What is the Impact of Blogging used with Self-Monitoring Strategies for Adolescents Who Struggle with Writing?

By

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Abstract

Writing is an onerous task for those who struggle with the skill. The basic pre-requisites of organizing thoughts, transcribing thoughts into words, and writing down those words is fundamental to the more advanced skills of developing a sense of audience, writing with voice and applying conventions. Without proficient skills, students who cannot write, do not write. Positive attitude toward the process of writing suffers. Time spent on actual writing is limited. As a consequence, writing skill does not develop.

Students who struggle with writing can be supported in their skill development through self-monitoring strategies. Self-monitoring strategies for writing give students a systematic process to know how to approach a writing task. The clear step-by-step process breaks down difficult skills and allows students to build proficiency through guided practice and eventually, independence.

This action research project explored the impact of using self-monitoring strategies with the 21st century skill of blogging within a Writer's Workshop instructional model. Sixteen students (eleven males, five females) in grades 6-8th participated in a twelve week study. Target writing skills of fluency, stamina, motivation, awareness of audience and participation in peer review were measured for changes over the course of the study. Students were instructed in the use of self-monitoring strategies focusing on increasing word counts in correct word sequence timings, on-command prompt passages, and formal writing process pieces. Blogging was introduced and used to apply target skills to a digital writing setting. Each student learned self-monitoring strategies to compose posts in personal blogs and to read and comment on other students' blogs.

Pre-and post-writing attitude survey, correct word sequence timings and writing samples were taken throughout the study to assess each students' skill level and attitude toward writing. The group showed average gains of 34% in correct word sequence and 66% in word counts of process writing pieces. Qualitative data and quantitative data demonstrate that writing skills and attitudes toward writing also showed positive development when self-monitoring strategies were used to support the writing tasks of blogging in a Writer's Workshop model.

Review of the Literature

What is the Impact of Blogging used with Self-Monitoring Strategies for Adolescents Who Struggle with Writing?

Increasingly, the ability to express oneself in writing is being put to the test. Instructors use written tasks to engage students with a topic, reflect on an experience, and promote better comprehension of concepts across the curriculum. From math to science to history to the arts, writing is becoming the chosen method to heighten and demonstrate critical thinking, analysis and synthesis, according to the researcher's observation. The five-paragraph essay, written on command, on a pre-chosen prompt is an essential genre to master for state testing purposes.

Whatever the context, writing is an over-whelming task for those who struggle with the skill. Whether at a state or national level, test scores show skill deficits clearly (Graham, 2004). According to findings from the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 33 percent of eighth-grade students and 24 percent of twelfth-grade students performed at or above the "proficient" level in writing. This means that two-thirds of eighth grade students and three quarters of twelfth-grade students score at either the basic level or below in writing. (Salahu-Din, Persky, and Miller, 2008, Graham, 2011). Of note are reading scores. Thirty-three percent of fourth-grade students and 31 percent of eighth-grade students perform at or above the "proficient" level (defined as solid academic performance) in reading (Lee, Grigg, and Donahue, 2007). In contrast, 34 percent of fourth-grade students and 43 percent of eighth-grade students score at the "basic" level, in other words, possessing the emergent literacy skills needed at their grade level. The rest of the students (33 percent of fourth graders and 26 percent of eighth graders) scored below this basic level.

Wisconsin students measured by the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination (WKCE) seemed to fare better than the national scope. According to the November 2011 WKCE results in language arts, 64.2 % of students tested statewide scored in the proficient or advanced range. However, the focus of this action research is the 37.6% of students who scored in the minimal or basic ranges (Wisconsin DPI, 2012).

The Story for Writers Who Struggle

What comes naturally for successful writers, the multi-dimensional process of planning, drafting, evaluating, revising and editing, is not found in the story of a struggling writer. In fact, when writing fluency of writers (the speed, accuracy and expression of putting thoughts into words) is assessed, writers who struggle show very low fluency, nearly half that of their peers (Santangelo, 2008, Weintraub & Graham, 1998). They write very little and too slowly, often because of handwriting issues, poor phonemic awareness and spelling skills, and difficulty in generating content (Goddard, 2008). Instead of emulating examples of good writing, utilizing strategies to guide their work, asking questions or seeking feedback, struggling writers seem to rely on an unrealistic sense of their own ability to approach the task (Weisendanger, 2011; Goddard, 2008). Instead of organizing ideas into a logical meaning, struggling writers tend to engage in knowledge telling: writing down all information that seems to be related in a list of ideas rather than a well-organized discussion (McCutchen, 1988, Goddard, 2008). Instead of revising and reworking passages of text, struggling writers engage in very little evaluation of their ideas. Revisions are limited to surface level corrections (Helsel, 2007). Instead of using reading skills to aid in meaning making, the fact, according to test scores, is that poor readers are also poor writers. The reciprocal cognitive connections between reading and writing are not developed, thus setting struggling students up for literacy difficulty (Anderson, 2011).

Self doubt, learned helplessness, noncommittal academic engagement and responsibility for learning give way to lack of motivation, weak persistence and low stamina for writing tasks (Graham, 2008). Struggling writers have no idea what good writing looks like and don't realize what strategies they could use to write well. The concerning end of this story is that state essay test scores of struggling writers place them well below the level of their peers in writing ability (Goddard, 2008). The lack of writing ability disallows them to take part fully in regular learning environments and the critical and analytical thinking activities their peers experience.

Self-Monitoring Strategies: Support for a Difficult Task

Process-based writing researchers and educators such as Donald Graves, Lucy Calkins and Ralph Fletcher, suggest that students learn to write by writing. Students need to understand the writing process and develop strategies for improving and independently monitoring their writing skills (McGrail, 2011). Many experts agree that most struggling writers differ from successful writers in that the struggling writers have not developed a strategic approach for creating and organizing ideas (Wiesendanger, Davis, Rajewski, Braun, 2011; Alexander, Graham, & Harris, 1998; Graham, 2005). Students need to write for an audience that is real and for reasons for which they can invest. This authenticity is essential because it is centered on a message that is to be written and read. Explicitly teaching students about the connection between writing and reading, the author and audience, is a powerful tool (Anderson, 2011).

Students who struggle with writing can be supported in their skill development through self-monitoring strategies. Self-monitoring strategies allow students a systematic process for approaching an academic task (Milford and Harrison, 2010). The task, such as planning for writing, summarizing a paragraph or increasing writing fluency is simplified into a number of instructional procedures designed for maintenance and generalization of the skill (Graham, 2004; Helsel, 2007; Moxely, 1995; Goddard, 2008). The application of self-monitoring strategies helps the learner to better understand the task and conceptualize a successful attempt, thus making the purpose and value of the task clear (Graham, 2008; Santangelo, 2008). For example, Graham & Harris (2004) showed improvement in 317 third graders' ability to plan and compose stories and persuasive essays. Using the POW mnemomic, students were taught three steps: 1) Pick my ideas, 2) Organize my notes and 3) What, why, where, when and how in relation to characters and concepts. Students become proficient with the strategy in 5 steps: Discuss it, Model it, Memorize it, Support it, and finally, Independent practice (Helsel, 2007). Using this strategy, students increased average word count in process pieces by 53 percent and increased time spend composing an average of 41 percent, consistent with other third graders in their school (Graham, 2004).

