Web-Based Discourse: Reflective Blogging to Encourage Student Enjoyment, Engagement, and Community in the Social Studies Classroom

Katie Henry
St. Mary's College of Maryland

Abstract: Students in social studies classrooms across the country are becoming disenchanted with the way in which their classes are conducted. Focusing on rote memorization makes social studies feel dull and impersonal. In this study, 20 students in a seventh grade social studies classroom used blogs to reflect upon what they were learning. Students responded to open-ended prompts on KidBlog, a blogging site that allows students to write in individual blogs that are linked within their classrooms. These prompts encouraged students to not only reflect on the course material, but also to include their personal impressions as a means of interacting with what they have learned. I gathered information regarding student engagement and enjoyment of the subject and content material in relation to the use of reflective blogs. Results showed no significant change in student engagement or enjoyment of social studies, but a potential reinforcement of classroom dialogue.

Introduction

Many student think of their social studies classes as places in which they are expected to memorize dates and names that they will forget by the end of the year. Social studies is often perceived as a subject based solely upon the memorization and regurgitation of facts (Thornton, 2005; McGuire, 2007), leaving little room for students to respond to or interact with the events, individuals, and facts that they are learning about. The subject can, if not approached with creativity and differentiation, end up being simply an exploration of the textbook (McGuire, 2007) – without exploring the thoughts and opinions of students as well.

Although some classes do provide opportunities for students to contribute questions or comments, there is not always enough time in a class period to address and respond to their ideas. When they go unaddressed, due to the conditions of the classroom not being quite right, students may lose interest in the subject because it does not make sense, or because they forget their question before the next class (Willingham, 2009). Their funds of knowledge (that is, the information they have collected through both education and personal experience) are limited through unanswered questions and a lack of engagement.

Focusing on rote memorization as a part of the social studies class can be a major stressor on students with learning disabilities who struggle with this method of memorization (Steele, 2005). When they are presented lists of dates and names with little more of an explanation than a definition, memorization and understanding can be difficult (Willingham, 2009). Students with disabilities could benefit from a more hands-on approach that helps them see these ideas and practices in action. If they are able to reflect on *why* some things are the way they are, they may be able to retain information more successfully.

The implementation of technology in the classroom can successfully remediate numerous classroom problems, including this common social studies dilemma. Integrating technology can support the link between technology, content, and pedagogy (Brush & Saye, 2009) and act as a familiar outlet for today's tech-savvy students (Harlan, Bruce, & Lupton, 2012). Although not all students have the same access to technology (due to privilege and family situations, among others), many are familiar with new technologies and forms of multimedia, from their smartphones to Facebook pages. By finding a place for personal technology in the classroom, content-based instruction can get a much-needed boost.

Specifically, using blogging as an outlet for reflection can be a helpful tool for encouraging students to foster a more critical view of culture (Drake & Drake, 2013). Because blogs generally focus on opinions and personal insight, a class blog can become an "academic safe space" when used as a place for students to reflect on details of importance and explain their personal perspectives that they may not feel comfortable saying aloud. Students can become more motivated to extend the greater classroom conversation into a more social sphere and make relevant connections between current events, themselves, and other sources (Drake & Drake). Blogging has the potential to help students articulate their thoughts, feelings, and opinions to help them take a stance on what they are learning (Crowe, 2006); this consequently helps them retain information in relation to their own funds of knowledge (Lucey, O'Malley, & Jansem, 2009).

In this study, I examined how reflective blogging outside the classroom plays a part in students' enjoyment and engagement with social studies topics, while contributing to their individual and social communities inside the classroom. By working with 7th grade social studies students and presenting them with the opportunity to blog about the content material they are exploring, I will analyze how the experience has facilitated their familiarity, engagement, and enjoyment of social studies topics, as well as how reflective blogging has encouraged them to make interpersonal and interpersonal connections with their peers.

Literature review/theoretical framework

Enjoyment and Engagement

As it stands today, the social studies curriculum is beginning to take a backseat to math and language arts, because social studies is not a tested subject, and is therefore seen as less important (McGuire, 2007). Schools are under pressure to make sure that their students have the highest possible test scores in math and language arts, so social studies often becomes co-opted as a supplement to literacy growth – simply because students do a great deal of reading in this subject. The issue with focusing only on literacy in social

studies is that it crams the content area into a mold that encourages (and even stresses) rote memorization: reading information from textbooks, memorizing it, and then repeating it for a test (Journell, 2007). Even if this process *does* help students do well on their standardized tests, it perpetuates the stereotype that social studies classes are based on heavy lecture input and fact regurgitation output. The more this process is maintained, the less that today's students will be able to develop the civic and social decision-making skills that they are capable of, due to fewer opportunities for students to evaluate, synthesize, and inquire about a variety of sources (Crowe, 2006).

In addition to the consequential decreases in both the value of social studies content knowledge and student engagement, the technological prowess of today's students tends to increase their boredom in the "conventional" classroom. Students are used to the fast-paced status of the technology that they use in their free time, from their smartphones to their laptops and tablets (Wilson, Wright, Inman, & Matherson, 2011). Being so accustomed to having instant gratification outside of school can make coming into class and reading out of the textbook for an hour a daunting task; students want what they want, be it information or enjoyment, almost immediately. Thus, they get bored with this method; they need something new and exciting that will keep their attention.

As our students' personal time is taken over by the rise of new technologies, their access to information has also grown exponentially through increased use of the Internet, social networking, and the aforementioned technologies that they are engaging with (Holcomb, Beal, & Lee, 2011). This information is dynamic, interactive, and constantly changing, just like social studies: there is no other subject that requires its students to draw information from a plethora of other fields in this way (Holcomb, Beal, & Lee). With such a unique and multi-faceted background and a growing level of access to information, students need to find a way to interactively incorporate these sources with what they already know.

Despite student proficiency with technology and information access, the inadequacy of the "old approach" to the social studies classroom is becoming more evident through teachers' lack of preparation to use technology in their instruction. Many teacher programs are not incorporating enough technological pedagogical content knowledge, a framework which fortifies the connection between technological proficiency in the classroom and content area teaching pedagogy (Brush & Saye, 2009). This means that teachers who have strong content knowledge, and even more modern ideas about teaching, may not be prepared to move their instruction past the status quo, simple because they have not been taught any alternatives. If teachers keep getting trapped in the same pattern, their students might also get trapped within the notion that social studies is a non-dynamic subject. The content area needs to be given an extra push to encourage disciplinary skills and inquiry, which starts with teachers learning more about the materials they can use (Holcomb, Beal, & Lee, 2011).

