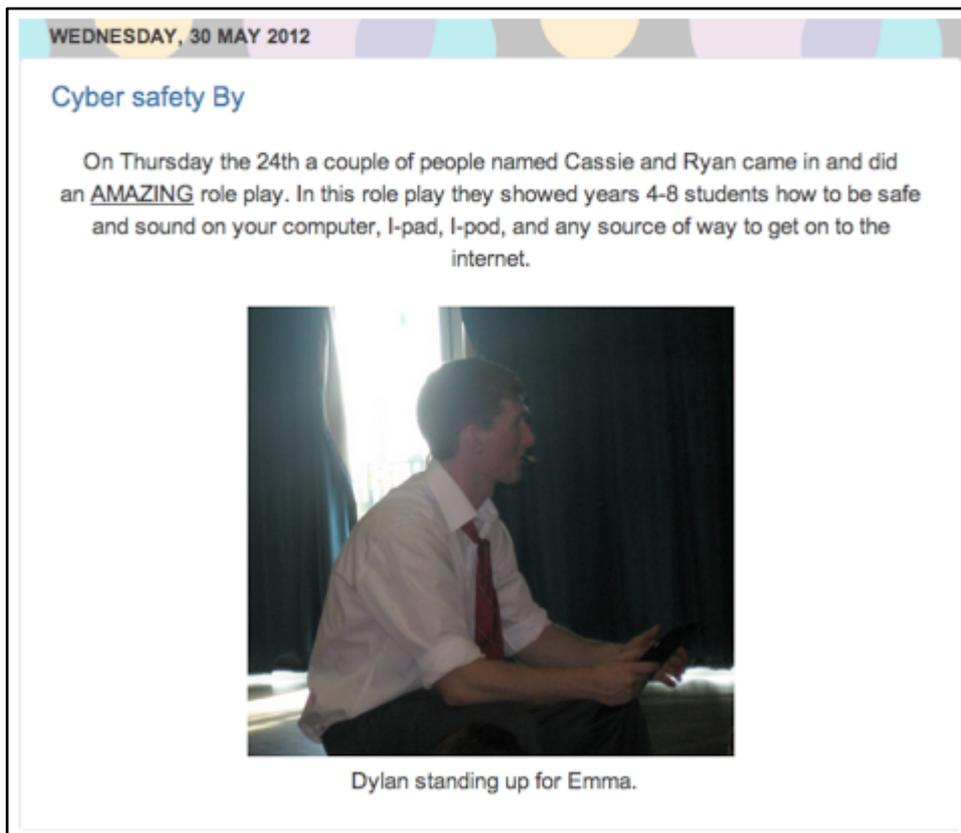
Other teacher posts were related to the classroom learning programme, intended to provide a reference point and further learning for students, and share their learning with families, as illustrated in Figure 4.3 below. They were also designed to encourage students to log into the blog from home.



**Fig 4.3 Teacher Created Blog Post 2**

Of the student-created posts, most were published student writing. Both the teachers and students concurred no writing had been composed directly onto the blog; all posts had been previously drafted in writing books, except for one shared writing piece which was drafted in Google Docs. This reinforced the idea that the blog was designed to feature work already done within the classroom programme as opposed to blog writing being a writing task in itself.

A couple of student entries recorded class events written by students in writing books and later published onto the blog. In these instances photos had also been included to help tell the story, such as in this post written and published by Laura the top section of which follows (Figure 4.4):



**Fig 4.4 Student Created Blog Post**

In explaining her post, Laura said:

*“(The teacher) asked me to take pictures of it and write about it... during writing time.”*

This validates a blog post as a genuine form of writing, although at this stage the student’s post was still teacher directed, and being drafted by hand and then digitally published.

Whilst a couple of ‘free writing’ pieces had been published onto the blog, the vast majority of student writing was published examples of ‘rocket writing,’ the purpose of which was outlined earlier. As there was a competitive aspect to rocket writing, the ‘winner’ for the day was encouraged to publish their piece on the blog.

Of the 34 student entries, the publication of rocket writing dominated (24 entries). Not only was rocket writing over represented in terms of the type of student entry, but student authors were also not widely represented. During the first two terms over half of the students had made only one or no individual blog posts at all.

Of the students who had made multiple entries, most of them were because they had published more than one piece of rocket writing, indicating that they had 'won' this competition several times. That four students' names did not appear on a post was somewhat surprising, since all respondents in the initial questionnaire indicated that they wrote on a blog at school. However, in the first school term, Jenny had formally taught the students how to make a blog comment, focusing particularly on the appropriate content and structure of a quality comment. From this I surmised that these students may have written comments on others' posts, thus having considered themselves to have written on the blog.

It was not possible to compile accurate data on who had or had not left comments on other people's work, as students were encouraged to not only comment on their own classmates' posts, but also on the posts from other classroom blogs. Further, although students were encouraged to sign their name to a comment, this was not always done, meaning the comment came up as being posted by their classroom as opposed to an individual, or if they had left a comment from home, often the user appeared as 'anonymous' unless the commenter had a personal google account.

Commenting was one kind of 'school' writing that some students did do at home:

*...on the blogs at school we're like just going on and having a look ... or posting our stuff, whereas at home we're commenting"*

*Karly FG2*

63 comments had been left on the class blog. Without exception, all comments were made by people known to the class and/or students. The majority of comments were left by Room 21 students themselves, commenting on their peers' or teachers' entries, while a sole family member had left three comments on the blog. Comments had been made on thirty-five individual entries, leaving twenty-eight without comment. Of those with comments left, the majority had only one comment. These comments were generally positive platitudes such as "Cool writing" or "That was fun". On only two occasions were conversations about the post or topic continued through the comments. Most comments had been made when the blog was first established in term one, dwindling off as the year had progressed.

This information, together with the data collected from the questionnaires and focus group interviews, provided an excellent platform planning an intervention to explore the impact of the inclusion of ICTs in the design of classroom writing tasks, on student enjoyment and self-efficacy.

## **CHAPTER 5: THE INTERVENTION**

This chapter outlines an intervention designed and used to explore writing tasks with a group of Year 7 and 8 students. Specifically the intervention sought to explore the relationships between student engagement and the incorporation of digital technologies in task design. It also explored the kind of writing tasks that appeared to contribute positively to self-efficacy and enjoyment in respect to writing. To investigate these relationships, the students' class blog was utilised. The chapter presents a chronological 'story' in narrative style, tracking the planning, action and reflection cycles of three blog writing tasks. In addition to describing and reflecting on the blog writing tasks, this chapter also explores the impact of the blog commenting feature on student self-efficacy.

To illustrate the effects the intervention had on student blogging practices, the class blog post intervention is then described. The chapter concludes with a cameo of one student's journey during the intervention, which highlights emerging themes from the project.

While major conclusions are discussed in Chapter Six, as with the previous chapter, research findings are also explored and discussed throughout this chapter.

### **5.1 Cycle One - Travel Blog Post**

#### **5.1.1 Planning**

Although information from the initial questionnaires suggested that all students had some experience with blogging, they were not particularly aware of its purposes and potential. The students did not appear to see the writing they currently did on the blog at school as an enjoyable activity, despite claiming to enjoy using digital technologies at home. Although blogging was using ICT by way of the computer at school, it appeared that simply engaging with a task on the computer did not necessarily make it enjoyable. Primarily, much of the writing done on the computer was

publishing previously drafted writing. At this early stage I wondered if this was considered a mundane task. Planning a writing task that utilised the computer for composing at writing time was a way to test this theory.

Blogging is an activity that has the potential to incorporate many activities students choose to do with digital technologies outside of school, such as using the internet, and capturing still and moving digital images. Our planned blog writing task would allow for these activities to be authentically utilised. The potential for students to use the blog platform to write about topics of their choice and things that mattered to them, was also an important consideration in our planning.

Before the intervention, students did not consider that blog writing could necessarily make them better writers:

*“Not like wow, way up there, but maybe kind of for socializing writing or something.”*

*Jody FG1*

*“I think in some ways it will, but some ways it won’t cos like it’s got spell proof so you’re not really practising on your spelling... but it does help in some ways because you can type faster and your arms don’t get sore from using your pencil.”*

*Karly FG2*

Such comments indicated that students held a narrow view of blogging, Therefore Jenny (the class teacher) and I saw the need to first plan a lesson that would expand student perceptions of blogging before they began to write posts of their own. Information from focus group students suggested that besides their own class blog, students visited only those from other classrooms within Waimahia School. This meant that their point of reference was restricted to blogs that had been established for similar purposes, and explained in part why the students were limited in their

understandings of the potential of blogging. The first step in the action plan therefore, was to broaden students' experiences.

### **5.1.2 Action**

To begin to expand their blogging knowledge, a homework task was designed, requiring students to visit individual blogs of students of the same age from 'Mana' School. Mana School is within our region, and has a well earned reputation for developing authentic student blogging practices. By viewing and reading blogs written by peers outside of their own school, it was hoped the students would begin to extend their notions of blogging.

Specifically this homework task asked students identify certain blog elements and traits. Exposing the students to exemplar blogging would encourage them to see what an effective student blog post looked like. Using the information from the homework task together with close examination of a specific exemplar student blog post, Jenny and the students co-constructed a set of success criteria for a successful blog post which was designed to lead the learning for the second lesson, which was to write their own blog post.

While I observed an engaged tone in the classroom during this introductory lesson, it appeared that the students did not fully realise the potential of a blog, or how it could contribute to being an enjoyable writing task. It remained to be seen if the actual blog writing task subsequently planned would be more enthusiastically received.

With the purpose for blog writing being wide and varied, It was decided to give students choice over purpose for their blog post, within a general topic. Students had just returned from a two week holiday period, therefore the topic decided upon for the task was a Travel Blog Post. Rather than be restricted to places visited during their recent break, students were invited to select any destination. As shown in Figure 5.1 below, teaching points

focused mainly on the actual 'blog genre,' using the points identified and recorded during the previous lesson.

**WALT: craft a successful blog post.**

**Task: Write a travel blog post about somewhere you have been.**  
*This could be in the recent holidays or a previous holidays, on the weekend or a another special time you remember.*

**Purpose: You decide!**  
*You could be entertaining your audience by retelling what you have done, you could be encouraging people to go there in future.*

**To be successful I will make sure I...**

- create engaging content that my audience will like reading.
- fulfill the purpose of my writing.
- put links in my post to lead my audience to further learning.
- Think about my layout and font and make sure this is clear and pleasing to my audience.
- be courteous to my audience by checking spelling, grammar and laying out the post in a pleasing manner.
- Include some multimedia in my post.
- tag my post with my name.

**Remember that whatever multimedia you decided to include in your post must be relevant to your topic.**

**Fig 5.1 Task Outline and Success Criteria - Travel Blog Post**

In contrast to the introductory lesson, an excited tone was evident as task was introduced. Comments made during the lesson and as students began the task centered on two aspects that made it attractive to them. The first was the 'novelty factor' of being able to write directly onto the computer, as opposed to having to draft in their books. Several students referred to this as being new and exciting:

*"... because we have not done a writing task straight onto the laptop, we usually draft then publish in our books... it's a new experience"*

*Jody*

*“I’m excited because I’ve never really written straight on to the blog before, or on to a computer before.”*

*Summer*

Knowing that students (including Summer) used computers regularly at home, I wondered if writing directly onto the computer was more of a ‘new-to-school’ experience as opposed to something Summer had never done before. This is another early example of the differentiation students themselves made between the writing they did for home and writing for school purposes.

Being given choice was another reason that students gave for being excited about the task. The topic was broad enough to enable them to choose something that was, as one student said, their own experience. Being able to select their own purpose for writing as opposed to having to write to a specific one as had been the case with many writing tasks previously completed, was also appreciated.

Following on from this lesson, Jenny conducted a series of opt-in mini lessons over the ensuing days, based on some of the multimedia skills required to meet the success criteria. These included aspects such as adding a link, inserting media such as an image or movie and tagging their name. While these may appear relatively simple tasks in terms of Web 2.0 usage, they were clearly not within the existing realms of experience of these supposed ‘digital natives’ (Prensky, 2001) and therefore required explicit teaching.

Students were allowed a generous time frame of two and a half weeks to complete their first post. To assist with completion of the task, in-school computer access for this task was not restricted to writing time. Further, students were encouraged to work on writing their post at home, however they did not appear self-motivated to do so. The few students who did log

in at home did so to upload the pictures from home computers or other devices.

To complete their blog post, several students needed reminding and extra time. This was surprising as I had presumed their initial excitement would flow onto their wanting to quickly complete a successful blog post. I had even predicted it would be something they would want to engage in away from the classroom. This seemed not to be the case. Instead it appeared that as a school task, and therefore as school writing, it was not 'fun writing.'

However all students eventually published a Travel Blog Post and as with any writing task, posts were varied in terms of quality and quantity. As will be discussed further, rich information was gathered to reflect and act upon when planning the subsequent blog post.

### **5.1.3 Encouraging Quality Comments**

As outlined earlier, a theme that emerged from focus group interviews in terms of self-efficacy, was the importance of feedback. If blogging is viewed as a social and community act rather than an individual one, feedback by way of commenting becomes an integral part of the process. To encourage students (and others) to comment on posts was therefore an important part of the intervention.

As bloggers ourselves, Jenny and I discussed the positive feeling a comment evokes. Comment 'feedback' is rewarding and motivating for us, and frequently results in us posting a reply comment, which in turn often grows the conversation around the blog post. However information from the focus groups suggested that students seldom revisited their own posts to see whether a comment had been made. Some students were not even aware comments had been left on their posts. This left an opportunity for students to receive feedback on their writing wide open. Encouraging

students to revisit their posts and therefore receive this feedback, became a critical focus of this intervention.