The Impact of Self-monitoring Strategies

The impact of self-monitoring strategies on adolescents who struggle with writing involves the quality of self-improvement. During the guided practice stage of working with the strategy, self-talk helps to shift from teacher-led instruction to self-efficacy and independence (Graham, 2008; Goddard, 2008). Self-monitoring strategies allow students to assume responsibility for their performance and behavior (Goddard, 2008). Self-control, self-reinforcement, self-instruction, self-assessment, personal goal setting along with promoting an "I can" attitude, build motivation and thus, quality writing (Santangelo, 2008). When Moxely and his colleagues (1995) theorized that writing more at a higher rate improved writing quality, student timed writings were used to track personal word counts. Students set goals and measured their progress. Using criterion-based assessment, students' conscious attempts to exceed past performances was linked to improved writing (Milford and Harrison, 2010; Moxely,1995; Goddard, 2008). When Solley and her colleagues used self-talk strategies to enhance writing skills, students were trained to become aware of, and regulate their thoughts towards, engaging positively in the writing process (Solley & Payne, 1992).

According to Santangelo, Graham & Harris (1997), over twenty-five published studies have been documented that show self-monitoring strategies lead to a significant increase in writing knowledge, writing quality, writing approach, self-monitoring of writing behavior and motivation—all essential skills for working in contemporary writing instruction methods such as Writer's Workshop (Santangelo, 2007; Graham & Harris, 1997). The application of self-monitoring strategies in a Writer's Workshop instructional model along with the motivating 21st century skill of blogging allows increased fluency, stamina, motivation, awareness of audience, engagement in the task, and connection to a writing community for self-reflection and feedback. Reading and writing, reciprocal skills, is inherent in blogging.

Why Blog?

A blog, short for weblog, is a type of website that compiles entries or posts and allows others to view and post comment in response. Popular among Internet users at

large, the addition of graphics, music files and video to text can be used to share ideas more richly than the limited student/teacher interaction of traditional theme writing. A blog can take the form of a diary or a journal, sharing news or interesting personal information. Academic blogging provides space for modeling and developing literary processes, reflection, questioning, and social practices (McGrail, 2011). Digital literature circles can be facilitated online, allowing free and fair discussion for several people without the domination of an over-zealous orator and the pressure of speaking spontaneously (Ellison, 2008; McGrail, 2011; Yang, Chang 2012). Blogging can also become a place to develop a writing community where writers exchange ideas, feedback and reflection (Richardson, 2006; Ellison, 2008; McGrail, 2011).

The purpose implicit in blogging is to write for an audience of readers. Thus, awareness of audience is an obvious component. Bloggers must in turn read in order to write a relevant response. According to Torrance (2007), blogging can provide young writers with the opportunity to write for an "external intervention" that points out to developing writers the areas that need improvement and teaches them the ways the reader makes sense of their writing. Experience with reader/writer relationship, so critical in today's information age, is central to the activity (McGrail, 2011).

Why Blog With Self-Monitoring Strategies?

If the story of students who struggle with writing is altered when more time is spent writing, and further, if strong evidence shows that self-monitoring skills positively affect the self-efficacy of these writers, then an engaging digital forum—the blog--may be the just place to combine both interventions (Witte, 2007).

Vigharajah, Luan and Bakar, (2007) used self-monitoring strategies in an e-learning environment in Indonesia. They concluded that students who use self-monitoring skills are more likely to generalize skills to real-world writing situations. Although no data were found to definitively prove the impact of students using the strategy because they feel it works, it was strongly thought that investment and trust in the method allowed the strategy to impact skills positively. If the community of strategy users is united in their support, the positive effect is increased and

strengthened (Vighararjah, 2007). Thus, the motivating and supportive writing environment of blogging with the systematic clarity of self-monitoring strategies may allow struggling writers to gain the necessary skills to participate in personal and academic 21st century forums such as chatting, video conferencing, wiki development and social networking (Vighararjah, 2007).

As classrooms strive to incorporate technology, the role of blogging as a digital literary device has the potential to encourage conversations between students, and additionally, become the facilitator for compiling student work and monitoring progress over time (Maskell, 2008). Imagine a collection of published pieces of writing, posts on self-chosen topics, and comments written to review another peer's work, reflective questions and thoughts, all contained in an on-line e-portfolio. One might title this collection *The Story of a Former Struggling Writer.*

Conclusion of the Literature Review

In summary, when the writing effort requires support, self-monitoring strategies are a means to allow non-writers to engage in the multi-dimensional task of writing. Writing will occur if only enough skill and enough motivation exist at the same time. When writers feel secure in their own ability to exhibit self-efficacy toward the difficult and complex task of writing, the writing effort is successful. A positive attitude toward writing allows motivation, stamina and the quality of writing to increase. Thus, practice at actual writing tasks in a blog or writer's workshop setting, allows students to spend more time writing and to be motivated to write more.

When students interact with each other via blog space, they are actually spending time reading: comprehending and synthesizing appropriate responses. The connection between reading and writing goes back to the very basic beginnings of letter-sound relationships, experiencing language at a structural level, and the pragmatics of language or the intention, purpose, and relation of a piece to its audience (Pearson, 2002).

With digital literacy at the cusp of integration in our classrooms and everyday learning routines, blogging with self-monitoring strategies is critical for the inclusion and development of writing skill for all students.

This action research will address the following questions:

- How are the specific writing skills of writing fluency, stamina, and attitude toward writing impacted through the use of self-monitoring strategies used with blogging?
- How does an authentic audience impact motivation and quality in student writing?
- What impact does the reading/writing connection of blogging have on peer editing and audience awareness?

Action Research

Participants

This action research project involved 16 middle special education students who receive special education services for language arts. All students in this study have writing test scores (WKCE) and correct word sequence timing scores in the basic or minimal range. Of the 6 eighth grade males, 2 eighth grade females, 3 seventh grade boys, 1 seventh grade female, 1 sixth grade male, 2 sixth grade females, 10 have diagnosed learning disabilities and 5 have significant emotional/behavioral disorders. The group's writing ability covers a range from non-writers (most written tasks dictated and transcribed) to reluctant writers (low stamina and word counts for most writing attempts, little attention paid to proper writing conventions such as capitalization, punctuation and spelling) to prolific writers that show poor sentence structure, poor idea cohesiveness and lack of organization. All students have current Individual Education Plans (IEPs) with goals that address their writing deficits.

