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**THE IMPACT OF BLOGGING ON THE FACILITATION OF CRITICAL  
LITERACY IN ADOLESCENT STUDENTS**

by  
Kelsey T. Wiemer

A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Language, Literacy and Special Education  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Master of Arts in Reading Education  
at Rowan University  
December 2014

Thesis Chair: Susan Browne, Ph.D

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## **Dedication**

*I would like to dedicate this manuscript to Mark, for the countless nights of bringing me dinner on the couch while I typed furiously, and to the 15 inspiring students who made this all possible.*

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my appreciation to Professor Susan Browne for her guidance and help throughout this research.

## Abstract

Kelsey Wiemer  
THE IMPACT OF BLOGGING ON THE FACILITATION OF CRITICAL  
LITERACY IN ADOLESCENT STUDENTS  
2014-2015  
Susan Browne, Ph.D  
Master of Arts in Reading Education

The purpose of this study was to explore how using blogging with adolescent students could foster critical literacy. During the study, students researched an alternative perspective from World War II and completed six blog posts on a variety of topics over the course of four weeks. At the completion of the study, students' blog posts and comments revealed five different categories: (1) problematizing generally accepted texts or beliefs, (2) an interest in empowering silenced voices, (3) inquiry-driven discussion, (4) the incorporation of multiple perspectives (5) and changing attitudes towards blogging. Additionally, their writing demonstrated evidence of four different components of critical literacy: (1) representing silenced voices, (2) problematizing texts, (3) student choice and (4) incorporating multiple perspectives. Implications for the use of blogging as a means of facilitating critical literacy are discussed.

## Table of Contents

Abstract	
Chapter 1: Story of the Question	1
Introduction: Why do you hate America so much?	1
Purpose of the Study	3
Statement of the Research Problem and Question	6
Story of the Question	7
Organization of the Thesis	8
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature	9
Introduction	9
Critical Literacy: Explanation and Implementation	9
Critical Literacy in the Social Studies Classroom	14
New Literacies: Explanation and Implementation	16
Critical Literacy, New Literacies and Blogging: Bringing It All Together	18
Conclusion	19
Chapter 3: Context, Research Design and Methodology	21
Context	21
Community	21
District and School	21
Classroom	22
Research Design/Methodology	23
Teacher Research	24
Procedure of the Study	26
Data Sources	28

## Table of Contents (Continued)

Data Analysis	29
Chapter 4: Data Analysis	30
Introduction	30
“Nothing More, Nothing Less:” Problematizing Generally Accepted Beliefs and Addressing Bias	31
“The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising Will Never Be Forgotten:” Interest in Empowering Silenced Voices	34
“How Come People Have to Punish Others for Being Who They Are?:” Inquiry-Driven Discussion and Participation	36
“Would the Catholic Church and the French Resistance Have Much in Common?” Finding Commonality in Diverse Perspectives	39
Changing Views Regarding Blogging	40
Summary of Data Analysis	41
Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions, Implications and Limitations of the Study	42
Summary	42
Conclusions of the Study	44
Emerging Evidence of Critical Literacy	44
Representing Silenced Voices	44
Problematizing Texts	45
Student Choice	46
Incorporation of Multiple Perspectives	47
Limitations of the Study	49
Implications of the Study	50



## Table of Contents (Continued)

References	52
Appendix A: Pre-Blogging Survey	56
Appendix B: Student Blog Post Topics	59
Appendix C: WWII Perspectives and Links to Student Blogs	60
Appendix D: Post-Blogging Survey	61

## Chapter 1

### Story of the Question

#### **Introduction: Why do you hate America so much?**

Just like the changing weather, the first day of school signals a transition. The relaxation of the summer months is over and I find myself facing a new group of 70 adolescent students (who are just as depressed as I am to get back to work). As a high school history teacher in a low-income, Title I school district, these first few days are the most important of the entire school year. It is when we not only establish the format for the classroom procedures, but we also get a sense of one another. I get a read of which students are going to take a little convincing to “buy in” to the plan for the year, which are ready to hit the ground running and those students whose parents I will soon get to know all too well.

They walk into the room the first day of classes and I always begin the new school year by posing the same question to my students...why do we study history? For the most part, I look into a sea of puzzled faces. To many of my students, it is easy to see the logic behind learning math, language arts, science and even physical education...but history? Why learn about the past if it has already happened? After giving some wait time after asking my introductory question, I start to see some tentative hands raise to answer. “We study history to learn about the past,” “because we need it to graduate” or “I really don’t think it matters at all” are some common responses.

Prepared for these answers, I then introduce one of my favorite quotes from one of (to me at least) the most intriguing people from history, Winston Churchill. In a speech to the House of Commons, Churchill famously said

“history will be kind to me, for I intend to write it.” At this point, I encourage my students to reflect on what history is, what its purpose is and who decides which version of a story is told. Many of the students are confused by the belief at the core of the Churchill quote: can one person really decide which “history” is told? Can they be that person who tells it?

After some conversation, another quote from an equally interesting historical figure, Napoleon Bonaparte, comes into the debate, “history is the version of past events that people have decided to agree upon.” The questioning then continues and intensifies: Whose history do we learn? Who agrees upon that version of the events? Can history “lie” to us? How do we know the truth? What responsibilities do we have as historians to uncover the “whole” truth?

As the discussion continues, usually taking up the entire first class period, I try to bring the students’ awareness back to the idea that studying history is not just a requirement of citizenship, but it includes responsibilities. A responsibility to the voices that have been silenced and the alternative histories that have been neglected or forgotten.

As the school year started to progress, my own critical interpretation of history began to become evident to my students. I encouraged them to criticize the actions of the United States and to never just take a telling of history at “face value.” We frequently discuss the human rights violations of the United States and the hypocrisies of the “promises” of America. At one point during this year, a student raised her hand and boldly asked me, “why do you hate America so much?” I was stunned and taken aback slightly by her question. Was I being too critical? Why do I often discuss the ironies, hypocrisies and wrongdoings of

American history? I definitely do not hate America, in fact, I'm proud to be American.

It was then that I explained to my 15 eager students that criticizing history is a way of saying, "I know you're capable of doing better and since I care about you so much, I'm willing to push you to achieving your fullest potential." It was at this crucial moment I began to see my research question really gain momentum. I needed my students to personally experience the power of critical literacy and how it allows for the empowerment of both the researcher and the research topic.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The research of this study intends to examine the relationship between blogging and the use of critical literacy skills in adolescent students. The purposes of this study are (1) to explore how students use social media as a form of expression, (2) how blogging can be used to promote components of critical literacy, (3) what happens when students use blogging to explore a marginalized perspective from a major historical event, (4) how does blogging facilitate social activism and (5) what aspects of critical literacy are the most prominent in adolescent students' blog posts.

Critical literacy is a stance that readers take when reading a text. As part of a plan to combat adult illiteracy, Brazilian Paulo Freire rejected the idea that education is politically neutral. He stated that most systems of education use the "banking system," where the teacher is the possessor of knowledge, the decider of what information is to be taught and the imparter of traditional values (Freire, 2000, p. 72). According to Freire (2000), this traditional educational system "regards men as adaptable, manageable beings" and seeks to incorporate them

into society (p. 73). The teacher has power and bestows knowledge on the students. Students become cataloguers of information.

In his seminal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (2000) advocated that education should be transformative and empowering to students. He stated, “looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so they can more wisely build the future” (Freire, 2000, p. 84). It requires challenging assumptions, exploring multiple perspectives, examining relationships, identifying dynamics of power and using literacy practices to take action for social justice.

Critical literacy has been established as an important aspect of reading education by the International Reading Association (Behrman, 2006). There are four different orientations to a critical literacy education: domination, access, diversity and design. In keeping with these different orientations, there are different classroom approaches that support each one (Behrman, 2006).

According to Behrman (2006), there are six broad categories of instructional approaches that support the four different orientations: reading supplementary texts, reading multiple texts, reading from a resistant perspective, producing counter-texts, conducting student-choice research projects and taking social action.

With the increase in new technologies and specifically social media, it is more important than ever that students possess the ability to identify biases and think critically about the information they read. In light of this, many researchers have explored the connections between critical literacy and technology, specifically blogging. Since many adolescent students use social media sources such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Vine on a daily basis for a variety of

different purposes, it is important that critical literacy instruction incorporates multimedia technology (Tan & Gibo, 2010).

Students are “digital natives” and thus have different literacy needs. They need to know the responsibilities and powers they have as digital producers (Morrell, 2012). Additionally, media literacy is required for “cultural citizenship,” or a concept that draws attention to the “important links between cultural participation and capacities for creating collective identities, redefining social relationships, building social networks and organizing collective action” (Lithgow, 2007). In order to facilitate cultural citizenship in students, blogging can be used to help citizens connect with one another and mobilize to take action for social justice. Additionally, by blogging, students can provide a voice for marginalized perspectives.

In a study completed by Brown and Years Stevens (2011) on graduate students, the use of blogging was used to foster critical multicultural literacy. Blogging was used to explore how language can encourage discrimination and fuel abuses of power (Brown & Stevens, 2011). The study used Richardson’s Spectrum of Blogging along with a rubric to determine if the students’ use of blogging helped them view topics with a critical lens. With the use of blogging, the researchers noted an increase in participation (particularly from those students too shy to speak up in class), helped students identify biases in sources, facilitated complex discussions and elicited aspects of critical literacy in participations. Additionally, it did encourage aspects of social justice by causing participants to question their own practices as future teachers and advocate for greater critical literacy instruction.