One of the challenges of the students writing for this class blog, as opposed to their own individual one, is that comment notifications were received by the teacher/moderator, not directly by the blog post author. Therefore unless they specifically revisited their own posts, students were generally unaware that a comment had been left. This was an area that Jenny resolved by creating a spot on the class whiteboard where names of students who had received comment notifications were recorded. Once they had read their comment and responded if necessary, students erased their name.

The conversational style of commenting can be related to some of the writing students do in their out-of-school lives. Texting and instant messaging are examples of digital conversations that bear some semblance. I wondered if the similarity between commenting and these practices that students often engaged in by choice outside the classroom was highlighted, that this would enhance their enjoyment of this aspect of blogging.

In addition we wanted students to generate quality comments that would encourage a conversation related to the blog post, as opposed to responders leaving a simple platitude as shown by some previously written comments on the class blog. This was despite Jenny having taken a lesson on commenting earlier in the year. Therefore another specific lesson was planned around this. Figure 5.2 outlines the success criteria of this lesson.

# WALT: write a successful blog comment.

**Task: Find a blog post you like and comment on it!**

*This could be our blog or one from our school. When we did this in class we looked at XXXXX and XXXXX School blogs. If you google these schools you should be able to find their blogs.*

**Purpose: to try and get people to visit our blog and to continue a conversation with someone about their blog post.**

**To be successful I will make sure I...**

*I use a greeting in my comments.*

*I say something that I like or agree with in their post.*

**OR**

*I relate to topic of the post to a similar situation I have had.*

*I ask a question of my audience to invite a response.*

*I invite the audience to come and read a post of my own.*

*I finish a comment by signing my name.*

**Fig 5.2 Blog Comment Success Criteria**

As the following example (Figure 5.3) illustrates, students made sincere attempts to facilitate conversation, and to encourage outside visitors to their own class blog. It was unfortunate that evidence of either of these things actually occurring was not immediately forthcoming.



**Fig 5.3 Student Blog Comment Example**

To further reinforce the potential and value of comments, a commenting homework task (Figure 5.4) was set to coincide with the completion of the students' own Travel Blog Posts. This activity was designed to enhance students' self-efficacy about their blog writing through the feedback they received. It was also hoped that comment conversations would occur, encouraging the sense of community we were trying to create. We also thought exposure to variety of blog posts written by peers could assist students to develop further ideas of their own to write about for future posts.

**Blogging Feedback - Commenting on our Travel Blog Posts**

Draw a classmate's name from the hat - this is the person whose Travel Blog Post you will be commenting on.  
<http://xxxxx2012.blogspot.co.nz/>  
 Room 13 blog password: xxxxx  
 Log on to the class blog at home.  
 If you do not have internet access at home, arrange a time with your teacher at school to do this part of your homework.

Remembering what Mrs xxxx taught you about commenting, make a well considered comment on your chosen person's post.

If you would like to comment on other classmate's posts, please do! There is no limit to the number of comments you can make. Just be sure to identify yourself in your comment.

Towards the end of the week, visit your OWN Travel Blog Post to see if there are comments there. Make a follow up comment on your own blog post.



**Fig 5.4 Blog Comment Homework Task**

Again I was a little surprised at the encouragement and extra time it took for the students to complete this set homework task. Making the first comment was critical as the second part of the task required students to revisit their original posts and reply to the comment left. However the slow uptake on the completion of this task again challenged my presumption which assumed that because it was digitally based, that students would be eager to complete it. Instead, it seemed to reinforce the now emerging notion that writing, even digitally oriented, prescribed by a teacher would not necessarily equate to a chosen fun activity at home, no matter how enjoyable it was in the school setting, or its resemblance to home writing practices.

#### **5.1.4 Reflection**

Student reflections were critical to the development of this intervention. As explained in Chapter Three, a prompt sheet (Appendix H) was provided to assist students with this process. Reflecting included ranking the task for enjoyment, and for how they felt about the writing they had produced for the task. The first ranking indicated task enjoyment, and the second gave an insight into their self-efficacy regarding the task.

Pleasingly, this first task was very well received by the vast majority of the students. In rating their enjoyment of this task, five of the students *liked* it, ten *liked it a lot*, and six *loved* it. Equally as heartening was that students also felt positive about the writing they produced as a result of the task, with nine of them being *quite proud* of their efforts, and another six being *super proud*.

Two clear reasons for it being an enjoyable task emerged. Eighteen of the twenty-one students present for the reflection mentioned the digital aspect of the task as a reason for enjoying it:

*“We got to type it up straight on to the blog instead of writing in a book and then publishing, so it was a lot more fun.”*

*Chris*

*“Got to use images and links.”*

*Charlie*

*“We got to use computers which I love using... I liked the red line for the spelling mistakes.”*

*Chelsea*

The second reason consistently given for enjoying the task was the element of choice it afforded the students. This was highlighted by half of the students. In response to being asked how the task could be improved, there was a resounding request for even more choice regarding topic and purpose. While students had appreciated being able to select their own topic within the travel blog theme, they were asking for even more ownership of topic selection.

*“To choose the subject to do it on.”*

*George*

*“If we got to choose entirely what we were writing for.”*

*Thomas*

Ultimately as teachers, this is what Jenny and I wanted too, and blogging provided the perfect platform for this to occur.

As is common practice at Waimahia School, students often reflect upon and self-assess their own learning by revisiting the success criteria established for a lesson. Walker (2003) considers self evaluation to be an essential factor in facilitating self-efficacy. The development of self assessment checklists is one way to help students attribute their success to particular strategies they have successfully used. Walker suggests that when used in writing, such self evaluation tools can improve both composing skills and the way in which students approach a task. Self-efficacy is also improved, as student perceptions of their own writing

competence is specifically related to task requirements. Jenny and I chose to use the self assessment checklist method for self evaluation of the blog posts (Figure 5.5 below). Reflecting on their learning in this way was not a new experience for students in this sample.

<b>Travel Blog Post Self Assessment</b>			
Name: xxxxxx			
My purpose was <i>to persuade</i>			
The place I wrote about was <i>Coromandel</i>			
I created engaging content that my audience would like reading.	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I fulfilled the purpose of my writing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I put links in my post to lead my audience to further learning	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I thought about my layout and font and made sure this was clear and pleasing to my audience.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I checked spelling and grammar	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I included some multimedia( <i>image/links</i> ) in my post.	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The multimedia I included was related to my blog post	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I tagged my post with my name.	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In relation to the above, I am most proud of <i>How I met my purpose to persuade</i>			
To improve next time I would <i>My grammar, and maybe my spelling</i>			

**Fig 5.5 Student Self Assessment Travel Blog Post**

In reflecting on how they felt about their writing, many students referred to the success criteria as a measure of how well they felt they had done. If they had achieved the points on the checklist, they felt successful, and good about the writing they had done.

*“I think I did extremely well because I used most of the things in the success criteria.”*

*Phoebe*

Feelings of success extended beyond that however, and often appeared to be related directly to the nature of the task. Many students identified the digital aspect as a reason for why they felt good about their writing:

*“My links and multimedia made me feel quite good about my writing.”*

*Chris*

*“I think I structured my writing well, and my image was really good. I’m happy I learned how to do the links because that was something new for me and I was pretty proud of that.”*

*Rosie*

Already students were indicating that they felt their writing was better, and that they felt better about it, when multimedia was used. As the blogging journey continued, the feeling that their writing was enriched by the inclusion of things digital was heightened. Through the new learning that was occurring, students’ self-efficacy was also being positively affected.

In their reflections, students also commented on what would make them feel better about their writing. In concurrence with our own observations, many students identified courtesies for the reader as an area to improve and make them feel better.

*“I would have done paragraphs because it’s a bit hard to read.”*

*Karly*

*“Improve my punctuation.”*

*Bianca*

The awareness of the importance of accuracy in this forum was heightened by the onus being on the students themselves to be ultimately responsible for what was published to this potentially worldwide audience. Previously the teacher had been the final editor, and although Jenny had

included a 'disclaimer' on the blog explaining that these novice bloggers may make some mistakes, this responsibility affected Sam's enjoyment somewhat:

*"... I like writing on the blog for something new and fun but I don't really like it because the teacher doesn't really check it, it just goes straight on so there might be like a little mistake and so it could like really embarrass you somehow."*

Sam FG2

For her own assessment purposes, Jenny used a specifically designed Blogging Rubric (Appendix G) to ascertain the development of the students' blogging skills across the period of the intervention and beyond. While this stood apart from the goals of the actual intervention, it was important for her as a teacher to be able to track the 'value added' of the intervention in terms of student achievement. It was also extremely valuable for determining the next teaching steps for ensuing blog posts. We consciously chose not to share the rubric with students as we felt that it would have been overwhelming for a beginning blogger to see the full scope of expectation. Having the students self assess against the success criteria each blog post was deemed more appropriate.

## **5.2 Cycle Two - Artifact Blog Post**

### **5.2.1 Planning**

After reflecting on and reviewing all the information from the Travel Blog Post, the second stage of our blogging intervention was planned. Jenny and I looked closely at student reflections and rubrics to determine teaching points for the second blog post.

The goal was to continue to foster the enjoyment and self-efficacy of the students. As student views about their own competency directly affects self-efficacy, we were keen to increase their blog writing abilities. The main teaching point for the writing was around enriching the content, as this

showed as lacking in many Travel Blog Posts when they were assessed against the rubric. We also wanted to broaden students' use of multimedia, and encourage them to be more discerning about the choices they made when selecting visuals, links and the like.

In terms of enjoyment, we were keen to give the students more choice, as this was overwhelmingly what was identified as engendering greater enjoyment for them. We still wanted to anchor the teaching around a particular focus however, and in our desire to diversify their use of multimedia, elected to ask students to base their post around an artifact. These could be material objects that could be photographed or videoed for inclusion, or existing digital objects. This idea was also reflective of evidence that had arisen from the initial focus group interviews, where the power of the visual (such as with the 'Aniboom' inspired writing) emerged as a contributing factor to enjoyment of writing for the students.

### **5.2.2 Action**

To illustrate identified teaching points, Jenny unpacked an authentic blog post with the students. This was one from her personal blog. The post, about her dogs, was immediately engaging for students, as they knew about this part of their teacher's life. Together teacher and students again co-constructed success criteria to guide them to meet the identified goals.

The concept of planning their next blog post around an artifact was explained and discussed, and students were asked to come prepared for the next lesson with their artifact in mind. They were also made aware that the topic and purpose of the blog post were completely their own choice. This news was met with enthusiasm.

To encourage students to validate and utilise the digital artifacts they already had, examples shared during the initial semi-structured interviews were highlighted. Sam had talked about taking photos of family holidays on his iPod and making them into slideshows:

*“...with my iPod with every trip I have been on I normally do like a slide show, so when I go away.”*

Thomas had talked about taking videos of his dogs, but not doing anything special with them:

*“Sometimes when I'm bored I'll like just video what my dogs do... I just keep it on my camera and when it fills up too much room I just put it on the computer ... I've got like a three minute video of my dogs asleep.”*

The intention was to not only acknowledge that they had existing digital artifacts, but also to bring the digital practices they were using at home into the school environment. Unless they logged into the blog at home however, this could be problematic. With school leadership approval, Jenny arranged for those who could, to bring their own personal devices into school for one day to use for this purpose. Many students took advantage of the opportunity.

Additional opt-in mini lessons around Web 2.0 tools designed to enhance students' choice of multimedia were run, including one on 'Picmonkey', <http://www.picmonkey.com/>, a photo editing site that enables photographic collages to be created. Jenny also introduced the concept of polls to students whose purpose would be strengthened by the inclusion of such a tool. Both of these appeared in many Artifact Blog Posts.

Strategically, completion of this task became a required part of homework. Although doing so ran the risk of making blog writing a 'chore,' it was also another way to encourage students to write onto the blog away from the classroom setting. We continued to hope that some synergy between writing at school and at home could be achieved. Despite being able to access the blog and write on it from home, the students were still seeing

writing on the blog as 'school writing' and we were keen to see if we could alter this perception.

### **5.2.3 Progress with Commenting**

The emphasis on effective commenting continued as students progressed with their second blog post. Students recorded their thoughts on this area in their reflective journals. It was important for students to reflect on this aspect of the intervention to ascertain if, as predicted, the feedback received by way of comments would directly enhance their self-efficacy regarding their blog writing.

This assumption was accurate. Fifteen of the eighteen students present for the reflection recorded feelings of pride, happiness and/or excitement about receiving comments, as these illustrations typify:

*"It made me feel happy that I didn't just write it for nothing."*

*Bianca*

*"Two people commented on mine, relating to my post and asking questions. They made me feel good and I like my post was actually acknowledged. Because I never had feedback/feedforward (on the blog) before."*

*Summer*

*"My sister commented on my blog and she said she liked my story and since she went to Fiji, she could relate to my topic. The comment made me feel happy and proud because of the nice things she said about my writing."*

*Phoebe*

The students reflected not only on receiving comments, but also on making them. The comments they had left clearly showed that thought had been given to both continuing the conversation started by the blog post,

and to making the blog post author feel good about themselves and their writing. On the second point, this appeared to demonstrate an awareness of the power of the comment in regard to enhancing self-efficacy, and they themselves were promoting this concept.