Materials

Instruction took place in a resource classroom setting with two separate groups of students. The resource classroom was fortunate to house nine school-networked computers, which the two groups regularly used for Internet access, word processing and personal file storage. Students also had access to ipads, approved

personal devices such as smart phones, ipods or e-readers on occasion for word processing or access to the Internet.

The project began by administering the Writing Attitude Survey to measure students' personal perceptions of various writing tasks. A baseline CWS measure was taken and used to guide word count goals and criterion-based writing quality goals on a Student Skill Focus form. Students referenced this word count each time a correct word sequence timing (CWS) was done.

All writing was contained in a writer's portfolio for each student that reflected writing process in sections: pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing/checklists and final graded pieces. CWS timings and on command writing was kept in the drafting section since any writing had potential to grow into a developed piece.

Anchor charts depicting graphic organizers of the writing process, and self-monitoring strategies, various forms of formal writing, and 6 Traits of Writing posters were hung in the room as on going reminders of mini-lessons. After students gained experience with silent writing time and had a chance to work through the writer's process for two formal pieces of writing, it was time to introduce a new form of writing: the blog.

Kidblog.com is a website designed for elementary and middle school teachers who want to give their a students a safe, secure, easy and free way to participate in blogging. Created in 2010 by Minneapolis educators, it was selected for use in this action research because of its secure format and ease of use. With Kidblog, classroom teachers are able to set up individual student blogs and a classroom blog to allow access to other classmate's blogs. The Kidblog website requires a login/password in order to read blogs and is not open for public viewing unless a semi-private status is selected. Parents or other bloggers can take part via a guest login. Once the classroom blog was set up, a link to our class blog was posted on my teacher website to make it easy for students to navigate their way to the blog. After two lessons to explain the blog format, blogging etiquette and what makes a good post and comment, the blogging project was ready to begin.

Procedure

Prior to beginning this project, participants had focused on direct instruction spelling and grammar exercises in their pull out English class. Writing progress was measured to provide documentation for IEP goals via three-minute correct word sequence timings taken once per six-week grading period. Students had journals but used them infrequently. Writing class met five days per week for 42 minutes. In order to increase writing fluency, encourage motivation, stamina, knowledge of the writing process and what good writing actually looks like, a new class structure was instituted. Three main components comprised the change.

First, more time was dedicated to writing. Writer's Workshop (mini-lesson, silent writing time and conferencing/sharing) replaced direct instruction on three days per week. Spelling and vocabulary, and blogging tailored for individual needs were the focus on alternate days. Once students became acquainted with blogging, students logged in as part of the rotation of independent stations they were responsible to cover. Between quick journal prompts, process piece work and blogging, students reliably spent between 10-30 minutes per day engaged in actual writing.

Blogging Procedure. Kidblog is one of several classroom blogging platforms that allow teachers to set up classes without email accesses or cost. Kidblog.com allows the administrator of the blog, usually the classroom teacher, complete control over the blogging platform. Comments or posts can be reviewed and approved before being published. Because word count feature allows students to see the length of their blogs, after studying some posts written by other Kidbloggers, an adequate post was defined as 50 or more words. Comments were to be 2-3 sentences. As a class, we discussed how posts and comments differed from texting or Facebook statuses and what type of content or issues is not appropriate for posting. Posting was modeled and student examples were studied. Students were allowed to create posts on topics of their choice in their blogs. Every week, the class blog had a new Blog Challenge to which students could respond. In both the individual and group blog, students were encouraged to comment on each other's writing and to be aware of word count to ensure adequate content.

Second, criterion-based goal setting focusing on word count was made systematic. The correct word sequence (CWS) timing is a valid way to measure writing fluency or the way words sound in sentences and sentences sound together in paragraphs. However, without student investment and motivation to target better performance, scores were not likely to increase significantly. After baseline CWS scores were recorded, individual student conferences were held, allowing personal analysis of writing strengths and weaknesses. Students became aware of how many words they could write in three minutes and what type of errors occurred preventing a correct word sequence. CWS timings were increased to once every three weeks to keep goals familiar to the student. Before a timed writing, students made criterion-based goals related to word count and a specific skill focus they felt best fit their skill level. (e.g. I can write a complete sentence with proper capitalization and punctuation. I can start each sentence with a different word. I can write a complex sentence and use transitions to link ideas.) In order to carry over goal setting skills to other writing forms students worked to produce eight formal writing process pieces over the twelve-week action research period using the writing process. Also, practice with on command writing pieces (writing to a specific genre from a given prompt, [e.g. *Write a compare and contrast essay on something that changed about where you live.*]) worked on idea development and various visual methods of organization. Increasing word count for CWS timings, formal pieces and on-command writing was emphasized and encouraged.

Finally, two self-monitoring strategies designed by the researcher, were taught to support writing skills and promote independence in writing tasks. The first strategy, THINK IT, SAY IT, WRITE IT, READ IT can be applied to any writing task and was taught along with the students' first blogging experiences. The second strategy geared specifically to support commenting on posts of peer bloggers after reading them was taught after eight weeks of using THINK IT, SAY IT, WRITE IT, READ IT. Both strategies were taught via the guided release model. In both full group and individual sessions, student received explicit instruction by way of 1) Discussion of the meaning each step, 2) Modeling the use of the strategy when composing a sentence, 3) Memorization through daily review and reminders, 4) Support its use when composing and finally 5) Independence to use as needed to successfully compose written work. Anchor charts and personal bookmarks were posted and

encouraged for reference.

Students who have difficulty focusing ideas into complete thoughts tend to give up easily, often before ever composing anything lengthier than a few words (Santangelo, 2008, Graham & Harris, 2005a, Harris & Graham, 1996). Using the strategy, THINK IT prompts a moment to focus on gathering a complete thought. SAY IT provides an audible rehearsal and allows students to fix up any unclear or incomplete thoughts. WRITE IT signals the student to write each word that was just said. READ IT invites the writer to step into the reader's reciprocal role—a purposeful check for meaning. Non-writers are able to express their thoughts sentence by sentence, gaining confidence to eventually produce smoother, more fluent passages. Writing becomes a more functional and an even pleasurable experience. For students with learning disabilities or a severe expressive language disorder, the laborious task of writing, translating thoughts to words and words to text, can be made simpler and less daunting when a step-by-step process is used**.** Students with more developed skill quickly internalize the strategy and become examples for those who are in developing stages of learning.

The second self-monitoring strategy, designed to support the reading/writing connection during blogging, is called 4 Comments. After reading someone's blog post, the benefit of blogging is the response, a relevant comment written in relation to the just-read text. In order to provide a purpose for reading and a more focused scope for critical thought about the post, students are taught four purposeful types of comments: Try This:, Positive!, Quick Question?, and "I think…" Try This is a suggestion posed in the role of a peer editor, perhaps in relation to content or the writing itself. Positive! leads students to connect personally to a specific aspect of what a classmate has written. A Quick Question? is a tool for monitoring understanding of the post or articulate dialogue into deeper meaning of the topic. Finally, I think…identifies a connection the student has made with the content and furthers thinking to infer, critically analyze, determine importance and come to a conclusion on the topic—all strategies that heighten comprehension through the act of writing.