This study intends to explore how blogging can specifically encourage adolescents' use of critical literacy. Students will be using blogging as a means of providing a voice for a group who has been typically neglected from the traditional "textbook" telling of an important historical event. The research seeks to contribute information regarding ways that collaborative, multimedia learning can facilitate challenging assumptions, exploring multiple perspectives, examining relationships, identifying dynamics of power and using literacy practices to take action for social justice.

### **Statement of the Research Problem and Question**

As digital natives, the students of today's classrooms have different literacy needs. With new participatory, collaborative forms of texts, students need the ability to identify bias and determine how texts can perpetuate an oppressive status quo. However, although new technologies can perpetuate the "mainstream" perspectives, they also provide opportunities for greater representation of all voices. Becoming a social media user, in particular, necessitates a certain level of digital citizenship where students accept both the rights and responsibilities they have as participants. Critical literacy has the power to provide a lens for students to not only use when reading digital sources but to use in the creation of their own texts.

The research question for this study is how can social media, such as blogging, be used to support critical literacy and social activism in high school students. In order to investigate the question, students created blog posts as well as commented on their peers' posts over the course of four weeks. The students were required to publish a minimum of six blog posts on a particular perspective from WWII.

## Story of the Question

When I was a senior in high school and still unsure of what I wanted to do when I finally stepped on to a college campus, I found myself organizing a community-wide awareness project on the genocide that was happening in Darfur. My history teacher at the time empowered me to tackle such an immense project and gave me an opportunity to take action for social justice. It was at that moment that I not only decided that I wanted to be a teacher, but specifically a history teacher. While I always enjoyed history because I thought it was interesting, it was through this project that I discovered the potential history offered for engaging students in practices that truly reflect positive citizenship and the opportunities it afforded to challenge the status quo. Although many of my peers at the time considered history as simply a study of what has already happened, I started to view it as a way of challenging the future.

Flash forward seven years later and cue Paolo Freire. I “met” Freire as a graduate student two semesters away from completing a Master’s in Reading. As soon as I began to listen to a presentation about his theory of Critical Literacy, I knew that this was a vision that I could relate to. Freire’s beliefs of challenging the status quo by implementing a problem-solving model within the classroom to eventually encourage students to use literacy to take action for social justice fit directly in with my beliefs regarding the goals of history education.

Continue forward to the beginning of the school year. September pre-first day of school meetings roll around and I listen to administrators repeatedly instruct us teachers to stifle the use of cell phones, particularly to prevent the use of social media in the classroom. Social media was portrayed as a negative force within the students’ lives and a distraction. It was at this point that I began to



wonder, why was social media so alluring? Was it the connection you could make with so many people at once? Or the fact that you could receive a lot of information all at once? Maybe it was that it provided a “soapbox” for people to express their beliefs. How do our students use social media? Is there a way for social media to find a serious place within the four walls of the classroom?

It was at the intersection of these two interests, critical literacy and social media, that I began to develop my research question. I was interested in how blogging specifically could provide a platform for acts of social justice and give students an opportunity to address a marginalized voice from one of the most studied events of the last century, World War II. Additionally, I considered the ways that blogging could possibly elicit greater, more frank and honest conversation amongst students. I began to wonder how blogging might be a way to appropriately merge social media into the classroom as a tool of fostering critical literacy.

### **Organization of the Thesis**

Chapter two of this thesis will provide an overview of literature related to either critical literacy, critical literacy’s role in the social studies classroom, the theory of New Literacies or the use of blogging in the classroom. Chapter three discusses specifics related to the location of the study, demographics, the students involved and the research design itself. The purpose of chapter four is to discuss and analyze the data collected from the research. Finally, chapter five presents the conclusions of the study and recommends areas or suggestions for future research related to this topic.

## Chapter 2

### Review of the Literature

“Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world. To exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it...Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection.”

(Freire, 1970, p. 88)

#### Introduction

The students filling the seats in today’s classrooms are digital natives—or post-millennial students who speak the “native language” of the Internet and new technologies. Faced with the task of transforming students into critical readers, new Web 2.0 technologies, such as blogging, hold immense promise. Chapter two contains a review of literature pertaining to critical literacy, critical literacy in the social studies classroom, new literacies and the emergence of blogging as a tool of both comprehension and critical literacy. The first section discusses the origins of critical literacy and its implication for classroom practices. The second section identifies the rationale for implementing a critical stance specifically in the social studies classroom, which is where the study takes place. The third section discusses the nature and application of new literacies in the classroom. The fourth section seeks to bring together the first three through the practice of blogging.

#### Critical Literacy: Explanation and Implementation

In his seminal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, exiled Brazilian educator Paulo Freire rejected the idea that education is politically neutral. Rather, educational systems often maintain oppressive structures by reinforcing mainstream values, maintaining the status quo and perpetuating power

inequities. The victims of these structures are the oppressed, or those marginalized by the oppressors. Freire (2000) cites the “banking” concept as being the mainstream educational model; one in which “the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing and storing the deposits” (p. 72). According to this concept, the teacher presents his knowledge base as being absolute and justifies his existence based on the ignorance of his students (Freire, 2000, p. 72). In this banking concept, inquiry is discouraged and the oppressed remain subjugated.

To ensure liberation of the marginalized, the banking concept must be rejected and instead, a belief of “men and women as conscious beings” needs to be adopted (Freire, 2000, p. 79). A “problem-posing” model of education has the power to expose inequalities, substantiate student funds of knowledge, liberate the oppressed and ultimately create consciousness (Freire, 2000, p. 79).

According to Freire (2000), the problem-posing model of education “epitomizes the special characteristic of consciousness...” and “consists of acts of cognition, not transferrals of information” (p. 79). Problem-posing education eliminates the vertical relationship of teacher-student and instead creates horizontal relationships where the knowledge of students is equally valuable to that of teachers. In this model, “the students—no longer docile listeners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” and the teacher presents the students with information and “reconsiders her earlier considerations as the students express their own” (Freire, 2000, p. 81). Freire’s Theory of Critical Literacy posits students and teachers as colearners while encouraging the liberation of the oppressed through inquiry, problematizing generally accepted beliefs or ideology and thorough examination of multiple perspectives.

According to Giroux (2011), “there have been few if any intellectuals on the North American educational scene who have matched Freire’s theoretical rigor, civic courage, and a sense of moral responsibility” (p. 154). To Giroux (2011), only a critical pedagogy has the power to be transformative (p. 154). Additionally, “critical thinking was not reducible to an object lesson in test-taking” but it is about “offering a way of thinking beyond the seeming naturalness or inevitability of the current state of things...” (Giroux, 2011, p. 155). Critical literacy maintains a valuable or crucial place in the American education system, since “the way we educate our youth is related to the future that we hope for” (Giroux, 2011, p. 157).

Ann S. Beck, a teacher in an all-male correctional facility in Canada, addresses the place of critical literacy. She defines critical literacy as “an attitude toward texts and discourses that questions the social, political and economic conditions under which those texts were constructed” (Beck, 2005, p. 392). According to Beck (2005), critical literacy also lends itself to substantial risks to students, teachers and “the institutions in which they are embedded” (p. 392). Despite the risks, critical literacy is highly valuable as it calls students to consider why some “constructions of knowledge are legitimated while others are not” and ultimately has the power to “encourage individuals to develop the critical awareness necessary to challenge the status quo and discover alternatives to existing social inequalities” (Beck, 2005, p. 393). Schools, in particular, represent important sites for addressing social conditions and questioning the structures that both put them in place and maintain their relevance (Beck, 2005, p. 393). By interrogating texts and their purpose, students take on the responsibilities of

citizenship, which include confronting social inequalities and the perpetuation of injustices.

According to McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) and their personal experiences as teachers, a critique of many schools is the lack of representation of diverse voices in the texts students read (p. 52). Due to the one-sidedness that is pervasive in many books used in classrooms today, the need for a critical stance is increasingly important. When reading from a critical stance, “students use their background knowledge to understand relationships between their ideas and the ideas presented by the author of the text” (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004, p. 53). They “raise questions about whose voices are represented, whose voices are missing, and who gains and who loses by the reading of the text” (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004, p. 53) When students read from a critical stance, they consider the motivations of the author of a text and the greater connection the text has to either furthering or impeding social justice.

In addition to discussing the purpose of reading from a critical stance, McLaughlin and DeVogd describe the four principles of critical literacy. First, the concept of “praxis” refers to the process in which readers draw from their background knowledge to transform texts in a way that they become more representative of silenced voices (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004, p. 54). This process, by nature, is “active, challenging, and disrupting the ideal” (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004, p. 54). Second, critical literacy involves problematizing information provided from texts to examine motives. Third, there are no set guidelines as to implementing critical literacy in the classroom; instead, “the dynamic nature of critical literacy” supports adaptation and flexibility (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004, p. 55). According to McLaughlin and DeVogd

(2004), “there is a sense of empowerment and confidence in the act of creation that cannot be achieved by copying” (p. 55). Finally, critical literacy involves the incorporation of multiple perspectives.