*“I like making comments because I like making people feel good. When I make a comment I think about all the good things in their piece.”*

*Laura*

*“I thought about the response I would get, and if it will be an ongoing conversation.”*

*Talia*

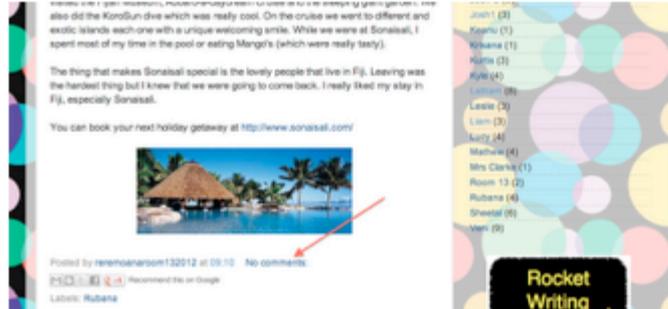
Because feedback is known to enhance the development of writing, and because this group of students had indicated feedback was particularly important to them, we wanted to capitalise on growing the commenting community. Jenny set about eliciting responses from a wider audience, as we were keen to get comments for our students beyond ones from their peers. Her mission included:

- emailing staff and asking them and their students to visit the blog
- emailing lead teachers of our cluster schools inviting them to do the same
- creating a wall display in the school foyer with paper copies of the students' blog posts, and highlighting the class blog address
- putting a piece in the school newsletter
- setting the students a homework task of getting a family member or friend to comment on the blog

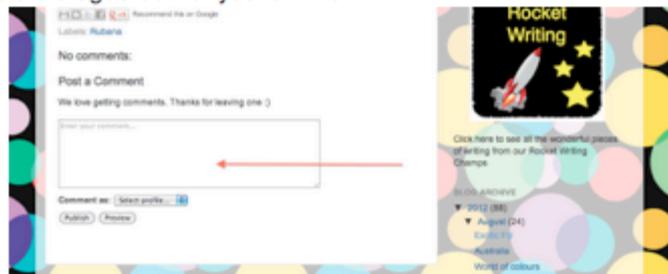
As illustrated in Figure 5.6 below, she also published a blog post of her own on the class blog, explaining how to do make a comment:

This is how you comment on one of our wonderful blog posts.

First, find a wonderful blog post you'd like to comment on. When you get to the bottom of the post you will see some kind of comment link. The one in my screen shot says 'No comments' as no one has commented on this post yet. If it already has comments the link will read something like '1 Comment' telling you how many have already commented on the post. Click this link.



It will bring up a dialogue box for you to write in.



**Fig 5.6 Teacher Blog Post - Commenting on our Blog**

Despite Jenny's efforts to diversify the comment base, this did not occur to the desired extent during the short period of the intervention. The wider school staff of Waimahia School did heed her call however, and as will be discussed, the comments they made definitely affected how the students felt about their blog writing.

### 5.2.4 Reflection

As with every writing task completed throughout the intervention, students reflected on the task and how they felt about their writing in their Reflective Journals. Again students ranked their overall enjoyment of the task, and how they felt about the writing they produced. Results showed that it was clearly the most enjoyed task so far in the term, with two students indicating they *liked it*, nine students *liked it a lot* and seven students *loved it*.

Regarding task enjoyment, the same themes of choice and inclusion of ICT were identified. When asked to explain their level of enjoyment, of the sixteen students who *liked it a lot* or who *loved it*, twelve referred to enjoying writing about their (self-selected) topic and/or having the choice of topic and purpose as the reason for choosing their ranking.

*“Because we got to pick our own topic and I picked a topic I liked, I got to learn more about my family.”*

*Bryan*

*“Because I got to choose whatever I wanted to write about and I really liked what I chose to write about (my dogs).”*

*Thomas*

The inclusion of ICT was regularly identified as making the task enjoyable.

*“I really enjoyed this writing task because I got to bring technologies into the class and get photos and multimedia off them.”*

*Summer*

*“I liked doing picmonkey and adding photos.”*

*Phoebe*

Students also reflected positively on how they felt about the writing they had created. That sixteen of the nineteen students present for the reflection felt *quite proud* (thirteen students) or *super proud* (three students) was a gratifying result. The reasons given for feeling proud of their work reflected three themes; the receiving of comments, the meeting of their chosen purpose, and the inclusion of multimedia.

*“I chose a 4 because I'm proud of what I have done. It was good for me and I got good comments.”*

Bryan

*“I think it is pretty good actually, because I used more voice and multimedia and links.”*

Summer

*“Because I thought I did really well with my purpose and I got my message out.”*

Phoebe

Reflections suggested that students could sense their own improved blog writing skills, and this was confirmed in their self assessments. Along with reflecting on the success criteria, Jenny and I also asked the students to reflect upon their learning by commenting on four prompts; the area they had identified as one for improvement from the Travel Blog Post, any new learning for them, things they were most proud of in this post and things they would still like to learn about blogging.

Although these comments were primarily to assist Jenny with planning the next teaching steps, they also provided some useful information for this project. Most student comments related to the use of multimedia in their posts. Without exception, students identified the use of an aspect of multimedia as their new learning. In commenting about what they were most proud of in their writing, eight students identified multimedia inclusions as a point of pride. Much of the future learning they sought was also regarding multimedia. Again the role of the teacher in specifically teaching aspects of digital literacy that students do not necessarily encounter or fully understand in their out-of-school interactions, is highlighted here.

Overall, Jenny and I were thrilled with the reactions to the Artifact Blog Post as a writing task; the levels of enjoyment students exhibited in their reflections, and in the positive feelings they had about their writing. The

improvements students (and ourselves as teachers) had noticed appeared to directly enhance their self-efficacy as writers.

### **5.3 Cycle Three - Free-Choice Blog Post**

#### **5.3.1 Planning**

Both the reflections and feedback from students regarding the Artifact Blog Post were very positive, therefore Jenny and I were keen to maintain the elements of the task design that appeared to contribute to this. The ability to self-select topic and purpose clearly had a huge effect on how enjoyable students found a task, so we elected to replicate that aspect. There was little student feedforward given for ways to improve the task, with many reflective comments stating it could not be improved. There was a call from some for still more choice. We decided therefore to offer students total autonomy over choice of topic, purpose and use of multimedia.

We were also pleased that a more confident approach to blogging for the Artifact Blog Post had been identified by students as being a result of new learning and practice. The new learning we as teachers identified for the final blog post for this intervention, was focussed on greater authenticity of student selected multimedia. A discerning selection would ensure that whatever they included was genuinely aimed at enhancing the purpose of the writing overall.

To enhance their awareness of audience, we wanted to encourage students to approach this task more from a reader-oriented perspective. An activity designed to see what blog posts the students themselves enjoyed as readers was planned, to facilitate a greater connection with their audience as writers.

#### **5.3.2 Action**

The teaching for the Free-Choice Blog Post was a little different, due to the inclusion of additional digital technologies in the teaching process.

Quite apart from this research intervention, the class was part of a trial within the school to introduce the use of school-purchased handheld devices (iPods) in the classroom programme. For the introductory lesson to this blog post, small groups students were provided with a laptop and an iPod and set the task of looking at the Artifact Blog Posts as readers, especially the posts that attracted their interest. They logged into the class blog on the laptop to browse posts and identify those of particular appeal. On the iPods they recorded the reasons they enjoyed these posts, with the teacher collating these on her projected laptop for sharing with the class at the conclusion of the lesson.

The observed engagement of students during this time, the discussions they had whilst looking at the posts, and the resulting collective list the students came up with were impressive. Student recording of ideas on the iPods using the notes feature seemed to confidently handled. All students I observed knew how to operate the equipment without assistance.

As they embarked on writing their Free Choice Blog Post, there were some students who found it a challenge to independently select a topic. Options were talked through with these students who all eventually chose a suitable topic.

The Free Choice Blog Post was completed amidst the busyness of the end of a school term. Another major project in a different curriculum area competed for students' time and commitment. Student and teacher absences added pressure to the timeframe for completion. However all students successfully published their blog post. Once underway, students showed greater independence in the composition of their posts. More students were considering it easier and as more time effective to log in at home, especially to add multimedia. However in talking with students at the completion of the task, it appeared that doing so was more about getting the task completed as opposed to a desire to write on the blog at home.

### **5.3.3 Progress with Commenting**

One of our commenting goals which was to encourage 'conversations' about posts, was beginning to be realised, as students continued to leave comments on each others' posts from the Artifact Blog Post. The quality of the comments students were leaving on each others' posts had improved from those that had been left following the first blog post. Student authors were revisiting their previous posts with greater regularity, and were also responding to their comments.

Besides those left by peers, a number of school staff had responded to Jenny's request to visit the blog and make comments. Conversations with students revealed that they found these comments particularly affirming - more so than those from their classmates. It appeared that if a teacher gave positive feedback about their blog writing they were more likely to 'believe it was good' than if one of their peers made a similar comment.

This comment thread (Figure 5.7) from Summer's post was typical of some of the 'conversations' that developed:

**Mrs H** 30 August 2012 11:52

*I really enjoyed reading this Summer. It was full of information and organised in a way that flowed well.*

**(Summer's reply)** 3 September 2012 10:40

*Thank you very much Mrs H  
From Summer*

**Mrs C** 30 August 2012 12:28

*What an amazing post Summer. I liked the way you structured your ideas so that we didn't really know who you were describing until right at the end. I think the quote was a wonderful touch too. Do you agree with it?*

*Mrs C*

**Summer** 3 September 2012 10:43

*Thank you very much Mrs C, I also enjoyed writing this blog post. Yes I do agree with it. What was your favorite part of the story?  
From Summer*

**Phoebe** 5 September 2012 15:56

*Hi Summer,*

*I really enjoyed reading this post not only because it's all about Netball, (My Favourite Sport) but it was also all about Kayla Cullen, One of my favourite netball players. I really liked your layout of your writing and pictures, also the quote at the end. I think I need to remember it for when I do my sports...*

*I hated every minute of training but I said;  
don't quit, suffer now & live the rest of your life as a champion!*

*From Phoebe :)*

**Summer** 7 September 2012 09:32

*Hi Phoebe,*

*Thank you for the nice comment!!(: kayla Cullen is really cool isn't she?  
And yes I love that quote it always runs through my head whenever i'm doing sports!!*

*From Summer xx*

### **Fig 5.7 Student Commenting Conversation 1**

Summer also made quality comments on the posts of others. The comment thread (Figure 5.8) from Chelsea's post about photography was another example of the types of comments that were being left for and by students.

**Summer** 3 September 2012 11:22

Hi Chelsea,

Wow! I love this blog post it is very interesting & your personality comes out in it. You had me locked into the story & have given me a little inspiration for taking photos! If you had any what advice would you give to a learner that wants to start photography?

From Summer xx :-)

**Chelsea** 7 September 2012 10:29

Hey Summer

Thanks a lot for reading my post.

Um advice... Just remember to have fun and enjoy yourself really.

Do you edit your pics?

If you do whats your favorite tool? :D

**Rosie** 9 September 2012 14:16

Dear Chelsea,

Reading your post it sounds like your a professional. I particularly liked the lesson about lighting. I took a photo this weekend and it had bad lighting. I couldn't wait to see the photo but then you could hardly see the picture taken. So, I know what it's like to have bad lighting. I loved how you structured your writing and the before and after pictures that you put on it. Good link too. I always love taking pictures of family and friends and keep them as memories. You should check out my blog post about family. It has one of my favourite photos because it is clear and the picture has good quality. Right now I am interested in Photography.

Do you know any more tips for taking pictures?

Which one do you think would look good on a picture? Black and White or Sepia?

Please reply soon!

**Chelsea** 26 September 2012 16:20

Hey Rosie I love keeping memories too, of course I could give you more tips just ask me at school. I love black and white photos they're just the best, Im not saying that sepia is bad i love that too but i just love black and white so much.

### Fig 5.8 Student Commenting Conversation 2

As illustrated by many comments above, students were cleverly including invitations for readers to visit their own posts in the comments they left for others, indicating they were keen for their writing to be read by a wide audience. Our attempt to elicit a more diverse range of commentors was beginning to occur, and the few comments that had been made by people unknown to the students had a powerful impact on them. 'Cynthia' had commented on Rosie's post about an embarrassing moment (Figure 5.9).

Cynthia 25 September 2012 07:38

Hi Rosie

*Let me introduce you to reframing. That's when you look at something that happened in a different way. This has been very handy in my life - it means I am able to entertain myself endlessly while remembering things I've done. Try looking at the opportunities you have had to make others laugh (e.g. falling over in fitness) as your contribution to making the universe a happier place. The positive power of laughter is known to be a great remedy for what ails you.*

*Keep running and making others smile.*

Rosie 27 September 2012 17:03

*Thank You so much for the advice...*

**Fig 5.9 External Comment to Rosie**

### **5.3.4 Reflection**

As previously mentioned, this task was completed during the busy end of term. Therefore time constraints and pressure to attend to tasks from other curriculum areas affected the completion of the final blog post of the intervention. Jenny felt that with this task, some students lost impetus during the process.

*"...the impression I get is that the students start off with a hiss and a roar but that enthusiasm doesn't continue throughout the task...although they do enjoy getting on the computer and writing this way."*

She wondered if the lack of availability of one-to-one devices, and the necessity to wait for and share computers were affecting how students viewed the task. This point was concurrent with what some students talked about in the final focus group interviews; Even though it was a 'school task,' many students preferred to complete it at home because of the autonomy they had over the equipment. They also liked writing in their home environments as opposed to working within the constraints of the four walls of a classroom. These points will be elaborated upon in the following chapter.

However student reflections regarding the Free-Choice Blog Post as a task were again positive. Five students were absent for the written reflections, but data from the seventeen students who were present showed similar patterns in terms of enjoyment and feelings about their writing, to the previous blog post.

All students *liked* (six), *liked it a lot* (nine) or *loved* the task (two). While there was a slight backward trend here, in the context of everything else that was occurring for students at this time, this was not excessively concerning.

