BLENDED LEARNING: EXPANSION OF THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FROM THE CLASSROOM TO TECHNOLOGY MEDIATED SPACES CAN HAVE A POSITIVE INFLUENCE ON RELUCTANT WRITERS IN K-12

by

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Abstract

This blended learning project is focused on the effects of the use of online environments to elicit motivation of reluctant writers in the elementary years.

The use of blended learning to facilitate engagement in reluctant writers in the K-12 environment is difficult to ascertain as there is little substantiated research to support this. Finding ways to positively engage young writers in the K-12 setting is an ongoing issue. Even the use of blended learning in general in the K-12 environment is not as prevalent as in the upper levels of education. This project delves into a consideration of whether the expansion of the learning environment from the classroom to technology mediated spaces can have a positive influence on reluctant writers in K-12. The author’s project encompasses the use of a Weebly website in which the users were to engage in various activities surrounding a unit of study. The other component of the project involves the use of Twiducate, a “Facebook” equivalent for children. The project findings of the components of the online interactions have revealed a higher level of engagement for reluctant writers.

Weebly site link: http://www.janecmastersproject.weebly.com/

Twidicate site link: http://janecmastersproject.weebly.com/twiducate-site.html

*Keywords: blended learning, reluctant writers, technology mediated spaces, literacy, Twiducate, engagement online.*
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of the project is to document findings of how expansion of the learning environment from the classroom to technology mediated online spaces can have a positive influence on reluctant writers in K-12.

Project Overview

This project will encompass observations from users aged 8 as they engaged in two online environments, a Weebly site (http://mscgrade3.weebly.com password: cuties2) and a Twiducate site (http://www.twiducate.com username: playnjayn@shaw.ca password: mygirls) and my findings from other documented case studies will be included in this project. Two colleagues will also view the Weebly site and contribute their perspectives about the site and the writing samples posted there. Looking at the other research, there is a limited amount done at the elementary level which has prompted the reason for this project. Most of the more substantiated research has been done at high school and post-secondary levels. There has been some research related to motivating reluctant writers at the elementary level. However, there is still very little research that is based on the possible influences of online environments on reluctant writers.

Validation for the Project

Reluctant writers often don’t write willingly, or well (Buis, 2007). Buis also states that writing requires different needs for motivation. He goes on to say that there is still very little in the way of analysis of motivational factors aimed at writing. One of the factors that can increase the odds of engaging reluctant writers is through intrinsic motivation (Buis, 2007). Yang et al. (2005)
suggests that the use of web-based writing environments improve writing skills over the more conventional writing environments. They go on to state that intrinsic motivation is often a factor when students have control over their writing and when they make fewer mistakes due to auto correct and publishing in the online environment. Their study of comparing early writing to later writing samples of students who used the web-based environment showed more improvement than students who used the more conventional method of writing. Goldberg, Russell, and Cook (2003) concur that student who engage in the use of computers to develop their writing, on average are not only engaged but have also made improvements in the length and quality of their writing. Another motivating factor that Flower, Stein, Ackerman, Kantz, McCormick, and Peck (1990) suggest is that writers’ conceptions of the written task affect what they write. They suggest that writing is social in nature and that the students’ ideas gain relevance when shared with a community. Applebee and Langer (1984), Elbow (1994), Langer (1992), and Spaulding (1992) agree that the process of writing has moved from emphasizing the mechanics of writing to communication. They also suggest that writers need to build a strong belief in the relevance and importance of writing of which also aligns with intrinsic motivation. Online environments can facilitate relevance and meaning by way of connection with others. I hope to show that expansion of the learning environment from the classroom to technology mediated online spaces can have a positive influence on reluctant writers in K-12.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

What is Blended Learning?

Blended learning is not a new phenomenon. It has been around for quite a few years (Bonk & Graham, 2006). However, in recent years, with the boom in online technology, it is coming to the forefront of education. Using a blended form of learning can take on many different forms. This makes blended learning a powerful learning venue, but can also make it difficult to implement effectively. Blended learning is not without some confusion and uncertainty and as it continues to develop within our educations systems, a clarified understanding, definition and direction will be required. In this chapter, I will be discussing the blended learning meanings, trends, and benefits. I will also discuss online environments and their relationship to fostering a positive influence on reluctant writers, case studies performed in the area of writing and online environments, and cautions of blended learning in today’s classroom.

Before beginning this investigation of its effectiveness, I will look at what blended learning actually means. The definitions of blended learning vary somewhat depending on the author cited. They can vary from being quite general to being very specific in nature. Driscoll (2002) identifies blended learning as “meaning different things to different people.” It is a mix of web-based technologies which are used to accomplish an academic goal that also combines pedagogical methods, such as behaviourism, cognitivism, and constructivism, to name a few (Driscoll, 2002; Sharma, 2014). Sharma (2014) and Driscoll (2002) both define blended learning as a mix of face-to-face and online formats, using both a combination of different types of technologies and a combination of learning methodologies. They further report that this mix of instructional technologies, methodologies, and educational tasks create an effective blended
learning environment. It is the mixing of web-based technologies with the appropriate methodologies which differentiate blended learning from the traditional classroom setting.

Valiathan (2002) gives a more specific description of what blended learning is, describing three possible models and providing examples for each. She describes a “Skill-Driven Model” which is geared toward learning targeted skills and knowledge augmented through self-paced, instructor-led lectures and on-line learning labs, the “Attitude-Driven Model” where students gain new behaviours and beliefs through interaction with their peers, and the “Competency-Driven Model” where students interact and learn from experts in the field. Each of Valiathan’s models is specific to a method of learning. The “Skill Driven Model” is more geared toward learning specific skills and knowledge in a more structured, teacher-focused environment. The “Attitude-Driven Model” has more of a social learning focus for problem-based or project-based learning. The “Competency-Driven Model” is geared more toward learning skills that will be needed for a specific occupation. All three models are equally beneficial as a learning venue for the particular learning outcomes they require.

According to Graham, Allen, and Ure (2003), blended learning is a continual convergence of two different learning environments. This convergence is the ever-evolving combination of using face-to-face environments in varying degrees with the emergent technologies that are available for communicating and interacting with others both in and out of the traditional brick and mortar environment. Graham et al. (2003) also notes that until recently face-to-face and distance learning have been two very different venues for learning that were difficult to combine. Face-to-face learning has been considered to be teacher-directed and geared more toward synchronous interactions. Distance learning, on the other hand, has been considered self-directed and largely asynchronous (Graham et al., 2003). The authors go on to report that
until recently, it has been difficult to effectively combine the two methods of delivery. Bonk and Graham (2006) support this point when they note that with the availability of many digital technologies and collaborative tools, the blending of computer-based instruction is more easily integrated into the face-to-face environment. Stein and Graham (2014) and Collopy and Arnold (2009) agree that blended learning requires a combination of face-to-face interaction, a mixture of delivery methods, and the accommodation of the diverse learning needs of numerous students over a variety of subject areas. The convergence of face-to-face and online environments is continuing to evolve and the gap between the two very different venues is closing rapidly.

Stein and Graham (2014) emphasize that blended learning is not simply using technology for technology’s sake, but that it should be selected to enhance learning and to achieve an enriched learning experience. They go on to say that it is important to think about the student’s specific learning styles and the content being taught before determining which technology will best fit the learners’ needs and enhance content in the most effective way. Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes, and Garrison (2013) state that “[t]he goal of blended learning is to bring these (face-to-face and online text-based) platforms together to academically challenge students in ways not possible through either mode individually” (p.9). There needs to be a cohesive combination of technologies to enhance the learning that is taking place rather than simply using technology for the sake of using it (Vaughn et al., 2013). It is often easy for some educators to get caught up in the emergent technology and lose sight of the educational goals they are trying to impart as well as the technology that would best benefit an individual student’s needs.

Therefore, blended learning is, in some form or another, a blending of technology with face-to-face instruction. It continues to be difficult to pinpoint the exact meaning for all people in every situation. Based on the needs of the student, the content being delivered, and individual
pedagogy and beliefs, each blended model of learning will look different in its implementation.

Blended learning can be as simple as the use of digital tools to enhance learning, such as with the use of YouTube videos and blogging, to a more specific definition with an increased focus on integrating computer interfaces that emulate more human attributes such as in virtual worlds (Bonk and Graham, 2006). Either way, the use of many of the emerging technologies available today will enhance the learning experience for students. As blended learning continues to evolve, so too will the meaning of blended learning.

**Trends of Blended Learning**

While the definition of blended learning is evolving, so too, are the trends of blended learning developing. There are many documented trends currently emerging in blended learning that give direction to how it will continue to adapt in the future. These trends can be attributed to the increase of the ubiquitous use of technology for learning. With this increase in digital learning, learning priorities are shifting. Collins and Halverson (2009) suggest that “[m]emorizing information is becoming less important with the web available, but people do need to learn how to find information, recognize when they need more information, and evaluate what they find” (p.9). Blended learning can facilitate the evolving requirements of today’s learners through the use of the web to find, evaluate, and process information. Another evolution that Stein and Graham (2014) suggest is that learning will become more geared towards the individual and immediate learning requirements of each student. They formulate that learning will take place more and more in online social settings than in the traditional classroom. Thus, the need for continuous evolution of the brick and mortar learning environment to encompass the ever-changing world of digitalization. We can no longer teach writing strictly in the traditional way, because technology is continually changing and challenging the whole idea of how we
perceive literacy (Bolter, 1991, 1998; Lemke, 1998; Reinking, 1998). We need to assimilate new types of technologies to augment this new perception of how literacy is taught, incorporating the traditional with the new (Bolter, 1991, 1998; Lemke, 1998; Reinking, 1998). Kurliooff (2005) supports this need for good pedagogy that uses technology as a tool to support learning. He states that teachers have only started to rise to the challenge of integrating new technologies into their teaching pedagogy to augment new learning experiences for students. This change in pedagogy will change the traditional face-to-face classrooms that are still in place today. Collins (1998) concurs that teachers need to make sure that they learn best practices of the available technology tools and how they fit their pedagogy before implementation of the tools to enhance student writing. Stein and Graham go on to describe that the trends in blended learning have evolved from simply posting a syllabus online, communicating through emails, and perhaps sharing slides or content information online to incorporating synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities, ensuring ample time for learning, and employing a variety of technologies to create optimal learning environments.

Young (2002) and Sharma (2014) comment that blended learning combines the best of the traditional setting with the best of the online environment. Students have the convenience of working online and at their own pace, but have the added benefit of the face-to-face interactions to boost learning or solve problems. It does, however, require a good balance between online and face-to-face interactions and support. Often, online material and content is designed specifically to support a more self-directed process, thus allowing for students to learn at their own pace and access material when it is convenient for them (Young, 2002). Supports in the form of face-to-face interactions help facilitate and maintain learning in a timely fashion.
Collins and Halverson (2009) suggest that digital integration will be utilized more through self-directed learning, where students choose their own learning paths. The authors state that because there is so much information online students have the ability to delve into an education that is tailored to their individual interests. They go on to mention that the opportunity for people to pursue any education that they want, whenever they want, is paramount to student engagement. Collins and Halverson (2009) build on what Stein and Graham (2014) previously wrote, suggesting that there are “imperatives” that will encompass the emerging blended learning environments. These imperatives are customization, interaction, and control. Customization of learning involves information and knowledge being available to students on demand. Interaction entails students having interactions with others and engagement in activities that simulate real-life events which provide them with immediate feedback. The final imperative of control involves students having autonomy over their learning by being able to choose their learning path (Collins and Halverson, 2009). Collins (1998) also comments on the importance of social practices within a learning community that will determine whether students can embrace literacy technologies and the new technologies that are available to them for them to be successful.

Trends toward increased blended learning approaches are providing students with more control of their learning by venturing out into cyberspace to gather and peruse information to augment their learning and (Collins and Halverson, 2009). One example of how students today are given the opportunity to have more control over their learning is through project- or problem-based learning activities in which students are given a project or problem to solve. Donnelly (2005) states that new technologies can enhance project- and problem-based learning because many emerging technologies are interactive which allows students to create and immediately receive feedback, thus building their understanding and knowledge in the process of learning.
Vaughan, et al. (2013) suggest that virtual worlds can also support collaboration and project-based learning. By collaborating and being immersed in virtual worlds, real-life scenarios can be ‘played out.’ These experiences can be powerful learning opportunities and may not be possible or cost effective in the physical environment. The authors see the future of blended learning as more than just adding online activities to a face-to-face environment. They state that “[t]he essential function of blended learning is to extend thinking and discourse over time and space” (p.9). Learning is enhanced when there is careful thought given to the online content and activities needed to generate engagement.

Ramaley and Lee (2005) contend that there is an “emerging cyberinfrastructure” that is in place now with the use of such tools as animations, concept inventories, WeBWorK, AskNSDL, the Molecular Workbench, and BugScope. Many of these current tools are advancing technology in schools (Ramaley and Lee, 2005). They also state that when the cyberinfrastructure is fully developed, there will be a myriad of technological tools that will be essential in studying intricate systems and duplicating real-world behaviours within these systems. There will be software to “support collaboratories (a collaborative environment without walls), visualization tools, data-mining capacity, and data management techniques, as well as support for geographically distributed sensing systems and observation sites that generate enormous amounts of data” (p.1). The aforementioned tools will better engage the “Net Generation” (Ramaley and Lee, 2005)

Benefits of Blended Learning

As new technologies are developed and introduced into learning, the benefits become more and more evident. Graham (2003) describes blended learning benefits to include an
increase in accessibility of course material for students who may not be able to access a brick and mortar school every day or for those students who wish to access course material when, where and how they wish. He also mentions that blended models are less expensive to run than a traditional classroom. Stein and Graham (2014) also concur that expenses are decreased with a blended learning model as many materials are accessed online instead of through the purchase of textbooks and less classroom space and resources are required. Schulte (2011) and Young (2002) notes that even though there is a high cost for licenses for software there are fewer teachers needed to supervise students, thus an overall cost reduction is experienced. Schulte further comments that students on a waitlist will be able to access learning sooner if classroom space is freed up by the use of a blended model of learning. He further states that because the face-to-face sessions may be only a few times a week, the teacher could teach more than one class at a time, thus reducing costs and the need for more physical classroom space.

Another benefit of blended learning is the shift in the role of the educator. Donnelly (2005) states that because of the opportunities online resources provide for new and creative ways to facilitate learning, there is a shift between the world of knowledge and the relationship between the teacher and student. The use of the emerging technologies is opening up so many rich opportunities for students and teachers to investigate new learning opportunities (Donnelly, 2005) as open access to information is increased. Vaughan, et al. (2013) also see the relationship between teacher and student changing from a teacher-directed lecture position to that of a facilitator and “that cognitive processes are directed to personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile outcomes” (p. 47) for each individual student. The benefits of the shift in the role of the educator is that the shift is away from a lecture-based, teacher-lead model to one of a facilitation process where students’ social identity and heightened cognition can evolve
(Vaughan, et al., 2013). Kurlioff (2005) concurs that the search for good pedagogy with the employment to new technologies has opened the channel for new thinking about how we teach effectively. Teachers have just begun to create new learning experiences for students as new technologies become available (Kurlioff, 2005). Research conducted by Kim et al. (2009) report their findings that the benefits of blended learning were improved learning experience, more access and availability of material, and reduced cost. The benefits of convenience, self-directed learning, lower cost, and vast choices of online tools all lead to the merging of the best of the traditional education setting with the best of the online experience to improve the learning experience for all students.

**Motivational Factors in Blended Learning**

Online environments and their relationship in fostering a positive influence on reluctant writers are important factors to consider. Roberts (nd) states that students of today are that of the “Net Generation,” never having known what it was like without computers and the Web. Roberts (nd) also found that all of the 25 students he surveyed responded that they preferred a 50% face-to-face instruction and a 50% interactive technological environment for learning. He further mentions that students feel that the use of technology must augment students’ needs, which further promotes a positive learning environment. Buis (2007) also reports that using online environments for writing is motivational (Buis, 2007). Buis states that reluctant writers often don’t write willingly, or well, because they don’t feel they have full control or authority of their writing and they are easily defeated by what they feel they can’t do. He further comments that writing requires different needs for motivation and that there is still very little in the way of analysis of motivational factors aimed at writing. One of the factors that can increase the odds of
engaging reluctant writers is that of intrinsic motivation (Buis, 2007). Dickinson (1995) concurs that learners who are actively involved in their own learning have both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. She suggests that the intrinsic motivation occurs by taking an interest in learning for it’s own sake and extrinsic happens when students/learners take control of their learning. Yang, Hwa, & Chung (2005) also suggest that the use of web-based writing environments improve writing skills over the more conventional writing environments. They go on to state that intrinsic motivation is often a factor when students have control over their writing and when they make fewer mistakes due to auto correct and publishing in the online environment. Their study of comparing early writing to later writing samples of students who used the web-based environment showed more improvement than students who used the more conventional method of writing. Goldberg, Russell, and Cook (2003) concur that students who engage in the use of computers to develop their writing are not only engaged but have also made improvements in the length and quality of their writing.

Another motivating factor that Flower, Stein, Ackerman, Kantz, McCormick, and Peck (1990) suggest is that writers’ conceptions of the written task affect what they write. They suggest that writing is social in nature and that the students’ ideas gain relevance when shared with a community. Applebee and Langer (1984), Elbow (1994), Langer (1992), and Spaulding (1992) agree that the process of writing has moved from emphasizing the mechanics of writing to that of communication. They also suggest that writers need to build a strong belief in the relevance and importance of writing, and online environments can facilitate relevance and meaning by way of connection with others. Ackerman (2006) deduces that students are motivated when using technology as a tool, such as through personal websites and/or blogs and classroom content that have a meaningful audience. He also states that students need to be given
the opportunity to be idea-driven given what is being done or taught in the classroom. Using the internet for writing fosters the importance of writing well for others to peruse as opposed to the only audience being that of the teacher (Ackerman, 2006). Ackerman (2006) proposes that the internet could become part of the learning community that would create motivation for students to write effectively.

**Case Studies of Blended Learning**

The results of several studies portray the positive effects of online learning. In their study on blended learning design, Walker and Keeffe (2010) found that students demonstrated self-determination and engagement when involved in a blended model of learning. Ruck (2012) concurs through her study on pedagogical characteristics of the online environments versus the face-to-face environment. She further states that online students were more self-reliant and the teacher role was that of a facilitator of resources and technology rather than that of a lecturer. She also found that the student-to-student interaction increased with the use of the online method and the students became active in their learning rather than the recipient of the teacher’s lectures. Walker and Keeffe (2010) found that students were more aware of their learning and situational needs and could select online formats to fit their individual needs. Cherry (2010) found that all of the educators she questioned in her study said the hybrid instruction was an extension of the traditional face-to-face classroom and that the students’ interest levels were heightened because the more traditional “seat work” was being presented in a more exciting, digital format. Demirer and Sahin (2013) found, through their study of the effect of blended learning on the transfer of learning, that students produced better transfer of learning when engaged in the blended learning environment. Picciano and Seaman (2009) found that there was a growing popularity in blended
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learning class. Their investigation revealed that in a span of two years there was a 41% increase in students participating in a blended learning environment. Furthermore, they report that there has been a rapid increase in the last ten years in K-12 student enrolment in blended learning environments.

In their study, El-Deghaidy and Nouby (2008) examined the effectiveness of a cooperative blended learning approach. They documented that the students who participated in the blended learning activities stated that they had a more positive attitude toward blended learning as opposed to only face-to-face learning. Karaman, Ozen, Yildirim, and ve Keban (2009) also found that blended learning environments had a positive effect on student development. Motteram (2006) concurs from his three-year long study on blended learning experiences of students that online experiences in a blended format had positive effects on their learning experiences.

Case Studies of the Motivational Factors in Writing Using Blended Learning Environments

The results of several other studies portray the positive effects of online learning and writing. In a study conducted by Goldberg, Russell, and Cook (2003), results found that students who used a computer to write produced longer passages than those students who wrote with paper-and-pencil. They also found that the quality of writing using a computer produced higher quality writing than those who used paper-and-pencil. In a study done by Snyder (1993), communication between students as opposed to only with the teacher was more predominant in an environment where students used computers to write versus pen and paper. She attributes this to the increased engagement, motivation and independence that the students experience while writing with computers. Ackerman (2006) concurs, through his findings, that students are more
motivated to write through technology because they are engaged in a more meaningful venue through blogs and/or websites, which facilitate more authentic writing. Yackanicz (2002) found through her case study of two third grade students, who were deemed as “reluctant writers” that they were substantially more willing to write and sustain their writing when they used a computer. She found that these students spent longer amounts of time and produced more writing when they used a computer as opposed to pen and paper. Leo’s (2002) study found that with the use of online learning environments and the teacher’s role of facilitator, students improved their writing. She also states that students are actively learning through support from other students and the teacher’s role as that of a facilitator had influenced the quality and quantity of student writing. Leo (2002) also found that students’ interactions were facilitated by online asynchronous activities, which had a positive influence on student writing because they could interact with other students anytime and anywhere. Rendahl’s (2009) findings of her case study on writing online found that most of the student responses to working online were positive. The students responded with how convenient, easy, and flexible working online was. She found that 18 of the 20 respondents to her survey conveyed that they worked on their writing assignments outside of the computer lab. Kim and Bonk (2006) state that the use of technology will actively engage students in the learning process and this will increase learning retention.

**Barriers to the Effectiveness of Blended Learning Environments**

Even though there are many benefits to blended learning, there are also some barriers that can impact the effectiveness of a blended learning model. One of the challenges of implementing a blended learning model is that blended learning experiences that are not properly designed can potentially decrease the effectiveness of learning (Collopy & Arnold, 2009). Kim et al. (2009)
refer to the main cause of concern as being a lack of understanding of what blended learning is and they attribute lower success rates to such misunderstandings being acted upon. Lack of understanding of the meaning of blended learning could be reflective of insufficient support and/or carelessly thought out selections of technology which will lessen the effectiveness of the blended learning experience (Kim et al, 2009).

Zhang (2009) and Schulte (2011) agree that a further concern that blended learning faces is the difficulty of integrating technologies into our current education system. The continually emergent technologies means that the process of integrating technology is never ending, which can be problematic if funding and time to master the emergent technologies are an issue (Zhang, 2009 & Schulte, 2011). As an example, Kim et al. (2009) make reference to emerging technologies, such as wearable and augmented reality technology, as being a possible deterrent to some educators as they are very new and the process of implementing them is overwhelming for educators constantly inundated with new technology. Educators may have a difficult time keeping up with emerging technologies and thus may refrain from using the best possible technologies to augment blended learning (Kim et al., 2009).

Even without looking at the emerging technologies and only focusing on the abundance of technologies that have been used in recent history, utilizing what is already out there is daunting. Donnelly (2005) points out the importance of educators paying close attention to the online resources they are using to make sure that they connect successfully with the content of the course. Also, Schulte (2011) states that because quality control over the types of technology integrated into blended learning is so diverse it is difficult to ascertain the effectiveness of the technology to blended learning until after it has been used. There is a need for an evaluation tool
for emergent technologies in order to stabilize the abundance and diversity of the technologies available (Schulte, 2011).

Another concern with implementing blended learning is the importance of making sure that students have the skills required to participate in a blended learning environment (Donnelly, 2005). While most students have the ability to email, chat, and surf the web, they do not necessarily have the familiarity of using browsers, file-sharing, or office suites or other skills needed in order to connect and collaborate effectively online. These skills may need to be taught before a fully blended learning situation can be implemented (Donnelly, 2005). Assessing where students are in their ability to use technology is a key factor in making sure that the technologies being implemented in the classroom are effective. If students are not ready to use a particular technology, it is important that the educator ensures that the students have the skills to confidently use the technologies they need to achieve the tasks being asked of them.

For these reasons, it is important to assess students’ abilities of effective technology use. Furthermore, assessment of the pedagogical effectiveness in teaching and learning in a blended format is something that needs to be monitored to ensure cohesive and effective use of the technologies in blended learning (Zhang, 2009). He goes on to state that educators must examine the interactions students are having with the technologies presented in different learning environments, a task which can be time consuming and daunting. Zhang also states that “[t]ruly blended learning requires significant changes from both pedagogy and technology” (p. 157) and notes that it is important for educators to understand how students are learning in order to adjust or redefine their pedagogy to meet the varying needs of students today.

Zhang (2009) outlines another area of concern in that many online communication
technologies are not robust enough to support online collaborations and interactions, which can interfere with some aspects of a blended learning venue. Donelan, Kear, and Ramage (2012) concur that online collaboration often has issues such as students being suddenly logged off, too much information being put forward making it difficult to know who is saying what to whom, and lags in communication causing the effectiveness of the online environment to break down. Making sure that the communication technologies used are conducive to the learning environment, with as few problems as possible, is paramount to effective online communication. This can also be time consuming if there is the need to troubleshoot various difficulties that may arise while using the communication technology.

**Conclusion/Summary**

When taking on the task of implementing blended learning, it is important to be aware of the key issues that can affect the fluency of integrating blended learning. Educators need to implement well thought out design and have a good understanding of blended learning and its implications. Integration of the appropriate technology to enhance learning is vital. Educators also need to understand student ability/knowledge of using a digital platform for learning, otherwise doing many online activities simply won’t work. It is important to not only assess how, what, and where students are accessing technology, but to assess where the pedagogy of the educator toward blended learning and technology lies.

In summation, I have touched on many of the meanings of blended learning as well as the trends, benefits, and cautions needed to make it effective. I have also investigated online environments and their relationship to fostering a positive influence on reluctant writers, case studies performed in the area of writing, and online environments. Blended learning is not
without some confusion and uncertainty, but as it continues to grow within our education system, so too will a clarified understanding, definition and direction. If blended learning is to be used effectively, there needs to be a common understanding of how, what, and where the different modalities of blended learning are in order to take the best of what online learning has to offer as well as the best the face-to-face classroom has to offer.

Research on blended learning and online environments and the relationship to fostering a positive influence on reluctant writers is still in the early stages. Most of the studies have focused on the high school and post-secondary levels. There is not a lot of substantiated data at the elementary level to support the positive effects of the motivational benefits at this stage. However, the findings to date do suggest that there is a correlation between the use of online environments and motivation for reluctant writers.
Chapter 3: Procedures and Methods

Set-Up of the Project

Over the Christmas holidays, I had put together a Weebly site for a unit of study. The site was geared towards the grade three Aboriginal content. There were various activities housed within the Weebly site for the participants to complete over the course of the unit. Such activities included watching slideshows and videos about the Aboriginal ideals around symbolism and the meaning of animals in their culture and lives. I had also set up a Twiducate account to be used within this unit of study. The Twiducate site was primarily set up to further instill the importance of communication and to develop an understanding of how the written word can be used to relay feelings, thoughts, and a sense of belonging.

Body of the Project

In January 2014, I drafted a permission slip with background information for parents. The approved permission slip and backgrounder were then sent home to parents on January 9, 2014. The information included a rationale of why I wanted to use Weebly and Twiducate. The premise was for the users to experience another form of community through the use of the aforementioned sites to engage in discussions, share stories, and to contribute to each other’s ideas with the intent to motivate them to engage in writing. Once the permission slips were signed and returned to me, we worked in the computer lab for four sessions. We had a one hour session each week in the lab. I guided the users through the basics of the Weebly site. They were given approximately one week to familiarize themselves with the site at home and at school. There were two to three sessions per week where the users had direct contact with me. The
reasoning behind this was to lessen any anxieties around using the site so that they could focus on the exercises within the Weebly site. I then assigned each user a Weebly site to design. The users were given time with me to design their sites. Many of them also worked on their sites at home. The purpose of having the users create their own Weebly site was two-fold. Firstly, to enable them to “play” with their site to further facilitate confidence with using it. This enabled them to transition smoothly to the unit of study site. Secondly, to give them a sense of ownership of the content they shared on their site. This was done with the hopes that they would also have a sense of ownership of the content they shared on the unit of study site. The Twiducate site was then introduced near the end of April 2014 in much the same way as the Weebly site. I went over the basics of how to navigate the site and then the users went from there. I first allowed them to “play” with the Twiducate site to ensure that they were comfortable with how to navigate the site. I then posted directed questions for them to comment upon, such as what they liked and didn’t like about the Twiducate site. Throughout May and part of June the participants commented on the Twiducate site. The users also posted their “stories” from one of the activities on the Weebly site. All stories were written using Microsoft Word. They were informed that their stories would be posted on the Weebly site and read by their peers, their family, and me.

End of the Project

I will be compiling the findings of the writing samples results. I will also summarize the findings from the informal discussions I had with the participants during the use of the Weebly and Twiducate sites to ascertain their feelings toward using these online tools. Three of my colleagues will be viewing and commenting about the Weebly site in general and sharing whether or not they noticed an improvement in the quality of the users’ writing after viewing pre and post writing samples housed on the site. The comments will be added at the end of this paper.
in the Appendix A section. These results and recommendations will be included in the field/beta testing chapter in this process paper. In preparation for the peer review, I requested that my colleagues give their feedback via email.

I presented my published Weebly site for review from September 5 to September 20. A review of whether my colleagues thought that the Weebly site did indeed allow for expansion of the learning environment from the classroom to technology mediated online spaces can have a positive influence on reluctant writers in K-12 was requested. Feedback was gathered the second to last week of September. After the reviews were attained, I reviewed each response and combined them as one document which is attached as Appendix A. Further comments were shared on the picket line with my principal and a few colleagues on the line with me about online environments and their implications in our school. I will also include these discussions in the Beta and Field testing chapter. I did not request a review of the Twiducate site, as we did not have the opportunity to fully utilize the site, as a result the intention of the development of writing did not come to fruition.

Proposed Timeline of the Project

The proposed timeline was from January, 2014 through to September, 2014. The proposal will be presented to Lori Williams by the second or third week in July. The major project and process paper will be submitted to Lori Williams by the middle to end of September, 2014.
Chapter 4: Field/Beta Testing

Field and Beta Testing Methods and Processes

The project was not initially intended as the basis for this paper. However, after seeing the effects of using an online/blended learning approach with the users of this project, it was very clear that there was a good rationale behind the project for further investigation into expansion of the learning environment from the classroom to technology mediated spaces and its positive influence on reluctant writers in K-12.

In this chapter, findings will be documented through an analysis of writing samples of the users on the Weebly site and posts made on the Twiducate site. Furthermore, I will consider the overall feelings that the users showed toward using the sites and share my observations of their motivation to write in a blended/online format. Responses from three colleagues about the Weebly site in general and whether it promotes motivation to engage in the activities housed on it will also be shared. I will summarize my colleagues’ findings, after comparing the writing samples, with regard to whether or not they found that the users showed an improvement in the quality and quantity of writing. Also, I will include thoughts from discussions that I had with colleagues and my administrator around the use of Weebly and Twiducate in our school. The participants in this project spent some time with me and some time on their own, primarily at home, to complete the assignments on the Weebly site. One of the activities was to write a story about themselves as though they were sharing a part of their history. There were activities leading up to the story writing, which included learning about how animals and storytelling are important to Aboriginal life. The users were to make comments and communicate with each other and myself on the Twiducate site to foster written communication skills. 18, eight-year-old
users participated in the project. There was an even split of boys to girls. Some participants did not have functioning Internet or a computer at home. Those users spent most of their spare time with me to work on the Weebly site. Most of the users were either non-writers or reluctant writers. For the purpose of this paper, non-writers refer to those users who avoided writing anything at all unless someone was sitting next to them. Reluctant writers refer to those users who would only write a limited amount on their own. Most of the users were reluctant writers, while a few were non-writers.

**Results of Field and Beta Testing**

In regard to the writing samples on the Weebly site, most of the participants wrote at least twice as much and there was as much as five times the amount of detail. The writing quality of most of the users had greatly improved. Most of the participants showed greater sequencing in their Weebly writing sample over the previous paper and pen samples. Most of the participants showed a great amount of eagerness to get started on their stories. During the course of working on the Weebly site, I was amazed at how many participants were eager to use the sites to either work on an assignment or on their own Weebly site. As soon as there was some “free time,” quite a few users were asking if they could go on Weebly or work on their stories. I overheard users talking about the sites in excited tones. Some users would talk about what they wanted to write about for their stories while others shared what they wanted to include in their own Weebly sites. It was wonderful to see the participants working together on each other’s sites discussing what content was needed and sharing what they had done.

I was quite nervous about hearing responses from my colleagues about the Weebly site. When I received the responses, I was excited when I heard the positive responses to the Weebly
site from the colleagues who reviewed the site. I will give further details of each response in Chapter Five - Conclusions and Recommendations.

I received responses, via e-mail, from all four colleagues. These responses included many positive responses and two suggestions for improvement. I was elated to hear such wonderful positive feedback from my colleagues about the Weebly site in general. Overall, the comments were positive about the look of the Weebly site and the content therein. Some of the positive comments reported were, “What a lot of work you’ve put into this!!” and “Implementing Weebly into our educational programs will be of great benefit to our technology savvy learners!” (Biggs, T. as cited in Christensen, 2014). Another colleague responded with, “The first page has a friendly feeling that makes you want to look further into the site.” (Young, L. as cited in Christensen, 2014). A third colleague responded with, “After exploring all the various links, I found the site to be simple, straightforward, and easy to manage.” (Wallace, S. as cited in Christensen, 2014). I was also gratified to hear comments from my colleagues about the improved writing of the participants. “I saw huge improvements from the first to second write - impressive.” Further comments as to the writing samples included, “...I was amazed at the significant change/development in detail, sentence structure, punctuation between the writing samples of the (users) work- taking into account the variety of skill development for each individual. The confidence of these writers is noticeable and impressive.” (Biggs, T. as cited in Christensen, 2014). More encouraging comments about the writing samples were, “The second samples definitely show improvement in writing skills. The second written passages had more detailed sentences. The spelling was more accurate and the passages were longer.” (Young, L as cited in Christensen, 2014) and “...I was inspired by the marked improvement from pre to post...vocabulary, spelling, sentence structure, willingness to expand on ideas had progressed so

An informal discussion later took place amongst a few staff members about Weebly and a suggestion was made to have a professional development session that I would run to introduce Weebly to our staff. Our principal was present and indicated that it would be a great idea and that we will look into it as soon as we are back to work. I felt empowered and excited by the prospect of introducing this online environment to my staff as I believe, through my own experience with the users in this project, there is tremendous value in motivating young learners via online environments such as Weebly.

Recommendations from colleagues were that music should be added to the slideshows for an added “hook” and hold the participants’ attention. (Biggs, T., Young, L., and Wallace, S. as cited in Christensen, 2014). One comment was shared that the voice of the woman telling the story was “a bit scary” (Biggs, T. as cited in Christensen, 2014).

During the Twiducate activity, users were to post comments and respond to others’ posts. Most of the participants made at least two or more comments or posts. Some users posted many responses or comments. A few participants did not engage in the activity and did not make any posts. Most of the posts and comments were one or two word responses. This activity was just starting to be developed so the full impact of this activity was not realized given the short amount of time the users had to participate. Most of the participants were excited to continue to communicate with each other via the Twiducate sight. Some participants made comments to other users asking when they would be online to “chat” on Twiducate. Overall, I found that most of the users who participated in this activity were engaged and motivated to participate in the online communication that the Twiducate site had to offer. It will be interesting to realize the
full potential of using Twiducate in the coming year, as this was another site with which my colleagues were highly interested in finding more about and the possibility of using it with their students.
Chapter Five - Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

As technology has become more prevalent in schools, so too has the need for using that technology to facilitate engagement in writing. Ackerman (2006) states that students are more motivated to write through technology because they are engaged in a more meaningful venue through blogs and/or websites, which facilitate more authentic writing. As I was working on finding supportive material for my project, I realized just how little documentation there was at the early elementary ages. Most resources and documentations were at the high school or university level. In my experience as a primary school teacher, I know the importance of literacy at the early ages. The realization of how little research there was has made me even more cognizant of how important it is to continue to delve into the positive influences that online environments can have on reluctant writers in the K-12 environment.

After looking at the results of the expansion of the learning environment from the classroom to technology mediated spaces and its positive influence on reluctant writers in K-12, summarization of the findings of writing samples in Weebly, posts of the users on Twiducate, colleagues’ reviews of the writing samples, and the observations of the participants engaging in the online activities, this project has revealed an improvement in the writing of reluctant writers. It is evident in the amount of writing produced, especially on the Weebly site, that there was a marked improvement from all of the reluctant/non-writers. Overall, the participants improved substantially in spelling, grammar, and detail. Some of this improvement can be attributed to the use of Microsoft Word to compose their stories. However, knowing that their stories would be put on the Weebly site was also a driving force in the participants’ motivation to produce better
quality work. This was evident when most participants mentioned that they were excited about others seeing their work online and their eagerness to work on their stories. All of the colleagues who reviewed the Weebly site and the writing samples concurred that when they compared the writing samples, there was significant improvements in all areas of writing. As one colleague stated, “I think students are more motivated to write when using a computer. If they are poor handwriters they have less judgment about their printing skills and that allows them to be more creative and less inhibited. If spell check is available that is also very motivating to a young writer.” (Young, L. as cited in Christensen, 2014). My final conclusion about this project is that there is definitely a place for online environments in the K-12 educational setting, and that these environments can have a positive effect on motivating reluctant writers in K-12.

**Recommendations**

The recommendations for further development of the Weebly online environments, including both the individual sites and the one used for direct instruction of the group of participants, involve mainly allowing users more time to fully develop what this online environment has to offer. If the users had had more time to develop their own Weebly sites, they would have had more opportunity for adding more content. The blog page in the Weebly site, which housed the content for the unit of study, needs to be updated to be fully functional as it was not usable at the time of this activity. More time to fully utilize the blog page in this unit is also a recommendation. Adding music to the slideshows, as one colleague suggested is an improvement that would further encourage motivation for participants.

The Twiducate site would benefit from the users having more guided questions and comments to facilitate genuine and in-depth discussion. The time to fully delve into some
aspects of this project were limited, which made it difficult to fully realize the full potential of the positive role that online environments could have had on this group of users. In time, the use of the Twiducate site could have had a larger role in developing writing in online environments for this group of participants. Even though they had opportunities to “play” on the site, there needed to be more directed commentary that could have facilitated more in-depth thinking and writing.

The biggest recommendation that I find exciting is to share with staff and facilitate the use of Weebly and Twiducate sites within my own school. I find this to be a thrilling recommendation and a testament to the value of implementing online environments in the K-12 setting. I look forward to the challenge and the positive learning implications that this could have on our children. Another very important recommendation is the need for more research into online environments and their effect on enticing reluctant writers to become motivated to write.
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Appendix A – Twiducate Website

http://janecmastersproject.weebly.com/twiducate-site.html
Appendix B – First Nations Connections Website

This unit of study was geared towards our Aboriginal connections. I was not initially intended for my Masters' project, however, when I saw the progress the participants made in their writing within a couple of months, I was astounded. I wanted to know why, so I started to investigate blended learning and its motivational aspects with regards to writing. I have always known that more valuable experiences in writing are directly linked to experiences that make it meaningful to the writer. The research that I pursued helped to solidify my belief that better writing is directly related to the motivation to write.

Click the link to access Our Community Connections Weebly Site:  [http://janecmastersproject.weebly.com/weebly-site.html](http://janecmastersproject.weebly.com/weebly-site.html)