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Using Blogs to Promote Literary Response during Professional Development

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*T*he blogging has, I don't want to say forced, but kind of made me read books that I haven't necessarily read before, and I don't think I would have. I've read lots of children's books just through student teaching and everything, but it makes me look outside the box and maybe at other genres that I wouldn't look at necessarily. (Sam, a preservice teacher, blogging in a children's literature course)

Providing preservice teachers such as Sam (all names are pseudonyms) with opportunities to expand their literary horizons and to explore children's literature through response or discussion activities may encourage literature-rich instructional practices in language arts classrooms. That perspective guided Amy Hutchison, Sam's instructor and an author of this article, during a required children's literature course for preservice teachers. Amy believes that if teachers engage in responding to children's literature, they are more likely to use reader response effectively with their own students.

There is good reason to emphasize reader response activities in language arts classrooms. Theoretically grounded in Rosenblatt's (1985) views of reading as a transaction between readers and texts from which personal meaning emerges, reader response promotes critical thinking and in-depth discussion centered in literature (Almasi, 1995; Eeds & Wells, 1989; Goatley, Brock, & Raphael, 1995; Langer, 1995, 2010; Rosenblatt, 2004). In this view, responses are best nurtured when readers share personal connections to literature in an open forum designed to foster critical reading and thoughtful reflection through discussions of a literary work (Galda & Beach, 2001).

Amy developed a class project that utilized an online social network, specifically a Ning network, to facilitate responses to children's and young adult literature. One option in this increasingly popular online genre for interactive communication, the Ning may be used to extend and enhance opportunities to integrate reader response into language arts instruction. Jamie (Colwell) and David (Reinking) then collaborated with Amy to consider how online social networks might be useful for instructors who provide professional development to language arts teachers. Here, we draw connections between Amy's class and the larger field of teacher education that encompasses both preservice and practicing teachers. For the purposes of this article, we use the term *teachers* to refer to both preservice and inservice educators participating in professional development activities.

Why Use a Social Networking Site to Facilitate Literature Response?

Social networking through commercial websites such as Facebook (http://www.facebook.com/), LinkedIn (http://www.linkedin.com/), MySpace (http://www.myspace.com/), and Ning (http://www.ning.com/) allow participants to create a personal profile and to link to other users to share ideas, activities, events, and interests within their individual networks. These sites often include a variety of other services, such as email, instant messaging, and blogs.

Social networking sites also facilitate the creation of a bounded network of participants, such as students in a school or district or, as in the present example, preservice teachers enrolled in the same class. Further, they encourage collaboration and personal expression of ideas, which are consistent with constructivist views of learning and growth (Vygotsky, 1978). For educators, social networking sites may be appealing because they readily

enable connections to and collaborations with other students or teachers—connections that mirror the collaborative, interactive, and open environments that constructivist teachers seek to establish. At the same time, they allow users to personalize their own space within the social network.

The popularity of social networking sites has risen substantially over the last decade and represents a remarkable cultural phenomenon. Facebook, currently the largest social networking site, reports 500 million active users, half of whom log on every day. Social networking is particularly popular with adolescents. National data collected by the Pew Internet and American Life Project reported that more than 40% of US adolescents and adults engage in social networking daily (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickhur, 2010). Further, Lenhart et al. (2010) reported that 97% of young adults (18–29) use the Internet, and 72% use social networking sites. Nowadays, college-age students are frequent users of social networking sites, which have been popular since they were adolescents (Lenhart et al., 2010).

Many social networking sites host blogs that encourage posting and responding. For example, one of the six largest online companies that help individuals create and manage personal blogs (http://wordpress.com/) includes a statistical tracking of activity on blogs they host. In one 24-hour period in May, 2011, the site reported the following traffic: 385,806 bloggers posted 420,898 posts and 438,809 comments, or approximately 292 posts and 305 comments per minute, for a total of 94,579,574 words—more than twice the size of the entire printed Encyclopedia Britannica. These figures represent the activity on a single (albeit large) online site, and that is undoubtedly only a small fraction of the blogs and blogging activity worldwide. Blogs and social networking sites are even gaining momentum among students at the elementary level; Gray, Thomas, and Lewis (2010) reported that 35% of elementary teachers use blogs and wikis in their instruction and that 22% use social networking sites for instruction.

Digital forms of communication have expanded definitions of literacy (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Street, 1995), and we believe they open up new approaches to using literature response. Given the close match between social networking, blogging, and the goals of literature response, Amy decided to use these popular online activities to engage the teachers in responding to children's and young adult literature. As university-based literacy researchers interested in teacher education and professional development, we used interviews to gather data about her students' reactions to this activity. Our interest in blogging and its potential to enhance language arts instruction is motivated by our view of literacy as social practice (Gee, 1996) and a desire to promote engaged literature learning (Langer, 1995). It is also motivated by our keen awareness that the landscape of literacy has irrevocably changed.

We are also committed to helping language arts teachers address their responsibility to integrate digital forms of literacy into the language arts curriculum, a responsibility that is becoming increasingly explicit. For example, the International Reading Association (2009) has adopted a position statement calling for the integration of digital literacy into instruction. Likewise, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has four position statements, four sets of guidelines, and 11 resolutions related to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), including standards for integrating them into instruction (see www.ncte.org). There is some evidence that preservice teachers will be better prepared to integrate digital literacy into their future classrooms when they have the opportunity to experience them firsthand (e.g., Franklin, 2007; Heo, 2009).

Although digital technology is increasingly available in classrooms, much work is needed to ensure that technology is consistently integrated into systematic and meaningful literacy instruction (Hutchison & Reinking, in press). Recent research (Hutchison & Reinking, in press) indicates that improved professional development on technology integration might increase substantive curricular integration of digital technology into literacy instruction. Thus, we believe that allowing teachers to experience literature response through digital

tools may provide them with technical training and curricular understandings necessary to integrate this type of activity into their own instruction.

Literature response is perhaps a good place to start for teachers and teacher educators who consider themselves inadequately prepared to respond to this transformation of literacy and who are beginning to explore possibilities for integrating digital literacy into their teaching. According to a recent national survey of literacy and language arts teachers (Hutchison & Reinking, 2010), 81.6% of teachers report that a lack of professional development on how to integrate technology is a barrier to its integration. Further, 73% of teachers report that they do not have time to teach students the skills needed for complex tasks, with 45.7% of teachers reporting their own inability to use technology.

Blogs, particularly those contained within a social networking site, are intuitive and simple tools that require minimal technical competence and no additional software. Responding with a blog tool is similar to responding with a word processing tool, an activity with which many students and teachers are familiar (Hutchison & Reinking, in press). Thus, teachers not inclined to integrate digital forms of literacy into their teaching may be more likely to do so with a tool that requires novice-level technical competence and minimal professional development. Further, most teachers likely already include literature response in their curriculum and would not have to completely reconceptualize their curricular approach.

We questioned how teachers would respond to blogging in a social network as a way to become engaged with children's and young adult literature in a children's literature course.

There are additional reasons why literature response may be a good place to begin integrating digital literacy into teaching.

- First, reader response is a familiar and widely used approach to teaching literature.

- Second, there is a close match between literature response and social networks that incorporate blogs—a practice that closely corresponds to conventional journaling, which is a common activity in the language arts. Blogs also connect to valued conventional pedagogical principles, such as writing for an authentic audience. More specifically, Shoffner (2007) and Weiler (2003) suggest that blogging among adolescent students facilitates reflective thinking and collaborative discussion, which may promote fruitful literature response and discussion.

- Third, students are likely to be acquainted with social networking and blogs and adept at using them (Lenhart et al., 2010).

- Finally, not only do social networks and blogs offer unique opportunities for response and possibly discussion, but they may also offer opportunities to teach new skills, strategies, and dispositions associated with digital forms of reading and writing (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004). For example, students may add supporting links and graphics to their own blog reflections, requiring them to search for and locate information on the Internet, as well as create and upload digital photos, videos, etc.

In short, it may be a short bridge between conventional reader response activities and the newer online activities, including blogging in social networks.

However, we questioned how teachers would respond to blogging in a social network as a way to become engaged with children's and young adult literature in a children's literature course. Would it prompt them to consider using such an approach in their own teaching? What might we learn about their views of children's literature and reader response within the context of this project? What might their responses suggest for integrating this approach in professional development? These are the types of questions we hoped to answer through our collaboration with Amy.

Context of the Project

The participants in this project were 15 (13 female and 2 male) preservice teachers of grades K–8 (n = 12) and 9–12 (n = 3) enrolled in a children's

literature course at a large university. The course was required for all education majors seeking a teaching certificate, and the students in this course had completed student teaching the previous semester. A main purpose of the children's literature course was to familiarize preservice teachers with children's and young adult literature. Amy was a second-year assistant professor at the time of the study, committed to the underlying rationale for reader response and to integrating digital forms of communication into the language arts. Thus, she designed the course to include a requirement that all students create a personal page on a social networking site and set up a personal blog on that site. She used Ning (see www.ning.com) because it offers private, no-cost networks for educators through funding from a major educational publisher. Like many social networking sites, Ning allows creators of networks to select the site's appearance and functionality, as well as whether the site is public or private. Ning permits personal sites to include features such as photos or videos, lists of network members and events, groups within the network, and communication tools such as forums or blogs. Ning is designed to set up a social network with minimal technical skills.

Ning was also an ideal platform for the course because participants can host a blog internally, restricting it to users of a particular Ning network. Users do not have to leave the site to post a blog response. Further, Ning organizes and displays every class member's blog site on a single page and displays recent blog posts on the homepage. For their Ning profile, participants uploaded pictures of themselves and had the option to personalize their own page by specifying interests and hobbies. Amy, the instructor, was also a participant in the class Ning. Figure 1 shows a screenshot of the Ning homepage for the class.

Teachers in the course were required to read children's and young adult literature in each of the following genres: fantasy, historical fiction, realistic fiction, poetry, multicultural literature, biography, classic children's literature, picturebooks, and informational books. They had the option of read-
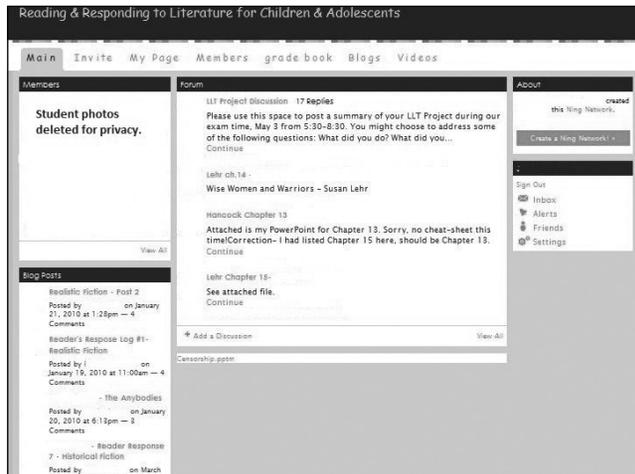

Figure 1. Screenshot of the Ning homepage

ing any book from an extensive reading list that grouped books into these genres with the stipulation that they read either 26 picturebooks, 6 chapter books, or a combination of 18 picturebooks and 3 chapter books. The teachers were given these options so they could pursue their own interests across several genres of children's literature. For example, some early childhood teachers wanted primarily to read picturebooks, whereas elementary or secondary teachers wanted to read chapter books or a combination of both picture and chapter books. Amy provided guidelines about how to respond to the required readings, listed in Figure 2. Students were required to post a weekly blog responding to their readings, for a total of 13 blog posts.

The teachers selected the number and variety of books about which to post each week. They were encouraged, but not required, to make comments on their peers' book selections and reactions, either in class or on their peers' online blogs. We were interested to see if the blog activity would lead to spontaneous reading and reacting to each other's blogs. Figure 3 provides an example of one teacher's blog posting in response to *Burger Boy*, a picturebook by Alan Durant.

To understand the teachers' reactions to and experiences with participating in the Ning blog project, we collected their blogs throughout the semester and, at the end of the semester after final grades had been submitted, we interviewed the 15 individuals

Figure 2. Blog posting guidelines

- Describe the literary genre accompanied by a digital picture of the book cover.
- Provide an annotation of the book:
  - *Annotation for picturebooks:* A well-written two-sentence story summary that creatively captures the essence of the book. A third sentence should make a statement on the type of illustrations used and how they contribute to the effectiveness of the story. Word choice (descriptive adjectives, powerful verbs) and voice are characteristics of well-written annotations.
  - *Annotations for chapter books:* A well-written two-paragraph story summary that creatively captures the essence of the book. The annotation should refer to story elements: character, setting, theme, problem, resolution, and point of view. While concise, the annotation should be effective in convincing another to read the book.
- Respond. Responses may include, but are not limited to:
  - What do you notice about the book?
  - How does the story make you feel?
  - What does the book remind you of from your own life?
  - Of what other books does this book remind you?
  - What meaning or message does the book have for you?
  - What classroom connections naturally link to this book?
  - What reading/writing strategies could be taught through this book?
  - To what grade level standard(s) does this book meaningfully align?

Note: It is critical that responses be spontaneous, genuine, and honest. Responses to picturebooks would include a paragraph entry in response to the story and a paragraph entry in response to artistic style and/or media. Responses to chapter books would include 2–3-paragraph entries in a literature response journal format that reflect your thoughts at different points throughout the book.

- Select a memorable quote, paragraph, line, or words from the text. Include a page number (or n.p. for non-paged picturebooks).
- Confirm that the copyright date is between 2000–2010.
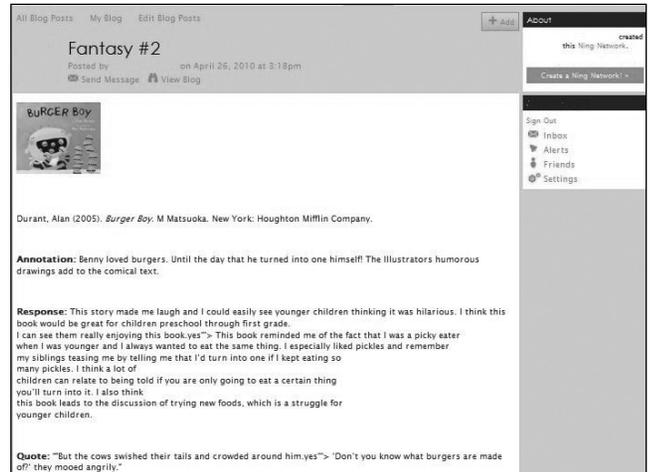
Figure 3. One teacher's blog posting about *Burger Boy*

for about 20 minutes. Because this project was exploratory, we used a semi-structured interview to stimulate participants' reactions to the blogging activity (see the Appendix). The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. We analyzed the transcriptions using a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2007), which allowed us to identify participants' significant reactions (Moustakas, 1994) and subsequently organize them into categories. Specifically, we developed a list of statements that related to how participants experienced blogging about literature during the Ning project. We grouped the statements into larger themes, and then used these statements to describe participants' experiences, which we explain in the following section.

What We Learned

The following questions reflect the major categories of participants' statements and observations during the interviews and summarize what we deduced from them.

What features of the Ning blog did the teachers find useful or appealing?

A prominent finding was that the teachers appreciated the structure of the Ning blog. Because they were able to post pictures of the books they were reviewing and all of the blog posts were combined into a single page of the Ning site, the blog created

a socially safe environment for posting responses. For example, Lisa explained,

> I think I liked having it all connected to see the book versus the person who wrote about it. Because I feel like if . . . someone had to click onto my page to see everything, I would be a little more hesitant to post. I liked hiding [by having my posts mixed in with others'].

Lisa felt that her responses to literature were intertwined with other responses listed on the Ning blog homepage, reducing the focus on herself as an individual writer. Consequently, we learned that the teachers were comfortable in the Ning environment because the focus of Ning blog responses was on the book or text, not the reader or writer. As Amanda noted, "Having all blog posts together felt safer. The focus was on the book rather than the person." We concluded that grouping responses by text during literary response may be most appealing to Ning users and encourage participation.

Also, teachers liked the quick and direct access to all blog sites in the Ning through an organized central homepage. Unlike external blog sites, Ning organizes and displays every class member's blog site on a single page and shows the 15 most recent blog posts on the homepage. This organizational structure offers streamlined access to all blog sites by creating a central location for finding and visiting other teachers' blogs. The teachers utilized this feature to quickly access multiple blog sites and easily keep up with others' literary responses. One teacher explained the appeal of this feature,

> I don't think that I would like it if everyone had to, like, email their reader responses to each other. I liked that with Ning, they could be found in one central location. I don't think I would be encouraged to read reader responses if they were available through email or on paper copies.

For literature response projects such as this one, social networking sites may be most enticing when they offer quick and direct access to all blogs and literature responses. Being able to easily access and read other teachers' responses seemed to create a community of readers genuinely interested in learning about new literature. Specifically, the teachers valued the Ning blog because it allowed them

to share common or new interests. As one teacher stated,

> I'm glad that we had [the Ning blog] because then I could look at other people's [blogs] and see what books they were using. And because I am doing just the picturebooks, I like to see what chapter books people are reading so maybe if I wanted to read chapter books later on, I can see what people are choosing to read, too. (Chris)

Unlimited access to each other's literature responses encouraged many of the teachers to read about a variety of children's and young adult books. Moreover, four of the 15 teachers specifically noted they were more inclined to read a blog post and to consider reading a book discussed in the post because classmates utilized graphic features of the Ning blog, such as adding a picture or graphical representation of a book's cover along with their response. Chantel explained, "Some of my reading choices were influenced by others' posts on Ning. I did choose to read a few books based on students' posts and book covers." Using visually attractive and centrally organized social networking sites that allow users to include graphics may invite interest in literature. In sum, we gleaned from the interviews that social networking sites used for literature response should have features that facilitate organization and seamless connections with other users while also providing easy-to-use visual aids or graphics.

How did the teachers view writing literature responses on a Ning blog?

Ultimately, the Ning blog supported an inter-connected database of responses to children's and young adult literature. This connected format promoted an awareness of audience when posting responses to literature and an awareness of others' responses to literature. The teachers were aware that all members of the class had access to all postings made in the Ning blog. The teachers' awareness of audience also created an incentive to post written responses that were grammatically correct, clear, and with accurate content. As Lisa admitted, "I was always very paranoid that I wasn't grammatically correct or what I was saying didn't make sense."

Like Lisa, other teachers indicated a heightened sense of awareness for grammar and mechanics of writing, but they did not indicate that this "paranoia" hindered their writing. Instead, the teachers suggested they spent more time editing what they wrote before posting to the Ning blog. Certainly, this emphasis on editing may be considered beneficial in honing grammatical writing skills and refining technical mechanics, which are important tools in the writing process. Yet, this blog was a nontraditional writing platform for personal expression and was constructed as a space where users could freely reflect on literature, focusing on content of response over grammar. Since the participants in our project had a required number of literature responses to post, we learned it is important to create a supportive and encouraging online writing environment where the teachers want to write about literature and feel comfortable doing so. To create such an environment, instructors can emphasize that the shared blog is a space for dialog where the strict conventions of formal writing are relaxed. This allowance is also important for younger students.

Responding to literature in a social online environment invited the teachers to consider audience and carefully examine the content of their responses.

In a similar vein, the Ning blog created a writing environment where technical and conceptual quality was valued because it was considered a reflection of one's intellectual capacity. Because the Ning provided a social and open class forum for literature response, the teachers expressed heightened awareness of audience, which in turn affected how they approached writing their blog responses. Therefore, responding to literature in a social online environment invited the teachers to consider audience and carefully examine the content of their responses. Alyssa confessed, "I felt like I thought about [my writing] more. I tried to make it sound maybe a little bit smarter for my peers than what I would if I was just writing it like a reflection." The teachers seemed compelled to demonstrate that they were capable readers and writers in this more public forum. Thus, multiple writing objectives may be addressed simultaneously by using socially connected blogging in language arts classrooms.

How might social media help with professional development, district-level curriculum coordination, and administration?

We identified several ways in which social media could be extended beyond the classroom to be employed at the school and district levels. First, because the Ning supported a highly organized and interactive central blog site, curriculum coordinators might use a social networking blog to connect and support teachers and language arts coordinators within and across schools by discussing various instructional materials and techniques. Second, the Ning's ability to link all blog posts in a central location may be useful for principals or others to connect faculty members in a continuous discussion about classroom literature (see more below) or various professional texts.

Additionally, teachers who are aware of the increased usage of social media by children and teens (Lenhart et al., 2010) may consider using socially connected blogging to motivate young learners and address multiple objectives. For example, a language arts unit on point of view may be enhanced by assigning students to a particular character from a story or book the class is reading and then having students blog responses to events in the story from their character's point of view. A socially connected blog would allow students to easily view other classmates' responses and even respond to other posts from their character's point of view, helping students gain multiple perspectives on how point of view affects plot. This type of project addresses multiple language arts objectives (understanding point of view, reflecting and writing about literature from one point of view, and using technology to write and communicate) while socially engaging students in literature.

Blogging allows for easy access to and integration of information (Lenhart et al., 2010). Helping teachers make connections to their objectives

might enable them to understand that blogging can equip students with skills for reading, writing, and communicating in digital environments while also meeting print-based curricular goals.

Did the project prompt connections to teachers' future classrooms?

We were also interested in determining if these pre-service teachers spontaneously connected their participation in the Ning blog with their future classroom practices. And if so, how did they view those connections? We decided not to ask them directly if they would consider using a social networking blog with their own students, but within the semi-structured interview, there were many opportunities for unprompted comments about that possibility.

Only four of the teachers made a connection to their own future classrooms, suggesting that explicit instruction on classroom uses of blogging and social networking is needed. However, the teachers who did make connections said they would include these technologies in their classrooms in part, it seems, because they experienced this new platform first-hand instead of merely being told about blogging as an option for enriching literature response. As Emily stated, "I think that I am much more interested now in using [blogging] for students instead of more traditional literature responses." Thus, first-hand experience with blogging seemed to encourage some teachers to consider how a Ning blog may fit into efforts to promote literature response in their future classrooms. Julia also confirmed the usefulness of her blogging experience in that regard: "I think the benefit was actually getting in the practice of something that I might want to use in my classroom . . . I have never blogged before. So I think that really benefitted me for my future classrooms and students."

What might this mean for using blogs in a language arts classroom or for inservice professional development? Based on our findings, leaders of professional development activities should directly prompt teachers to talk about using a social networking blog for literature response in their own classrooms.

How did the Ning blog affect the teachers' views about literature response, literacy, and choosing literature?

The Ning blog encouraged thinking about literature response, literacy, and choosing literature as a social activity. As Julia stated, "[Shared-reading response] to me is the nature of reading and literacy. It's a social experience, anyway. So sharing [responses through the Ning blog] was just fine with me." Many of the teachers felt authentically engaged in the social nature of the blog responses. Shelly commented, "I would go to Ning to post my own blog response and end up reading everyone else's instead. I got sucked in." Further, ten of the teachers indicated that reading others' posts allowed them to discover their peers' literature interests and to make social and relevant connections based on those interests.

The social aspect of blogging stimulated interaction with a wide range of literature. Nearly all of the teachers' responses positively discussed being given the opportunity to read a variety of genres. The teachers were eager to read each other's responses to determine if a book might be interesting for them to read. For example, Shelly commented, "Allen [another teacher] has somewhat secondary-level reading interests, it seems to me. So he reads a lot of those books, and I am like, oh, okay, you like this. What did you like about it?" Teachers like Shelly actively chose specific peers' responses to follow and were influenced by those responses. Some of the teachers noted their own increased interest in various texts or types of literature because of intriguing book responses. As Sam explained, "[The blogging assignment] opened my eyes to a wider range of authors, different books, and genres."

What might a schoolwide or districtwide approach to online literature response look like? Principals or professional developers may consider using a social network blog to connect faculty within or across schools to respond to and talk about various types of literature. Through this type of approach, teachers may be encouraged to read a variety of responses to literature, which may spark

consideration of how literature connects to different grade and subject areas, in turn prompting cross-grade or curricular collaboration. For example, a language arts teacher may consider using *Chicken Sunday* by Patricia Polacco in a language arts unit to discuss ideas about family. However, a social studies teacher may read *Chicken Sunday* from a historical viewpoint and consider using the book to discuss or introduce the Holocaust. If these teachers were given the opportunity to read each others' ideas about the book through a social networking blog, they may consider collaboration to develop a richer unit on *Chicken Sunday* than if they worked individually. Language arts coordinators may accomplish similar goals by connecting language arts teachers online to respond to literature, thus increasing the amount of children's and young adult literature teachers are exposed to and providing opportunities for language arts collaboration.

Some Unanticipated Issues

The interviews revealed some issues that teacher educators may wish to consider as they incorporate blog activities. For example, we found that the teachers in our project felt constrained by responding to literature solely through the blog and not during in-class discussion. Thus, it may be useful to provide opportunities for face-to-face discussions in addition to online interactions. These discussions could provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on how their own responses may have changed after reading others' responses and practical ways to adapt this type of project for their language arts classrooms.

We also found that the teachers rarely used the "comment" feature of the Ning blog even though that feature, in theory, could have facilitated blog interactions. Although posting responses or comments to others' literature responses was encouraged, but not required, we believed that the social nature of the Ning blog would naturally engage students in making comments. The teachers indicated that they enjoyed blogging and responding to literature through the Ning site, but other course requirements took precedence, limiting spontaneous interactions beyond course requirements.

Shelly explained, "It looked like there were a lot more responses early on than there are now. It's like the novelty wore off, so I stopped, too. It's awful the way we think 'this won't really help my grade any so why am I bothering?' but I think a lot of people think that way."

Teacher educators who wish to integrate blogging to engage teachers in literature response can structure course requirements specifically to encourage interactions. Simply assuming that teachers will use the available tools to interact may not be adequate. For example, instructors can actively stimulate discussion by commenting occasionally as an interested reader, thus modeling such activity and communicating that the blog activity is integral to the course. In fact, the convenience of using the comment feature of a blog may allow instructors to respond to more literature responses in less time than collecting written responses or moving from group to group during in-class discussion. On the other hand, if participation is required and evaluated or if the instructor is too active or heavy-handed, comments may be stifled, superficial, and less than genuine.

We look forward to investigating these issues and possibilities in the future. To create an atmosphere of discussion instead of grade pressure and performance evaluation, the comment feature may be integrated into face-to-face discussion, either as a follow-up tool to wrap up a specific discussion or as an online extension of face-to-face discussion. Emphasizing that the activity is aimed to stimulate thinking about how it might be used with their future students may also be helpful.

Final Thoughts and Recommendations

So, what did we take away from our exploratory project? Foremost, it convinced us that blogging in a social networking site is an activity that can be productively integrated into a university language arts methods course and may have some potential for use among inservice teachers. However, it is now clearer to us what conditions and approaches may increase the likelihood that blogging could be effective in meeting pedagogical or professional devel-

opment goals and lead to desired outcomes. As with any instructional intervention, success is dependent on subtle variations in the way it is framed and the conditions of its implementation.

Although most of the teachers in this study were unfamiliar with blogging or social networking through Ning, their overall experiences were positive and suggested the potential for using this type of technology in teacher education and professional development. Essentially, most teachers felt that the blog atmosphere provided a safe, literature-focused response environment that promoted interest in various genres of children's and young adult literature. Engaging teachers in literature response projects that utilize social networking blogs provided first-hand experiences that opened up a consideration of how such activities might be employed in language arts classrooms. As Mishra and Koehler (2006) argued, such experience may play an important role because having explicit opportunities to explore the applications of specific technology and

its uses establishes a "relationship to subject matter in authentic contexts" (p. 1045) in teacher education. Doing so, allows teachers to consider how a specific technology fits into and supports a particular subject area or topic.

Providing these opportunities may encourage teachers to integrate technology into their classrooms in a manner that supports and enhances already-established classroom practices, such as literature response. It is also consistent with findings from a recent study of teachers' perspectives on what might improve their professional development on technology integration. Hutchison (in press) found that teachers desired more hands-on experience with the technology tools that they were being encouraged to use, supporting the notion that technology is best learned in the context of authentic integration in the teacher's subject area.

Further, we know that both large and small communities of shared learning and practice may be created through online discussion spaces

INTO THE CLASSROOM WITH READWRITETHINK

In this article, educators look at the use of blogs for literature response. How else can blogs be used in the classroom and with students?

The ReadWriteThink Tip "How to Start a Blog" provides guidance on blogging, organizing content, and presenting ideas effectively.

   http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/tips-howtos/start-blog-30117.html

In the lesson plan "Weekly Writer's Blogs: Building a Reflective Community of Support," students analyze sample writers' blog entries, then begin the habit of writing their own weekly entries that focus on the writing that they have done over the past seven days. These reflective assignments ask students to think about their progress on writing activities and to project how they will continue their work in the future, while communicating about that theme with their classmates.

   http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/weekly-writer-blogs-building-1113.html

Taking one step further, the ReadWriteThink lesson plan "Creating Character Blogs" demonstrates student understanding of the text by including images, quotations, links, and commentary on their blogs. Students then help one another develop their blogs by acting as editors during the creation stage and reviewing one another's blogs upon completion.

   http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/creating-character-blogs-1169.html

—Lisa Fink
www.readwritethink.org

(Hunter, 2002), suggesting their powerful collaborative function (Godwin-Jones, 2003). However, providing teachers with a connected, online response platform to facilitate reader response may be even more powerful as multiple blogs are linked and social network users are able to easily access multiple sites from a central location—features viewed favorably by our teachers. Shared literature response encourages users to explore various literature responses and increases awareness of audience. Based on our findings about writing on a Ning blog, we encourage teachers to actively engage in this type of response project to heighten their sensitivity to how their students may respond to it.

Despite identifying less than optimal results and the need to consider adaptations, we are encouraged that the project provided practice with blogging, expanded teachers' familiarity with children's and young adult literature, encouraged consideration of response writing and content, and facilitated spontaneous connections between teacher education and practical applications in future classrooms. In light of these findings, we wondered whether other areas of language arts might benefit from utilizing a social networking blog. For example, how might a social networking blog be utilized in teaching the research process or in a writing workshop? Further, although we have speculated how inservice teachers might respond to utilizing a social network blog for literature response, systematic attempts to do so are needed to reveal its potential in that context. Further, we need to know more about whether teachers engaged in this activity during their preparation program would implement social networking and blogging in their future classrooms. These questions pose challenging but relevant future directions for using social network blogging in language arts education.

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APPENDIX: Semi-structured Interview Questions

1. What were your initial thoughts about using the Ning at the start of the semester, and did your thinking about it change in any way by the end of the semester?
2. What was your favorite feature of Ning and why?
3. Did the Ning have any effect on your correspondence or relationship with your classmates and/or professor?
4. Were there any advantages or disadvantages of using Ning?
5. How did you feel about blogging your reading responses for others to see?
6. Do you feel that using Ning affected your decision to read or not read other students' reading response blogs?
7. Do you think you would have been more or less likely to read and respond to other students' responses if they were available to you in another format, such as paper or email?
8. Were your reading choices influenced by other students' blog posts on Ning? Explain your response.
9. Would you have preferred to have your own blog space (not connected to Ning), or did you like having it connected to everyone else's?
10. What are your thoughts on the social aspects of Ning? (Follow-up: If you did not utilize social aspects, why not?)
11. Has Ning or blogging affected any other areas of your life?
12. Do you have any other comments or thoughts regarding the use of Ning or blogging?