Again the same themes of appreciating topic choice, and the use of ICT were recorded as reasons for enjoying the task:

*“I liked everything especially that we could write about whatever we wanted. I liked (my writing) because it was something close to me.”*

*Talia*

However as previously stated, some students found it difficult to determine exactly what they wanted to write about, when having completely open topic choice:

*“I loved that we had completely free choice about everything but for me it was kind of hard to think about a topic.”*

*Rosie*

When Jenny looked back at the lesson she reflected on this point.

*“To improve the students connection to their topic choice (and thus hopefully their enjoyment) I would stagger the start of the blogging as I think ‘coaching’ students (either one on one or in small groups) through the choice of topic before they start would be helpful.”*

As stated to earlier, some students made comment about time pressures affecting their enjoyment. They wanted more time to complete the task, and found managing their commitments to assignments due in other curriculum areas a challenge.

When judging the blog writing against the assessment rubric, there was not the same degree of improvement in terms of skill development that had been evident with the first two blog posts. Rather, it could be claimed that a consolidation of their blog writing skills had occurred. Reflections indicated that students felt they were blogging more effectively, and this enhanced how they felt about the writing they produced. Some were aware of how they could further improve, as Phoebe's reflection illustrates:

*"I'm really proud of my work because I think it's one of my best posts. My pictures and people saying it was cool and a great post made me feel good about my work. To make me feel better about my post I could add a video or a poll."*

*Phoebe*

Feelings of self-efficacy regarding their blog writing remained high, with the vast majority of students feeling *proud* or *super proud* of the writing they had done for this task.

Along with the regular self assessment for this task, students also completed a final reflection on the intervention as a whole. This data, along with information from mid and post intervention focus group semi-structured interviews, will be used to support findings in the ensuing chapter.

#### **5.4 The Classroom Blog Post Intervention**

In concluding this journey, a picture of the classroom blog at the end of the ten-week period illustrates the extent of the changes the intervention brought to Room 21's class blog.

Statistically, student-made entries made during the intervention was almost treble the number made prior to it beginning, with an additional 89 entries appearing on the blog. This compares with 34 student-made entries for the previous six month period. While most of the student posts were compulsory as part of the classroom programme, some students had begun to initiate opportunities to add to the blog of their own volition. This was something that Jenny intended to further encourage in the following school term.

The compulsory aspect of the blog posts throughout the intervention allowed for students were to be fairly represented on the class blog. This was also apparent also in the comments left, as all students participated in this endeavour as well. Comments left on blog posts had also increased considerably, and totaled 214 at the conclusion of the intervention. Despite efforts to broaden the source of comments, those who left comments largely remained known to the student, with 148 being made from student to student. However 'comment conversations' were more prevalent; 49 posts had two comments or more, with 28 of these having four or five comments left. As illustrated in previous examples, the nature and content of student comments often enriched and extended the content or purpose of the original blog post.

The scope allowed by the blog writing encouraged a wide variance of topic and purpose of blog posts. This was in contrast to most previous student-written posts, which had primarily been the publication of 'Rocket Writing' tasks drafted in writing books. The complexity of 'text' had also increased dramatically, with all posts including examples of multimedia to support and enhance their written texts.

Teacher presence on the blog had switched from making posts to making comments. Jenny had made a conscious effort to place comments to model effective comment writing, and to provide feedback to students. The posts she created were informative ones, regarding the practice of blogging and commenting, intended for both student and visitor audiences. This left the opportunity for students themselves to create posts about class events. This was something that was beginning to occur as the intervention period came to an end.

#### **5.4 “Bryan” - A Case Study within a Case Study**

To illustrate the impact of the intervention on an individual student, this section shares the journey of ‘Bryan.’ At 13 years of age, Bryan began the intervention as a reluctant writer. In a conversation with him early in the data-gathering process, Bryan described himself as being “into sports and stuff - writing just isn’t my thing.” This view supported his initial questionnaire responses; when asked how much he enjoyed writing at school, whether he thought he was better than others in his class, if he liked to share his writing with others and how much he enjoyed writing at home, he selected *not a lot*. In regard to writing tasks at school, he didn’t like many of them, and was only *a little* proud of the writing he did. When asked if he enjoyed writing on paper, such as in his draft writing book, he responded with *not a lot* and said he enjoyed writing on the computer only *a little*.

Bryan approached the first blog writing task with an attitude of resignation; as an obliging student, he went through the motions and completed an adequate Travel Blog Post. His self-assessment of the task indicated that he did not feel he had met the criteria of the task particularly well. In reflecting on the task in his journal, Bryan ranked his enjoyment of this activity only two out of five, and considered how he felt about his writing as a lowly one out of five. What he did enjoy was “writing straight on to the computer”. What he did not enjoy reflected his general feeling about writing: “I didn’t like the task because writing is not something I enjoy”.

Whilst using a link in his writing was the one thing that made him feel good about what he had done, clearly for Bryan at this stage, simply transferring the writing process to a digital medium was not enough for him to suddenly start enjoying writing. His suggestion to allow for topic choice for improving the writing task, was the suggestion of many students.

Topic choice was opened up for students in the Artifact Blog Post, and for Bryan, choosing an artifact to write about provided him with a connection which appeared to be missing from previous writing tasks that had influenced his perceptions of writing and himself as a writer. In the class discussion during the lesson, Bryan spoke about his great-grandfather's war medals, and the positive reaction he received about his idea was the first step to what ultimately became a turning point for him in terms of how he saw himself as a writer.

From this idea, Bryan created a blog post about people who inspired him. He incorporated his love of sports by writing about Michael Jordan, the inspiration from his great-grandfather through his artifact - the war medals - and finally he wrote about the ways in which his friends inspired him. In a conversation we had during the writing of the post, Bryan revealed that he was enjoying the task a lot more, and this was primarily because he was finding it easier to write about the topic that he had chosen. The inclusion of the actual artifact was not necessarily the motivating force here, but rather the connection the artifact had facilitated. As his reflection would later show, Bryan's enjoyment of the task was enhanced by the opportunity to re-connect with his grandfather, by way of talking to him to find out about the great-grandfather's medals which were in his possession.

Bryan's self assessment against the success criteria for the task, and his journal reflections were markedly different to those from the Travel Blog Post. Bryan was confident that he had achieved success with almost all the criteria that had been identified to guide the task. In his journal he

ranked both his enjoyment of the task and his feelings about it writing a four out of five. While the former was driven by topic choice, his reflective comments indicated that the way he felt about his writing grew from two areas. First, he had a feeling that his writing was 'good' because "When I read it over, I knew it was a good piece and I got a picture in my head". This was confirmed for him by the second reason he felt good about his writing, which was the feedback he received from others by way of the comment feature on the blog. Bryan's post drew many comments, and it was this acknowledgment of others that finally had Bryan beginning to believe that his writing was worthwhile.

An indication of this outside of the intervention focus, was Bryan's new-found engagement with 'rocket writing'. Sharing his efforts in this forum was something Bryan had not done before, but which he began to do more regularly. On one occasion his writing was selected by his peers as the 'winner' of the day, and Bryan immediately published it to the blog. This writing too drew comments from readers, from both within and outside of his classroom. Bryan was also one student who chose to independently add a piece to the blog about an aspect of the classroom programme.

Bryan's improved attitude was carried over to the Free Choice Blog Post. Here in a link to his previous post, Bryan wrote an emotional piece about war and poverty. In this piece he embedded a slideshow of highly emotive digital images of war and a link to a clip of poverty-stricken children to enhance a message he felt very strongly about.

Again both his self assessment and reflections indicated that he felt positive about his writing and had enjoyed the task, as shown by his rankings of four out of five for both areas. Bryan related his enjoyment to the fact that he felt he had created a powerful piece of writing, and felt good about it because he thought it was going to make a difference - in his words, "I got my message out to the world". Bryan was beginning to see

that writing could have a social impact beyond the classroom walls, and that in the digital environment this could be more easily achieved.

In his final reflection, Bryan showed he had made some enormous shifts in his thinking about writing, and himself as a writer. He commented that, through the intervention “I’ve enjoyed writing more because I feel I can write a piece that people are amazed by”. While he did not explicitly attribute it to the blog writing, his self-efficacy had also been enhanced by the improvement that had been gained in formal assessments. Bryan commented “I’m nearly at the standard for writing now, and I never thought I would be.”

Bryan’s responses to the questionnaire regarding self efficacy re-administered at the conclusion of the intervention, confirmed the shifts that his reflective comments indicated. He now enjoyed writing at school *quite a lot* and considered himself to be *quite good* at writing. He liked sharing his writing *a little* as opposed to *not a lot*, and instead of not liking many of the writing tasks at school, he now indicated *I like most of them*. Bryan also had moved from being only *a little proud* of the writing he did at school, to being *quite proud*.

Bryan also indicated that he now liked writing on to the computer *quite a lot*. However, overtly the use of digital technologies did not appear to be the driving force of his improved attitude towards writing. Unlike many other students, he made little mention of the lure of the digital in enhancing his enjoyment and self-efficacy. But subliminally, the feedback he received about his writing validated for him the value of it, and improved his feelings about writing. This feedback would not have been received had it not been for the environment in which it was made available to the audience. The inclusion of still and moving images also had an impact on Bryan’s writing. Unlike some other students, Bryan had not included these from a ‘bells and whistles’ perspective. For him they provided authentic enhancement of the textual message he was trying to share.

Bryan's story provides an illustration of one student's journey throughout this process, and situates many of the findings that emerged from the research project. His story highlights the themes of students desiring choice over writing topics, the advantages of a personal connection with a topic, and to a lesser degree perhaps, the role digital technologies play in motivating students to write. It also emphasizes the importance and impact of feedback on how students feel about themselves as writers. These themes, and others, are elaborated upon and discussed in the ensuing final chapter.

## CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

### 6.1 Initial Reflections

As outlined in the introduction to this project, the interest I developed while undertaking postgraduate study in the changing face of literacy, particularly the relationship between ICT and writing, strongly influenced the impetus of this project. The new understandings I had developed as a result of my study, lead me to notice a lack of synergy between what I saw occurring in students' out-of-school literacy lives, in comparison to what was occurring within classrooms.

Like many New Zealand schools, the incongruity in these areas at Waimahia School was apparent. The focus of classroom literacy programmes remained predominately based on traditional views of language, despite informed and forward-thinking leadership and staff professional development as a result of involvement in a Ministry funded ICT contract. Many teachers, including those at Waimahia School, are competent and frequent personal users of digital technologies, and utilise them easily and effectively in many of their own in-school practices. Teachers plan digitally, they research digitally, they collaborate digitally, they write their school reports digitally and they communicate with families digitally. Yet the manner in which the literacy curriculum is generally delivered within their classrooms tends to remain inherently traditional, reflecting few of the 'real life' practices that teachers themselves use. Whilst some more 'experienced' teachers have had to contend with the rapid changes that digital advancements have demanded of them, some recent young graduates also tend to address literacy in a traditional fashion within the confines of a school. This latter aspect was surprising to me, as one would assume that beginning teachers would have the most current pedagogical knowledge based upon their more recent training. More importantly it is surprising because newly graduated teachers themselves are more likely to be 'digital natives', and therefore would

presumably posses more of a twenty-first century approach to literacy in the classroom.

I have come to believe this is strongly influenced by the nature of 'school' as an institution, and the obligations the school has to comply with political constraints and societal perceptions. While the constitution of literacy in academic contexts is constantly evolving, translation into classroom practices is taking longer. This is likely to have been influenced by the application of the aforementioned political and societal brakes.

Along with ICT, writing has been an area of professional development focus at Waimahia School. This focus was based on concerns for acceptable student achievement levels. Low levels of confidence, and in some cases competence, in the teaching of writing were also apparent. Perhaps this was not surprising, when considering the confusing messages teachers have received about effective teaching practice in writing. Conflicting views during the past few decades have meant that some teachers have been unsure about what constitutes best practice in the teaching of writing. Frequently, an approach based on teaching to specific genre appeared to be favoured by many, and while this enables students to create successful pieces according to a particular 'recipe,' in my opinion this approach does not equip today's students to participate successfully in the literacy landscape of the twenty-first century.

Further, current assessment practices in writing tend to advocate a formulaic approach to the teaching of writing. The results students achieve against these assessments supposedly reflect upon teaching effectiveness, and as teachers obviously want their students to achieve well they will therefore will gear their teaching to enable this. Sadly, these assessments bear little resemblance to the skills our students require to be twenty-first century literate.

At the beginning of this research project, it was my assumption that because our students are growing up in a digital world, with many of their chosen recreational and social pursuits involving digital technologies, that identifying exactly which of these activities they do outside of the classroom, and using this knowledge in the design of writing tasks, would be not only more relevant to their needs, but also more enjoyable. My hypothesis was that if the students enjoyed writing tasks more, their self-efficacy would increase, and with greater self-belief would come improved writing skills.

This consideration led me to explore what students did at home in terms of writing and using digital technologies, and compare this to what they did at school. The baseline data collected through questionnaires and focus group semi-structured interviews generally confirmed my initial assumptions about home and school use of digital technologies. In general, computer use was common at both home and school, although use was more regular at home. Students regularly used hand held devices such as cellphones and iPod touches out of the school environment but never at school. Texting, gaming, browsing the internet and collecting images on these devices was common practice for many. The school policy preventing use of cellphones and personal devices in the classroom, meant however, that these practices were not available to students at school. When students entered the school grounds, they left many of their home-based digital practices at the door - literally. The passing over of hand-held devices into the school office for safe-keeping creates both a physical and metaphorical divide from many of their out-of-school digital and literacy practices.

Another theme that emerged about the difference in computer use between home and school was that of freedom. Unlike school, home computer use, though sometimes subject to parental 'house rules', was without time restraint, website restriction and allowed a broad choice of activity. Students often preferred to complete school writing tasks at home

for homework, because of the control they had over their writing environment.

