The Use of Blogs in the
Practical Literary Criticism Classroom

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Abstract

This paper explores the use of blogs in the literary criticism classroom as a means of enhancing student interaction with unseen literary passages. Unfortunately, the majority of students find literary criticism challenging since it does not simply require the identification of the thematic concerns of the unseen passage, but also the ability to comment on various literary aspects such as, imagery, diction and figurative language. Therefore, one major barrier that students would need to overcome is that of effectively visualising what the poem or prose passage is depicting. This visualisation would lead to the proper identification of literary aspects and the effect the author or poet intends to create. In other words, students must first establish a sense of confidence with the passage - one that is normally lacking during their first months of experience with literary criticism of unseen poetry / prose passages. This research, based on a pilot project, seeks to address this lack of confidence by using a specifically-created blog where the students are free to express their thoughts and comments on a particular poem or prose passage in an online collaborative atmosphere which goes beyond the classroom setting. This fosters confidence, whilst concomitantly promoting other supplementary skills.

Keywords: blogs, Literary Criticism, online collaboration, new literacies, thinking skills

Introduction

One of the most challenging tasks that Advanced Level students of English face during their post-secondary academic experience in local Further Education Institutions is that of Literary Criticism. This is a compulsory task for all students sitting for the MATSEC (Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate) English 'A' Level examination where in Papers I and II the students are required to write a literary analysis of not less than 400 words on an unseen poem (Paper I) and prose passage (Paper II). No choice of text is offered in both of these sections and the essays "should be an exercise in practical criticism and should demonstrate the candidate's ability to describe, interpret, analyse, critically assess and appreciate

a given unseen poem" (MATSEC Syllabus 2012, n.d.) or prose passage. Apart from the general learning outcomes for other language features such as coherence, structure and appropriate vocabulary, the syllabus lists ten learning outcomes for the literary criticism essay. These learning outcomes primarily focus on the ability of the students to 'analyse an unseen poem through the application of appropriate critical strategies', interpret and appraise 'the effectiveness and distinctiveness of literary language in a given unseen poem' while demonstrating an awareness of the necessary critical terminology in their appraisal of the unseen poem. Moreover, these learning outcomes also focus on the importance of organizing 'observations (description, analysis, critique and appraisal) about an unseen poem in a cogent essay of not less than 400 words.'(Ibid.)

Apart from examination exigencies, the task of literary criticism exposes students to meaningful contexts that are characterised by the use of descriptive and figurative language. Literary criticism "also appeals to [the students'] imagination, develops cultural awareness, and encourages critical thinking about plots, themes, and characters." (Van Truong, 2009, p.2)

The Barrier

As one of the lecturers teaching literary criticism in a post-secondary institution, I believe that the root of students' anxiety in relation to poetry criticism is that of 'disenfranchisement' (Regis, 2013). Many students perceive poetry (especially when it is unseen) as something which they cannot relate to and as having a meaning which they will fail to unravel. In other words, their fear of 'misunderstanding' the poem and getting it wrong is so high that it sometimes obfuscates even their basic and literal understanding of the poem. Consequently, the subject is perceived by many to be challenging and inaccessible.

The typical process, which starts with the students reading the unseen poem for the first time until their final critical essay on the poem, can be outlined as follows:
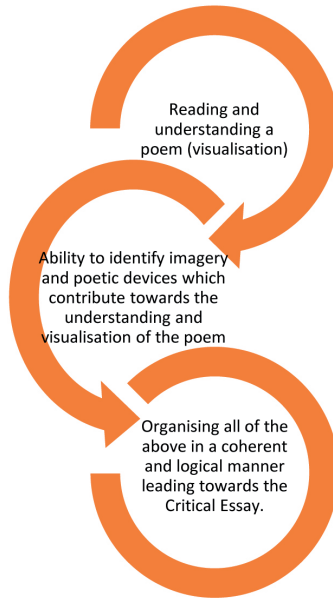
Reading and understanding a poem (visualisation)

Ability to identify imagery and poetic devices which contribute towards the understanding and visualisation of the poem

Organising all of the above in a coherent and logical manner leading towards the Critical Essay.

Figure 1: Literary Criticism process leading to the Critical Essay

After reading the poem the student attempts to visualise what the poem is depicting (through figurative language, mood, atmosphere, theme, etc.). This is followed by a closer look at the poetic language employed where the student should note how it contributes towards the theme and the overall image or vision the poem creates. The final step is to express all this in a coherent and logical critical essay using a formal and analytical style. Unfortunately, even after any challenging vocabulary is explained, many students encounter a major hurdle in the very first step of this process and therefore, due to the interdependency of these steps, they would not be able to proceed with the rest. The students' sense of 'disenfranchisement' and their perception of the subject as being inaccessible are the main factors that serve to drain the required confidence necessary to attain a basic understanding of the poem.

The Research Questions

Given this scenario, I decided to pursue this issue further with my main research questions being:

- How can a sense of confidence in literary criticism be instilled while making students aware that critical thought is something personal and that, as long

as it is accompanied by appropriate argumentation, there is no right and wrong answer?
- How can the subject's lecturing atmosphere be deformalized and hence make the subject more accessible through effective student collaboration?
- Would the above ultimately facilitate the visualisation of the poem?

'Deformalizing' the subject, ideally through student collaboration, necessarily entails a change in the medium of delivery itself. I had to find a medium that would not simply transcend the formal lecturing atmosphere but act as a supplement to it ideally by promoting peer collaboration.

Breaking the Barrier

We are all aware of the dependency of teenagers on technology, it "is like oxygen—a necessary component of their life" (Lacina and Griffith, 2012, p.316). Children of the 21st century are 'digital natives', they "are all 'native speakers' of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet" (Prensky, 2001, p.1). Students taking down notes during lectures on their tablets or laptops, and others asking if they can use their devices instead of traditional paper books are all situations with which we are familiar. Whether one should radically condemn or accept such use of technology in the light of current trends in education is a topic, which I feel, necessitates discussion.

This directed my attention to the fact that technology must be the medium through which the confidence barrier can be broken. With a plethora of Web 2.0 tools, availability of wireless internet throughout the college, all students being in possession of an email address and a personal background in education technology, I decided to explore how technology can assist my students in gaining the required confidence in literary criticism ideally through a collaborative online forum. For this reason, I decided to explore the use of weblogs as a technological tool for creating an online environment where students can discuss a particular poem or prose passage in an informal / deformalized atmosphere. My previous research questions could now be simplified as: Does a blog serve to deformalize the subject (whilst maintaining the necessary formality in language use) and hence boost student confidence through online collaboration; and would this lead the students to an effective visualisation of the unseen poem that allows them to ultimately write a cogent literary essay?

What is a Blog?

One of the major benefits brought about by Web 2.0 tools is the possibility of the internet user to become a participant and not simply a consumer of information. Now, internet users can produce information and learners are empowered with the possibility of contributing to the resources and not just consume them (Handsfield, Dean and Cieloch, 2009). Consequently, Web 2.0 tools opened up the possibility of collaboration where users can co-create content and share it with the world. Blogs (short for web logs) are interactive and personally composed Web 2.0 spaces in which entries typically appear in reverse chronological order. Blogs may include images, videos and hyperlinks to websites and bloggers can interact with their audience via a comment section at the end of the blog (Ibid.). Creating and maintaining a blog is very simple since the interface provided by the platform is highly intuitive and user-friendly. No prior knowledge of web coding and design is required since all platforms provide the user with WYSIWYG editing facilities.

There are many free blogging platforms available with those most used being WordPress, Blogger, Tumblr and Squarespace (Haines, 2017). All of these platforms are also available as smartphone apps, so users can receive instant notifications on their devices whenever someone leaves a comment on a particular blog entry.

Why use a Blog?

Before discussing the ways in which blogs can assist in the literary criticism classroom, it is important to locate their importance within the framework of new literacies. Due to their participatory and collaborative nature, blogs are a paradigm case of a tool that assists in new literacy practices (Knobel and Lankshear, 2014). New literacy goes beyond the basic skills associated with reading and writing and include activities like text-messaging, social networking, blogs, podcasting, and video making. These digital technologies extend our communication abilities and change what it means to both "read" and "write" texts. New literacies "are more participatory, collaborative, and distributed, and less "published," less "author-centric," and less "individual" than conventional literacies" (Ibid. p.98). Blogs are therefore an ideal means how new literacies can be implemented in our classrooms.

Deformalization and Collaboration

As far as the students' perception of the subject of literary criticism is concerned, a blog's possibility of providing social collaboration in a non-formal setting should enable them to attain the necessary confidence in the subject. Owing to its constant availability, a blog has the potential to extend beyond the classroom thereby enabling the students to comment on a particular blog entry in their free time.

Even those students who are reticent and do not engage in class discussions might be interested in joining the blog discussion at their leisure by writing comments or replying to existing ones. By taking this task out of the classroom, blogs allow students to express their voice even from their own private spaces whilst injecting a sense of 'play' which 'lowers the emotional stakes of failing' (Jenkins, 2006, p.23). Ironically, blogs' capability of taking the task out of the classroom strengthens even further the collaboration between students. This is because students now feel part of a 'team' where knowledge is shared and developed collectively by means of a constant exchange and brainstorming of ideas.

One other reason why blogs enable 'deformalization' is that in blogging the students are not writing for a central reader but to their peers by providing feedback on what has been discussed or by proposing new ideas and arguments. The absence of a central judgemental reader is a factor that contributes towards making blogs a means of 'deformalization' because, in line with the new literacy practices, blogs can only operate if the teacher or lecturer becomes a participant in the task and not someone who "requires, assigns, models, and mandates" (Steller, 2015, p.17). The role of the teacher in a blogging task, which is discussed below, is that of a moderator who establishes parameters, since the value of blogs in education lies precisely in the fact that bloggers "recognize that quality is judged by groups rather than by appointed experts" (Knobel and Lankshear, 2014, p.98).

Another benefit of blogging, which results from its collaborative nature, is that it allows the students to write for a wider audience. In the blogosphere, students' comments are not simply read by the lecturer but by other classmates and anyone around the world who locates the blog. However, this might create a problem given that my particular situation had to deal with boosting student confidence in the subject. Widening the audience to my students' writing and thinking could have a counter-effect; yet seeing that the benefits posed by the project far outweigh the disadvantages, this was a risk worth taking.

Enhances other skills

Besides serving as a motivation-booster by promoting collaboration and decentralisation of authority, blogging leaves a positive impact on other skills. Zawilinski maintains that literature discussion blogs promote higher order thinking (HOT) skills especially in relation to reading and writing because on the internet "writing is intrinsically integrated with the reading comprehension process" (Zaliwinski, 2009, p.652). These new literacies of online reading comprehension essentially serve to "emphasize higher order thinking skills like analysis, synthesis and evaluation" (Ibid. p.652). These skills are not simply required for online communication but also form an integral part of the task of literary criticism and are all skills that "can be practiced through blogging" (Ibid. p.652).

Lecturer's role

Before introducing the blogging task for the first time, my role as lecturer had to be re-defined. On one hand, it was clear that the presence of a sage who knows everything does not fit in the realm of the blogosphere. On the other, guidance had to be provided to the students as to what the purpose of the blog is and what is required from them. It was clear that my role had to be twofold: providing the necessary guidance and facilitation but also acting as an active participant in the task. The following are the factors I took into consideration and explained to my students when the blog was introduced:

Purpose of the blog: Having a clear purpose helps both the readers and writers to better define their contributions to the blog, so it was explained that the purpose of the blog is to act as a brainstorming activity where everyone is free to express his or her own thoughts on the poem being discussed. Students were encouraged to read and respond to each other's comments and later, when directed by myself, use this shared information to write their own critical essay.

Establish the level of formality: Even though my aim was to create an informal setting to promote participation, the need for a formal writing style synonymous with literary discussion was requested. When participants are responding to each other's comments, they should utilise accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar.

Defining the lecturer's role: In order to maximise the sense of confidence and promote participation as much as possible, I defined the role that I will be assuming in this task namely that of participating in the discussion by providing guidance and checking the quality of the blog entries. No grades or marks will be assigned to the entries since the scope of this task is that of fostering discussion and peer learning. All posts will be made public only after my approval.

The *CritBlog*

The institution provides a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) which I could have used to create the blog. All students have access to this platform where lecturers upload handouts, notes, hyperlinks and can even conduct online surveys. Using this VLE would have served all my requirements; however, I decided to use an independent platform in order to distance this project from the academic setting as much as possible. For this reason, I opted for WordPress, which is a free open-source platform that operates 30% of the web (WordPress, n.d.), to create the blog and named it *CritBlog* (http://critblogspace.wordpress.com). One other reason why WordPress was chosen is that it enables the installation of an app on the students' mobile devices. In this way, the students can receive instant notifications hence creating a social-media community with which the students are familiar.

Step 1: The first blog entry consisted a welcome message describing the purpose and scope of the *CritBlog* emphasising the importance of students' contribution towards the discussion.

Figure 2: CritBlog welcome message

In order to provide the students with all the necessary tools and ease of use, the *CritBlog*'s header included links to online resources such as a complete list of figures of speech and tips on how to write literature essays.

Figure 3: CritBlog header

Step 2: The first task was then posted and for this purpose I chose Ted Hughes's *The Thought-Fox* which is a highly accessible poem yet rich in figurative language. Constantly aware of my role as facilitator, I did not simply post a poem but also provided further guidance by providing a link to a YouTube video featuring the poet's voice reading the poem and images that complement what is being read. A checklist with various elements used in literary criticism (such as theme, speaker/voice, imagery, tone, atmosphere, diction and rhyme) was also included in order to enable the students to analyse the poem in the light of these important elements.

Step 3: A week after the launch of the blog I reminded those students who had not yet submitted a comment to do so. This resulted in more entries and the following week I asked the students to write a critical essay on the poem. At this point, the students were asked to read all comments submitted and, if necessary, ask other students for clarification or to further develop a particular argument. The students were given one week to write the critical essay.

Results

Students started submitting comments from the first day the blog was introduced. WordPress statistics show that all of the 17 students in my class had visited the blog; all of them watched the YouTube video though only 10 students submitted a comment. All comments made use of a formal style and, even though I previewed them before appearing live, it was not necessary to make any changes to the entries. My role was that of guiding the discussion by answering and acknowledging all comments and hinting towards the discussion of other poetic elements such as tone, voice and sound effects. It was evident that students were finding this medium conducive to reflection since the comments submitted demonstrated a close and critical reading of the poem. The following are excerpts from what two students posted:

1. The words "something else is alive", reinforce uncertainty to create the atmosphere of suspense. The transferred epithet "the clock's loneliness" shows that it is the poet that is lonely not the clock. In addition, the ticking of the clock emphasizes the loneliness the poet feels, as the seconds are drawn-out. However, the poet feels lonely not because he is alone but because he does not have any inspiration to write.

2. The poem portrays a VERY strong sense of auditory imagery. It immediately mentions "clock" in the first stanza and the word "ticks" in the last. This is to emphasise the poet's solitude and quietness. The atmosphere is silent and tense. "…this midnight moment's forest:" this shows us that his description is set in the present and he is experiencing it as he's writing it.

These two samples, like the rest of the submissions, clearly demonstrate the students' attention to the poet's use of language while focussing on poetic devices and how they contribute towards creating a particular effect. Moreover, three of the submissions were from students who are normally silent in class and so the blog provided them with a 'voice', a boost in confidence that was lacking in the classroom environment. This shows that writing for a wider audience did not serve as a deterrent to these students.

It should be noted that, contrary to my expectations, no student submitted an entry in direct response to a comment left by another student. Even though it was clear that the comments submitted were based on developments of previous entries, no student submitted an entry that directly challenges or develops an argument left by another student.

When it comes to the critical essay, it was evident that the blog, in making the students view themselves as readers and writers, assisted them to be better writers (Steller, 2015, p.13). This is because the majority of the essays demonstrated a significant improvement in structure, coherence and critical thought. Even though some students did not leave a comment on the blog, they consulted other students' comments to write their essay. The sense of confidence that the blog instilled enabled them to express their ideas logically and coherently in the writing assignment by assimilating and incorporating the various ideas presented in the blog and develop them further.

Post-project Survey

After submitting their critical essays, the students were asked to answer a very brief online questionnaire comprising three questions:
1. How would you rate your overall *CritBlog* experience?
2. What did you find most interesting in using a blog for literary analysis?
3. Apart from commenting on a literary passage, what other skills did you gain from using this blog?

The purpose of this questionnaire was to obtain feedback from the students themselves as to how they perceived the blogging experience. Being a pilot project, this questionnaire would also shed light on which areas require improvement. All the ten students who participated in the blog answered the questionnaire with 66.7% of them finding the *CritBlog* an enjoyable experience and 33.3% finding it extremely enjoyable. When asked 'What did you find most interesting in using a blog for literary analysis?' and with the possibility of choosing more than one answer, the students responded as follows:
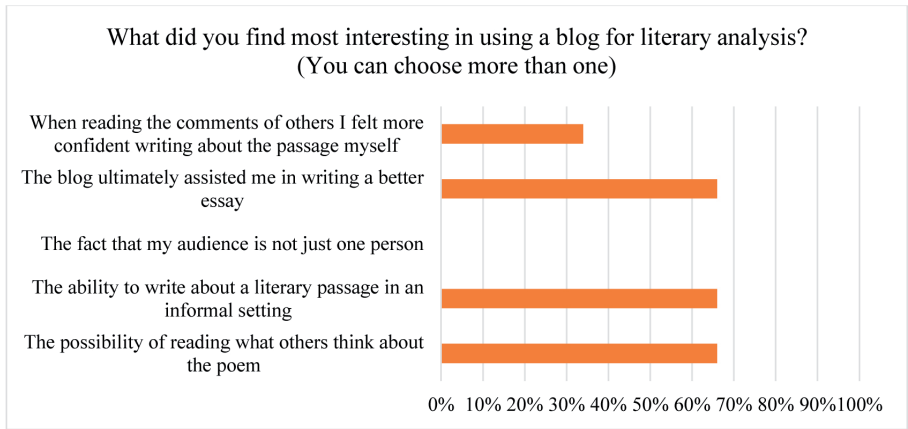
What did you find most interesting in using a blog for literary analysis? (You can choose more than one)

When reading the comments of others I felt more confident writing about the passage myself	
The blog ultimately assisted me in writing a better essay	
The fact that my audience is not just one person	
The ability to write about a literary passage in an informal setting	
The possibility of reading what others think about the poem	

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

Figure 4

These results show that the blog, by offering the students the possibility to read each other's comments (even though they did not address or answer any of their colleagues' remarks), served as a tool which assisted them in the writing process mostly because of its deformalized setting (66%) and hence boosting their confidence (34%).

When asked to identify which skills, apart from commenting on a literary passage, are gained from using a blog, the students answered as follows:
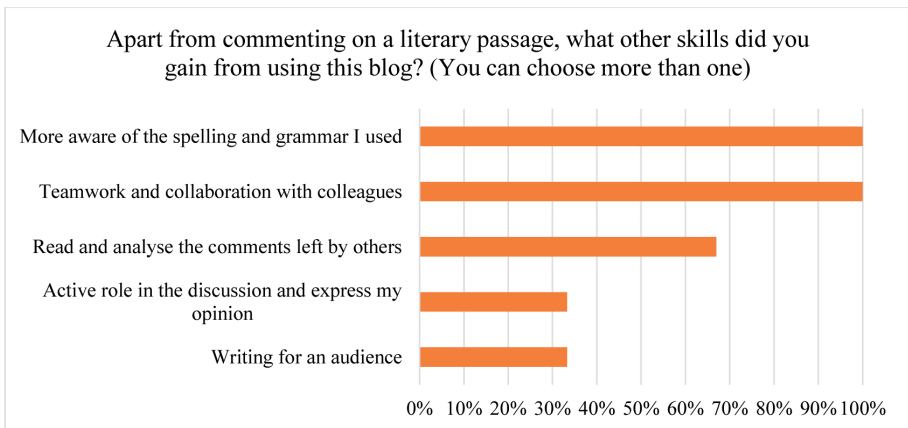
Apart from commenting on a literary passage, what other skills did you gain from using this blog? (You can choose more than one)

More aware of the spelling and grammar I used	
Teamwork and collaboration with colleagues	
Read and analyse the comments left by others	
Active role in the discussion and express my opinion	
Writing for an audience	

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

Figure 5

It is clear that writing for an audience did not prove to be an obstacle but, on the other hand, all of the students who answered the questionnaire felt more aware of the spelling and grammar used. Another important skill that students felt to have gained by means of blogging is that of teamwork. Even though there were no direct exchanges between students, it was clear that they were using the blog to learn from each other and consequently assimilated these ideas in their essays.

Conclusion: Reflections and Improvements

As already noted, this was a pilot project so there is ample room for future improvement and development. Among the steps to be taken into consideration for future implementation is the insistence on the use of the blog as a brainstorming collaborative space where students do not simply post their opinion but also challenge and develop ideas presented by their peers. A less accessible text might be used which would necessitate students posing questions to their colleagues thereby enhancing teamwork and collaboration. Since writing for an audience is a motivating factor in itself, the implementation of the *CritBlog* with more than one group/class of students should also be considered. This helps to widen the students' audience, enables the creation of a social media community whilst encouraging the students to view themselves as readers and writers.

This initial experience with using a blog in a literary criticism classroom clearly highlights the effectiveness of this tool as a means of creating collaboration and boosting student confidence. It leaves a positive effect on the depth of analysis and improves critical reading and writing skills. In a world where technological literacy skills are becoming increasingly important, a blog is not only academically beneficial but also enhances the students' communicative and digital skills.

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Bio-note

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