Although a lecture-based approach to social studies limits students to learning what is actively and tangibly present in their classrooms, technology connects individuals with information and each other all over the world (Crawford & Kirby, 2008). Sharing ideas within a web-based domain provides individuals with an authentic, globalized experience that takes them outside of their personal microsystem and exposes them to new thoughts and ideas. Blogging can help students learn about other people and themselves through sharing their personal thoughts, ideas, and experiences within a constructivist framework

that stresses the importance of personal input (Seitzinger, 2006). The malleability of social media encourages a more active and social learning process that allows students to discuss and engage with their content material through creative new methods (White, King, & Tsang, 2011). Instruction and inquiry can be approached from multiple angles that emphasize active participation in learning through problem solving, collaboration, socialization, interactivity, and reflection (Seitzinger, 2006).

As previously mentioned, many students are already using the communication methods that are facilitated through Web 2.0 technology, so class activities can profit from using these familiar styles (Wilson, Wright, Inman, & Matherson, 2011). Although the ways in which students must deliver information may differ from what they are used to when using these methods of communication, it can facilitate the transition into using them for classroom purposes by building upon what they already know. The switch to using Web 2.0 communication methods in the classroom enriches educational platforms through helping students recognize that content knowledge can be expedited in a similar way to the conversations they have with their friends (White, King, & Tsang, 2011).

According to Berson and Berson (2009), classroom blogging can create a space for meaningful discussion of content area topics. Since the 1990s, blogging has made the transition from being simple, personal online journaling to being a means to exchange information with a worldwide audience. It "enhance[s] communication and promote more engaged learning" (Berson & Berson, 2009, p. 124) by providing opportunities to reflect about current and past events, often through the incorporation of personal thoughts and opinions. Students can become more informed and opinionated about the world as it is today because they are encouraged to interact with topics, rather than just hear about them (Crawford & Kirby, 2008). This also makes way for the possibility for students to respond to their peers' claims about similar topics in a civil manner (Drake, 2012). Blogging is a great way for students to practice respectful and productive debate, even when other students do not agree.

Not all students feel comfortable raising their hands in class to answer a question or share their opinions. Blogging gives students of all backgrounds the opportunity to respond to questions by extending and privatizing the reflective process (Boling, Castek, Zawlinski, Barton, & Nierlich, 2008). When students are able to take the time to reflect on their ideas in a collective or constant location, they become more accustomed to networking and sharing. This increases motivation and literacy engagement towards authentic tasks by directing the process of answering questions into a reflective, digital setting that alleviates the pressure and anxiety of verbal sharing.

In addition to their value in academic settings, blogs are interesting tools that are enjoyable to many. Blogging platforms, most of which not requiring any software downloads or questionable use of adverisements, are often free and easily available to anyone with the privilege of Internet access (Harlan, Bruce, & Lupton, 2012). Besides common options like Blogger, WordPress, Tumblr, and BlogSpot, there are many safe and secure options that are specifically catered towards classroom instruction, such as EduBlogs, that ensure students will be able to practice proper digital citizenship without distractions (Manfra, Gray, & Lee, 2010).

Students use blogs outside of school as a means to develop digital identities (Naslund & Giustini, 2008). These identities can be that of writers, artists, poets, performers, historians, or anything under the sun; their blogs are social spaces in which

they share their own cultures. By providing personal stories and insights, students use their blogs to share their own content in an informal way that showcases their cultures and values (Harlan, Bruce, & Lupton, 2012). This model of content creation and sharing could be channeled into a more academically constructive approach that values both the author's input and content knowledge.

Individual Reflection and Social Community

The process of maintaining and contributing to a blog is a reflective one that consequently encourages communication. Blogging provides an opportunity for shy or struggling students to express their thoughts and construct responses that they had once been unable to share (Boling et al., 2008). Rather than be pressured into producing an immediate verbal response, the students can take the time to gather their thoughts and put it into a blog post format that coherently addresses the question or word. In addition, blogging allows students to engage in consecutive online conversations with the original poster and each other; some students may be too shy to debate their positions or show support, so the computer screen can act as a transitional tool towards more verbal communication.

The Internet contains an immense amount of information from an even larger pool of sources, both legitimate and defective. Using blogs as a tool for response and synthesis of information can help students decode what they find online and reflect on whether or not it is credible (Crowe, 2006). Students are encouraged to reflect democratically and consider many different worldviews and processes when engaging in this decoding; they need to be able to understand that just because a source has a different perspective than others does not mean it is credible.

When students blog, the emphasis of their work is placed on self-expression and feedback (Drake, 2012). The posts that they make are individualized and personal, but generally structured to spark the reader's curiosity in an unconventional but self-expressive way that further encourages the audience to respond. This expressive type of response can still align with learning objectives through analysis processes and prompt framing. When students are deliberating topics as a part of responding to questions and prompts, they can reflect on what they have learned while also finding their own voice; persuasive communication allows their critical thinking to be put into a more personal context (Drake & Drake, 2013).

As an academic practice, blogging is growing in prominence; according to the National School Boards Association (2007), 35% say their schools and/or students blog officially or for instructional benefit, and this number continues to grow. With this increase in use, more students are beginning to navigate the slippery slope of digital citizenship. Using Web 2.0 communications methods more often within an academic setting involves more responsibility and limits than using a blog at home, but the principles of safe and ethical Internet use are important in any setting. Having to think about it within the classroom can help students consider how to present themselves and their ideas on the Internet in the most positive manner.

Classroom blogging has additional value as a form of differentiation that benefits all students in a manner congruent with the concept of "equity pedagogy," which emphasizes equal access to learning (Manfra, Gray, & Lee, 2010). Students are able to work at their own pace, and blogging provides a less conventional way for them to present what they

have learned and thought. Because some students may have difficulties expressing themselves verbally or responding in a pen-and-pencil manner, a larger number of students get the chance to have their voices heard through blogging. Essentially, more students get to participate in the learning process because it has been facilitated in a way that is accommodation-based and does not change learning goals.

The reflective process that blogging provides not only benefits the individual, but also provides a unique way for students to share and respond to ideas in the classroom (Boling et al., 2008). Personal webpages, which are moderated by teachers to ensure they are safe spaces for communications, allow students to access each others' content; this opens up the forum to more than just the typically involved audience. Students who may otherwise have never interacted get the chance to share their ideas in a common space, without fear of tripping over their words or blurting out something they did not want to say. Blogging involves personal internal thought (response) and social external response (discussion) that fosters a feeling of community. This provides the perfect space for democratic discussion, which helps students learn how to communicate with each other in a productive and constructive manner (Hostetler, 2012).