Finally, how the students viewed and understood the concept of 'writing' was also a key finding of this project. From the outset it appeared that what constituted writing was school bound, and that they did not consider digital writing done for communicative purposes, such as texting and writing on social networking sites, as 'real writing.' Writing was instead something done at school, or for school purposes. It is these considerations that are explored in the following section.

## **6.2 On the Subject of Writing**

### **6.2.1 Students' Perceptions of Writing**

It appears that while teachers and the wider education fraternity grapple with a consistent definition of the broader term 'literacy,' within that our students themselves are trying to make sense of what 'writing' is. This study suggests that our students maintain a traditional interpretation of writing despite growing up immersed in a digitally literate world. Much of the 'writing' they do in their own worlds being digital, however when the students in this study talk about writing, they locate these practices in reference to the kinds of writing they usually do at school. Guided by an essentially traditional curriculum interpretation and delivery, it would appear that students believe that, despite changes to writing in the 'real world,' writing is a print-based pursuit, predominantly composed using pen and paper. In addition to the learning experiences and tasks they usually receive, assessments given to consider their writing capabilities are administered using pen and paper and assess traditional writing practices, skills and behaviours. It is hardly surprising therefore, that this informs student perceptions of what writing is.

Evidence of this claim was found in comments and reactions gathered during the semi-structured focus group interviews. It was quite clear that this group of students had a distinct definition of what writing meant, and

viewed it as something that occurred within a school context. To them, writing was less of an activity and more of a subject; something you did at school, at a particular time, described as 'writing time.' Writing was an assigned task to be completed within a set timeframe, designed to improve specific writing skills with the ultimate goal of helping them get to where they wanted to go in life, as this conversation from Focus Group 1 students illustrates:

*Chris: (It's) when you've got a task and you have to stick to it*

*Laura: It's got a due date*

*Rosie: And you have to complete it*

*Jacob: (You feel) pressured*

*Laura: (It's) quite important because like, it helps you learn, and then it probably gets you into a better high school*

*Jacob: And a better job later on in life*

The last two comments signal the high stakes these students place on writing.

Reflecting on her experience, the classroom teacher Jenny claimed that by her observation, students have become more focussed on their formal assessment levels over the past two years, since the introduction of National Standards in New Zealand. Although National Standards in writing are determined using an 'Overall Teacher Judgement' that encompasses a range of student work, including the writing they do in curriculum areas outside of 'writing time,' the students appeared to place a high value on the levels they achieved in their formal writing assessments to gauge their ability in writing. These tasks produced what to them illustrated real school writing, which was a set topic, often to a formulaic

structure to meet a set purpose, measurable, taught formally, and a result they were accountable for.

At the conclusion of the intervention, student views on what constituted writing did not appear to have shifted. When asked to give examples beyond 'tests' (their words) of the writing they did in school, the focus group students restricted their responses to tasks set within the previous classroom writing programme, such as speech writing and 'Rocket Writing.' Further, even when it was suggested that the novel studies they wrote as part of their reading programme could be considered as writing, this was categorized by the students in terms of a reading/homework task, and not really writing at all, because it was done outside of writing time. Of particular interest to me was that after completing three blog posts as part of the writing programme, blog writing was only given one late mention by single student as an illustration of writing.

### **6.2.2 The Impact of Assessment**

There is little contention that assessment is a critical part of the teaching and learning process. However the purposes and processes of assessment practices vary according to how learning is viewed. According to Rinaldi, (2006, cited in Klenner & Salandro, 2011, p. 114) assessment is about "deciding what to give value to." Klenner & Salandro (2011) explain that traditional behaviorist assessment practices value the assessment of what has been taught. A constructivist view considers assessment as the meaning-making of individuals as they make sense of new experiences and information. From a contemporary sociocultural perspective, learners are viewed as active community members, who make meaning as they participate. Therefore teaching influenced by this view will be supported by authentic assessment practices that involve teachers and students working together. Students in this study appeared therefore, to value more formal assessments graded by their teachers as the most significant indicators of how well they were achieving in writing. Further, that value is not being attributed to writing completed as part of the wider curriculum, is

of concern. Students are not placing significant value on self-assessments and personal reflections about their own writing either. It is important that students' perceptions of what determines their writing ability extend beyond formal assessment tasks so they may begin to value authentic and purposeful writing in other subject areas, and to also include the forms and types of writing they are involved in away from the classroom.

Many students commented that they felt their writing had improved across the term in which the intervention took place. Although percentage-wise most of the school-writing they completed was on the blog, some were reluctant to attribute any of their success to the blog writing. Jacob's view on this was quite definitive:

*I've improved with writing but not necessarily with the blogging because as I said before the blogging is like, it's more enjoyable but it doesn't help you with your writing, it doesn't build up your strengths in writing, but when you write on pen and paper for tests and then you're like you're pushed to do something, you're pressured, then that's when you work hard and build up your levels in writing.*

*Jacob FG1*

Clearly Jacob considers that his success is measured by the results he achieves in traditional pen and paper tests. This is when he feels the need to put in the most effort, and in doing so, will achieve his best result, a result that can be assigned a numeric value. This would support Nicholls (2012) suggestion that numerically represented assessments may indicate to students that "their work is only as valuable as the number that is assigned to it" (p. 74).

Laura considered she had improved also, but could not quite ascertain the reason for this. She too used her formal writing assessment levels as evidence of her improvement:

*I think it has improved because I did start at 2A and at the end of last year, at the moment I'm like 4P or something so it has improved quite a bit, but I don't know whether it's the blog post thing or it's just the teachers' help... but I'm sure it's the blog posting, because since the blog post started we haven't done much normal writing.*

*Researcher: Is blogging not normal writing?*

*It is different, because it's on the computer.*

*Laura FG1*

It appears that because her success in blog writing was not measured in a traditional fashion, Laura was unsure of whether to attribute any of her writing improvement to this activity. Laura's uncertainty intensifies the notion that often students value an assessment method that provides them with a definitive grade to gauge their success or level of achievement. This introduces a future challenge for teachers, who will need to consider the assessment of writing in the digital context.

Assessment of writing is already a challenging task, open to varied interpretations and potential subjectivity. To date there are no formalized assessment practices that can effectively measure in the traditional sense, how well a student is achieving in the digital domain. Digital writing such as blog writing invites and encourages diversity, individuality and informality. The message of the written text in this context is enhanced by multimedia choices, links, layout and design. Further, because it is so different from traditional pen and paper writing, it is not possible to simply apply current assessment practices to this new way of writing. This suggests that if teachers are wanting to grade and compare student examples of such writing, it will present challenges and cause debate.

Consideration must therefore be given to determining whether teachers are actually assessing the best writing students can do, or if they are

assessing the writing practices that teachers are presently required and generally equipped to teach and assess. This is a concern for schools now and for the future, as teachers consider preparing students to be twenty-first century literate, which will include developing competence in digital composition. The digital writing capabilities of students will differ from and may well exceed the skills they exhibit in traditional writing practices. Until we have the tools to assess the former effectively, we may not actually be evaluating the best writing our students are capable of producing, which may be that which they create digitally. Perhaps 'good writing' should be exemplified by the best example of the writing that they most commonly practice (Yancey, 2004). Or perhaps we may come to appreciate that placing a number on a piece of writing is not necessarily a measure of its effectiveness.

Laura's comments also introduce another perception this group of students appeared to hold regarding writing. She differentiates the writing she did for the blog from 'normal' writing - this being pen and paper writing that these students ordinarily do in their books. This suggests that even after ten weeks of regular digital writing, that this practice is still a novelty at school, rather than the 'norm.' It appears these twenty-first century learners may be so ingrained with a traditional idea of writing, that even after three assigned blog writing tasks, this kind of digital writing at school is still not regarded as a bona fide school writing experience.

For these students, knowing if they had been successful with a task meant measuring their success by engaging in a writing task they were familiar with, assessed against a tool they value. Although the self-assessment checklists developed from the success criteria following each blog post indicated positive feelings of success, it would seem this tool does not measure what these students perceive as the skills they need to prove they are good writers.

Jenny and I wondered what impact sharing the blogging assessment rubric we developed with the students may have had on how they viewed their overall writing skills and improvement in light of the blog writing focus, which as discussed, we deliberately chose not to do during the intervention. This is something Jenny intended share with the students in the following term. Sharing their progress in this way may go some way to reassuring students who are not acknowledging that the blog writing may have assisted their writing development, to see the progress that they have already made in this area.

Generally, when reflecting on their blog posts in their journals, students felt they had not only been successful in meeting the requirements for the blogging tasks, but also considered that their overall writing abilities had improved. The feelings about the quality of the writing they produced in their blogging, and their perceived improvement, suggested high levels of self-efficacy. Jenny and I had been very excited about these reflections, as it confirmed for us that the goals of the intervention had largely been achieved.

What was therefore disappointing, was that these views did not appear to be sustained beyond their journal reflections. It was apparent from discussions with the focus group students a week later, that they were not validating their success with blogging in terms of their level of achievement in writing. While they enjoyed blogging, and felt they had learned and been successful, they were still reliant on formal assessment procedures to confirm their success and abilities in writing.

### **6.2.3 The Semantics of 'Writing'**

Troia, Shankland & Wolbers (2012) suggested that an examination of how participation in non-academic forms of writing, such as texting and social networking, relates to writing motivation would be useful. In effect this was one of the goals of this intervention. Troia et. al. suggest it is possible that "students view these forms as more authentic, interesting, and valuable

and consequently possess differentiated self-efficacy beliefs, goals attributions and attitudes related to them. (p. 18)” However in the case of the group of students in this project, the opposite perception emerged. Because their definition of writing is strongly aligned to what they do at school, they do not appear to validate the ‘non-academic’ writing they do in their own environments. To bring their out-of-school practices into the classroom would require a shift in thinking not only from teachers, but also from the students themselves.

The writing these students engage in away from school was primarily using digital technologies, including computers, iPads, cellphones and iPods. The purpose for their writing in their out-of-school environment was for mainly for fun, socialising and communication. Even though it is in written form, these students did not classify these practices as ‘writing.’

When asked to give examples of the writing they did away from school, the students’ first reactions suggested that they did not really do writing by choice at home. Any writing they did at home they classified as writing for school, completed as part of homework expectations. This fell clearly under their definition of writing as school writing.

When questioned about their use of digital technologies at home and how they used them, the focus group students begrudgingly acknowledged that they did use them for producing text, though were still reluctant to term this ‘writing.’ Examples students gave of this include the following:

*It’s like phones and messaging, maybe like Facebook. That’s pretty much just social, so you just email or text friends or you could write notes down or on a calendar or something.*

*Jacob, FG1*

As illustrated below in this conversation between the students from Focus Group Two, although they describe what they are doing as ‘writing,’

because they see the purpose as socialising not 'work,' it does not conform to their definition of what writing constitutes. The lack of formality appeared to be one reason that this could not be 'writing':

*Sam: Whenever I write its like normally like really short.*

*Karly: Like on Facebook I just write my statuses.*

*Thomas: I don't usually just write and post something, when I write on the computer I'm just normally talking to somebody on Facebook or something.*

*Sam: Kind of like fast, like they'll get it really fast and I'll reply*

*Researcher: Like instant messaging?*

*Sam: Yeah.*

*Researcher: So you're not thinking of that as writing?*

*Thomas and Karly: No not really.*

*Karly: Because you're using slang and stuff and it's not exactly writing.*

*Thomas: Yeah cos like you'll spell that 't-h-t' and stuff.*

*Sam: And yeah like, 'I' will just be a lowercase 'i'.*

The two examples below further highlight the distinct categorisation these students are making in regard to what constitutes writing, by the choice of language to describe the activities. There is a clear differentiation between 'writing,' which is used to describe what is done at school and 'texting' using cellphones:

*"Usually when you're writing the teacher wants something like really good with all the proper grammar and all that, but when*

*you're texting and you just wanna send something quick so you like make up slang."*

*Thomas, FG2*

*Thomas: I don't see it (texting, updating Facebook statuses) as writing, more of talking*

*Karly: Yeah I see it as text, like text talking*

*Thomas: Its just like a conversation*

*Karly: It's just like talking to your friends but they're not there. I don't see it as writing.*

This introduces the need to consider the language we are using when we talk about writing in the current literacy landscape. To encourage a wider interpretation of what writing today entails, a broader representation of the process of composing to allow for textual and multimodal inclusions appears necessary. Perhaps Lessig's (2005) term of 'remix' is appropriate, although in the school setting the notion of 'compositing' (Bianco, 2007) may be more easily understood. As the word 'composite' suggests, compositing in this sense allows for the mixing and blending of various elements, in this case text and multimodal representations, to convey a message. Had this term or concept been introduced to the students in this study, it would have been interesting to see whether a broader notion of writing/compositing would have emerged; a view that perhaps saw them acknowledge some possible commonalities between in and out-of-school composition.

Besides the differentiation these students made between the types of writing they did in the classroom and in their home lives, another variation was the importance they placed upon the kinds of writing they did. As mentioned earlier, very few students chose to write in the 'school' sense (as they saw it), away from the classroom, for pleasure. The two students

who did, mentioned songwriting and creative writing such as poetry writing, though the frequency at which they engaged in these activities was very low.

Whilst most students regularly engaged in texting, social networking and other digital communication activities involving writing, usually daily, it was the collective opinion of students in both focus groups that these 'written' activities lacked importance. The only time writing at home was considered 'important' was when they were required to complete a school task for homework. A conversation between the students from Focus Group One, when asked how important the 'writing' they did at home was, typifies these ideas:

*Laura: Not at all really*

*Chris: Unless you're doing speeches or something, that's quite important*

*Laura: Yeah, or like a task for homework*

*Jacob: But other than that, no*

*Researcher: The social kind of writing you talked about, do you think that's important?*

*Jacob: Not really... It's just in the morning "Hi wot u doing?" and it's just, it's not really "Oh I've written this story, read it!"*

Although they may not consider it to be writing under their own definition, these students are socialising and communicating through digital literacies on a daily basis in their out-of-school lives - by choice. (Yancey, 2004.) Until students begin to value and authenticate the kinds of writing they do for themselves as 'real' and important, it is unlikely that their perceptions of what counts as writing will change.