Although critical literacy itself offers limited guidance in terms of instructional practices and even rejects a set of standardized instructional procedures, Edward H. Behrman (2006) offers six classroom practices that facilitate a critical stance in students (p. 482). First, students should read supplementary texts that “may allow students to confront social issues glossed over or avoided by traditional texts” (Behrman, 2006, p. 482). Second, students should read multiple texts “to introduce students to the subjectivity of authorship” and to “disrupt the notion that textual meaning is fixed” (Behrman, 2006, pgs. 482-3). Third, reading from a resistance perspective allows students to “‘peel’ back different layers of meaning from a text and explore how the same reader may approach a text from different identities based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, language, sexuality and religion” (Behrman, 2006, p. 483). Fourth, students produce countertexts to validate the marginalized or “missing” voices from a text (Behrman, 2006, p. 484). Fifth, choice projects that allow students to decide on an issue of personal importance provide an opportunity to apply a critical stance. Finally, taking social action is the final goal of critical literacy and it “requires students to become involved as members of a larger community” (Behrman, 2006, p. 485). By embracing a critical literacy pedagogy, teachers facilitate a critical stance amongst their students and develop a problem-posing model of education.

## **Critical Literacy in the Social Studies Classroom**

Steven Wolk (2003), a teacher educator, draws a distinction between the goals of making students technically literate and critically literate (p. 101). Technical literacy involves imparting the basic skills of reading, writing and math where as critical literacy helps “students to see and question the dominant power themes in our society and world...” (Wolk, 2003, p. 102). According to Wolk (2003), “social studies is the perfect forum for that critique to take place” particularly because “the purpose of social studies is to help students participate in civic life” (p. 102). If the goal of social studies education is to prepare students for the responsibilities of citizenship, then it is imperative that they have the tools necessary to adopt a critical lens. To help facilitate critical literacy in social studies, students need to question the content, identify silenced voices, examine their prior knowledge or preconceptions regarding a topic, connect aspects of critical literacy to their own lives or experiences, use newspapers or current events to identify reoccurring historical themes, debate issues and write for social justice (Wolk, 2003, p. 102).

Due to the continued presence of issues involving race and ethnicity in schools, it is increasingly important that students assume a critical stance when reading texts. Soares and Wood (2010) argue “issues of race, gender, culture and power need to be brought to the forefront of our classroom societies to accommodate the range of student diversity in today’s schools” (p. 486). The social studies classroom in particular is “the best place to teach students to question truths, sources, and evidence...” (Soares & Wood, 2010, p. 487). Additionally, it is the best place to “teach students to be critical consumers of the

many sources of information they encounter in their lives” (Soares & Wood, 2010, p. 487).

Soares and Wood (2010) suggest an instructional model of critical literacy practices for the social studies classroom (p. 488). First, students examine multiple perspectives to search for the voices missing or silenced in texts and examine them to determine if they would agree with or reject the author’s point of view (Soares & Wood, 2010, p. 488). Second, students search for the “authentic voices” to “become more knowledgeable on important issues in their world and then to specifically connect their voice to critical issues” (Soares & Wood, 2010, p. 490). Third, using a critical literacy approach in the social studies classroom teaches students to recognize social barriers and cross borders of separation by discussing the reality of living in a society as a member of the nondominant culture (Soares & Wood, 2010, p. 490). Fourth, students can find their own identity in a social studies classroom because “it fosters a climate where students can open their minds, think creatively, and be open to the possibility of social healing” (Soares & Wood, 2010, p. 491). Finally, utilizing a critical stance in the social studies classroom provides students with opportunities to pursue social change.

Delaney (2007) sought to foster a critical stance in her middle school students in her combined language arts and social studies classroom. According to Delaney, social studies “serves well for teaching critical literacy, since textbooks are generally biased and have been written from the perspective of the victors” (p. 30). Additionally, in keeping with this, she states that teachers who want to encourage critical literacy need to shift away from traditional resources and actively search for those that reflect a broader range of perspectives



(Delaney, 2007, p. 30). She also acknowledged that “with the advent of multimedia and its accompanying messages, critical literacy needs to respond to the changes in the definition of literacy itself” and expanded to include critical multimedia literacy (Delaney, 2007, p. 31).

For her study, Delaney (2007) allowed students to choose a topic to study from WWII to the end of the Gulf War (p. 30). She used a five-part inquiry method: student-generated questions, planned investigations, collection and analysis of data, explanation of the findings and justification of the findings (Delaney, 2007, p. 31). Throughout the study, students researched their topics, critiqued the portrayal of their topics in “traditional” resources, addressed multiple perspectives and criticized the neglect of certain groups in textbooks. According to Delaney (2007), throughout the study students were empowered in two ways: first, from the critical stance, students questioned the status quo and second, students were “challenged to explore and construct their own knowledge about the world” (p. 34). Overall, encouraging students to use a critical stance when studying history was effective and gave adolescent students the purpose they needed to be highly engaged.

### **New Literacies: Explanation and Implementation**

According to theorists Lankshear and Knobel (2006), New Literacies consists of two kinds of “stuff:” “technical stuff” and “ethos stuff” (p. 80). The new technical stuff is “digitality” or the “use of digital or electronic apparatuses, like computers” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006, p. 80). The new ethos stuff incorporates a “post-physical and post-industrial mindset” that believes that “cyberspace operates on the basis of different assumptions and values from physical space” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006, p. 80). In order for something to be a

“new literacy,” it must incorporate the new ethos stuff, but not necessarily the new technical stuff. New literacies are “collaborative practices, involving distributed participation and collaboration, where rules and procedures are flexible and open to change...” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006, p. 81). The theory of New Literacies examines the increasingly collaborative nature of the production and discussion of texts, both digital and print.

According to Morrell (2012), “we are living during a time of communications revolution” (p. 300). In turn, information has been “globalized, digitized, and sped up to move at the speed of thought” (Morrell, 2012, p. 300). Being literate in today’s world requires a new and frequently changing set of skills. In order for students to be prepared for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century literacy demands, they need to possess “critical media literacy” (Morrell, 2012, p. 302). Critical media literacy requires students to “bring their critical literacy skills to the analysis of texts produced across many genres...” (Morrell, 2012, p. 302). Additionally, it emphasizes the potential students have as media producers as well as the responsibilities of being a producer in a digital age.

Tan and Guo (2010) conducted a study regarding the implementation of new literacies into English language classrooms in Singapore (p. 316). Tan and Guo (2010) argue “that as digital natives, our Singapore students’ interactions with texts have expanded and their text experience has encompassed multiple modes of representation for meaning making and communication” (p. 317). During their study, they sought to use critical multimedia literacy to encourage their students to critique “the power relations inherent in the production and interpretation of texts” (Tan & Guo, 2010, p. 317). Throughout the study, Tan and

Guo (2010) identified two major impediments towards critical multimedia literacy: teacher preparedness and standardized testing (p. 322).

### **Critical Literacy, New Literacies and Blogging: Bringing It All Together**

Lithgow (2007), a blogger for *Art Threat*, describes the media literacy that one acquires through the act of blogging as “essential for cultural citizenship” and the growth of a participatory culture where collective identities are actively constructed via social media (p. 177). He describes the blogosphere as the “citizen’s newsroom” or “an emergent mass-media unconstrained by the traditional political economies of corporate or state-run media” (Lithgow, 2007, pg. 178). Blogging reverses the flow of information as consumers now have the potential to become producers and thus blurs socially constructed understandings. According to Lithgow, cultural production is more accessible with blogging and it provides a “soapbox” with the power to circumvent “the structural limitations of corporate media by taking out the middle-man” (Lithgow, 2007, p. 181). Blogging teaches users media literacy, empowers them to take action and allows for the evolution of a collaborative culture.

Teacher educators Years Stevens and Brown, in a qualitative study involving graduate students, used blogging to teach critical multicultural literacy. They define critical multicultural literacy as “pedagogy that combines an emphasis on critical literacy with the notion of culturally responsive pedagogy” (Stevens & Brown, 2011, p. 32). It moves beyond the basic beliefs of multicultural education by “taking into account power, privilege, and oppression that are reflected in and shaped by literacy practices” and additionally promotes social justice (Stevens & Brown, 2011, p. 32). Due to the high interest in blogging,

particularly in adolescents and young adults, Stevens and Brown (2011) integrated the use of blogging into their hybrid graduate class (p. 32).

Overall, they found that the “blog project exposed students to critical multicultural issues they had not considered, and students comments evolved over the course of the semester” (Stevens & Brown, 2011, p. 33). Students wrote a minimum of two blog posts per week and the researchers analyzed blogs for components of critical multicultural literacy using chunking and coding. Stevens and Brown (2011) concluded that blogging facilitated greater, more straightforward discussion amongst contributors and elicited increased participation (p. 41).

Teacher Zawilinski uses blogging in her classroom to facilitate comprehension and higher order thinking skills in her students. She claims that a “blog does not simply develop communication skills” but instead “online communication has become an essential aspect of reading comprehension” (Zawilinski, 2009, p. 652). During blogging, her students used higher order thinking skills, such as synthesis and evaluation, when responding to their peers and creating their own posts. According to Zawilinski (2009), blogging “allows them to share diverse perspectives and exchange information with one another on the Internet” and provides opportunities for thinking critically about texts.