The three components of altered programming (more time writing, criterion-based goal setting and self-monitoring strategy instruction) made the pull out writing

class look quite different for these sixteen students. The benefit of Writer's Workshop is a writing community, autonomy in topic choice and an individual's self-directed path of progress. Self-monitoring strategies provide support and clarity while skills and confidence are developing. Blogging, to quote the Kidblog website, presents a chance to "*Provide your students with an authentic, engaging, and interactive learning experience…*" Instead of reluctance and refusal, students were provided the right set of circumstances for writing/reading progress (Kidblog, 2012).

Results and Discussion

In addition to monitoring student blogs, a professional blog was kept to document anecdotal observations of student's reactions to blogging. As students began this project the following excerpt notes a significant point:

"*An important point of this action research to keep in mind is that 100% of the participants are struggling writers. Given a writing attitude survey, none claimed to love to write…and in fact, even without the survey they told me plainly, "I don't like to write. It's hard. I don't know how to spell. I never get anything right. I hate writing."*

Interestingly, students willingly wrote in the blog. The following observations were made after 2.5 weeks of creating posts and comments:

Students enjoy posting images and writing a little about the image. Sometimes these are pictures of themselves and something they are interested in. Sometimes it's just a representative picture. For others and myself, it's a great way to find out more about a person--and a fun way to ask questions to find out more.

The younger class of students on their own began mimicking the questions I posted as my Blog Challenge. They thought of interesting, thought-provoking questions that their peers enjoyed answering. This happened without me ever instructing them to do so.

One girl, upset about a family situation, asked for advice from her peers. "Please read this..." was the title of her post. She did not get any responses, mostly because she routinely makes her problems known. She later posted some poetry that she wrote in connection with her problems. The blog actually became documentation of how she worked through being very upset to gaining better footing of her problem.

Some found the blogging environment a comfortable place to compose. Their thoughts and experiences about their weekend became something they copied and pasted into a word doc. to create a piece of formal writing.

A writer who has no problem coming up with words, but struggles with organization, used the blog to ramble away as she saw fit and then went back to edit the mass of text into manageable paragraphs. When fellow students saw her big blocks of text they balked--there was no way they were going to read all that! It was a real lesson for her to understand how important it was to make her writing make sense to an audience.

Some eagerly posted past or current writing projects on the blogs for others to comment on. I did not instruct them to do this. It just seemed like a cool thing to put collected ideas in a spot meant for that purpose (Klein, 2012).

As students connected with each other, I also wrote posts and comments to model purposeful blogging and to further thinking. Students were continually reminded of the THINK IT etc. strategy and of the post/comment parameters regarding word count and length. Posts were to be fifty or more words and comments 2-3 sentences in length. Over the course of the twelve weeks, 137 published posts with 309 comments reflecting experiences and interests were compiled.

In the beginning, comments were the short, witty type found in social networking or texting. The writing definitely had voice, delivered through word choice or excessive punctuation (i.e. *"COOOOLL!!!!!!!!!!!!"*) Direct but simple, surface level replies reflected at least a connection to what was read. Familiarity with the blogging platform, study of model blog comments and use of the 4 Comments strategy helped students to understand that blogging could be more like a discussion and not just light conversation. A comment should have content, meaning and purpose.

Of the 4 Comments, I think…and Positive! were the most prevalent, representing fifty percent of all comments written. It seemed easy and natural to enthusiastically agree or point out a similar interest. Students sometimes encouraged each other *("I like how your you. Its amazing. That's amazing how you wont let anyone change who you are. Its going to help you be a even stronger and better person in the long run"* or made good-natured jokes (*"You are going to get your butt kicked in paint ball.")* By comparison, Quick Question comments were few, just 10 out of the 309, and often were posed as a request for assistance rather than inquiry (i.e. *"I don't know a word that can describe me. What do you think?")* Try This comments were attempted just 4 times, likely due to the uneasiness with the role of peer editor. One student wrote to another close friend, *"Why don't you think about writing something else but your life. I'm just sayin I never see anything but that. (sic.)"*

Writing conventions were largely unobserved: proper punctuation was absent fifty percent of the time and capitalization at the start of sentences, of proper nouns or the pronoun "I" were rarely used. There was no indication that the lack of these conventions hampered understanding during blog reading, however misunderstandings stemming from punctuation and spelling errors did occur during the revision process of process writing pieces. When one student was encouraged to write more content into her blog posts, she commented back, *"I wanted to write more details but I didn't want it to be long."*

As a group of struggling readers and writers, the consciousness of their capacity for literacy while still practicing skills via blogging is a credit to these learners. Audience awareness and meta-cognitive forethought about how to structure writing with readers in mind was an unexpected quality. Collectively, for example, students used the blog to connect with each other on weekend plans, query on mutual hobbies, encourage each other and poke fun at each other in a good natured joking way. Their writing was not quality in terms of English conventions or spelling and they were never asked to fix up the writing they did. However, writing confidence and comfort level brought voice and consciousness to their writing. In the last week of the project, spontaneous posts titled *Summer School, Can I Please Have Some Peace,* and *The End of the Year* appeared on the blog without my assigning. These students revealed reflections and used writing to process personal thoughts and feelings. As these examples indicate, they began to feel more comfortable with the task of writing. They could be themselves.

The Impact on Correct Word Sequence Timings

This quantitative data (Fig. 1) shows that 14 of 16 students increased correct word sequences in a three-minute timing. Percentages of gains were calculated for all students posting scores. Nine students show gains between 5% and 30%. These students had baseline measures of 20 to 60 correct word sequences. Students showing gains in the range of 50-90% also had very low correct word sequence baselines (5-30 words.) The last recorded timing produced CWS's of 50-60. Students able to produce passages of 80-90 words for a three-minute timing reached this point on the third timing and did not exceed that point in the next two timings taken in the following weeks. Four out 16 of students were able to reach self-selected goals for word count in CWS timings.

Impact on Word Count of Formal Writing Pieces

Word count increases were also shown on the length of formal writing pieces (Fig. 2). Encouragement to write longer pieces was given informally, often during conferences or simply whispered as a challenge as a student started writing. Keeping track of word count was easy with word processing software and the Kidblog post area. Student confidence grew quickly as they realized just how quickly words added up. It was thrilling for many to reach beyond 100, 200 and beyond to longer and longer pieces of writing. Once enough content was composed, productive instruction on organization, paragraph structure and transitions could occur during mini-lessons or conferences. Soon, students set their own goals to reach beyond previous papers. Genre interests expanded from simply relaying paragraph-long descriptions to creative writing, compare and contrast essays, persuasive essays written for an authentic purpose to even poetry, music lyrics, and research reports. Students approached the task of writing with eagerness, focus and stamina, most able to sustain write for 20-30 or more minutes each day.