To facilitate this necessary shift in thinking, it may be beneficial for teachers to stress the one aspect of Freebody and Luke's (1990) Four Resources Model that is currently not specified in New Zealand Ministry documents such as the Reading and Writing National Standards (2009), that is, using texts functionally. This is clearly what students are doing with writing in their out-of-school lives, yet they are not valuing this capability in or out of school. Explicit inclusion in guiding documents may assist teachers in highlighting the importance of, and validating the use of, the functional kinds of writing students utilise outside of the classroom. This may go some way to enabling students to see writing as more than a school-based task.

#### **6.2.4 Taking School Writing Home**

The attitude students had to completing what they saw as 'school writing' tasks at home as part of homework expectations was another point of interest. While they clearly differentiated this kind of writing from their home practices, many students actually enjoyed doing their 'school writing' in their home environments. I was surprised by this as I presumed that because they saw a distinct difference between the two, they might have seen bringing school writing into the home setting as encroaching on their home worlds. As a result of this perception, I had been concerned that setting the blogging tasks for homework may impact negatively on their attitudes towards blog writing. Instead there emerged almost a preference to complete some school writing tasks such as speech writing and blogging, away from the classroom.

The students liked having the option of setting up their learning environments as they wanted them at home; they could lounge on the couch or lie on the floor, they could play their own music as they wrote, and they could get up and take a drink or get a snack at their leisure. The time restrictions were lessened at home; if the task was computer-based such as the blog writing, they did not have to book a time to use the computer, or vacate the computer when someone else needed to use it. At

home they could walk away from their writing and return to the computer knowing that it would have been interfered with, and they could simply continue with their work. These factors in reverse make the environment for writing at school appear restrictive and controlled:

*Laura: Because (at home) like you can sit anywhere, instead of just sitting at the hard chairs and just sitting there, like sometimes you can sit on a couch or on the floor or maybe outside.*

*Jacob: In your house you can just get up and do stuff and come back and it will be right there and no one will have touched it, but at school you've got like slots and you'd have to save it and come back to it and another person would be on.*

*Chris: And at school you like have a time limit but at home you can do it for as long as you want.*

For others, a digital task such as blog writing or commenting simply made for a more enjoyable homework task.

*It just makes your homework a bit funner, just going and commenting and using the computer*

*Chris, Final Reflection*

*It's quite cool, it's like a different way of writing (at home), instead of just writing on a piece of paper*

*Thomas, FG2*

While students appeared to enjoy blog writing as an assigned school task at home, this did not mean that these students were about to adopt blog writing as a leisure activity, however. It would seem that the separation the students themselves make about the writing they do at home and school means that doing a 'school writing task' by choice and for fun, is just is not an option. While feedback from student reflections was resoundingly in

support of blog writing as being an enjoyable writing task at school, my prior hypothesis that if it was enjoyed at school it may therefore become a pursuit of choice at home, did not transpire.

It may be however, that at ages 11 to 13, these students are not quite ready to delve into the world of blogging of their own volition. When focus groups discussed the possibility of blogging in their own time, some were partial to the idea, and others were adamant it was not for them. Given continued exposure at school, we may see some of these students elect to adopt this practice in their own time in the future.

### **6.3 Enhancing Enjoyment and Self-Efficacy Through Task Design**

Determining the kinds of writing tasks which enhance both student enjoyment and self-efficacy was a major goal of this project, as established in the guiding research questions. The blog writing intervention enabled an investigation into this in terms of the impact the integration of ICTs had on these two areas. It was always expected however, that there would be other factors that would have an effect however, and this proved to be so.

In this section, research questions regarding the relationship between student engagement in writing tasks and the incorporation of ICT in task design, and the kinds of writing tasks that appear to contribute positively to self-efficacy and enjoyment are further discussed. The themes identified in Chapters Four and Five which emerged from the data as being conducive to positively affecting student enjoyment of writing tasks, and often as a consequence, their self efficacy, are also discussed. These themes revolve around student choice, the use of digital technologies, and the impact of feedback. Throughout the intervention, these areas were consistently identified by students as the reasons for why the blog writing tasks were enjoyable, and why they felt good about the writing they produced.

### 6.3.1 The Freedom to Choose

In this case study, a prominent theme which had a major impact on student enjoyment of a writing task was the opportunity for choice. Particularly, these students welcomed the scope that blog writing afforded them in terms of topic choice. Of almost equal appreciation was their being given the ability to select the purpose for their writing. As a proponent of this aspect of process writing for many years, this was not something I found surprising, but rather, affirming.

Of all the writing tasks completed throughout the period of the intervention, the Artifact Blog Post held the most appeal. This was evident not only in student reflections, but also in the responses from focus group students. Having the choice to freely select the topic was important to the students because they felt they knew more about what they were writing about. This aspect was positively commented on by many students, and is exemplified the comments from Laura and Thomas:

*“I probably enjoyed the artifact one, because you could write something that you really know about, like that you could feel something about.”*

Laura FG1

*“From the first one you had to do this (topic), like I did it, but it wasn’t as good as it could have been because I didn’t really get to choose as much, but in the second one I got to choose anything so that made it easier cos you knew like, a lot more.”*

Thomas FG2

It would appear that having a choice is also path to greater authenticity for some, as Talia’s comment indicates.

*“(In a blog) I think I express more personal comment in my writing, and that choosing the topic because you know what you are writing about, means you don’t have to rely on the Internet to help you out”*

*Talia, Final Reflection*

In response to student feedback, Jenny and I had increased student autonomy over choice across the intervention, leading us to providing them with the opportunity for complete choice over theme, topic and purpose for the third blog post. As mentioned earlier, for some the completely open choice was somewhat overwhelming and they needed guidance to select a topic. However in my experience, and as Graves (1994) explains, the more opportunities students receive to exercise choice over topic, the better they become at making quick and relevant topic selections. This reiterates the necessity for students to write every day, and self-select topics often, rather than occasionally. As with all learning, they need practice to become competent and confident topic choosers.

### **6.3.1 The Impact of Digital Technologies**

These findings support Boscolo & Hidi (2007) who claim that a theme or topic that is of interest to a student has a motivational influence, particularly when there is a sound knowledge base to that topic as well. Additionally, they comment that the type of task within which this topic is situated may also have an effect. If task design is not just attractive but also unusual and/or meaningful they say, students will find it more interesting and feel more competent than they may do with a traditional writing task.

When the first blogging task was introduced to the students, this ‘novelty factor’ in terms of writing directly onto the computer at school rather than having to complete a writing task in their draft-writing books, was certainly evident. As illustrated by student examples in the intervention narrative,

the fact that it was a new and different experience for them was a highly motivational influence.

I wondered however, if the newness rather than the inclusion of digital technologies in the composing process, was the motivator. This made me consider if the impact of using digital technologies would decrease across the duration of the intervention. This proved not to be so. The lure of using digital technologies held their interest and positively influenced their enjoyment of tasks throughout the intervention.

*“ (I enjoyed it) because you got to use some form of technology which I like a lot, it’s one of my favourite things to do is to get on something that has a screen.”*

*Jacob FG1*

*“I went home and I went on picmonkey to make more collage like photos and like it was a lot more fun than like than just finding a photo and putting it on cos you can mix them together, change colours and all that and that made it like, way more fun.”*

*Thomas FG2*

In addition to using ICTs being fun, students also acknowledged that the inclusion of multimedia enhanced the quality of their writing. In her post about her new baby cousin, Karly included a description of how the baby looked under the ultra-violet lights. Her comment describes how she felt the inclusion of photographs helped to portray this more accurately:

*“If you like explain like when she was under the blue lights that she looked like a little blue avatar smurf, people would like just think like oh, she looked blue but then when you actually see the pictures and she was like, really blue, and you can see where my perspective comes from... it’s also better because when you’re*

*writing you can't exactly stick a photo in your book, and like on the Internet you can."*

*Karly FG2*

This for me was confirmation of one of my initial hypotheses, that incorporating some of the digital literacies that students used outside the classroom would make school writing tasks more relevant and interesting.

However it was not only using ICTs that enhanced the students' enjoyment. It was also that they were learning new skills, and ways to more effectively use existing skills. Despite their frequent interactions with digital technologies outside of the classroom, many of the online tools and techniques Jenny shared were new learning for the students. This reinforces the notion that although students are frequently engaged with digital technologies in their home lives, this does not necessarily translate into sophisticated use at school. The students in this sample initially required specific teaching to enable them to include the simplest of things in their blog posts such as uploading photographs and adding hyperlinks. Although they may perform similar actions on social networking sites for example, the lack of adaptive skills required to add them to a blog therefore required teacher expertise to generalise their learning from one digital context to another. This supports the view that students do not learn to effectively utilise digital technologies by osmosis. The role of the teacher in providing not only instruction for how to use these tools, but also in providing a relevant context for their use, is critical.

As student familiarity with blogging increased, so did their confidence and perceived self-efficacy. Greater familiarity with the task of blogging assisted with this because the more they knew about blogging, the more successful they felt:

*"I felt a little more confident in the second one because the first blog post it was all new to us, we hadn't really done it before, so in that one I was kind of like learning to do all this stuff, and it didn't come out 100% as I'd like it. But now this one I knew and put a video and pictures on so it was a little more successful I think."*

Sam FG2

*"The first one you were learning and the second time you know everything, you're still learning but you know more about it now. And then you can look at other people's and say 'Oh I like how they've done this, I might put it in my next blog post'."*

Laura FG1

Writing tasks aside, writing directly on to the computer was hugely motivating and engaging for almost all students. In their final reflections, several students indicated that for them, using computers was preferable to writing in a book. Such comments included that this was easier, faster and allowed for more effective editing. The following comment typifies student feedback:

*"I prefer the computer because it's easier, and because if you make a mistake you don't have to scribble and make a mess when one click of the backspace and it's gone, no mess."*

Danny, Final Reflection

Students also appreciated writing on the computer because it meant that access to information from the Internet was literally at their fingertips. Composing on the computer also enabled the inclusion of multimedia, through which they felt the quality of their message was enhanced, as Karly stated:

*"The multimedia has made my writing more exciting to read. We have learned heaps of new things to involve in our writing to make*

*it more fun for the writer and more fun for the reader to read. I like to know that anyone all over the world can read my writing!"*

*Karly FG2*

### **6.3.3 Feedback Through Commenting**

Blogging has the potential to positively influence many aspects of student writing. In their research, McGrail & Davis (2011) found that the comment feature had the potential to have almost as much impact on student writing as did the actual writing of the posts. This was evident in this project also, where commenting enhanced students' awareness of audience. In addition, the acknowledgement of the audience through receiving and responding to comments highlighted for students the importance of purpose. Receiving comments also encouraged a greater consideration for ideas in terms of interest for the reader, as the intervention progressed. Karly's previous comment is an illustration of this awareness.

By the creation of the final blog post, students were, as McGrail & Davis found with the students in their study, learning to interact with the blog from both reader and the writer perspectives:

"As bloggers, these students were learning to write in the readerly way, by attending to their readers' needs and interests. In a similar fashion, as readers of posts from the audience, these student bloggers were learning to interpret their posts in the writerly way, looking for ideas to comment on and questions and issues to which they could respond. Understanding the complexity of this new relationship and the authorial positioning of the reader and writer is critical to writing and writing instruction in today's world" (p. 432).

With self-efficacy, commenting was also strongly acknowledged by students as making them feel positive and more confident about their writing, and encouraged them to accept that it was 'good'.

*“It feels good to look back and see like, oh these people really like how I write and it’s like oh, ok then!”*

*Laura FG1*

*“The commenting and feedback gave me a big push and a lot of confidence in writing and that’s what helped me the most.”*

*Summer, Final Reflection*

Further, some students said that receiving comment feedback made them want to write more. Others were encouraged by the impact their writing had on their readers. Karly explains how she felt when her teacher, who also has a baby, left a comment on her blog post about her new baby cousin:

*“I know with my blog post, about Mia, Mrs X said it made her go back to a year ago, it gave her warm fuzzies, which it’s cool like, my writing was touching somebody.”*

*Karly FG2*

Knowing that their efforts had been read and responded to was greatly appreciated by students. This highlights the advantage of a publication vehicle such as the Internet in enabling students’ writing to be acknowledged by an audience beyond their teacher. This supports the view of Ellison & Wu (2008), who suggest that students may be more invested in their writing if they know they are writing for a wider Internet audience, and is evident in Rosie’s reflection:

*“I like it that more people read my work on the blog, and that they could comment on it, while in my book my teacher is the only one commenting”*

*Rosie, Final Reflection*

The one area that students were a little dubious about with commenting, was whether to accept that comments left by peers were done so with integrity, or if they were just trying to make the authors feel good. This is even though the students themselves felt they had made their own comments with good intent. A higher value tended to be placed on comments left by teachers or commenters outside of the school. This supports the view of Ellison & Wu (2008), who found that students did not always consider peer comments valuable for their learning.

#### **6.4 Limitations of the Study**

The following points have been identified as potential limitations of this study:

- A case study design always carries with it the limitation of being a single unit, in this project one class of Year 7/8 students, in a single setting. This can make generalizing findings across wider and more diverse situations difficult.
- The timeframe for the research, while appropriate for the gathering of data for the project, did not allow for reflection into the embedding of seemingly changed attitudes and enjoyment over time.
- Despite all attempts to mitigate the effects of any past relationship with myself as researcher and the research participants, both student and teacher, it is possible that this had some impact on the ways in which they responded.
- As with any interview, it is possible that not all responses were genuine. It could be that some participants offered comments that they believed that the researcher wanted to hear, or that in some cases students chose to concur with their peers.