### **Conclusion**

Paolo Freire (2000) initially rejected the idea that schools or texts were politically neutral. However, critical literacy allows for the liberation of the oppressed and the oppressors, as inquiry is used to identify injustices and eventually act for social justice. Texts have the transformative power to either perpetuate oppression or liberate. Due to its emphasis on preparing students for

the responsibilities of citizenship, the social studies classroom is an appropriate forum for students to examine multiple perspectives, discuss power distribution, critique one-sidedness of texts and take action for social justice. According to Lankshear and Knobel (2006), new ways of communicating (ethos) and new forms of communication (technologies) combine to create new literacies. Reading and writing has become increasingly participatory. In keeping with this, the collaborative and accessible nature of blogging has the power to provide students with opportunities to develop a critical stance towards texts. It elicits mass participation and provides users with a soapbox to expose impediments to social justice.

## Chapter 3

### Context, Research Design and Methodology

#### Context

**Community.** Pleasant Town High School is the only high school in the city of Pleasant Town, New Jersey. Pleasant Town is located in Pacific County and there are an estimated 20, 520 people currently living in the city. It is approximately 5.69 square miles and contains 7,219 housing units. In Pleasant Town, 57.4% own their houses and the median value of owner-occupied houses is \$166,100. According to the 2010 US Census, the median household income in Pleasant Town is \$40,009, as opposed to the New Jersey state average of \$71,637. About 27.5% of the people living in Pleasant Town are under the age of 18. As of 2010, 20.3% of people living in the city are below the poverty line (US Census Bureau, 2014).

According to the 2010 Census Bureau Data, 11.5% of the population in Pleasant Town is white, 45.9% is black or African-American and 41.1% are Latino or Hispanic. As of 2012, 25.8% of the population is foreign born and 46.4% speak languages other than English in the household. In the city, 69.4% of the inhabitants of Pleasant Town have a high school diploma, with 12.4% having a bachelor's degree or higher.

**District and school.** The Pleasant Town Public School District contains six schools: four elementary, a middle and a high school. It is a pre-K-12 district that about serves 3,444 students (Education.com). As of 2013, there were 762 students attending Pleasant Town High School (PTHS) with 392 male and 370 female students. According to the New Jersey State Performance Report Card, PHS is a focus school because of low graduation rates. In 2013, the school met 0% of its

college and career readiness and graduation and post-secondary targets (NJ State School Performance Report Card, 2013).

In terms of Pleasant Town High School's demographics, as of 2013 44.7% of the students in attendance are Hispanic, 40.7% black, 8.8% Asian, 2.9% Pacific Islander and 2.1% white. As of 2013, 75.9% of the student population primarily speaks English at home, 20.6% Spanish, 1.3% Haitian Creole and the remaining 2.3% either French, Gujarati, Nepali or other languages. In reference to participation in programs, 18% are Students with Disability, 82.5% Economically Disadvantaged Students and 8.5% Limited English Proficient Students (NJ State School Performance Report Card, 2013).

**Classroom.** Ms. Wiemer's Honors United States History II class contains 15 students. In the class, 14 of the students are in 11<sup>th</sup> grade and one is in 12<sup>th</sup>. Of the total 15 students, seven are female and eight are male. Seven of the students are African-American, one is Haitian, six are Hispanic and one is white.

The class is a semester long course and the students attend it every day from September to the end of January. Due to block scheduling, the class period is 82 minutes long. To be enrolled in the Honors level US History II class, the students had to meet certain criteria. The students were high performing in their previous World and US I history classes, received teacher recommendations and expressed an interest in the content area. Thirteen of the students are also enrolled in other Honors or Advanced Placement courses at Pleasant Town High School. Six of the students are in three or more Honors or Advanced Placement classes. Due to its intensive reading and writing expectations as well as the depth and specificity of the content, the United States History II class is "honors."

*Students:*

The students in the class are hardworking, inquisitive, motivated, intelligent and eager to learn and participate in assignments. Several of the students are in the top ten of their class and determined to be academically successful. Although the class generally achieves at a higher academic level, there is still a variety of skill levels present within the class. For example, five out of the 15 students scored over 1000L on a Lexile Level test administered during the first week of school, nine scored between 500-1000L and one below 500L.

Overall, the students of the class participate often, have high academic independence, complete assignments and score highly on assessments. Thirteen of the students participate more than once on a daily basis and every student participates at least once. The students are cooperative and enjoy working in groups. Using technology motivates them and they express interest in social media.

### **Research Design/Methodology**

This research study uses the qualitative research paradigm. According to Ruth Shagoury and Brenda Miller Power (2012), “research is a process of discovering essential questions, gathering data and analyzing it to answer those questions” (p. 2). Qualitative research is typically used in the social sciences to gain greater insight into human behavior. As opposed to quantitative research, which uses methods of statistical analysis to generalize data to a larger population, qualitative studies rely on smaller sample sizes to pursue a particular problem or question posed by the research. Forms of qualitative research share the “feature of systematicity and intentionality” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 44). Qualitative research typically uses data collection methods such as interviews, surveys, teacher observation and anecdotal notes. Due to its



goals and methods, qualitative research is better suited to the diverse needs of teacher research.

**Teacher research.** Teacher research positions the researcher subjectively, as both a component and director of the study. According to Shagoury and Power (2012), “teacher research is a natural extension of good teaching” due to the fact that “observing students closely, analyzing their needs, and adjusting the curriculum to fit the needs of all students have always been important skills demonstrated by fine teachers” (p. 3). When teachers pursue research, they inquire into a problem observed in their classrooms on a daily basis.

There are several characteristics shared by most forms of teacher research. First, “most versions of practitioner inquiry share a sense of the practitioner as knower and agent for educational and social change” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 37). Many teacher researchers use their research to address shortfalls of knowledge needed to reconcile issues observed in the classroom. The goal of teacher research is to incite progress and growth to better improve the education of all students. Second, the educational practitioner (teacher, principal, coach, superintendent, teacher educator, etc.) also assumes the role of researcher and is able to work from the inside (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 41).

Third, in practitioner and teacher research “the role of the local community is critical, since this is the context in which knowledge is constructed and used” but also scrutinized and applied (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 42). The knowledge acquired through teacher research is applied directly and immediately within the classroom. Fourth, teacher research blurs the boundaries between the “knowers” and the “learners.” The teacher, as researcher, becomes a learner as they investigate a question in-depth and then in turn becomes the

knower as they share their knowledge within the community. In doing this localized and specific research, the practitioner also rejects the “idea that knowledge can be generated in one site and directly and unproblematically generalized and transmitted to another” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 42). Shagoury and Power (2011) view the teacher-researcher as a “careful gardener” as opposed to a farmer with a large-scale agricultural business and as “a human being in the midst of teaching, carefully weighing the value of different ways of teaching and learning” (p. 5).

Fifth, teacher research turns everyday locations, such as classrooms, into sites of inquiry and examination. With teacher research, “questions emerge from day-to-day practice and from discrepancies between what is intended and what occurs” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 42). What truly makes teacher inquiry unique is that the research questions develop from “neither theory nor practice alone but from critical reflection on the intersections of the two” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 42). In keeping with this, teacher research is also systematic. Like other forms of qualitative research, practitioner and teacher research relies on data collection to both prove and disprove methods. According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), what truly distinguishes the inquiries of practitioners is the additional component of systematically document from the inside perspective “their questions, interpretive frameworks, changes in views over time, dilemmas and recurring themes” (p. 44). With teacher research the researcher does not remove themselves from the study, but instead uses their insider’s position to reflect on results of the study and their personal knowledge to interpret it.

The goal of this study was to identify the relationships between the use of blogging and critical literacy in adolescent students. Specifically, the study focused on four particular aspects of critical literacy: exploring multiple perspectives, examining relationships, identifying dynamics of power and acting for social justice. In order to facilitate these components of critical literacy, the study used six broad categories of instructional practices. Students read supplementary texts, multiple texts, read from a resistant perspectives, produced countertexts, conducted student-choice research projects and used literacy practices to take social action (Behrman, 2006, pgs. 482-5). Throughout the course of the study, students worked in digital small groups to focus on the less heard voices and perspectives of WWII.

Qualitative inquiry strategies used to conduct this study were student interviews, surveys, student projects and assignments, Edublog, student blog posts and responses, anecdotal notes, student reflections and a teacher research journal.

### **Procedure of the Study**

To begin the study, students completed a survey regarding their use of social media and what they believe its purpose is. The goal of this survey was to identify common themes amongst student usage of social media, specifically in terms of how they use it, how often they use it and what they ultimately think it should be used for. Additionally, following the survey, students responded to a blog post asking them to consider what comes to mind when they think of World War II. The goal for this blog post was to gauge students' preconceptions regarding WWII to identify potential biases and misconceptions.

Based on the results of the blog post, it was evident that most students associated WWII with D-Day, Adolf Hitler, the Holocaust and the effects on American soldiers. Due to this, fifteen different subtopics or alternate perspectives were chosen for the students to research in-depth. Each student chose their own topic, particularly because student choice projects are a way to facilitate critical literacy. For the project, students created a blog consisting of six different posts focusing on their subtopic.