The community-encouraging benefits of blogging have the potential to work well beyond the boundaries of the classroom. By responding to a variety of different prompts and situations, students can gain a growing worldview that allows them to understand each other's perspectives in a way they have not been previously able to access (Crawford & Kirby, 2008). Once they become more familiar with how blogs work and how to interact with their peers while using their points of view, they can become comment contributors to other blogs outside of their class network. This can help them learn more about other cultures and ideas that they are not necessarily familiar with, while sharing what they know or have learned in class. Creating and sharing content can lead to greater information literacy, as well as inspiration from each other's ideas and explorations that have been posted (Harlan, Bruce, & Lupton, 2012). This can be done inside and outside the classroom, as an inclusive approach. Blogging brings forth a new way to have students provide constructive criticism and foster bonds by discussing topics as a forum, rather than individually (Lucey, O'Malley, & Jansem, 2009).

Blogging is "The Great Equalizer"; all students get a chance to respond to ideas, even the shy ones, and even if they are not immediately present in class (Drake & Drake, 2014). Everyone can have access to each other's thought processes, even after the class is over. With the proper permissions, blogs are accessible from home or in the library - anywhere a student can get an Internet connection. It even allows greater clarification through the ability for students to comment with questions and responses. Information and discussion can build and build long past the original post.

Of course, blogging does not always have to be an individual approach extended outward; it also can be used for group projects in a single or a few spaces. Students can collaborate on group projects through a unique approach that encourages authentic learning by using online tools (Kittle & Hicks, 2009). This provides a different means towards giving feedback and combining ideas, because it can be done in a web-based format; not everyone has to be present in the same place, but they can still work on it at the same time and post comments and suggestions on how to better their work. Collaborative blogging and communication creates a more active approach to group work; students are

given the opportunity to think for themselves in a reflective manner, and then eventually put all the pieces together as a community.

When students use social media and mobile tools, like blogging on laptops or smartphones, they begin to learn how to better integrate content from a plethora of sources – including their classroom, their peers, and the outside world (Shih, Chuang, & Hwang, 2010). Blogs do not only house text; they allow the integration of multimedia and other mediums, so the style of communication used can be incredibly varied. If a student feels that a video from YouTube helps him or her get a reflective point across, it can be easily added on with an embed code. Many blogging platforms have smartphone apps or can be loaded up on their Internet browser; this makes it easy for a student to add photos taken with their smartphone camera and integrate it with other content they have collected. Blogging may be associated with computers, but it can go much farther outside than some may have thought possible.

Using blogs as a classroom supplement can be a helpful tool towards bringing the social studies curriculum into the 21st century. By allowing students to reflect and interact with each other using web-based tools, they not only can improve upon skills crucial to living in our digital society, but also can learn ways of communicating with each other in productive and democratic ways. When students are given the chance to take the time to put their thoughts into writing (or, rather, typing), they can ensure that their thought processes are clear and concise, while also putting their own personal spin on content area information.

Research Questions

1. Does reflective blogging help students feel more familiar with social studies content?
2. Does reflective blogging increase student enjoyment of social studies?
3. Does reflective blogging encourage students to make interpersonal connections with their peers?
4. Does reflective blogging help students see how social studies works and is present outside of the classroom?

Methods

Intervention

This study was conducted with a group of 7th grade students at Spring Ridge Middle School who are taking World Cultures II. Although there are six sections of this class, I chose to use the 3rd/4th period A-Day class as my intervention sample, as they were a group who seemed to crave a little "more" from their instruction. Because of limitations on technology access due to state testing and minimal in-school resources, blogging assignments were completed at home as a short weekly reflection. Most of the students in this class had some sort of access to the Internet, which helped them to complete this task. Students with limited access to technology had the option of completing the task on paper, and then typing it up at school if they had free time. The blogging prompts were assigned weekly, usually at the end of the week, to provide students with time during the weekend to complete the assignment. Students were encouraged, but not required, to comment on at least one blog post other than their own to spark communication. This project was

executed as a class practice, and occurred during the second half of my internship (roughly March through May).

I chose www.kidblog.org as the given blogging platform for this project. KidBlog is a closed source site that allows for close teacher moderation and eliminates distractions by only allowing students access to the blogs that are a part of their own class. It also ensures student privacy by making student blogs inaccessible from an outside link. This site is optimal in addressing potential issues, such as cyberbullying; the teacher-moderated environment makes intervention a simple and quick process. Additionally, KidBlog offered an app for IOS devices, making it accessible for students with the iPod Touch or iPhone. The process is safe, secure, and still allows for customization. Each blogging prompt was composed of both an open-ended element and a closed ended element that required the student to integrate their own impressions and reflections with content knowledge from the class.

Data Collection

Table 1:
Research Questions and Data Sources

	Pre/Post Survey	**Student Blog Posts & Comments**	**Behavioral Checklist**
Does reflective blogging help students feel more familiar with social studies content?	☐		
Does reflective blogging increase student enjoyment of social studies?	☐	☐	☐
Does reflective blogging encourage students to make interpersonal connections with their peers?	☐	☐	☐
Does reflective blogging help students see how social studies works and is present outside of the classroom?	☐	☐	

Three sources of data were collected during this study to implement a mixed methods approach: pre- and post-test results, student work, and observations of on-task, positive behaviors. To gauge students' enjoyment and engagement with social studies

material, I provided them with a short questionnaire composed of self-evaluation questions, both before the students began the blogging experience, and once the project was complete. The first and second questionnaires were primarily composed of the same questions, but each had an additional two questions that were unique in relevance to the beginning and end of the study. Before and after the study, students rated themselves using a Likert-type scale from 1 (extremely false) to 5 (extremely true). Each question on the questionnaires (found in Appendix A) had space for students to make comments, if they so desired.

In addition, students' work was collected in the form of their personal blog posts and the comments that they have contributed to other students' blogs. This data was used to observe the interactions between students, and to judge whether or not students were engaging in democratic discourse when using comments. Students' personal blog posts were collected to examine how students were able to translate what they learned in their social studies classroom toward more real life experiences.

Student behaviors were also observed using a behavioral checklist (found in Appendix B) to provide evidence of increased student interaction and engagement in the classroom parallel with the blogging opportunity. Some specific behaviors that I was looking for to assess the extent to which students enjoyed class and their classmates (a) included talking with peers outside of their usual classroom social circle, (b) taking notes, (c) raising their hands eagerly, (d) participating in small group discussion, and (e) helping other students with information. I recorded these behaviors on the behavioral checklist by making a tally mark on a chart next to the observed behaviors and the student in question.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data from the pre- and post-questionnaires, I conducted a paired, two-tailed t-test to determine whether or not using reflective blogging had a significant impact on students' enjoyment and engagement with social studies class. If there was a significant change, the t-test would be important in determining the significance of using blogging as an instructional tool that encourages a change in attitudes.