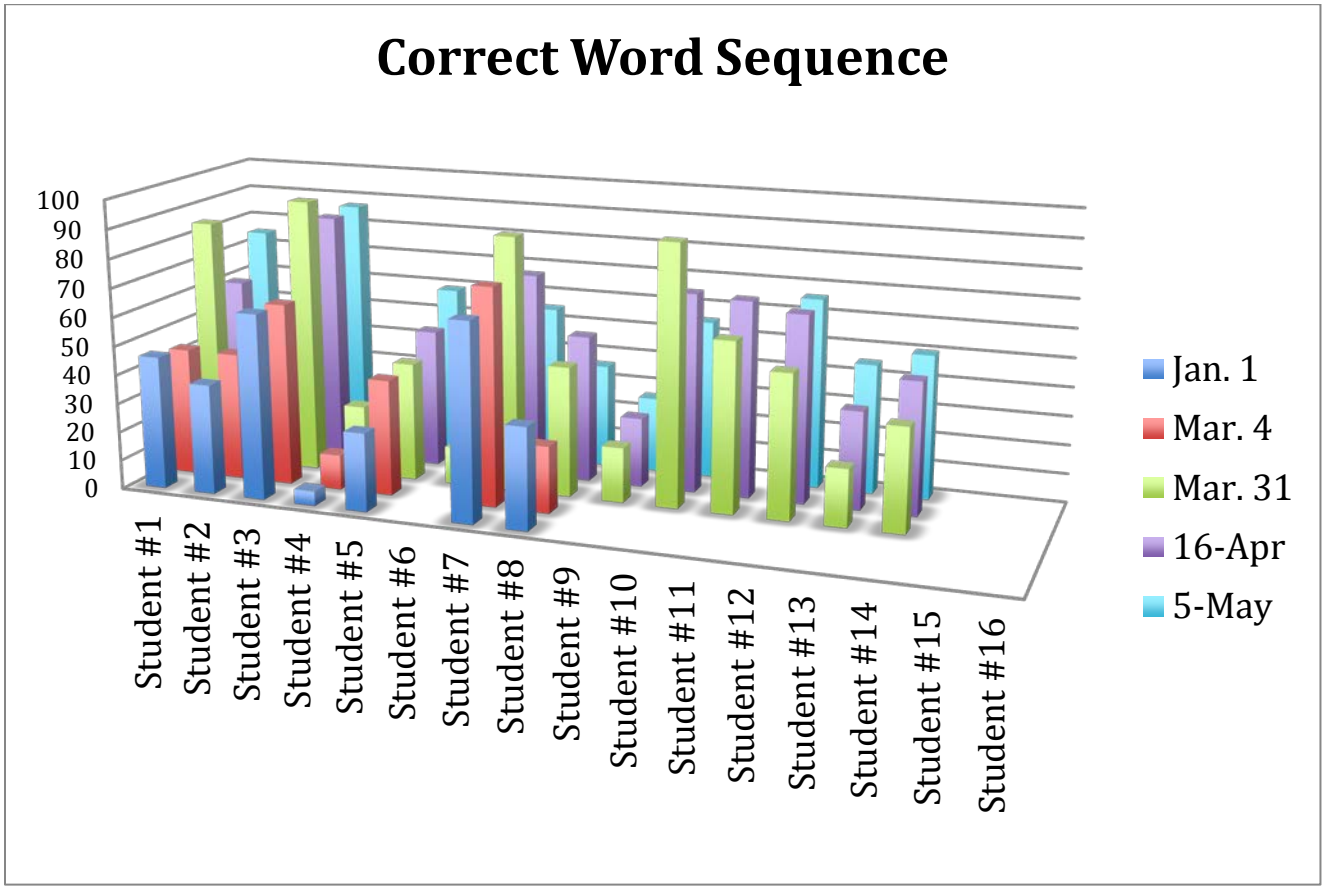

Figure 1. Students 1-8 were 8th grade students and wrote more CWS timings. Students #15 and #16 represent students with emotional/behavioral disorders. No valid CWS timings were recorded for these students.

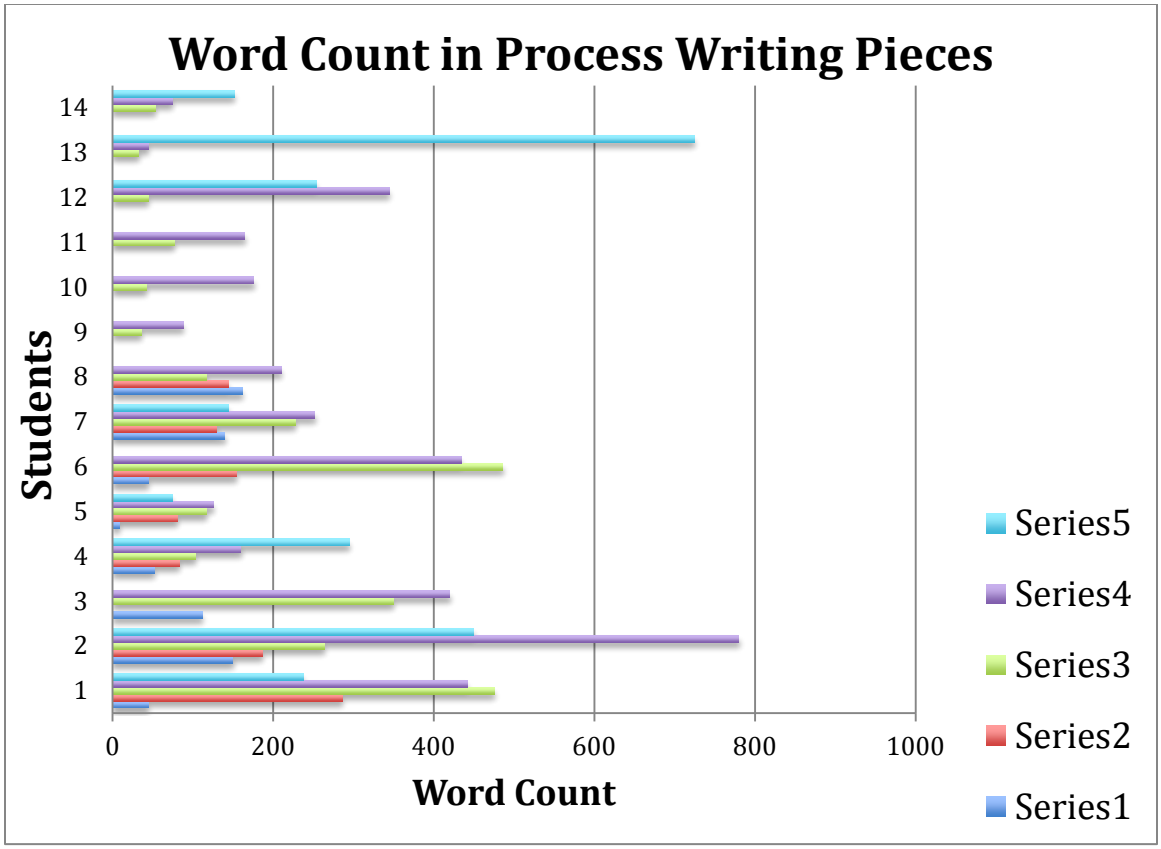

Figure 2. More than the five pieces were written (represented by Series 1-5) but just five were selected for this sample. Students 9-14 were able to complete 2-3 pieces and students 15 and 16 had drafts started for several pieces of writing but did not complete the writing process to finish a piece.

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Impact on Attitude toward Writing

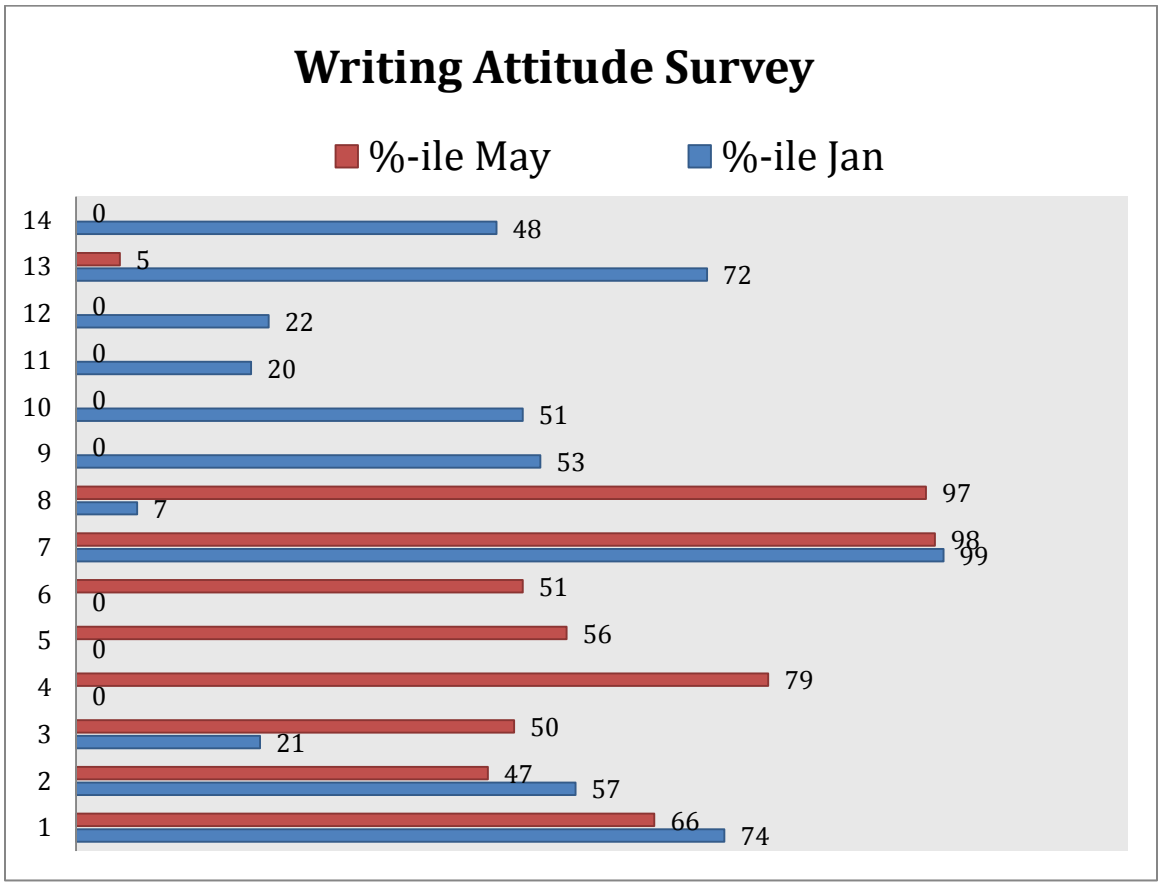

Figure 3. The Writing Attitude Survey was administered to pre- and post project.

As noted previously, the data produced from The Writing Attitude Survey showed a predominant negative attitude toward writing. With the exception of three students, all scored below the 50%ile. Although daily observations show high engagement in writing tasks, the post-test showed only two students exceeding the percentile they received in January. In fact, one student shows an unlikely 90-percentile point increase. Of note is that the survey was given on a Friday by a substitute teacher, perhaps contributing to rather unexpected results. Observation and anecdotal measures can also measure impact on the growth and change in attitude toward writing.

Student Interview

Students were asked to respond in writing or verbally to the following sentence frame:

I think I've become a better writer because…

Of the students who completed the task, these were the responses:

I can come up with ideas faster and type faster.

I got a lot of practice so I've been really better at writing.

I write more.

I am more willing to write. I even use my cell phone to write in the car.

I can write until the time is up.

Some of the sixteen students were not present on the date of this interview. Others, because of emotional problems, refused the opportunity to respond or could not respond sincerely.

Informal Group Survey

An authentic content area-writing task presented itself through the eighth grade student's American Studies course. All eighth grade students were given a choice between one last comprehensive test on the Civil War for the year or to compose a letter. In this letter, students would represent a Civil War soldier either at the Battle of Vicksburg or Gettysburg and write to his loved ones back home. The letter needed to contain facts and present a realistic voice. The discussion with students regarding the assignment went something like this:

ME: Why would your history teacher assign such an assignment?

STUDENT: Because the teacher needs one last assignment for the grade book…?

ME: Keep thinking…

STUDENT: So we can understand how it must have been back then.

ME: Right!

ME: So…How do you feel about this assignment?? Are you going to take the test or write?

(All 8 students indicate with raised hand they will write the letter.)

ME: Ok…so on a scale of 1 to 5 with one being "yikes" and five being "GREAT! How do you feel about your ability to handle this writing task?"

Three of the eight students indicated 5-Great, three said 4 and two said 3-okay about handling the task successfully. Compared to the Writing Survey pre-project data, the attitude toward approaching a creative and research based writing task and meeting the same criteria set for all students was predominantly positive, confident and self-reflective.

Final Assessment-Blogging with Middle Schoolers in May

As a final assessment piece for this project was the Image Blog Challenge. Banking on students' love of images and their adeptness at posting them, the researcher created a blog project: in thirty minutes, find a image that represents you and create a post of at least fifty words go along with it. I did not tell them it was actually an assessment. The writing objectives were:

- Approach a pre-determined writing task positively
- Use a writing process to generate ideas and distill a thesis statement
- Complete a writing task with a set amount of time
- Write enough content to make a meaningful connection to the chosen image
- Apply writing conventions to make meanings clear and easy to read
- Feel comfortable with blogging platform, audience awareness and personal writing voice
- Follow blog and internet content expectations

This excerpt from the Blogging Project Review explains the result:

Searching for images went fine. The urge to post pictures of school-inappropriate things was there, but appealing to Internet expectations and not entirely **my** *expectations was useful in helping make acceptable choices. All students choose school-appropriate images.*

Students easily posted images with no prior instruction or need for assistance. I actually asked a student to help me. One boy with lower writing ability posted two images of ATV's, one like his dad's and one he would like to own. He needed a boost to start writing. When asked about the connection he could draw between the two pictures, he was able to synthesize a "seed" of a thesis. ATV's were a family hobby with a history and a future that he was involved in. He quickly composed a title, ATV's in the Family *started writing.*

Students used their images as a symbolic framework for their own identity: "This John Deere is a classic tractor. I'm a classic type of guy," and "I love the beautiful explosion of color in this design because I'm a colorful person." Horses, fishing trips, dirt bikes--there was no duplication of content or theme.

As everyone worked, there was some off task chatter but it still related to topics people were writing about. Students asked questions from time to time: Is this the right "there?, "How do you spell "quad?", "Should it be ATV's is *or* ATV's are?" *Interestingly, rather than me asking grammar questions of them, they were seeking answers to questions they needed to know.*

Fifty words made the task easily doable; just enough to really say something on the topic. Seven of the ten students--the remaining three writers most affected by emotional disorders--did not complete the task. One individual who, earlier this year due to under-confidence, struggled to write 10 words in a 30 minute span, exceeded the 50 words and wrote perfectly spelled, capitalized and punctuated

sentences. He beamed when he was reminded how far he had come. Yes, meaningful content with correct writing conventions.

One girl finished quickly and began commenting on others' posts. She realized that we'd amassed quite a collection of posts and comments over the past couple of months. Quickly counting, she announced with triumph that the group had blogged 164 comments. When I replied with my fun blogging fact: " Did you know there are 154 million blogs in the world," a *very reluctant reading/writing student said that he'd run across a dirt biking blog. He said read some stuff about four-stroke engines.*

*The colorful girl, finished with her task and after checking some of her other posts, was surprised to find eight comments from others. She was elated and commented back to each one. She said, "Look, Mrs. Klein, I told people if they want to know more about me, just comment!" Looking over those 164 posts, many people tend to end their comments with a "*What do you think? " *With that question, I see community. Amazingly, a writer's community in our classroom.*

Logging off at the end of the hour, we all felt satisfaction. Blogging was not so bad. (Klein, 2012).

The results of this research indicate that self-monitoring strategies combined with blogging in a Writer's Workshop setting impacts adolescents who struggle with writing in several positive ways. Using a self-monitoring strategy to nurture writing confidence is a foundational step. The guided-release model, taking a student from non-writing to learning the tool to independence is essential for progress toward becoming a proficient writer. When writers are given autonomy to choose topics and set goals to direct course of their own writing development, word count increases. Setting target goals and choosing a writing skill focus that feels like it's possible to achieve sets struggling writers on a track to exceed previous ability levels in stamina, length of writing pieces and repertoire of writing forms. The key to this kind of progress however is openness to motivation. In cases where formal pieces were not completed or data could not be collected, lack of motivation was to blame. Students affected by emotional disorders, often reacted with opposition toward the task of a correct word sequence and refused to write during the timing. Upset by circumstances outside of writing classroom, they were often unable to focus on a writing task. Because of these examples and many others, students with emotional disorders are at great risk academically because of the difficulty they have feeling positive toward motivation.

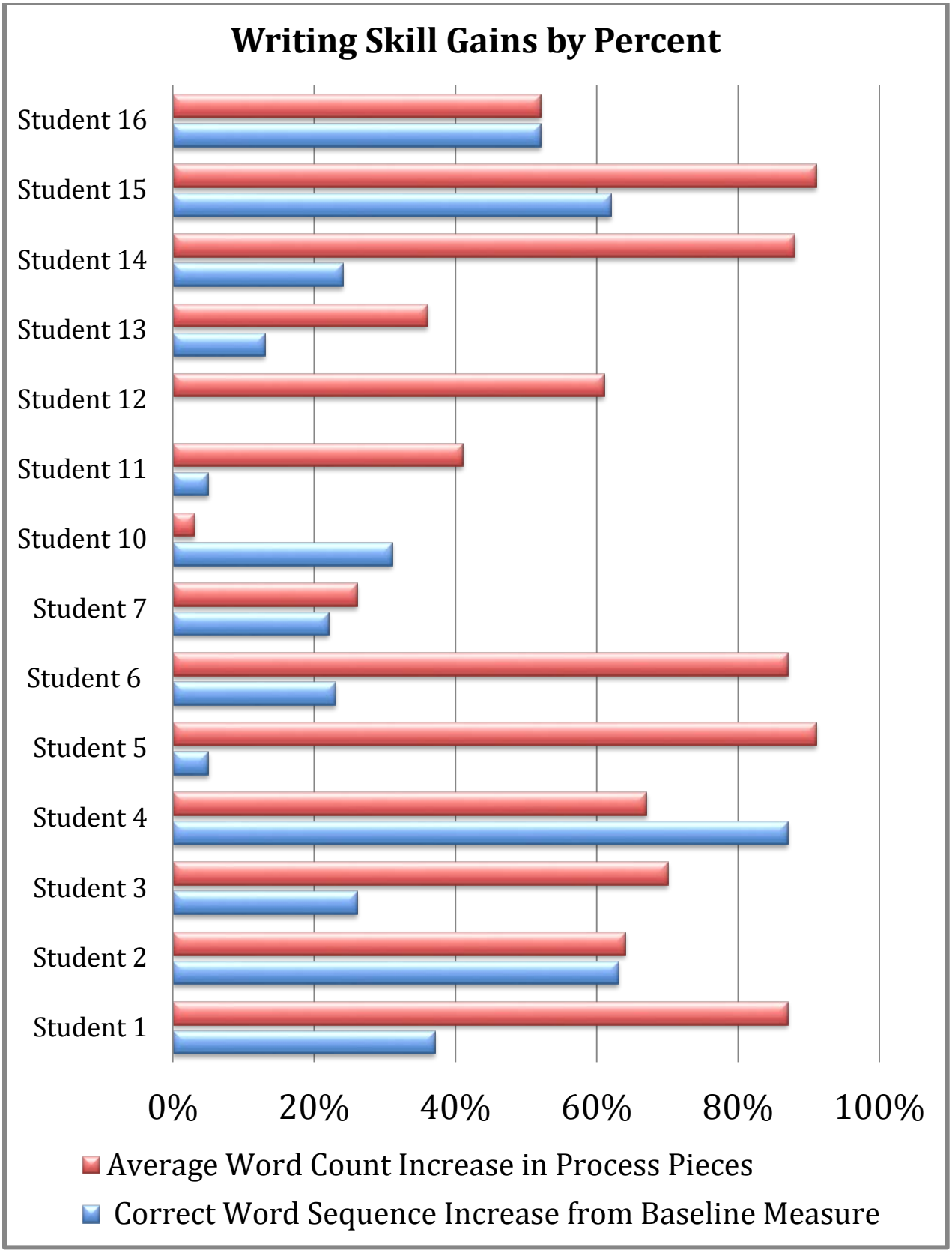

Figure 4. Students 8 and 9 are no included in graph averages due to data that was incomplete or absent because of lack of motivation.

Students in this study made gains measured quantitatively and qualitatively that far surpassed what was anticipated. Correct Word Sequence measures increased significantly for most of the sixteen students. Data taken on 3-5 writing timings showed four of sixteen students increased CWS by 50% or more, six students increased by 20-50% and three increased by 10%. Word count in process pieces also increased with nine of sixteen students writing over 50% or more words compared to the word count of their first piece included in the study. Lack of increase in CWS may be due to lack of motivation on timings, deficiencies in processing speed or handwriting skills. Large increases in word count, in some cases were due to one lengthy piece (600-800 words) an individual became very interested in. Together, the group averaged an increase in CWS of 34% and an increase of word count in process pieces of 66%.

Some of the students needed confidence. The effect of personal feedback and dialogue during conferences shifted their beliefs about themselves as writers. For others, conferences felt awkward but having someone, even their peers, proudly acknowledge an achieved goal assured them they had a voice and their voice was valid. After only twelve weeks, we had just started to get into a groove. The self-monitoring strategies, particularly the 4 Comments, though familiar and useful enough to give students a start, had not been internalized enough to truly measure the affect of the strategies alone. Trust, investment and a unified effort of the group in the use of the strategies may have produced even further gains in proficiency and independence. Blogging and commenting was emerging as a skill, similar to the basic "How are you?/Fine" dialogue exchange.

Deeper, richer content in posts and comments would require experience with structure and firm paragraph writing skills, which few of these students possessed. Still, it is encouraging that most students put such effort toward the pragmatics of communication—connecting with others meaningfully though written words. An extension of this action research would include honing on self-chosen goals to target and improve specific writing skills at the sentence and paragraph level. Use of the blog to connect writing to literacy practices such as literature circles and quick writes (brief but quality responses to posed topics) would give struggling writers experience with advanced skills of analysis and synthesis. Further instruction in peer editing would equip students with critical analysis and evaluation skills, facilitating better inclusive experiences with more proficient peers.

Blogging clearly motivates students to write because of its autonomous and authentic qualities. It leads to opportunities to work comprehension and meaning making, to build

reading and writing skills. By writing to each other, students learn about audience and peer connections. As the fun in connections is experienced, students feel competent to write more. They are willing to transfer writing skill to writing tasks given in other content areas. They began to take responsibility for their writing, understanding that since writing is meant to be read, it should be well written. Beyond simply knowing how to think up a complete idea and transcribe it into words, this research shows that struggling writers can enter the learning environments of their peers, and given the support, take on challenges in all types of written forms including participation in a 21st century writing community. Time spent writing, attention to writing goals and positive experiences will alter the course of the story for struggling adolescent writers.

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Appendix 1

Student blogging samples show a sense of voice and audience.

what i need to live and things i like

May 9, 2012 @ 1:07 PM 2 Comments Edit this Post

Im doing this because Mrs. Klein said that i should so now i am.

Some of the things i need to live are pickle, and apple juice, and i need to have pictures or colorful things , i need my family ,and friends . i need music to calm me down but i dont know what else to write because i cant think of anything.

Things i like are having fun, being random, annoying, crazy, hanging out with my friends, pepsi, music, moped , reading, traveling, i LOVE ANIME,swimming and biking. There are more things but i cant think of them right now.

Leave a comment

1 2 3 »

if i had $100,000,000

April 30, 2012 @ 1:20 PM 0 Comments Edit this Post

what would you buy. If i had $100,000,000 i would buy a new golden 44 smith and wesson magnum. every thing i would buy would be new. I would buy all John Deeres ever made. i would buy a log cabin style house. Alout of people know i would get a 69 dodge chardger rt 440 magnum with a v8 engin like the dukes. i woud buy my own trap ant target shoting spots. i would get all the guns i could i would have a whole house for guns. A whole gerodge for all my cars and a man gerodge. give 1 mill to my firends and family. my own mud place for muding, dirt biking, fore wheeling, three wheeling, demo derbies, pulling raceing and stuff like that. i would give to church and build my own for friends and family to come. i would always hunt, fish, camp, and do stuff like that. i would never work in my life exsept fixing things. i could keep going on but im way past the dead line already. what would you buy.

Leave a comment

My family is in to atv's, go karts, mud trucks sand rails, dirt bike, racing, snowmobiles, quads and guns. I got in racing from my

Dad teaching my cousin how to race. We race every time I go to my cousin. At Bikeman thay have a track and some times i go down there and ride the track.

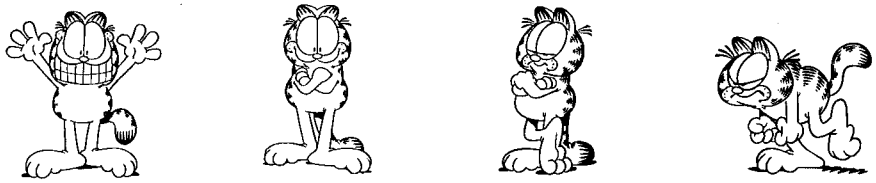
Appendix 2. Writing Attitude Survey (sample page)

Elementary Writing Attitude Survey

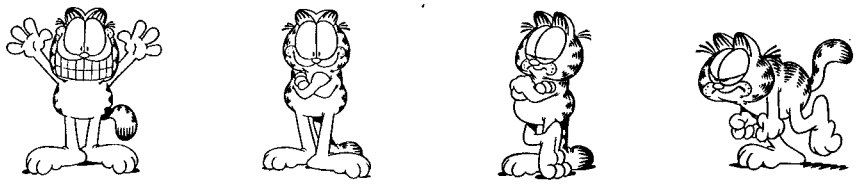
Name_____ Grade_____ School_____

Please circle the picture that describes how you feel when you read a book.

1. How would you feel writing a letter to the author of a book you read?

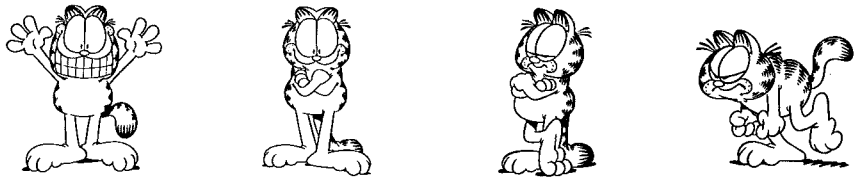


2. How would you feel if you wrote about something you have heard or seen?



3. How do you feel writing a letter to a store asking about something you might buy there?

4. How would you feel telling in writing why something happened?



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