The first week of the study familiarized the students with both the United States' entrance and role in WWII, but also with the logistics of Edublog, the blogging website used for the study. During this week, students read texts about US neutrality leading into the war, the attack on Pearl Harbor, US entrance into WWII and key battles. Students read supplementary texts to familiarize themselves with different perspectives within the United States. They commented on the class blog throughout the week, both in responses to questions posed by the teacher and by fellow peers. Additionally, during this first week of the study, instruction took place regarding the responsibilities of digital citizenship. Students discussed and developed the rights and responsibilities of a digital citizen as well as guidelines for blogging.

Students were given six broad topic focuses at the beginning of their three-week blogging experience. The students needed to make sure they covered the topics of each blog post, but they did not have to do them in any particular order. The goal of this format for the blog post assignments intended to afford the students greater freedom and creativity in their posting. Each blog post topic reflected a different strategy used to promote critical literacy (Appendix B).

The first blog post required students to read supplementary texts to provide an overview of their topic. The second post involved analyzing the portrayal of the topic in two different American history textbooks in order to identify bias, read from a resistant perspective and question marginalization or systems of power inherent in texts. Third, students produced countertexts by creating an inner monologue from the perspective of their subtopic regarding a major WWII event. Students made a connection between their topic and a current event in the fourth blog post in order to read secondary texts. The fifth blog post required students to compare and contrast their topic with a classmates' in order to analyze multiple perspectives. Finally, students were allowed to write about a topic of their choice for their final blog post.

In the final week of the study, students put the finishing touches on their blogs. They then completed a "blog walk" where they viewed the contents of their fellow peers blogs and commented on their posts. Students reflected on both what they learned from the typically neglected perspective, how it adds to their overall understanding of World War II and why they believe the perspective is often neglected or ignored. Additionally, they completed a post-blogging survey.

### **Data Sources**

In order to collect data for the study, several methods of qualitative research were used. First, students completed a survey regarding their use of social media. This information was analyzed to determine students' familiarity with forms of social media as well as their perceptions regarding its usage. Second, students responded to a blog post regarding their prior knowledge regarding World War II. This knowledge was used to determine the subtopics

and alternative perspectives for the in-depth research. Student blog posts were read and coded based on components of critical literacy that were evident in their responses. This information was tallied and compiled. Additionally, throughout the course of the research study, notes were recorded in a research journal regarding peer discussions as well as researcher perceptions of the study. Finally, students completed a post-blogging survey which was analyzed for changing perceptions of blogging.

### **Data Analysis**

Data collection and analysis was important to the study to help draw conclusions regarding the impact of blogging on fostering critical literacy in adolescent students. The initial student surveys were used to identify student perceptions regarding the use of social media. Also, student knowledge regarding WWII was polled and used to generate a list of alternative topics to be researched. Student blog posts and comments were then reviewed, analyzed for commonality and separated into categories. After categorizing the blog posts, they were coded for evidence of the four major aspects of critical literacy: (1) representing silenced voices, (2) problematizing texts, (3) student choice and (4) incorporating multiple perspectives. Finally, students completed an exit survey which was used to identify differences in student perceptions regarding blogging and social media.

## Chapter 4

### Data Analysis

#### Introduction

Chapter four discusses the results of my research study that investigated the question, “how can social media, such as blogging, be used to support critical literacy and social activism in high school students?” Conducted over a period of four weeks, the study used student surveys, interviews, teacher-research journal notes, observations, student blog posts and blog post comments to determine major themes that emerged when students used blogging to address multiple perspectives about World War II. As I analyzed and sorted the data, four key categories of response emerged that unified the student survey responses, blog posts and blog comments. These patterns or commonalities were (1) problematizing generally accepted texts or beliefs, (2) an interest in empowering silenced voices, (3) inquiry-driven discussion, (4) the incorporation of multiple perspectives (5) and changing attitudes towards blogging.

As explained in chapter three, data was collected over a four week period. The posts and comments of all students were analyzed for this study. Before beginning to blog, students completed a survey addressing their beliefs regarding the purpose of social media and blogging. Next, students responded to a blog post addressing their knowledge of WWII. The information guided the creation of a list of topics for students to choose from for their blogging project (See Appendix C). Then, over the course of the four weeks, students created six individual blog posts regarding their topics and commented on each other’s information. While the students blogged, observations, conversations and notes were recorded in a teacher-research journal. Finally, at the end of the study, they

completed an exit survey to address changes in perception regarding the purpose of blogging.

### **“Nothing more, nothing less:” Problematizing Generally Accepted Beliefs and Addressing Bias**

When researching their blog topics, students read and analyzed many sources in an attempt to create accurate posts that appropriately reflected the impact of the group on the events of World War II. According to Behrman (2006), “traditional classroom texts need to be supplemented by other works of fiction, nonfiction, film or popular culture” (pg. 482). In light of this, I advised them to never settle for one source on a particular aspect of their topic, but to continue to “check the facts” and always keep searching. For one particular blog post, students had to use two American history textbooks to look up any information they may have had on their topic. As a result, a theme of criticizing generally accepted beliefs and texts started emerging in the students’ blog posts, comments and conversations.

As they began delving deeper into the sources that were available, students frequently reflected on the bias they discovered in texts. For example, Ryan (2014), a student who blogged about the Wehrmacht or German military, wrote about the difference between the portrayal of the same story regarding the discovery of a secret German army that was important during WWII in a German and British online news source. He began by analyzing the story in the German news article and then addressed what was different in the British version of the story. Regarding the British story Ryan wrote,

“in my opinion, the article contains a few different **biased** points than the German-originated article.”



He addressed the idea that a story often changes based on who is telling it.

Another student, Rachel, noted that the only mention of her topic, French Resistance, was a simple definition in her United States history textbook. She reflected on this lack of information in her blog post titled “Battle By the Books” by saying, “in the definition it briefly discusses what they [French partisans] did; however it doesn’t even say why” (Rachel, 2014). She continues by asking “why isn’t the movement important in this U.S. textbook? Weren’t we allies with France?” (Rachel, 2014). Finally, Rachel (2014) ends her blog post by quoting Dwight D. Eisenhower regarding his belief of the importance of the French Resistance Movement and states, “the resistance had no value in our textbooks, though.”

Rachel was not the only student who criticized the portrayal of her topic in the American history textbooks. Mary’s topic was the role of women in World War II. When she first began looking in the two textbooks, she was initially satisfied by the amount of information that was in both books. However, during class, as she reread a section of a book she called me over and directed my attention to a particular phrase. She said, “I’m confused by this sentence: ‘Women found the work more interesting and challenging than what they had done before.’ “

I asked, “why does that confuse you?”

Mary replied, “well, it doesn’t confuse me, but I think it’s not fair.”

“Why is it not fair?”

“Well, I think it’s saying that because women are doing men’s work now, since the men are at war, it’s more rewarding. I think meaning that what they were doing before wasn’t equal” (journal entry December 2, 2014).

Although that phrase from the textbook was not overtly biased, Mary was critical of how the authors chose to discuss the feelings of women working in war industries during the war.

In addition to criticizing the textbooks' portrayal of their topics, several students' blog posts also reflected on how sources attempt to protect the "American image." They addressed the idea that textbook authors did not want to make the United States look badly to American students. For example, Justin (2014) stated in his blog on the Tuskegee Airmen that he was very disappointed that one textbook only had a brief paragraph on their role in WWII. He stated, "personally, I think that the Tuskegee Airmen experiences were far more intense, powerful and historical than the paragraph shows" (Justin, 2014). He continues by saying, "I think the textbook excluded that information because it would make America look bad for mistreating one of the hardest fighting groups they had because they were black" (Justin, 2014). Justin critiqued the noticeable marginalization of the Tuskegee Airmen in the textbook.

In keeping with this category of criticizing textbooks because they seem to be protecting the American image, Erin (2014) was not satisfied with how her topic, Japanese Internment, was presented. She writes that in the one paragraph allotted to Japanese Internment, it appeared to be a "hasty summarization" and it "left many questions unanswered" (Erin, 2014). Erin (2014) then asks, "why? Is it because America doesn't want our youth, which is the targeted audience for these textbooks, to know what America has put American citizens through?" When Erin was reading the textbooks to complete her blog post, she expressed disappointment in the textbook's lack of information and stated "it's almost worse than if they left them out entirely" (journal entry December 2, 2014).

Another student echoed Erin and Justin’s belief regarding the desire to protect the American image in textbooks. Marcus (2014) noted that the important contributions African-American soldiers made during World War II were left out entirely from one book. He wrote, “I feel that this information on African-American soldiers was absent because they couldn’t describe how African-American soldiers helped without mentioning discrimination so they just left it out entirely...” (Marcus, 2014). Marcus (2014) continues to explain the textbook authors to ensure that the United States did not look bad did this intentionally.

As students researched their topics, many blog posts criticized how their topics were portrayed in texts. According to Behrman (2006), “an assertion that a text minimizes the social impact of an event presents a problem from an ethnocentric or gender-based viewpoint, or considers an activity within a historically situated, noncontemporaneous context need not invalidate study of a traditional text” (pg. 482). However, instead using that provides an opportunity for inquiry. In keeping with this, students were particularly critical of textbooks. One student even reflected on the exit survey that the most meaningful experience for them throughout the project was “the fact that I learned about different things that aren’t even discussed in textbooks.” Many questioned their honesty and accused them of wanting to protect America’s image.