During my observation process, I looked for signs of student enjoyment, engagement, and interaction. When analyzing the data that I collected from the behavioral checklist, I took into account the frequency of on-task and positive behaviors and whether or not they have become more prominent. I conducted a t-test on the data collected on the first three days of my intervention and the last three days of my intervention to see whether there was any significant change in the frequency of these on-task and positive behaviors. Similarly, students' blog posts and comments were analyzed by looking for examples of digital citizenship and understanding. If students' responses and comments show a great level of reflection (e.g. critical thinking, agreeing/disagreeing with a peer's ideas and providing reasoning, interesting observations, connections between theory and personal experience), it could be concluded that they were able to increase their familiarity with topics while getting engaged with the material. Because this was largely qualitative data, I was looking for key phrases and language cues in their posts and comments (including those that are provided in the pre- and post-questionnaires); their responses were examined to see if their reflective abilities changed with practice.

Validity concerns

I attended to validity through triangulation of data pertaining to students' ability to connect with their peers and their content area through pre- and post-questionnaires, blog posts and comments, and the behavioral checklist. This provided multiple approaches to the research question and further secured the validity of my inferences. Throughout the duration of the study, I debriefed with my mentor teacher to ensure the validity of information that was gleaned from all sources.

Findings and interpretations

Does reflective blogging help students feel more familiar with social studies content?

At the beginning of my study, I had hoped to use the blogging experience as a means of encouraging students to feel more familiar with what they were learning in social studies class – to examine whether or not they *felt* that they understood it. I opted to measure this through their responses to a question included in their pre- and post- intervention questionnaire: "I feel familiar with the information I learn in social studies class." Using a two-tailed paired t-test on the students' responses to the Likert-type scale, I found that there was not a significant increase in student familiarity with social studies content (p= .3597). There was a slight increase in the students' average scoring of their familiarity with social studies content, from a mean of 3.4737 to a mean of 3.6842, but because the value of $p > .05$, the increase not statistically significant, and could very well have been caused by chance.

Table 2. *t*-test results comparing the mean student response noting content familiarity prior to and after intervention.

Statement	**Mean Pre-Intervention**	**Mean Post-Intervention**	***p***
I feel familiar with the information I learn in social studies class.	3.4737	3.6842	0.3597

Students' belief in their familiarity with social studies topics showed no significant decrease, which shows that although the process of using a blog to respond to social studies concepts did not significantly improve their experience, it also did not confuse them in their learning process. It simply acted as an alternative approach to applying their course material to outside concepts.

Does reflective blogging increase student enjoyment of social studies?

Because most of the students in my sample tended to crave extensive lessons and learning experiences, I intended for my study to act as a means towards bridging the gap between curiosity and true enjoyment. Thus, I triangulated the question of whether or not reflective blogging would increase their enjoyment of social studies through examining their pre- and post- questionnaire results, their blogging activity (posts and comments), and use of the behavioral checklist. Using a two-tailed paired t-test on their responses on

the Likert-type scale surveys, I found that student enjoyment of social studies did not significantly increase (p = .57).

Table 3. *t*-test results comparing the mean student response noting enjoyment before and after intervention.

Statement	Mean Pre-Intervention	Mean Post-Intervention	*p*
I enjoy social studies as a subject.	4.1053	3.8947	0.5778

As evident in the table above, the average student response actually decreased after intervention, from 4.1053 to 3.8947. Because this is such a small change, it is difficult to attribute this change to an actual lack of enjoyment; some students may have simply circled answers randomly, or depending on their current mood or desire to complete the questionnaire. Because this data was not significant, I wanted to examine my students' behaviors and written interactions to get a closer look at the big picture of their enjoyment.

Using a daily behavioral checklist (see Appendix B), I calculated the total number of positive behaviors that students displayed during each class meeting. These behaviors included talking to their peers, taking notes, raising their hands, talking about the blog posts they made, participating in small group discussion, and helping their peers with information. I considered these positive, on-task behaviors to be a sign of class enjoyment because when students enjoy the class they are in, they are more likely to be involved and engaged in the class.

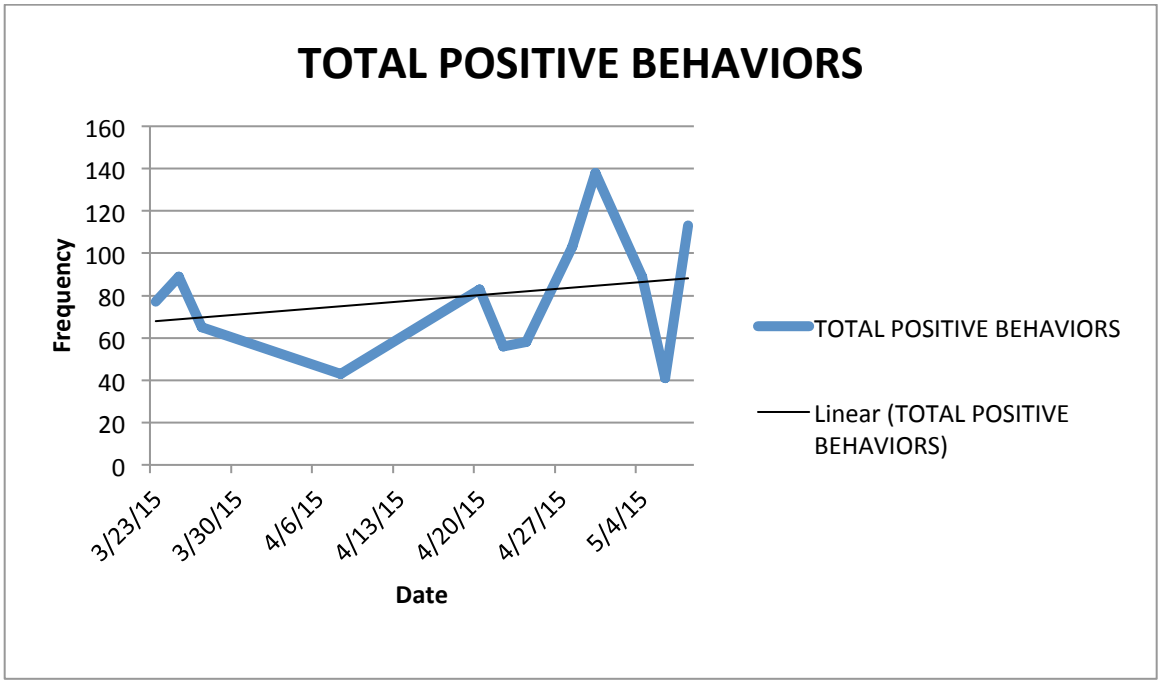

Figure 1. Frequency of students' display of positive behaviors in each class meeting. The trend line shows the change in students' frequency at the beginning and the end of intervention.

As evident in the graph above, students' display of positive behaviors in each class meeting tended to fluctuate day by day; as is the case in many classrooms, students occasionally have off days. Additionally, some class meetings (including those in the last week) required less instances of positive behavior, such as independent reading tasks and guided notetaking; the format of the class certainly affected the frequency of positive behaviors shown. However, using the trend line, it can be seen that the prominence of positive classroom behaviors did show an increase between the beginning and end of intervention. However, using a two-tailed paired t-test and comparing the frequencies of positive behaviors in the first three classes and last three classes, I found that the increase was not statistically significant, with $p = .918$. This could be due to the fact that the class had a strong existing classroom culture of positive interaction and respect prior to my intervention; it is difficult to encourage students to enjoy a subject or become more engaged in the classroom when they already have existing practices in play.

Although I did not find any significant change, in the frequency of students' on-task behaviors, positive or negative, the slight increase in positive behaviors could show a positive reaction to the blogging prompts as a classroom practice. According to a two-tailed paired t-test that I performed on the data regarding student discussion of blog topics and responses, there was an increase in frequency that was closely approaching significant, with a p value of .056. Although this increase was not significant, it does provide a basis for looking deeper into students' blog responses and comments to gauge how they showed their enjoyment.

To use my students' blog responses and comments as a way to identify their enjoyment, I specifically looked for words and statements that were positive or expressed interest, such as "cool," "fun," "interesting," and "good job." Because the prompts were

sometimes about social and political issues that students may not see as positive or fun, such as the Holocaust, I also gauged their enjoyment of exploring the topic through their investment into the narrative they are producing. If the student responded to the prompt with an exciting, enjoyable response, it is likely that the student enjoyed preparing it. This worked similarly when coding their comments on peer responses; when students provided funny, positive, or dialogue-encouraging comments, it showed their desire to learn more, to have fun, and to keep talking.

There were 27 prompts showing specific examples of enjoyment and interest throughout intervention. The ways in which students showed their interest and enjoyment varied throughout each response, but each clearly provided a basis for why the student was enjoying what they were writing about. For example, one of the prompts called upon students to provide an example of environmental propaganda and then reflect upon how it makes them feel and how it related to what we had been discussing in class. One particular student took this task head on, ending her response with a passionate conclusion. She wrote,

> "79% of people say that we should protect the environment and 21% people say that we shouldn't protect the environment. [The] Earth needs our help. We need to help it or we all could die or live in trash. WHO WANTS TO HELP ME SAVE THE EARTH!"

By using a great amount of emphasis in her writing through exclamation marks, capitalization, and passionate language, the student is showing that she is invested in the topic and wants to encourage her peers to share her interest and passion.

I also tabulated the frequency of student comments that expressed positivity and/or praise for the writer. I have interpreted positively-worded comments as a sign of enjoyment because these comments were entirely voluntary; since students were not required to comment, a positive comment reflected that the student took time to acknowledge enjoyment of what the writer provided in his or her response. Out of 33 total comments, 26 expressed some sort of positivity or praise. Camaraderie and mutual support was incredibly prevalent in these comments. For example, one student wrote, *"Nice job. [Name redacted] and I will be your top (sic) payers. Can't wait for this to be at the local Walmart! Again, very good job!"* Throughout the intervention, students were showing a great deal of support for their fellow peers, encouraging further writing and simply having fun together divulging over different topics. The students were not necessarily enjoying social studies topics more in this format, but they were continuing to enjoy the conversations about the content that came about.

Besides what was evident in their responses and comments, students tended to show excitement about the promise of a new prompt, making suggestions about what they could write about, and asking "Can we keep blogging even after you leave [in May]?". The student population was taking ownership of the blogging process, and enjoyed the fact that they had a say in what they could write about. To them, this process was not about completing an assignment; it was about getting to talk about something they liked, or even did not like. Overall, the students enjoyed the blogging activity, with an average scoring of 3.9 out of 5 on the Likert-type scale when responding to whether or not they enjoyed using a blog (see Appendix A). Although this may not have shown an increase in enjoyment of the subject itself, it does provide evidence that the intervention was a useful and enjoyable

teaching method for these students.

Does reflective blogging encourage students to make interpersonal connections with their peers?

One of the major goals of my study was to provide students with a way to make interpersonal connections with their peers through use of the blog. Both before and after intervention, I used a Likert-type questionnaire to ask the students if they felt that they got the opportunity to compare and share their thoughts and opinions about social studies topics with their classmates in class.

Table 6. *t*-test results comparing the mean student response noting ability to make content-based connections with peers before and after intervention.

Statement	Mean Pre-Intervention	Mean Post-Intervention	*p*
I get the opportunity to compare and share my thoughts and opinions about social studies topics with my classmates in class.	4.2105	4.4211	0.5416

Change in students' perceptions of their ability to connect with their peers over social studies topics was not significant ($p = 0.5416$). The mean response also showed little change, from 4.2105 to 4.4211. What is important to note is that the mean response was already quite high, at above a 4 out of a maximum scoring of 5. This shows that the students already felt that they were able to interact with each other about social studies topics before intervention. The class culture that my mentor had previously established was firmly grounded in Socratic dialogue and discussion, so comparing and sharing ideas was already a norm. Although there was no significant increase, it is equally important to note that the intervention did not lower students' ability to interact with their peers using classroom topics.

Because the data I collected from the pre- and post- intervention questionnaires did not show any significant changes, I also analyzed the data I collected from the behavioral checklists I used every day throughout intervention. To get a better idea of the "big picture" that emerged in the study, I compared the data from first three classes (at the beginning of intervention) and the last three classes (at the end of intervention) that I worked with the students. Specifically, I focused on the more socially-engaged behaviors: talking to another student outside their usual social group about social studies content, talking about blog posts that they or another student has made, participating in small group discussion, and helping another student with information. I performed a two tailed-paired t-test on the data I collected to see if there were any significant changes in the frequency of behaviors that the students performed.

Table 7. *t*-test results comparing the mean frequency of socially-engaged, interactive behaviors before and after intervention.

Behavior	Mean Frequency Pre-Intervention	Mean Frequency Post-Intervention	*p*
Talking to another student outside their social group [about social studies content]	0.633	0.816	0.1168
Talking about blog posts they/another student has made	0.25	0.484	0.056
Helping another student with information	0.433	0.5	0.4841
Participating in small group discussion	0.933	0.6	0.0014

Although the change in frequency of students talking with peers outside their social groups was not statistically significant, there was an increase in this behavior; I saw students who hardly spoke to each other before working with each other and make connections over social studies concepts. Even if the increase was not high, it did exist. Additionally, at the beginning of intervention, the students had not become fully invested in their blogs, so their discussion of the prompts was not as frequent. At the end, they began talking to each other much more because there was more to talk about; they had completed a series of six prompts, and even had a choice of what to write about for their last prompt.

There was a small increase in the average frequency of students helping their peers with information (from 0.433 to 0.5), but with $p = 0.4841$, the change was not significant. I believe that this corresponds with the fact that this group of students typically did not ask for help from their peers, though there is a small group of students that did enjoy bouncing ideas off one another. I observed a small increase in the number of students who began to participate in this group thinking approach, which can explain the small increase in frequency, as well as the fact that it was not significant.