## 6.5 Future Directions

Undertaking an action research approach to my research has meant that practical steps can now be taken to address some of the findings which have emerged. Personally it is my intent to share relevant findings with my own staff and explore ways to refine and replicate some of the aspects of the intervention that impacted positively on both student self-efficacy in writing, and on their blog writing abilities. This will include increasing student autonomy over choice, encouraging students to write for a wider, more authentic audience, and an increased and more strategic teaching of multimodal aspects of literacy within a digital environment.

Before this however, and as is a common theme in this thesis, there is a need within my own school and the wider education community to acknowledge this wider notion of literacy. Once teachers understand and embrace new understandings of what it means to be literate, meeting the needs of the twenty-first century learner may be more readily realised.

Part of this will also be encouraging students to make a shift in their thinking regarding what constitutes writing. The teachers' role here may be to explore with their own classes the functional ways in which students use 'text' outside of the classroom, and validate these communicative forms by authentically integrating them into classroom literacy practices. Exploring ways to effectively assess digital writing may go some way into giving this kind of writing more value for all, and is a suggested area for future research.

The move to approaching literacy within a twenty-first century frame highlights the tension between this and the responsibilities teachers have to teach and assess within the traditional confines of literacy as is bound by current curriculum and assessment requirements. This reality means that teachers will need to find a balance between the two, and mitigate any confusion for students along the way. Until education policy explicitly

acknowledges the changing face of literacy, this is always going to be a challenge for both teachers and students.

## **6.6 Conclusion**

This investigation provides insight into the relationship between the inclusion of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) in the design of school-based writing tasks, and student self-efficacy and enjoyment in writing.

Although the students in this study clearly enjoy writing using digital technologies both at school and at home, they do not consider the writing that they do through digital technologies to be 'real writing.' They make a clear distinction between the writing they do outside of school, and that which they do for school purposes. A greater acknowledgement of writing through ICTs by both students and teachers may diversify the perception of what writing in the twenty-first century is. Adopting an expanded view of literacy to include a multimodal, multiliteracies approach will assist our students to participate effectively in today's society.

Student self-efficacy and enjoyment in writing are enhanced when students are provided with the opportunity to make choices, particularly regarding topic. Student enjoyment in writing increases when digital technologies are used. Feedback about their writing also enhances student self-efficacy. Blog writing provides an authentic platform to combine the three contributing aspects of choice, the use of digital technologies and feedback.

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## Appendices

### *Appendix A - Letter to Classroom Teachers*

'Waimahia' School  
P.O. Box 75210  
Auckland

1 June 2012

Dear Jenny

As you know, I am currently working to complete my Masters thesis at the University of Waikato. My official research working title is "Examining the effect on children's self efficacy of digital technologies as part of a writing programme for school purposes". My focus is on writing and ICT, and how students feel about certain writing tasks they do at school. I am also interested to find out what digital technologies they use at home and at school. All this information will assist me in finding out which writing tasks students find helpful and enjoyable, and make them feel good about themselves as writers. With writing and ICT both major professional learning areas at 'Waimahia' School in 2012, my research focus aligns fortuitously with the school's goals.

I am keen to explore these areas via a case study within an action research framework. As previously mooted with you, I would like to work with you, (other teacher) and the students of Room 21 on my research project. I am now seeking your informed consent to enable me to proceed with my research.

It is my aim that involvement in this project will be an enriching experience for both teacher and student participants, as well as for myself. For students I have designed data gathering methods that will have minimal impact on their learning, in terms of time. They will need to complete two online questionnaires at the beginning and end of the intervention, and also complete a writing sample at both ends of the data gathering period. They will also be asked to keep a reflective journal in regards to writing tasks they are involved with at school. Because reflective practice is commonplace at 'Waimahia' School, this should not be an add-on for them. I also intend to conduct focus group interviews from time to time, with small, randomly selected groups. My final data gathering will be via participant observation, which I will conduct unobtrusively during class writing times approximately once a week.

For you as teachers, I intend for my research to benefit you as opposed to requiring extra work. It may be that you want to incorporate your involvement in this project in to your Performance Management goals for 2012. After the collection of baseline data, I would like us to work together on the collaborative design of an intervention, a modification of your usual writing programme. This would be for some, not all, of your writing lessons. As with the students, I will also be keeping a reflective journal,

and ask that you do the same. Data from these journals will assist us with the planning of our intervention.

Any information collected will maintain the confidentiality of all involved, and will only be used for the purposes of this project. Data reported in my thesis will be widely available via the University of Waikato Research Commons digital repository, but the school, teachers and individual students will not be identified.

If you consent to me proceeding with my research as outlined, please read and complete the attached consent form, and return it to me by (date to be determined). Although we have verbally discussed me undertaking my research with you and your class, if you are no longer agreeable, please let me know immediately so I may explore other avenues.

Any questions you may have about the project will be happily answered – please contact me at [lynnf@'Waimahia'.school.nz](mailto:lynnf@'Waimahia'.school.nz) or call me on 09 266 .....

If at any time you have questions or concerns about the conduct of the research, you can contact my supervisor, Gail Cawkwell at the University of Waikato ph 07 838 ..... ext: 7...

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing back from you.

Kind regards

Lynn Fothergill

### Teacher Consent Form

- I \_\_\_\_\_, teacher at 'Waimahia' School, have read and understood the nature of the research project, and I agree to my and my class's involvement in it.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time up until the beginning of the data gathering. Withdrawal after this time but before the end of data gathering will be open to negotiation.
- I understand that the identities of all involved and school's name will be kept anonymous, and that any information gathered will be kept safely and confidentially.
- I understand that the findings of this research will be used in the researcher's thesis. If the information is to be used in any other way, further consultation will occur.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## *Appendix B - Letter to Principal*

'Waimahia' School  
P.O. Box 75 210  
Auckland

1 June 2012

Dear Louise

As you know, I am currently working to complete my Masters thesis at the University of Waikato. My official research working title is "Examining the effect of digital technologies on children's writing self efficacy as part of a classroom writing programme". My focus is on writing and ICT, and how students feel about certain writing tasks they do at school. I am also interested to find out what digital technologies they use at home and at school. All this information will assist me in finding out which writing tasks the group of students I am working with find helpful and enjoyable, and make them feel good about themselves as writers. With writing and ICT both major professional learning areas at 'Waimahia' School in 2012, my research focus aligns fortuitously with the school's goals.

I am keen to explore these areas via a case study within an action research framework. You are aware that I have approached the Room 21 teachers Kate Clarke and Rebecca Sentsch, about working with Room 21 on my project, and they have verbally agreed. Along with theirs, I am now seeking your informed consent to enable me to proceed with my research.

It is my aim that involvement in this project will be an enriching experience for both teacher and student participants, as well as for myself. For students I have designed data gathering methods that will have minimal impact on their learning, in terms of time. They will need to complete two online questionnaires at the beginning and end of the intervention, and also complete a writing sample at both ends of the data gathering period. They will also be asked to keep a reflective journal in regards to writing tasks they are involved with at school. Because reflective practice is commonplace at 'Waimahia' School, this should not be an add-on for them. I also intend to conduct focus group interviews from time to time, with small, randomly selected groups. My final data gathering will be via participant observation, which I will conduct unobtrusively during class writing times approximately once a week.

For the teachers, I intend for my research to benefit them as opposed to requiring extra work. Following the collection of baseline data, I would like to join with them regularly in planning and reflecting on an intervention or interventions that arise from that data. It may be that they want to incorporate their involvement in this project in to their Performance Management goals for 2012.

Any information collected will maintain the confidentiality of all involved, and will only be used for the purposes of this project. Data reported in my thesis will be widely available via the University of Waikato Research

Commons digital repository, but the school, teachers and individual students will not be identified.

If you consent to me proceeding with my research as outlined, please read and complete the attached consent form, and return it to me by (date to be determined).

Although we have verbally discussed me undertaking my research at 'Waimahia' School, if you would prefer that I did not conduct my research here, please let me know immediately so I may explore other avenues. Any questions you may have about the project will be happily answered – please contact me at [lynnf@'Waimahia'.school.nz](mailto:lynnf@'Waimahia'.school.nz) or call me on 09 266 ....

If at any time you have questions or concerns about the conduct of the research, you can contact my supervisor, Gail Cawkwell at the University of Waikato ph 07 838 ..... ext: 7...

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing back from you.

Kind regards

Lynn Fothergill

*"Examining the effect of digital technologies on children's writing self efficacy as part of a classroom writing programme".*

### Principal's Consent Form

- I \_\_\_\_\_, Principal of 'Waimahia' School, have read and understood the nature of the research project, and I agree to the involvement of the teachers and students of Room 21.
- I understand that any participation is voluntary and that teacher participants may withdraw at any time up until the beginning of the data-gathering period, and student participants may withdraw at any time up until the end of the data-gathering period.
- I understand that the identities of all involved and school's name will be kept anonymous, and that any information gathered will be kept safely and confidentially.
- I understand that the findings of this research will be used in the researcher's thesis. If the information is to be used in any other way, further consultation will occur.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## *Appendix C - Letter to Students*

'Waimahia' School  
P.O. Box 75 210  
Auckland

5 June 2012

Dear

Most of you know me as the Deputy Principal at your school, 'Waimahia' School. You may have noticed that I have not been around much this year. As some of you know, I am a student this year too. I am studying at the University of Waikato, working to complete a "Masters Thesis" (that's one very big research project). This letter is to ask if you would be willing to help me with my project, not as your Deputy Principal, but as a fellow student and researcher.

My research focuses on writing and ICT, and how you, as students, feel about certain writing tasks you do at school. I am also interested to find out what digital technologies you use at home and at school. All this information will assist me and your teachers in finding out which writing tasks are helpful and enjoyable, and make you feel good about yourself as a writer. The fancy title is "Examining the effect of digital technologies on children's writing self efficacy as part of a classroom writing programme". I am approaching you because you are a student in Room 21, and your teachers and Mrs (Principal) have agreed that I can ask for your help.

So what will helping me involve? Hopefully not a lot more than you would regularly do as part of your normal school life. I will be asking you to complete two questionnaires that will take about 10-15 minutes each. There are no right or wrong answers in the questionnaires, and the questions are multi-choice. You will be given the same questionnaires at the beginning and end of my research period. I would also like to collect a writing sample from you at the beginning and end of my time with you.

I know that you reflect on your learning a lot at 'Waimahia' School, and I will be asking that you keep a reflective journal to jot down or rank how you felt about various writing tasks you do at school. I will also be randomly selecting ten of you (two groups of five) to take part in some group interviews. Finally, from time to time I would like to come in and see a writing session in your classroom. Both the interviews and the classroom observations may be video or audio recorded to help me remember what was said and/or what went on.

Any information you share with me, or that I collect from you, is private to you, your teachers, Mrs (Principal) and me. It will only be used for my research project. I will keep it safely at my house. When I write my project up, I won't be using any of your names; I won't even be using the real name of our school. This is to protect your confidentiality.

If you are willing and able to participate, please read and complete the attached consent form. Naturally I also need to ask your parents/guardians if it's OK for you to take part, so I have a letter and consent form for you to take home to them too. I suggest you have a chat about it together. I ask that both signed consent forms be returned to me by this Friday, June 8.

If you don't want to take part, that's OK. You will remain part of the class and take part in the all the learning opportunities that arise from this project. If I make any video or audio recordings, I do all I can not to include those who choose not to be part of this project in those recordings. Even if you give your consent now, you are able to withdraw from the project at any time, up until the end of Term 3 (that's when I finish gathering all my information).

Please feel free to ask me about anything you do not understand. I will be at school tomorrow afternoon (Wednesday June 6) if you want to come and ask me anything about the project that we did not discuss today, or any queries that come up when you speak to your parents/guardians about this project. If at any time you have questions or concerns about how I am conducting my research, you or your parent/guardian can contact my supervisor, Gail Cawkwell at the University of Waikato ph 07 838 ..... ext: 7....

Thank you for considering my request for help. I look forward to hearing back from you.

Ms Fothergill

*"Examining the effect of digital technologies on children's writing self efficacy as part of a classroom writing programme".*

### **Student Consent Form**

- I \_\_\_\_\_, have read and understood what this research project is about, and I agree to participate as requested.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary (meaning I don't HAVE to do it), and that I may withdraw at any time up until the end of September.
- I understand that my name and my school's name will be kept anonymous, and that any information that is gathered will be kept safely and confidentially.
- I understand that what is found out during this research will be used in the researcher's thesis. If the information is to be used in any other way, I will be asked about this.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

*Appendix D - Letter to Parents/Guardians*

'Waimahia' School  
P.O. Box 75 210  
Auckland

5 June 2012

Dear Parents/Guardians of Room 21 Students

Most of you know me as the Deputy Principal at your child's school, 'Waimahia' School. As many of you also know, I am currently on study leave, working to complete my Masters thesis at the University of Waikato. I write to you in my role as a researcher.

My research focuses on writing and ICT, and how students feel about certain writing tasks they do at school. I am also interested to find out what digital technologies they use at home and at school. All this information will assist me in finding out which writing tasks students find helpful and enjoyable, and make them feel good about themselves as writers. The official working title of my research is "Examining the effect of digital technologies on children's writing self efficacy as part of a classroom writing programme".

I am planning to conduct my research via a case study and have approached the Principal Louise, and the Room 21 teachers Jenny and Karen, about working with Room 21 on my project, and they have agreed.