### **“The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising Will Never Be Forgotten:” Interest in Empowering Silenced Voices**

Throughout the blogging project, another aspect of critical literacy emerged in students’ blog posts and comments. Many students advocated for the “silenced voices” they were representing through their blogs. They sought to empower the groups their blogs represented and expressed interest in becoming

a voice for those marginalized from the traditional telling of World War II. Some students expressed the importance of memory and not letting their group's story be forgotten. Additionally, many students expressed an appreciation for the project because it gave them an opportunity to learn about different groups.

Frank (2014), who chose to blog about the Warsaw ghetto uprising, often wrote on the importance of representing the Jewish resistance movement and ensuring that their resiliency not be ignored. When I first asked Frank why he decided on this topic, he told me it was because many people often wonder why the Jews did not fight back so he wanted to show them that they did.

To start his first blog post, Frank (2014) wrote, "the Jews were definitely not weak during the Holocaust and the Warsaw ghetto uprising was a perfect example of their strength." He then continues by discussing the formation of a group of resistance fighters called the Z.O.B. led by Mordecai Anielewicz in the ghetto and how they were able to hold out against the German soldiers. He concluded his post by saying, "this proved the Jews were not weak at all and shocked the German Empire" (Frank, 2014). Mary (2014) commented on Frank's initial post by asking him if he believed his topic is important to "our generation." Frank (2014) responded by stating that yes, he thought it was important because "it gives pride to modern day Jewish people to have known that their people did not just let this happen" and "they fought back and did unbelievable things." Frank emphasized the resiliency of the Jewish resistance fighters, the importance that their story never be forgotten and frequently advocated for their inclusion into discussions on World War II.

Like Frank, Rachel also discussed the importance of remembering the toughness and strength of her topic. She blogged about the French resistance

movements' significance during German occupation. In a blog post written from the perspective of the French leader Charles de Gaulle, Rachel (2014) writes, "our country may be conquered but not her people. Germany will not win. We will persevere." She emphasized the determination of the French partisans and the promise to never admit defeat, despite the odds or the fact that Germany had conquered them.

In addition to writing about resiliency, students also sought to empower silenced voices by insisting that the reader learn about the role their topics played in World War II from first-hand accounts. For example, when Erin (2014) wrote about the neglect of Japanese internment in American history textbooks, she advised the reader to look to the interned Japanese-Americans' testimonies for the truth. She blogged, "including more first hand accounts would give us as readers a better understanding for what it was like to really experience this" and then attached a link to interviews with internees (Erin, 2014).

In another post, Erin (2014) wrote about a newspaper article where people sent letters in response to a person who downplayed the severity of the internment camps. She discussed the importance of the letters by saying, "these letters also give people an inside look on how the internees throughout this entire unreasonable experience" (Erin, 2014). Again, she advised readers that the only way to truly do justice to the silenced stories was to turn to those involved directly.

### **"How Come People Have to Punish Others for Being Who they Are?:" Inquiry-Driven Discussion and Participation**

Reminiscent of Friere's problem-solving model for education, students frequently used inquiry to complicate and drive discussion during blogging.

They often commented on each other's blog posts but not only responding to the content, but inquiring further and courting controversy. According to McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004), problem-posing discussion, or questioning the author's message from a critical stance, "works well in a variety of instructional settings, including student-facilitated literature circles and online discussion boards" (pg. 58). The commenting aspect of blogging elicited greater participation and allowed for greater, in-depth discussion that facilitated deeper critical thinking.

Ryan (2014), whose topic was the German military, wrote a post about Police Battalion 101. The Police Battalion was part of the Einsatzgruppen, which was a mobile killing squad comprising not of Nazis, but enlisted soldiers. He wrote of the actions of the killing squad, the many people they were responsible for murdering and their role in the facilitation of the Holocaust. Frank (2014) commented on Ryan's post by asking, "do you think some of the soldiers had sympathy for the Jews?" Frank's question regarding Ryan's post problematized his topic further by interrogating the motives, feelings and actions of a controversial group of people during WWII. It additionally led to greater discussion amongst his peers and elicited critical thinking by addressing the power of peer pressure.

Alex (2014) chose to blog about the Japanese army in World War II. When asked why this was an important topic, Alex said that "it's hard for Americans to read about our enemy's side, but it doesn't mean we should avoid it" (journal entry November 26, 2014). In his first post, an overview of his topic, he wrote about how Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor is what they are typically remembered for (Alex, 2014). In response to this post, another student commented, "how

could Japan betray us like that though?" (Brandon, 2014). That question encouraged a greater discussion as to who was to blame for the war in the Pacific: Japan for attacking Pearl Harbor or the United States for provoking Japan with an embargo? Students often used inquiry to provoke debate and discussion when commenting.

The benefits of commenting on peers' posts and debate topics further was a common theme that emerged particularly in the exit survey that was administered to students following the completion of the project (Appendix D). Six students stated that their favorite aspect of the project was reading, writing and responding to comments. One student wrote, "I liked how I was learning about topics through the words of my peers, making it easier to understand." Others wrote that reading comments on their posts made them rethink what they wrote originally.

Problem-posing and inquiry is an important aspect of critical literacy. When engaging in problem-posing, "readers question the author's message from a critical perspective" (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004, pg. 58). Students engaged in problem-posing behavior through blog comments and their online discussion. When asked what part of blogging was the most meaningful to them, one student wrote, "how fast I learned about so many different topics." Another responded, "learning and obtaining information about victims and people involved during WWII." One student said, "keeping up with the blogs of my peers." Many students reflected on the value of the participatory nature of blogging and how it enabled them to gain a broader understanding of the wider effects of World War II.

## **“Would the Catholic Church and the French Resistance Movement Have Much in Common?” Finding Commonality in Diverse Perspectives**

Another theme that emerged, specifically amongst the student blog posts, was students trying to bridge seemingly opposite perspectives to demonstrate similarities. Although the blogging project required that students complete a compare and contrast blog post, interestingly many students chose very diverse perspectives to analyze. They attempted to bring together very different points of view and demonstrate common ground.

Frank (2014) wrote about the similarities between his topic, the Warsaw ghetto uprising, and Ryan’s, the Germany military. Despite the fact that on the surface these two groups have almost nothing in common, Frank (2014) wrote, “both sides were dedicated and would do anything for their country.” He continued to reflect on the idea that both sides were fighting for their lives and to return home. Despite the fact that they fought one another, Frank attempted to show readers that both sides had significant and powerful reasons for fighting.

Another student, Mark (2014), chose to compare and contrast the German and Soviet soldiers in World War II. He discussed how both groups of soldiers were essentially under the control of a totalitarian regime and at the mercy of a man with an ulterior agenda. Despite the Germans and Soviets being enemies for a majority of the war and fighting some of their deadliest battles against one another, he was able to discuss many similarities. Additionally, his post sparked discussion amongst his peers.

Rachel (2014) asked, “how could the Soviet Union be the victors if they had less training than the German soldiers?”



Mark (2014) responded by explaining the different perceptions regarding the value of human life between the Germans and Soviets, as well as the different tactics used by both sides.

By bringing together diverse perspectives, several students were able to demonstrate the significance of commonality.

### **Changing Views Regarding Blogging**

An interesting pattern that emerged, particularly through the student surveys, was a changing perception in the significance of blogging. Before beginning the project, students responded to a survey question asking what they thought the purpose of blogging was. Some answers included “reading the news,” “writing about what is interesting,” “posting information” and “reading current events.” Many students viewed blogging as a means of gaining information regarding news or peoples’ particular interests. Additionally, there was not one student who reported that they used blogging as a form of expression or social media.

Conversely, on the post-blogging survey students responded differently regarding the purpose of blogging and its uses. One student wrote, “blogging is a way to convey complicated information.” Another wrote that blogging helps with making connections between different ideas. Interestingly, 14 out of 15 students said that blogging was a form of social justice in their post-blogging survey. A student wrote that “it is a form of taking action” and has the power to be like protesting. One student responded that you can “post from normally unheard perspectives.” Many students discussed how blogging gave them an opportunity to advocate for a topic that was generally neglected and this was a form of social justice.

## Summary of Data Analysis

After looking through student survey responses, blog posts, comments and teacher research journal notes, several themes emerged from the data. First, many students problematized generally accepted beliefs and texts by addressing bias. They criticized the information or lack thereof provided in texts regarding their topics and drew conclusions as to why this occurred. Many reflected on the possibility of America trying to “protect its image” by neglecting important aspects of history, such as Japanese Internment. Second, students frequently sought to empower the marginalized or silenced voices their topics contained. They reflected on the resiliency of the members of their group, such as the Warsaw ghetto partisans or the French resistance fighters, in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. Third, students relied heavily on inquiry-driven discussion to facilitate criticism and elicit greater participation. Fourth, many students challenged perspectives by comparing opposite points of view. Finally, many students viewed blogging as an important method of taking action for social justice and advocating for silenced voices.