Interestingly, with $p = 0.0014$, the results of the t-test on students' frequency of participation in small group discussion showed a significant decrease. This can be attributed to a change in the type of activities that the class was performing during the end of intervention; there was a shift towards more independent work, so small group discussion was not implemented nearly as much as it was in the beginning of intervention. However, as can be seen in Figure 2, small group discussion participation was generally consistent throughout each class meeting. This further contributes to the presence of discussion as a part of the existing classroom culture.

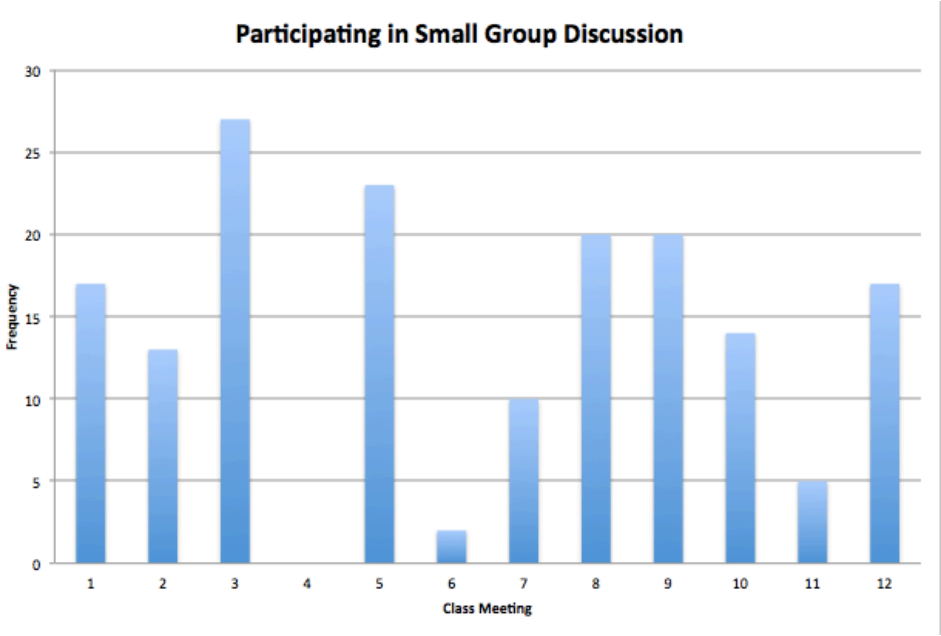

Figure 2. Frequency of student participation in small group discussion throughout each class meeting.

Because my study was not limited to the scope of the classroom, I also analyzed the interactions that were taking place on the second setting of my intervention: KidBlog. As previously stated, students were encouraged, but not required, to post comments on their peers' blog posts. By doing this, the students had the opportunity to clarify ideas and become more familiar with the writer's point of view, while also providing an opportunity to show what they have learned in class.

Table 8. Themes connecting to content-based interpersonal connections present in student comments on peer blog posts.

Trait	Representative Quote	Frequency
Feedback	*"[Name redacted]-great blog. I agree with you 100%. I think we would all be informed because FDR kept us in the loop. I also agree with you on the ISIS statements. That [Name redacted] guy knew what he was talking about :) LOL! ISIS should be stopped because they are the next Nazi group. Again, GREAT job."*	17
Encourages Dialogue	*"I disagree with you because we are doing so much to the environment that it is not even funny. We are destroying the environment fast. We could all end up dead. There will be no more o-zone layer to protect us from the sun. We could get skin cancer and we have a possibility of being dead. The glaciers are melting because we are letting more sun rays in."*	15
Asks a Question	*"I agree with you. Would you be in America or (sic) some where across seas? Would or do you have a family member in the military?"*	6

As evidenced in Table 8, out of 33 total comments, 17 provided some sort of feedback (corrective or praise-based), 6 asked clarifying questions, and 15 encouraged a continuation of dialogue. While some of these themes overlapped, it is clear that the majority of the comments were not simply based in saying the writer did a good job; the comments explained what was good or needed clarification, what they thought was interesting, and provided an alternative way to apply it. When these students provided constructive feedback, ask questions, and encourage further dialogue, the conversation did not stop, and the students continued to be involved in and enjoy their online community. Between these three sources of data, it is clear that students *were* forming connections with each other over the course material, and there were plenty of instances of effective and purposeful interaction. Even when engaged in academic dialogue, the students formed positive and meaningful connections online that persisted in the physical classroom.

Does reflective blogging help students see how social studies works and is present outside of the classroom?

In analyzing whether or not students can apply what they have learned in social studies class to the outside world, my study put into consideration my students' opportunities to reflect on the topics they are learning, as well as how they perceive their own ability to see how these topics could be applied outside of the classroom. I used the results from my pre- and post- intervention Likert-type scale questionnaire to perform a two-tailed paired t-test on the responses that students provided me for the two questions associated with these concepts. This test would show whether or not there was any significant change in my students' ability to reflect upon what they are learning, as well as their perceptions of if they can understand social studies in the real world.

Table 9. *t*-test results comparing the mean student response noting opportunity to reflect about social studies topics and ability to understand social studies outside the classroom before and after intervention.

Statement	Mean Pre-Intervention	Mean Post-Intervention	p =
I get the opportunity to reflect and think about what I'm learning in social studies class.	3.7368	4.3158	0.1719
I can see how social studies works and is present outside of my classroom.	4.1053	3.7895	0.3566

The mean scoring pre-intervention of whether or not students had the opportunity to reflect on what they are learning in social studies class was already rather high, at 3.7368 out of 5. By the end of the intervention, this scoring increased to 4.3158. With a p value of 0.1719, the increase was approaching statistical significance, but was not strongly significant. This can be attributed to the fact that the average pre-intervention score was already high, and therefore a strongly significant increase could be hard to come by.

Conversely, the average scoring of students' ability to see how social studies is present in the real world slightly decreased after intervention, from 4.1053 to 3.7895. However, with $p = 0.3566$, the change was not statistically significant. This could mean that the change happened by chance, or that perhaps some students in the room had scored the question randomly before and after intervention.

Because the results of the t-test on the questionnaire were not significant, I looked into my students' blog posts to find concrete evidence of their ability to reflect and to see social studies concepts in their own world and outside of the textbook. Evidence of reflection through personal connection could include feelings about certain issues and events, as well as how such happenings could affect their lives; applying social studies concepts outside of the classroom could include comparisons between topics discussed in class and current events, how certain events are affecting their lives directly, and how certain products or industries help our economy (and therefore helping them).

Table 10. Themes connected to application of social studies content to the real world present in student blog responses.

Trait	Representative Quote	Frequency
Shows understanding of social studies in the real world	*"I am designing a personal air filtration system for the people of China. They are one of the worlds worst when it comes to pollution…This would also help the Chinese economy, it would create new jobs, and the stores selling it would make a good profit."* *"World War two reminds me of ISIS (Cam said this also) because ISIS kills anybody that (sic) betray's or does not believe in their religion."*	42
Makes a personal connection	*"If I were an American Teen or pre-teen during the Holocaust/ World War Two, I would be very upset for being so helpless and not being able to help the poor people who are being killed and abused just for believing in something or looking a certain way."* *"I would feel bad for the European's during the War because if you were not the "Perfect Person" you would be executed or you would be forced to work long painful hours, while I was enjoying life in America."*	35

Throughout the students' blog responses, there were 42 posts that showed an understanding of how social studies topics can be applied to the real world, and 35 that made a reflective personal connection. Although some posts exhibited examples of both of these traits, it was clear through the high total frequency of these themes that the students were engaging in these types of thought. They were thinking about how these topics could interact with their own lives, as well as how they relate to life on a more global, universal scale.

Discussion of results

The purpose of my study was to see whether or not student engagement, enjoyment, and community in a social studies classroom would increase when students were provided with a classroom blog. Researchers have found that use of social media in the classroom encourages a more active and social learning process that allows students of all abilities and personalities the chance to respond in the classroom, because blog responses and other postings can take on many different forms and allow time for reflection *before* they are published (White et al. 2011; Boling et al., 2008). Additionally, blogging provides students with a secondary community within the blogging network – they get the chance to respond to a plethora of different thoughts and opinions that emerge from the same prompt, and are introduced to each other's differing perspectives (Crawford & Kirby, 2008). Not to mention, blogging sites create a space for students to reflect independently and together outside the classroom; the discussion can continue even after the bell rings (Berson & Berson, 2006). Because blogs allow students to reflect, share, compare, and explore the content in a more personal context, the approach could be optimal for a content area that is often perceived as less important and less interactive (McGuire, 2007).

One of the major goals of my study was to increase my students enjoyment and engagement with social studies topics by using the blogging experience. As shown in my findings and interpretations, their enjoyment and engagement with the subject did not quantitatively increase. However, there was evidence of student enjoyment and engagement with classroom topics within their responses and comments. There was a great deal of individualized self-expression and quirkiness throughout the postings that showed the students having fun and enjoying what they were writing about, while still aligning with the learning objectives at hand (Drake, 2012).

Despite the questionnaire results, which showed my students perceiving no increase in their familiarity with social studies concepts, their ability to reflect on the topics and see how they function outside of the classroom speaks volumes on their engagement with the content area. Rather than simply giving me lists of facts, their prompt responses and comments were written in their own voice and with their own reflections, showing evidence of what Drake & Drake (2013) refer to as "persuasive communication." Students were using personal stories and insights to back up their claims. Manfra, Gray, and Lee (2010) consider blogging to act as a form of differentiation due to its format that allows students to work at their own pace and express themselves in a non-verbal manner. I found this to be true in my classroom, as even my shyest students were responding to prompts with gusto and showing true interest in what we were learning and discussing.

Through analyzing my findings and their implications, I have seen a great amount of growth in the classroom community after the blogging intervention. My students were already a part of an existing classroom culture that emphasized Socratic dialogue and discussion; however, many of my students were a part of an existing social group, which prevented them from connecting with other peers – even on a content-based level. As evidenced in my findings, by the end of the intervention, the students were interacting more with individuals outside of their social circle, helping each other with social studies topics, and talking about their blog posts in the classroom. This frequency is even higher when we consider the discussions that were taking place on their blogs in the comments section. By adding an element of interaction that is not always face-to-face into instruction, all students get the chance to talk through their ideas with each other, if they so choose.

Because there was no social intimidation in the teacher-moderated space, the students were free to express themselves, and therefore find common ground and mutual respect within the newfound online community.

Conclusion

I hoped to use this project as an opportunity to drive naysayers away from the notion that social studies is a boring class, based on memorization and regurgitation. In my own schooling, I had seen my peers exhibiting a disdain for the historical, the philosophical, and the political; I wanted to see how I could help students enjoy and be engaged with the content material while also enjoying their classmates. Because I am an avid blogger, my goal was to use Web 2.0 principles to expedite this process of content area engagement and enjoyment. Through my research, I found that use of social media and other Web 2.0 resources can be engaging and interesting for students, while also helping fulfill learning objectives in a fun and differentiated manner. I was also introduced to its community benefits, since it provided a more interactive realm for discussion. Thus, my goal was not just about helping students enjoy the content area, but also to start talking with each other about what they are learning. In the end, my findings did not match with this body of research; they did not necessarily negate the effectiveness of using blogs in the classroom, but they did reveal the potential dominance of a strong classroom culture over Web 2.0 instruction methods. The usefulness of blogging in the classroom truly depends upon many factors, such as the set of learners, the time of year, and the resources that are available; if it is chosen as a method, it needs to be implemented with consideration of the following limitations.

Limitations

When considering the findings of my study, I must acknowledge the limitations that came forth as I conducted my research. First and foremost, I did not consider just how limited my students' access to the blogging platform would be. Although most of my students had some form of Internet or smartphone access, the app and website for KidBlog was unstable and unreliable; my students came to me with reports of it crashing in the middle of their post, or it not publishing it correctly. A student had responded on the post-intervention questionnaire that she "enjoyed using the blog when it actually worked"; the fact that she had to fumble with the site got in the way of her engagement with the experience itself. The app was only available for iOS devices, so my students who had Android devices (but no home computer) were given less accommodation by the site. Additionally, the number of students who had limited to no access to the Internet was much greater than I expected. I tried to make up for this deficiency by allowing students to come see me in the mornings during advisory to type up their responses, but seeing as their advisory time is also when they are given breakfast, I could not always expect them to see me. My sample size was also small; at 20 students, I had the opportunity to have one-on-one discussions with the students about what they were working on, but statistically, obtaining significant results was difficult. Had my class size been larger, I may have seen results that were more strongly significant as a part of my findings.

Although a strong classroom culture is fundamentally a good thing, my study was limited by the fact that my mentor had developed one before my intervention. My chosen sample of students – with the best access to technology of every class – enjoyed discussion,

and was already engaging in a lot of reflective dialogue with each other. Had I chosen a sample of students who had a weaker class culture, I may have seen more growth in their perceptions of community dialogue, but they also would not have been able to be involved in the task at the same completion rate.

Additionally, the time of year in which I conducted my study was not ideal. Because of time constraints, I could not begin my intervention until right before spring break, so I had to continue my intervention directly after the break, when the students were still getting used to being back in school. After that transitional week, my students began PARCC testing, so our time in the classroom was even more limited. By the time I saw them for class in the afternoon (a departure from my usual 9:20 – 10:50 a.m. block of time with them), they were exhausted and disengaged. Had my study begun during a more consistent block of time, such as the beginning of the school year, the results might have shown more of a significant change of behaviors and student perceptions.

Implications

I would recommend that researchers further study how reflective blogging could be executed in classrooms with typically low-SES students, and what benefits it could yield for said student population. I read many studies that explained the benefits of interactive blogging in the classroom, but there was little to no acknowledgement of whether or not the student population typically had access to the Internet and other technology at home. It would be useful to examine the impact this type of classroom intervention could have on a more diverse set of students, especially with the task itself taking place outside the classroom.

It could also be beneficial for future researchers to examine how reflective blogging would function as a long-term classroom practice. Because I only had the opportunity to execute my study over a slightly interrupted two-month period, I could only see so much growth; it would be interesting to see whether this type of classroom process would be a meaningful long-term activity that encourages reflection for the entire duration of the class.

This study has taught me that even when an intervention does not create significant changes in a classroom's environment, it does not necessarily mean that the method is not worthwhile. My study only showed significant changes in the traits that I observed in the words that my students spoke and wrote, but what was important was the fact that they were enjoying the approach we took to instruction. Even though the students did not necessarily get *more* out of instruction this way, introducing blogging to students still allowed them to learn in an unconventional and exciting way. Soon, these students may apply the things they learn in class to everything in their outside world – one blog post at a time.

References

Berson, I.R., & Berson, M.J. (2006). Privileges, privacy, and protection of youth bloggers in the social studies classroom. *Social Education, 70*(3), 124.

Boling, E., Castek, J., Zawilinski, L., Barton, K., & Nierlich, T. (2008). Collaborative literacy: blogs and internet projects. *The Reading Teacher, 61*(6), 504-506.

Brush, T., & Saye, J. (2009). Strategies for preparing preservice social studies teachers to integrate technology effectively: models and practices. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education*, 9(1), 46-59.

Crawford, E.O., & Kirby, M.M. (2008). Fostering students' global awareness: technology applications in social studies teaching and learning. *Journal of Curriculum and Instruction,* 2(1), 56-73.

Crowe, A. (2006). Technology, citizenship, and the social studies classroom: education for democracy in a technological age. *International Journal of Social Education*, 21(1), 111-121.

Drake, J.P. (2012). *Civil Talks: Analysis of online discussions in social studies classrooms.* Kent State University.

Drake, J.P., & Drake, J.L. (2013). Toward an understanding of social studies blogging pedagogies. *Oregon Journal of Social Studies*, 21-35.

Drake, J.P., & Drake, J.L. (2014). One blog at a time, students slog through immigration and complex issues. *The Ohio Social Studies Review, 51*(1).

Harlan, M., Bruce, C., & Lupton, M. (2012). Teen content creators: experiences of using information to learn. *Library Trends*, 60(3), 569-587.

Holcomb, L., Beal, C., & Lee, J.K. (2011). Supersizing social studies through the use of Web 2.0 technologies. *Social Studies Research and Practice, 6*(3), 102-111.

Hostetler, A.L. (2012). Democratic use of blogs and online discussion boards in social studies education. *Social Education, 76*(2), 100-104.

Kittle, P., & Hicks, R. (Fall 2009). Transforming the group paper with collaborative online writing. *Pedagogy*, 9(3), 525-538.

Lucey, T.A., O'Malley, G.S., & Jansem, A. (2009). Using online reflection and conversation to build community. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning, 8*(3), 199-217.

Manfra, M.M., Gray, G.E. Jr., Lee, J.K. (2010). Blogging to learn: educational blogs and u.s. history. *Social Education, 74*(2), 111-113.

McGuire, M. E. (2007). What happened to social studies. Phi Delta Kappan, 88(8), 620-624.

Naslund, J., & Giustini, D. (2008). Towards school library 2.0: an introduction to social software tools for teacher-librarians. *School Libraries Worldwide, 14*(2), 55-67.

National School Boards Association (2007). *Creating & Connecting: research and guidelines*

on online social- and educational- networking. Alexandria, VA: Vockley Lang.

Seitzinger, J. (2006, July 31). Be constructive: blogs, podcasts, and wikis as constructivist learning tools. *Learning Solutions,* 1-16.

Shih, J.L., Chuang, C.W., & Hwang, G.J. (2010). An inquiry-based mobile learning approach to enhancing social science learning effectiveness. *Educational Technology & Society, 13*(4), 50-62.

Steele, M.M. (2005). Teaching students with learning disabilities: Constructivism or behaviorism. *Current issues in education, 8*(10), 6-16.

White, B., King, I., & Tsang, P. (2011). *Social media tools and platforms in learning environments*. Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag.

Willingham, D. T. (2009) *Why don't students like school: A cognitive scientist answers questions about how the mind works and what it means for the classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Wilson, E., Wright, V., Inman, C., & Matherson, L. (2011). Retooling the social studies classroom for the current generation. *The Social Studies, 102*(2), 65-72.

Appendix A

Pre- and Post-Questionnaire

1. I enjoy social studies as a subject.
   1 2 3 4 5
   Comments: _____

2. I feel familiar with the information I learn in social studies class.
   1 2 3 4 5
   Comments: _____

3. I think that social studies classes are really just about memorizing facts.
   1 2 3 4 5
   Comments: _____

4. I get the opportunity to reflect and think about what I'm learning in social studies class.
   1 2 3 4 5
   Comments: _____

5. I get the opportunity to compare and share my thoughts and opinions about social studies topics with my classmates in class.
   1 2 3 4 5
   Comments: _____

6. I can see how social studies works and is present outside of my classroom.
   1 2 3 4 5
   Comments: _____

- The additional two questions for before and after the study will be framed differently, but correspond with each other:

Before Study

1. I have a blog, or have used a blog before for any purpose or reason.
   1 2 3 4 5
   Comments:

2. Blogs can be interesting and useful tools for reflecting and talking about opinions and insights.
   1 2 3 4 5
   Comments:

After Study

1. I enjoyed using a blog for learning in the classroom.
   1 2 3 4 5
   Comments:

2. Using a blog helped me respond to and reflect on social studies topics.
   1 2 3 4 5
   Comments:

Appendix B

Behavioral Checklist

	Frequency					
Student	Talking to another student outside their social group [about social studies content]	Taking Notes	Raising Hand eagerly	Talking about blog posts they/another student has made	Participating in small group discussion	Helping another student w/ information
A.A.						
J.B						
Y.B						
C.C.						
K.C.						
C.CR.						
A.C.						
T.D.						
G.H.						
J.H.						
D.H.						
K.M.						
J.M.						
T.M.						
K.O.						
R.P.						
A.P.						
U.T.						
K.W.						
J.W.						