I am now asking for informed consent from parents/guardians of Room 21 students, and from the students themselves.

If you consent to your child being involved, please be assured that it will not detract from their learning, as my research will be largely integrated into their everyday programme. As outlined in my letter to students, which I have asked that they share with you, I will gather my data from now until the end of the third school term, via questionnaires, writing samples, focus group interviews and classroom observations. Students will also be asked to keep a reflective journal.

Any information collected will maintain the confidentiality of your child, and will only be used for the purposes of this project. Relevant information may be shared with classroom teachers and the Principal, Louise. Data reported in my thesis will be widely available via the University of Waikato Research Commons digital repository, but the school, teachers and individual students will not be identified.

If you consent to your child being involved, please read and complete the attached consent form. To assist them in making an informed decision, you may like to have a discussion with your child also, before they give their own consent. I ask that both signed consent forms be returned to me by this Friday, June 8.

If you would prefer that your child did not take part that is completely your choice. They will remain part of the class and take part in the all the learning opportunities that arise from this project. Even if you or your child give your consent now, your child may be voluntarily withdrawn from the project at any time, up until the end of Term 3, when data gathering will be completed.

If you have any questions about the project, feel free to email me - [lynnf@'Waimahia'.school.nz](mailto:lynnf@'Waimahia'.school.nz). I am happy to meet with you at a mutually suitable time if necessary.

If at any time you have questions or concerns about the conduct of the research, you can contact my supervisor, Gail Cawkwell at the University of Waikato ph 07 838 .... ext: 78...

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing back from you.

Kind regards

Lynn Fothergill

*“Examining the effect of digital technologies on children’s writing self efficacy as part of a classroom writing programme”.*

#### **Parent/Guardian Consent Form**

- I \_\_\_\_\_, parent/guardian of \_\_\_\_\_ have read and understood the nature of the research project is about, and I agree to allow my child to participate as requested.
- I understand that my child’s participation is voluntary and that they may withdraw at any time up until the end of the data-gathering period.
- I understand that my child’s identity and school’s name will be kept anonymous, and that any information gathered will be kept safely and confidentially.
- I understand that the findings of this research will be used in the researcher’s thesis. If the information is to be used in any other way, further consultation will occur.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix E - Questionnaire One - Finding Out About Home and School Writing and ICT Practices

**Student Questionnaire One: Finding Out About Home and School Writing and ICT Practices**

This questionnaire is about the kinds of writing you do at home and school, and about the kinds of digital technologies you use at home and at school.

There may be some kinds of writing you do not do, and some digital technologies you do not use. Please just answer "NO" if you do not do that kind of writing, or use that kind of technology, and select Continue.

If your answer "YES", select an answer from the choices given and then select Continue

**Part A - At Home**

	Yes/No		At least once a day	At least once a week	At least once a month	Hardly Ever
Do you write a diary/journal at home?		If yes, how often do you write a diary/journal at home?				
Do you write on a blog at home?		If yes, how often do you write on a blog?				
Do you write in a book or on paper for homework at home?		If yes, how often do you write in a book or on paper for homework?				
Do you write using a computer for homework at home?		If yes, how often do you write using a computer for homework?				
Do you write for fun, or for family and friends, using a computer at home?		If yes, how often do you write for fun, or for family and friends, using a computer at home?				
Do you write instant messages (such as MSN/Skype/Windows Live Messenger/Facebook Messenger) at home		If yes, how often do you write instant messages				
Do you write letters or postcards by hand at home?		If yes, how often do you write letters or postcards by hand?				

	Yes/No		At least once a day	At least once a week	At least once a month	Hardly Ever
Do you write your own stories, poems, songs, reports etc by hand at home?		If yes, how often do you write your own stories, poems, songs, reports etc by hand?				
Do you write on social networking sites (such as Facebook, Bebo, Moshi Monsters, SuperClubs) at home?		If yes, how often do you write on social networking sites				
Do you send text messages at home?		If yes, how often do you send text messages?				
Do you send emails at home?		If yes, how often do you send emails?				
Do you write on Twitter at home?		If yes, how often do you write on Twitter?				
Do you use a desktop or laptop computer at home?		If yes, how often do you use a desktop or laptop computer				
Do you use an iPad or other tablet device at home?		If yes, how often do you use a tablet device?				
Do you use a cellphone at home?		If yes, how often do you use a cellphone?				
Do you use an iPod touch or similar device at home?		If yes, how often do you use an iPod or similar device?				
Do you take images using a digital camera at home?		If yes, how often do you take images using a digital camera?				
Do you record moving images using a digital video camera or 'Bloggie' type device at home?		If yes, you record moving images using a digital video camera or 'bloggie' type device?				

	Yes/No		At least once a day	At least once a week	At least once a month	Hardly Ever
Do you use a cellphone to record still or moving images at home?		If yes, how often do you use a cellphone to record still or moving images				
Do you upload images/movies on to the internet (including social networking sites and YouTube) at home?		If yes, how often do you upload images/movies on to the internet?				
Do you watch videos on the Internet, including YouTube, TV On Demand etc at home?		If yes, how often do you watch videos on the Internet, including YouTube, TV On Demand etc?				

Appendix F - Questionnaire Two - Finding Out About Attitude and Self-Efficacy in Regard to Writing

**Questionnaire Two - Finding Out About Attitude and Self-Efficacy in Regard to Writing**

*This questionnaire is about how you feel about writing, and yourself as a writer. For each question, please select the option that best describes how you feel.*

How much do you enjoy writing at school?	Not a Lot	A little	Quite a lot	Heaps
	Bad	OK	Good	Very Good
How good do you think you are at writing?				
	Bad	OK	Good	Very Good
How good do you think your teachers think you are at writing?				
	Bad	OK	Good	Very Good
How good do your Mum/Dad/Guardians think you are at writing?				
	Not a Lot	A little	Quite a Lot	Heaps
Are you better at writing than others in your class?				
	Not a Lot	A little	Quite a Lot	Heaps
How much do you enjoy writing at home?				
	Not a Lot	A little	Quite a Lot	Heaps
Do you like to share your writing with people other than your teachers?				
	Not a Lot	A little	Quite a lot	Heaps
How much do you enjoy the writing tasks your teachers plan for you?				
	Not a Lot	A little	Quite a lot	Heaps
How much do you the writing tasks your teachers plan help you to be a better writer?				
	I enjoy them all	I like most of them	I don't like many	I don't like any

*This questionnaire was administered to students online. The layout and formatting was therefore different to what was shown here*

## *Appendix G - Focus Group Semi Structured Interviews - Guiding Questions*

*The initial semi-structured interviews explored and extended themes related to the questionnaires.*

### **Writing/Digital technologies at home and school**

Purpose:

Further explore the kinds of writing done by choice at home - I was interested to know if students validated the writing that may not parallel what they do in school (i.e. social networking, texting, instant messaging) as 'real writing'.

Ascertain if there are kinds of writing they engage in and enjoy at home that were not covered in the questionnaire.

In terms of digital technologies, if there is a difference between home and school use, I would like to explore students' ideas about how they feel about any imbalance.

Further explore the use of non print-based literacies in the home, especially video and image – how these are used and for what purpose. Do students see a link to 'writing?' Do the students' conceptions of writing extend beyond print-based literacy practices?

- *Do you view the writing you do at home any differently than the writing you do at school? (e.g is one more fun than the other, more important than the other, harder/easier than the other...)*
- *Are there any other kinds of writing you do at home or at school that were not asked about in the Questionnaire?*
- *Is there any difference between the digital technologies you use at school or away from school, or maybe how you use them?*
- *I see that a lot of students in your class take digital photographs and movies. What do you do with them? Why do you do that?*

### **Writing tasks**

Purpose:

Seek reflection on previous writing tasks this year – which have been the most enjoyable/interesting and what may have contributed to that.

Determine which tasks have enabled them to feel success as writers. How they gauged and felt about that success. Did it have an impact on how they felt about themselves as writers?

Seek student ideas about what kinds of writing tasks they would like to do at school; their ideas about how teachers could make them more enjoyable and engaging.

Explore student perceptions about the technologies they are using outside of the classroom, and their relevance for the classroom writing programme – how they could be incorporated into task design

- *Thinking back to the writing you have done in class so far this year, which tasks have you enjoyed the most? Why do you think that is?*
- *Which ones have you not enjoyed? Why do you think this is?*
- *Does an interesting writing task make you feel better about the writing that you do?*
- *Have your feelings about writing changed this year and if they have, how?*
- *What do you think your teachers could do to make the writing tasks you do at school more enjoyable and interesting?*
- *How do you feel when you have completed a writing task at school? How do you know you have been successful with your writing?*
- *What kinds of writing tasks do you think make you a better writer?*
- *What kinds of writing would you prefer to do more of at school?*
- *Given the choice, what tools would you choose to use to get your 'message' out there?*

## **Blogging**

Purpose:

To further explore perceptions of and experiences with blogging, with a view to potentially using blogging as the platform for the Action research project

*The information from the questionnaires suggested that everyone writes on a blog at sometime at school, and that most of you write on a blog at home.*

- *Why do you think people write on a blog? What do you think the purpose of a blog is? Do they have different purposes?*
- *Can you tell me about what kind of writing you do on blogs?*
- *Is the writing you do on blogs at home different to the writing you do on blogs at school? Why?*
- *Do you ever read anyone else's blog? Tell me about the other blogs you read.*
- *How are decisions made about what goes on the class blog? Why do you think this is?*

- *Why does the teacher have restrictions around what is put on the blog?*
- *Would you like to write about anything different on the class blog?*
- *Do you have any other ideas about what you could write/ include on the blog - can you think of any other ways that blogging can be used in the classroom*
- *Do you make comments on other people's posts or blogs? What kind of comments do you make?*
- *Do other people leave comments on your blog posts? What kind of comments do they leave? How does receiving a comment make you feel?*
- *Does anyone have an individual blog? Tell me about your blogging*
- *Do you think blog writing could help you become a better writer? If yes, how?*

*Appendix H - Student Reflective Journal Prompts*

Reflective Journal Prompts

Task:

How much did you enjoy this task?

- 1 Not at all
- 2 Not particularly
- 3 I liked it
- 4 I liked it a lot
- 5 I loved it!

- Please comment on why you chose this rating.
- What, if anything did you like about this task?
- What if, anything, did you not like about this task?
- How could this task be improved so you could enjoy it more?

How do you feel about the writing you have done for task?

- 1 I don't think it is good at all
- 2 It's not very good
- 3 It's OK, average
- 4 I think it's pretty good actually, quite proud
- 5 I am super proud of it!

- Please comment on why you chose this rating
- What, if anything, made you feel good about your writing for this task?
- What, if anything, would make you feel better about your writing for this task?

## Blogging Rubric

Student's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

developed by 'Jenny' and Lynn Fortherrill

	Expert	Proficient	Developing	Beginner
Quality of Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear train of thought and purpose</li> <li>• Substantial information for the reader</li> <li>• Well organised</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing a train of thought and purpose</li> <li>• Satisfactory information for the reader</li> <li>• Well organised in the main</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Train of thought and purpose lack clarity</li> <li>• Some information for the reader, though lacking</li> <li>• Some parts not well organised</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No thought given to purpose</li> <li>• Train of thought not clear</li> <li>• No new information for the reader</li> <li>• Disorganised</li> </ul>
Voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Written in an interesting style and voice</li> <li>• Words are carefully chosen, memorable and bring content to life</li> <li>• Fluent sentences, natural and expressive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Written in a somewhat interesting style and voice</li> <li>• Words chosen mostly reflect author's personality and bring content to life for the most part</li> <li>• Some fluency, becoming natural and expressive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Post has little style or voice</li> <li>• Words chosen show an attempt at bringing content to life</li> <li>• Sentence fluency achieved in some places</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Post has no style or voice</li> <li>• Words chose lack impact</li> <li>• Sentences lack fluency and seem unnatural</li> </ul>
Multimedia/Links	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multiple pieces of Multimedia</li> <li>• All media/links clearly relevant to the post</li> <li>• Media/links are positioned to assist flow within the content</li> <li>• Links add to reader's understanding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At least 2 pieces of Multimedia/links</li> <li>• Most media/links clearly relevant to the post</li> <li>• Media/links don't impede flow within the content</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At least 1 piece of Multimedia/link</li> <li>• Media/links shows some relevance to the post</li> <li>• Flow of content not helped by positioning of media/links</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No Multimedia OR</li> <li>• Media/links not relevant to the post</li> <li>• Flow of content impeded by positioning of media/links</li> </ul>
Courtesies for the Audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All grammar, spelling and punctuation is correct.</li> <li>• Formatting adds interest and makes for easy reading for the audience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most grammar, spelling and punctuation is correct.</li> <li>• Formatting adds some interest and generally makes for easy reading of the post</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation.</li> <li>• Formatting does not contribute to ease of reading</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation.</li> <li>• Formatting makes reading of post difficult</li> </ul>
Commenting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Idea or point of view is original and clear</li> <li>• Comment shows clear connection to blog post</li> <li>• Clearly encourages further conversation, perhaps through further links, asking a question</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Idea or point of view shows some clarity and originality</li> <li>• Comment shows some connection to blog post</li> <li>• Beginning to encourage further conversation, through asking a question for example</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Idea or point of view lacking in clarity and originality</li> <li>• Comment shows little connection to blog post</li> <li>• Little evidence to encourage further conversation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Idea or point of view not stated</li> <li>• Comment not connected to blog post</li> <li>• No encouragement of further conversation</li> </ul>

Acknowledgements: <http://janquitches.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/blogging-commenting-rubric.pdf>  
<http://elickandusen.wordpress.com/2011/02/16/blogging-lunch-and-learn-at-winston-kroll/>