The data seems to suggest that researching multiple perspectives, blogging and communicating with peers through commenting facilitates critical thinking and components of critical literacy. Additionally, when given choice, many students become interested in promoting a particular perspective and advocating for its inclusion into mainstream conversation. Seven students responded that being able to choose a topic that was important to them was the most meaningful aspect of the project in the post-blogging survey. Chapter five presents conclusions of the study, its implications and suggestions for future research.

## Chapter 5

### Summary, Conclusions, Implications and Limitations of the Study

#### Summary

In analyzing and drawing conclusions from my research, I found that components of critical literacy emerged in students' writing when blogging. Over the course of four weeks, students worked on writing six blog posts reflecting a topic from World War II. Students chose from a list of different topics that are often neglected from a traditional textbook telling of the war. They were given six broad topics to focus on for their blog posts (see Appendix B). Additionally, students responded to their peers' posts and used questioning to facilitate deeper critical thinking.

After four weeks, I identified five different categories that emerged from students' blog posts and comments: (1) problematizing generally accepted beliefs, (2) an interest in empowering silenced voices, (3) inquiry-driven discussion, (4) the incorporation of multiple perspectives and (5) changing attitudes towards blogging.

One of the predominant categories that emerged in students' blog posts and comments was the problematizing of generally accepted beliefs. Students frequently critiqued the portrayal, or lack thereof, of their topics in two American history textbooks. They questioned the motives behind marginalizing particular groups and suggested supplemental readings. Additionally, students criticized the language of the textbooks and how they reflected biased attitudes towards their subjects.

A second category that was evident in the students' blogging was an interest in empowering silenced voices. They advocated for the silenced voices

and emphasized their importance to the events of World War II. Additionally, students reflected on their resiliency against immense odds and the legacy they left behind. When students reflected on their experience in a post-blogging survey, many noted that the most meaningful aspect of the project for them was having the ability to advocate for a marginalized perspective.

Third, students used problem-posing questions and inquiry-driven discussion to stimulate critical conversation. When responding to each other's blog posts, students often responded to their classmates' texts by asking questions that courted controversy and debate. Questions such as "this is disturbing, but do you think some German soldiers had sympathy for the Jews?" or "what made you make the assumptions you made? How do you know?" elicited conversation that led students to question the status quo.

The fourth category of blog posts that emerged was the inclusion of multiple perspectives. Students often brought together seemingly opposite perspectives in an attempt to find commonalities. For example, one student compared and contrasted the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising with the Germany army. By bringing together multiple perspectives, students demonstrated the power of finding the similarities between different points of view.

A final topic that emerged throughout the blogging process was changing student attitudes towards the purpose of blogging. Originally, through student surveys (See Appendix A), it was identified that most students believed the purpose of blogging was to keep up with current events or to read about topics that one finds interesting. However, through post-blogging surveys (See Appendix D), many students wrote about how blogging can be an opportunity to

take action for social justice. They wrote that it allowed for them to advocate for a voice that is often marginalized from “mainstream” perspectives.

### **Conclusions of the Study**

**Emerging evidence of critical literacy.** Paolo Freire (1970), a Brazilian teacher and activist, rejected the idea that education was politically neutral. Arguing that most educational systems maintain social inequalities by reinforcing the status quo, Freire advocated for a problem-posing model of education (1970). In a problem-posing model, students are their teachers’ equivalents and lessons are driven by inquiry and discussion. The goal of a problem-posing model is for students to ultimately challenge the status quo and take action for social justice.

Throughout the study, several different aspects of critical literacy emerged in students’ blog posts, comments and survey responses. As stated in chapter two, McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) identified four different aspects of critical literacy: (1) students expand their background knowledge to modify texts to be more representative of silenced voices, (2) texts are problematized to identify motives or bias, (3) there is flexibility and choice and (4) multiple perspectives are incorporated (pgs. 54-5).

**Representing silenced voices.** Over the course of four weeks, students’ blog posts and comments revealed elements of representing marginalized voices. Students wrote inner monologues from a typically neglected perspective. Many used this blog post to advocate for the significance of a group during World War II, but to also emphasize that their voices should not be silenced or left out. For example, one student wrote from the perspective of Mordecai Anielewicz, the leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. He wrote that despite all odds, they

would fight until the end. Additionally, when explaining the uprising, he wrote, “this proved the Jews were not weak at all and shocked the German Empire” (Frank, 2014). Like Frank, many students were not only interested in representing silenced voices, but empowering them.

Additionally, many students also advocated that to better understand a group, primary sources and testimony is the best way to ensure that their story is accurately portrayed. For example, when Erin (2014) wrote about the neglect of Japanese internment in American history textbooks, she advised the reader to look to the interned Japanese-Americans’ testimonies for the truth. She blogged, “including more first hand accounts would give us as readers a better understanding for what it was like to really experience this” and then attached a link to interviews with internees (Erin, 2014). Many students echoed Erin’s emphasis on the value of letting people tell their own stories.

**Problematizing texts.** When preparing to write their blog posts, students spent time reading over multiple sources to try to gain a well-rounded understanding of their topic. Throughout this process, many students expressed a strong disappointment in how two different US history textbooks portrayed (or did not mention) their topics. This is in keeping with Beck’s (2005) definition of critical literacy as “an attitude toward texts and discourses that questions the social, political and economic conditions under which those texts were constructed” (p. 392). Questioning the motivations behind the writing of a text is an essential component of critical literacy.

One student who wrote a blog on the French Resistance movement commented on the noticeable lack of information in both textbooks she examined. She reflected on this lack of information in her blog post titled “Battle

By the Books” by saying, “in the definition it briefly discusses what they [French partisans] did; however it doesn’t even say why” (Rachel, 2014). She continues by asking “why isn’t the movement important in this U.S. textbook? Weren’t we allies with France?” (Rachel, 2014). Finally, Rachel (2014) ends her blog post by quoting Dwight D. Eisenhower regarding his belief of the importance of the French Resistance Movement and states, “the resistance had no value in our textbooks, though.”

Another student addressed the lack of information in the textbooks because of bias. Justin (2014) stated in his blog on the Tuskegee Airmen that he was very disappointed that one textbook only had a brief paragraph on their role in WWII. He stated, “personally, I think that the Tuskegee Airmen experiences were far more intense, powerful and historical than the paragraph shows” (Justin, 2014). He continues by saying, “I think the textbook excluded that information because it would make America look bad for mistreating one of the hardest fighting groups they had because they were black” (Justin, 2014). This is evidence of McLaughlin and DeVogd’s (2004) argument that critical literacy involves addressing the motives regarding the writing of a text (pg. 54). By interrogating texts and their purpose, students take on the responsibilities of citizenship, which include confronting social inequalities and the perpetuation of injustices.

**Student choice.** An important aspect of Freire’s problem-posing model of education, the significance of student choice became evident in their post-survey reflections. Students were allowed to choose their own topic for the blog, decide the order of the blog posts, pick the focus of each post and blog freely about whatever intrigued them for their final post. Their blogs were guided by their

own interests and curiosity. According to Behrman (2006), choice projects that allow students to decide on an issue of personal importance provide an opportunity to apply a critical stance (pg. 484).

Additionally, encouraging student freedom to make decisions based on their own interpretations of their topic, facilitated critical literacy and a more equitable relationship between the students and teacher. By allowing choice and inquiry, “the students—no longer docile listeners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (Freire, 1970, pg. 81).

Using choice and inquiry-driven literacy practices empowered students to become advocates for their topics. One student responded in the post-blogging survey that “by picking my topic and how to write about it, I felt like I could really defend it.” In the same survey, 14 out of 15 students wrote that blogging is a form of taking action for social justice. As discussed in Chapter four, a student wrote that “it is a form of taking action” and has the power to be like protesting. Another responded that you can “post from normally unheard perspectives.” Many students wrote how blogging gave them an opportunity to advocate for a topic that was generally neglected and this was a form of social justice.

**Incorporation of multiple perspectives.** An important aspect of critical literacy, students frequently examined multiple perspectives throughout the blogging process. As discussed in Chapter two, students examine multiple perspectives to search for the voices missing or silenced in texts and examine them to determine if they would agree with or reject the author’s point of view (Soares & Wood, 2010, p. 488). Additionally, searching for multiple perspectives on a topic encourages students to look for “authentic voices” “become more



knowledgeable on important issues in their world and then to specifically connect their voice to critical issues” (Soares & Wood, 2010, p. 490). The value of using multiple sources when addressing a topic cannot be understated in relation to critical literacy.

During their blogging, many students chose to compare and contrast both how the same events were portrayed differently based on the author. For example, Ryan (2004) wrote about how a current event story regarding the discovery of a secret German military that was used during WWII was presented differently in a German and British news source. As discussed in Chapter four, he began by analyzing the story in the German news article and then addressed what was different in the British version of the story. Regarding the British story Ryan wrote, “in my opinion, the article contains a few different **biased** points than the German-originated article.” He addressed the idea that a story often changes based on who is telling it.

As part of the blogging project, students had to read their peers’ blog posts and not only comment, but also analyze how each group viewed and participated in the war differently. Additionally, students also compared and contrasted seemingly opposite perspectives in their blog posts. For example, Mark (2014), as discussed in Chapter four, chose to compare and contrast German and Soviet soldiers. Even though they were enemies for a majority of World War II, Mark explained how both sides were under the control of a totalitarian leader who was not necessarily concerned about high casualties. By bringing together diverse perspectives, several students were able to demonstrate the significance of commonality.

## Limitations of the Study

Although much was learned during this brief study regarding the use of blogging in adolescent classrooms as a way of facilitating critical literacy, there were several limitations. First, blogging is very time consuming, particularly when students are unfamiliar with this mode of social media. During the first week of the research study, a large majority of students' time was spent trying to understand how to use the blogging website and do important tasks such as post, comment, add images or hyperlink. Additionally, this may have negatively affected the first blog posts students created due to the fact that some were frustrated with the program initially and it took a few class periods for them to feel comfortable posting. A longer time-span for the blogging would help alleviate any stress the students or teacher may feel about completing quality posts by a particular deadline.

Second, crucial to using blogs in the classroom is access to technology. For this study, laptops were used within the classroom for two to three class periods a week. However, this is not always possible for all classes. In addition to having access, sometimes issues develop with the technology that is available. For example, there were several times when the internet crashed while students were working or laptops would freeze and they would lose some of their work. This is frustrating for both students and teachers.

Finally, another limitation to this study was the narrow focus of the blogging. Due to curriculum and time restraints, the blog topics needed to focus on the unit being taught in the classroom—World War II. Although it was beneficial to choose a narrow topic for the short span of the study, it would be interesting to implement the blogs across several units by having students

“follow” their group’s history throughout WWII, the Cold War, Civil Rights and possibly even to modern day.

### **Implications of the Study**

After analyzing the data accumulated throughout this study, there are several implications for teachers (both in general and social studies specifically), administrators and reading specialists and future teacher researchers.

First, there are implications for teachers in general. Despite it being time consuming and sometimes difficult with access to technology, blogging is a very rewarding classroom experience. It elicits participation and valuable discussion from students who may not normally feel comfortable volunteering their opinions and beliefs in whole or small group discussion. Moreover, it empowers students by giving them a platform to advocate for a marginalized group and take action for social justice.

Additionally, there are important implications from this study for social studies teachers specifically. Having students investigate a historical event from the “lens” of a specific subgroup is valuable and encourages them to find “authentic voices.” Also, it gives students practice with identifying bias and motivation, an important skill necessary for historians. Finally, as discussed in Chapter two, encouraging critical literacy and the incorporation of multiple perspectives in social studies provides students with opportunities to engage in citizenship. According to Wolk (2003), “social studies is the perfect forum for that critique to take place” particularly because “the purpose of social studies is to help students participate in civic life” (p. 102).

Second, there are implications for administrators and reading specialists. It would be beneficial for administrators to strive to create greater opportunities

for teachers to access technology. As addressed by Lankshear and Knoebel's Theory of New Literacies, the nature of literacy is changing. It is more participatory, collaborative and increasingly digital. As even standardized testing begins to shift to a computer-based format, it is important for administrators to ensure that teachers are not just given access to technology but also supported in their usage of it. This also involves training or providing professional development and support for teachers regarding the implementation of New Literacies, such as blogging. Since being literate in today's world requires a new and frequently changing set of skills, it is crucial that administrators and reading specialists support, encourage and educate teachers as they better prepare students to meet the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Finally, this study lends itself to important conclusions for future teacher researchers. Although a fair amount of data was analyzed and collected for this study regarding blogging and critical literacy, there are still many components that require further investigation. For example, expanding the length and scope of the study would be beneficial. It would allow for students to research their topics in greater depth and track their stories throughout a greater span of history. Additionally, although many students felt blogging in and of itself was a form of social justice particularly because they were advocating for marginalized voices, it would be interesting to have students coordinate social action projects together. Studying how blogging can be used to plan social action events would be meaningful to the field.

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## Appendix A

### Pre-Blogging Survey

#### **HOW DO YOU USE TECHNOLOGY?**

##### *Survey*

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Do you have access to a computer at home?  Yes  No
2. Do you use the computer everyday?  Yes  No
3. If you said "yes," how long do you use the computer for? <1 hour 1-2 hours  
>3 hours
4. If you do not use the computer everyday, how do you access the Internet? phone  
tablet other \_\_\_\_\_
5. Besides a computer, what other forms of technology do you use on a daily basis?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. What do you primarily use technology for?

*Check all that apply.*

- Homework
- Research
- Social Media
- Games
- Online Shopping
- Email
- Watching shows/movies
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

7. Do you use social media?  Yes  No

8. What forms of social media do you use?

*Check all that apply.*

Facebook

Instagram

Twitter

Vine

Pinterest

Snapchat

Blog

Other \_\_\_\_\_

9. Rank the forms of social media from **most** to **least** frequent use, with **1** being the most frequent. If you do not use a form of social media, write “**n/a**” in the box.

*Check all that apply.*

Facebook

Instagram

Twitter

Vine

Pinterest

Snapchat

Blog

Other \_\_\_\_\_

10. What do you think is the **purpose** of social media?

11. What are the **advantages** of social media?

12. What are the **disadvantages** of social media?

13. Do you think social media can be used for educational purposes? Explain.

14. How much time per day do you think you devote to social media?  <1hour  1-2 hours  >3 hours

15. What do you think is the purpose of each of the following forms of social media?

*Facebook*

*Instagram*

*Vine*

*Blogging*

*Pinterest*

*Twitter*

## Appendix B

### Student Blog Post Topics

#### **Blogging WWII – Blog Post Topics**

##### Blog Post #1

**Overview** – *what role did this group play in World War II? How were they affected by the war? How did they impact the course of the war?*

##### Blog Post #2

**Marginalization** – Use two textbooks to try and find information on your perspective in the chapters on WWII. Is there any there? If there is, how is your perspective portrayed? Why do you think it is either portrayed that way or neglected entirely? Make sure you use evidence or quotes from the textbooks in your blog posts.

##### Blog Post #3

**Inner Monologue** – Choose a commonly portrayed event from WWII. Write an “inner monologue” regarding that event from the perspective of your topic.

##### Blog Post #4

**Make a Connection** – Find a current day newspaper article that connects to your topic. Explain the connection and how it demonstrates that this perspective is relevant even today. Be sure to include a link to the article.

##### Blog Post #5

**Compare and Contrast** – View another classmate’s blog posts on their perspective. Compare and contrast their topic with yours.

##### Blog Post #6

**Student Choice** – You decide what to blog about for this one. Make sure it is relevant to your topic.

## Appendix C

### WWII Perspectives and Links to Student Blogs

Perspective	Link
Tuskegee Airmen	<a href="http://jovanluna1.edublogs.org/">http://jovanluna1.edublogs.org/</a>
African-American Soldiers	<a href="http://marquelbridgers.edublogs.org/">http://marquelbridgers.edublogs.org/</a>
The Catholic Church in WWII	<a href="http://dimitrileger.edublogs.org/">http://dimitrileger.edublogs.org/</a>
Homosexuals in the Holocaust	<a href="http://noellysanchez.edublogs.org/">http://noellysanchez.edublogs.org/</a>
The Hitler Youth	<a href="http://deeannagroce.edublogs.org/">http://deeannagroce.edublogs.org/</a>
German Soldiers	<a href="http://germansoldierswwii.edublogs.org/">http://germansoldierswwii.edublogs.org/</a>
Egypt in WWII	<a href="http://egyptinwwii.edublogs.org/">http://egyptinwwii.edublogs.org/</a>
Soviet Soldiers	<a href="http://sovietsoldiersinwwii.edublogs.org/">http://sovietsoldiersinwwii.edublogs.org/</a>
Women in WWII	<a href="http://womeninwwii.edublogs.org/">http://womeninwwii.edublogs.org/</a>
Warsaw Ghetto Uprising	<a href="http://warsawghettoupriasing.edublogs.org/">http://warsawghettoupriasing.edublogs.org/</a>
The French Resistance Movement	<a href="http://frenchresistanceinwwii.edublogs.org/">http://frenchresistanceinwwii.edublogs.org/</a>
Jehovah's Witness in the Holocaust	<a href="http://wynettawoods.edublogs.org/">http://wynettawoods.edublogs.org/</a>
Interned Japanese Americans	<a href="http://internedjapaneseamericans.edublogs.org/">http://internedjapaneseamericans.edublogs.org/</a>
Political Holocaust Victims	<a href="http://politicalholocaustvictims.edublogs.org/">http://politicalholocaustvictims.edublogs.org/</a>
Japanese Soldiers	<a href="http://beckadam2.edublogs.org/">http://beckadam2.edublogs.org/</a>

## Appendix D

### Post-Blogging Survey

#### Blogging WWII

##### *Exit Survey*

- How did you feel about blogging when you initially started the project?
- How did you feel about your topic when you initially started the project?
- What did you enjoy the most about the blogging project?
- What did you enjoy the least about the blogging project?
- What could Ms. Wiemer have done to improve this project?
- What aspect of the blogging project was the most meaningful to you?  
Which 3 topics (not including your own) were the most interesting to you?  
Why?
- Why is blogging important?
- Will you blog again? Why or why not?
- Do you think blogging is a form taking action for social justice? Why or why not?
- What do you think is the purpose of social media?
- What are the advantages of social media?
- What are the disadvantages of social media?
- Do you think social media can be used for educational purposes?

Final thoughts on your experience: