



The National Association for Media Literacy Education's  
Journal of Media Literacy Education 2:1 (2010) 23 - 36

## Using Blogs to Teach Strategies for Inquiry into the Construction of Lived and Text Worlds

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### Abstract

This paper describes a teacher-researcher collaboration aimed at teaching students strategies for inquiry into the constructed nature of lived and text worlds – a pedagogical objective consistent with goals of media literacy. As an introduction to these strategies, students were asked to engage in a commonly used media literacy tool – a blog – to explore the socially and culturally constructed aspects of their own lived worlds. As students blogged, they were also asked to examine the represented worlds in a literary text – *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee 1960). Research discussed in this paper examines the specific affordances of blogs for helping students acquire these new strategies for critical inquiry.

*Keywords:* Blogs, Literature Instruction, Digital Literacies, Media Literacy, High School Classrooms

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In recent years, scholars have called for an integrated approach to media literacy education, advising specifically that English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms incorporate a critical examination not only of traditional literary texts, but also of a wide variety of film, digital, and popular media texts (Beach 2007; Hobbs 2007; Scholes 1998). Likewise, scholars suggest that traditional literary texts, like any other text genre, would benefit from approaches to criticism that examine how they are constructed through signs, symbols, and images steeped in social and cultural discourses (Beach and Myers 2001). These calls for change to traditional ELA instruction are supported by the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE), which recommends that teachers engage students in “active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages that we receive and create,” recognizing that all messages are “constructed” (2007) and represent particular social and cultural situations or “worlds” (Beach and Myers 2001) that forward certain values and beliefs.

A key element in helping students understand texts and their messages is providing them with strategies for inquiry into the construction of all social and cultural worlds. The instructional goal of the teacher-researcher collaboration in this study was to teach stu-

dents these strategies by engaging them in a blogging project in which they explored the socially and culturally constructed aspects of their own lived worlds. As students blogged about their lived worlds, we encouraged them to examine the represented worlds in a traditional literary text – Lee’s (1960) *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Our research goal was to examine the usefulness of blogs – a digital media tool becoming prominent in ELA teachers’ instructional repertoires and key in students’ media literacy learning – for moving students toward an understanding of the constructed nature of text and lived worlds.

### **Pedagogical and Theoretical Background**

#### *Teaching Texts as Constructed*

Traditional ELA instruction privileges literature learning grounded in cultural literacy – or literature as a work of art or cultural artifact (Hirsch 1987) – and knowledge of literary conventions and “official” textual interpretations (Richards 1929). Such approaches are inadequate for a critical approach to textual analysis aligned with the tenets of media literacy education (NAMLE 2007) because they do not allow for a full consideration of how texts and their readers are shaped by socially and culturally constructed practices related to beliefs, attitudes, and norms (Beach, Thein, and Parks

2007; Beach 2000; Galda and Beach 2001; Smagorinsky and O'Donnell-Allen 1998; Sumara 2002a, 2002b). Moreover, Beach and Myers (2001) argue that if students perceive texts as static artifacts, they are likely to see the worlds represented in those texts as fixed entities rather than fluid constructions open to critical interrogation.

Beach and Myers's (2001) model of inquiry based English instruction was chosen for the instructional unit in this study because it was designed to help students understand the constructed nature of lived and text worlds and to critique the messages they forward. The model is based on the notion that all people participate in multiple, often-competing social worlds in their daily lives – worlds of family, school, athletic teams, religious groups, and peer groups, for instance. These worlds are constructed – that is, rather than assuming that social worlds are naturally occurring or static, this model emphasizes that social worlds continually shift and are reconstructed as roles, relationships, values, beliefs, and norms evolve over time. Another key idea behind Beach and Myers's model is that no person has one fixed or static identity, but rather, identities change given involvement in various social worlds. Beach and Myers explain, "As we participate in multiple social worlds, our possible identities become mixed, limited, expanded, or even contested in each world" (2). Teaching literature through this pedagogical model is fundamentally different from prevalent models because it asks students to interpret texts not as pathways toward banking (Freire 1970) static, universal meanings, but rather as representations of fluid social worlds that advance messages that are open to critique and transformation.

Beach and Myers's model is based on six inquiry strategies (Table 1), each requiring close examination and critique of the social world in question.

Table 1: *Strategies for Inquiry into Social Worlds (from Beach and Meyers 2001, 17-18)*

<b>Inquiry Strategy</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Immersing	Entering into the activities of a social world, experiencing the social world as a participant, or observing the social world.
Identifying	Defining concerns, issues, and dilemmas that arise in a social world, or from conflict across multiple social worlds.
Contextualizing	Explaining how the activities, symbols, and texts used in one or more social worlds produce the components of a social world – identities, roles, relationships, expectations, norms, beliefs, and values.
Representing	Using symbolic tools to create a text that represents a lived social world or responds to a represented social world.
Critiquing	Analyzing how a representation of a social world privileges particular values and beliefs; analyzing how particular literacy practices within a social world promote certain meanings while marginalizing other possibilities.
Transforming	Revising one's meanings for the components of a social world, changing one's actions and words within a social world to construct more desirable identities, relationships, and values.

In this study we chose to use blogs as a vehicle for introducing students to these strategies and to the larger ideas that Beach and Myers advance because blogs as a genre of communication are conducive to understanding social worlds as constructed, fluid, and transformative.

### *Blogs as Conducive to Inquiry into Social Worlds*

Scholarly work on the use of blogs in literacy classrooms indicates that blogging has a number of benefits including increasing students' engagement in reading and writing (Boling, Castek, Zawilinski, Barton, and Nierlich 2008; Witte 2007), preparing

students for digital literacies and forms of communication they will use in the future (Beach 2007; Lank-shear and Knobel 2003; Zawilinski 2009), and allowing students to experiment with alternative identities (Taricani 2008; West 2008). Building from this past research our interest in blogs is related specifically to the qualities of blogging as a particular genre of communication – in terms of audience and purpose (Bazerman and Prior 2004) – that make it well-suited for inquiry into the constructed nature of social worlds.

A weblog or a blog is a public webpage that can be edited over time, displaying posts in reverse chronological order. At first glance, a blog may seem simply like a diary or journal written in a digital forum (Utecht 2007), however a closer look reveals unique qualities of blogging as a literacy practice and as a written genre that align with the goals of inquiry into the construction of social worlds (Beach and Myers 2001).

### *Blogs as documentary spaces*

Rather than understanding blogs simply as on-line personal diaries or as objective non-fiction, blogs might more accurately be compared to documentary given that a blog, like a documentary, “is understood to be a view about the world that is evidentiary, representational and argumentative” (Miles 2005, 68). Miles used the term *everydayness* to describe how both blogs and documentaries use quotidian detail to create particular representations of lived worlds. Although some of the major criticisms of blogs center on bloggers as focused on the mundane and unremarkable details of their own lives (Cohen 2006), it is precisely this level of detail one must observe and document in order to understand how rules, norms, roles, and relationships function to construct social and text worlds and the messages they forward .

### *Blogs as spaces for authentic audience*

A key feature of blogs distinct from other online genres often used in educational settings (e.g. email, Blackboard) is that they are public and provide an authentic audience for student writing (Leu, Leu, and Coiro 2004). Further, the audience that one writes for in a blog is ambiguous – one is never sure for whom, if anyone, he or she is writing (Cohen 2006). Consequently, although blogs are spaces for documentation and reflection on the everyday, making them somewhat akin to personal diaries, they are simultaneously similar to public essays, editorial commentary, or speeches given the possibility that they will be read

by others. These qualities make blogs useful spaces for students to be both personally reflective about the perspectives they hold relative to the social worlds they inhabit and also cognizant of alternative perspectives of others who might be reading their blogs.

### *Blogs as spaces for dialogic discussion*

Although blogging is a form of writing, blogs are perhaps better understood as conversations given the ability for dialogue through the comments feature. As Utecht (2007) explained, “The power of blogging comes from conversation threads that can be carried on within them...When blogs are viewed as vehicles for dialogue...they are no longer journal assignments, they are thoughtful discussions” (32-33). Likewise, Wang and Hsua (2008) pointed out that conversation threads in blogs can stimulate cognitive conflict and experimentation with alternative perspectives (81-82). The potential for dialogic conversation and conflict inherent in the genre of blogging makes blogs useful spaces for challenging static understandings of beliefs, rules, and norms used to construct social worlds.

Because blogging as a genre aligns in many ways with the goals of understanding social and cultural worlds as constructed, fluid spaces, we saw them as a logical space for teaching students an inquiry based approach to understanding lived and text worlds. This paper documents how this unit was implemented and presents data that speak to both the effectiveness of blogs for teaching students this approach and the usefulness of this approach in helping students understand the constructed nature of social worlds in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

## **Method**

### *Context*

Research for this paper took place in one 10th grade honors level English class at Creekside<sup>1</sup> Junior/ Senior High School, a school that serves two primarily white, middle and working class communities five miles outside of a large “rust belt” city. Amanda was a researcher and participant observer in the classroom (Graue and Walsh 1998; Spradley 1980). Tim and DeAnn were both doctoral students at the time of the study. Tim was a graduate student assistant on this project. DeAnn was the classroom teacher.

<sup>1</sup> All places and names of participants are pseudonyms.

### Participants

Participants included all 13 students enrolled in the course. Five were male and eight were female. All were white and ranged in social class from upper middle to working class.

### Background on the Project

The project began with several days of class discussion in which students attempted to define social worlds and in which DeAnn provided students with background on Beach and Myers's (2001) approach to inquiry into social worlds. Next, students were given instructions for the blogging project (Appendix A). Over the course of the project, each student was asked to write nine entries in his or her blog about a lived social world of his or her choosing. A prompt was assigned for each blog entry, typically asking students to use one of Beach and Myers's inquiry strategies to think about their social worlds. Students were also required to post comments on their peers' blogs. As students moved through this blogging project, they began a unit on *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Assignments and classroom discussion surrounding the novel encouraged students to examine how social worlds functioned in the represented world of this novel.

### Data

Data for this paper included all student blog entries and transcripts of five audio-recorded class sessions related to *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Our primary focus in these transcripts was on two days in which students participated in whole class discussions of the novel.

### Coding and Analysis

This study was driven by qualitative, interpretive methods designed to build theory and delve into variability rather than to test theory or make broad generalizations (Graue and Walsh 1998). The blog data were read and coded for evidence of students' understandings of the basic tenets of lived worlds as socially constructed (drawing on Beach and Myers 2001). We found that students demonstrated four key understandings of social worlds: 1) social worlds are constructed and fluid, 2) identities are fluid within and across social worlds, 3) norms, beliefs, and perspectives are shaped by participation in social worlds, and 4) tensions occur as individuals move across social worlds. Next, using open-coding (Corbin and Strauss 2007), the blog data were read for particularities in how students used specific affordances of the genre of blogging to gain under-

standings of social worlds. We found that students used the blogs in three prominent ways including: 1) as spaces for documenting details of life, 2) as spaces for audience-aware writing, and 3) as spaces for expressing and reconsidering beliefs. Then, we juxtaposed data on students' burgeoning understandings of social worlds with their particular uses of blogs in order to make sense of ways that blogging as a genre aided students in developing understandings of social worlds. We constructed case studies of three students who together represented the range of ways that students in this class understood and blogged about social worlds. Furthermore, students selected for the three case studies represented diversity in social positions, levels of classroom participation, and overall engagement in the class. Finally, we turned to our classroom discussion data, this time reading and coding for evidence of students' understandings of the basic tenets of text worlds as socially constructed. We found two trends in this data, both of which were consistent with the trends found in the blogs – students understood 1) identity as fluid and shifting across roles in various social worlds, and 2) social worlds as constructed based on specific rules and norms to which insiders are privy and new members must learn.

## Findings

### Beginning the Project

Before beginning work on their blogs and discussion of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, DeAnn asked students to consider what is meant by the term social world. Students' responses illustrated that they understood social worlds to be based on similarities and differences between people, linked to insider and outside status, and to impact how people and characters are treated by others. However, their responses also demonstrated that they understood social worlds as insular and dichotomously positioned with respect to other social worlds. For instance, one student equated social worlds with social classes, which she defined as static rather than fluid or nuanced. Students also depicted membership in social worlds as fixed – one might be a member of one social world or another, but not two at the same time. As one student stated, social worlds are “groups of people that are separated based on their differences from the larger group.” This definition suggests that social worlds are factions of people who do not fit with the large group norm and therefore form their own groups. Similarly, another student likened social worlds to cliques and emphasized the notion that one is either an insider or an outsider and

is treated in particular ways by others as a result. She explained that social worlds are “the way of life of individuals who are in a clique and how people in a group interact with one another and the people outside.”

Overall, students were able to identify social worlds, but lacked nuanced understandings of how such worlds are constructed and how *all* social worlds (including those that they perceive to be “normal”) forward particular values and messages that create tensions for individuals who participate across multiple worlds. The case studies in the section that follows demonstrate some of the ways that blogging helped students to develop more sophisticated understandings of social worlds.

### Case Studies of Students' Blogging Experiences

#### Monica: documentary blogging

Monica was a white working-class student who was reserved in class discussions and seemed to have little social power in the school in general. An important aspect of Monica's out-of-school life was her family's restaurant, which she chose as her social world for the blogging project. Despite the reserve Monica demonstrated in class and in school in general, she was an active participant in the blogging assignment.

Audience and dialogue did not seem to be significant factors in Monica's blog. Although a few of her classmates posted surface level comments agreeing or sympathizing with her sentiments (for example, Dana wrote, “I really liked reading your blog . . . I can kind of sympathize with you when you are saying that you are the youngest and it stinks”), Monica did not respond to or take up these ideas in subsequent blogs. However, Monica is an example of a student who used the blog as a space for documenting the quotidian details of life in her social world (Miles 2005). By documenting the everyday details of work in her family restaurant Monica was able to contextualize (Beach and Myers 2001) her identity within that social world, as the following excerpt illustrates.

*One role I take in my social world is pseudo-waitress. I'm not actually a waitress, but that only means that I don't take orders. I do everything else that a waitress would do. The only reason I'm not a waitress is that in the back (kitchen) they use a specialized short-hand that they have been using for about 30 years... I don't like having to act as a waitress but people assume that I am one and get all “why is that waitress ignoring us?” I'm not ignoring them, I'm doing my job by doing something*

*else, like getting drinks, clearing a table, or washing dishes. Which brings me to my next role, as a dishwasher. I wash every cup, glass, bowl, and small plate that passes through that restaurant from 8:30 to when we close at 1. It may not seem like a lot, but...that is a whole lot of dishes. And it makes my hands all dry and old looking which is really unfortunate.*

By detailing what she and others did (or did not do) at the restaurant Monica was able to identify her role as one of “pseudo-waitress.” For instance, Monica noticed that waitresses perform a learned, long-standing shorthand to which she was not privy. She also identified a discrepancy between what customers expected of her as a waitress (that she would talk with them and take their orders) and what her relatives expected of her role in dealing with customers (that she would only interact with them by quietly bussing tables) – a discrepancy that led her to see herself as not-quite-a-waitress. Finally, Monica identified herself as a pseudo-waitress by noticing that she was expected to fulfill a task that is not expected of full-fledged waitresses – washing dishes. By noticing the roles and expectations of various restaurant staff, Monica was contextualizing identities as they were constructed in the social world of this particular restaurant – a key aspect of understanding how social worlds are constructed.

In documenting the details of everyday work in her family's restaurant, Monica was also able to contextualize this restaurant as a particular kind of restaurant – a family restaurant where home issues intersect with work. In the following excerpt, Monica relayed incidents that highlight the fluidity between her family world and work world. In noticing this overlap and the subsequent tensions that arise, Monica was able to critique (Beach and Myers 2001) norms within this social world.

*Now most family environments are happy and relatively drama free. However this is rarely the case at work...Even the smallest thing, such as ONE order being messed up, dropping a piece of toast, not writing on the check that it's a “to go” order, can mess up the entire day...all of this is going on while we have paying customers, many of whom we have known for most of my life, sitting mere feet from us while we bicker. Sometime the customers join in, which can also end disastrously.*

Although many restaurant managers might frown upon the mishaps that Monica described, in this case Monica connected these mishaps directly to family bickering –

a practice not seen in other kinds of restaurants. Further she noticed that the long-standing customers played a specific kind of role in this family drama – joining in on this bickering as customers rarely do in other kinds of restaurants. By identifying these specific practices, Monica was able to critique this social world – noticing that family and customer bickering often “ends disastrously.”

By using her blog as a space to document and contextualize practices within the social world of her family restaurant, Monica was able to critique issues, roles, and norms that impacted the functioning of this social world.

#### *Nina: audience-aware blogging*

Nina was a white, middle-class student who was interested in art, literature, and writing. She was eager to read the assigned books in the course and was an active participant in class activities. An aspiring writer, Nina immersed herself in the blogging assignment both as a vehicle for showcasing her writing ability to her audience and for reflecting on a personal issue – the tensions in identity she felt in moving between her day-to-day social worlds and those of her conservative, religious, upper-middle class relatives. Nina frequently addressed her audience directly and received more comments on her blog than any other student in the class – comments that primarily praised and encouraged Nina’s writing ability, style, and humor. For instance, Genna, another student in the class, responded to Nina’s blog,

*So your blog is probably the most amazing thing I’ve ever read . . . I also think it’s really nice how respectful you are of their [Nina’s relatives] religion and politics and such, because depending on who I’m with it’s really hard to bite my tongue . . . please continue you awesome blogs!*

Nina’s blog demonstrates how a blog can evoke both deep reflection – akin to diary writing, and a high level of audience awareness – similar to that of editorial column writing (Cohen 2006). Nina’s blog was personal and reflective in that she explored her feelings about her place within her relatives’ social world. At the same time, Nina’s awareness of her audience was illustrated by her careful, positive characterization of her relatives and her rhetorical reminders to her audience that she saw her relatives as good people despite the discomfort she often felt with their beliefs. Writing within this unique genre of a blog seemed productive for Nina in developing an understanding of social worlds as constructed because by being both personally reflective and careful in her characterization of her relatives Nina identified

social and institutional reasons for differences in her beliefs and those of her relatives rather than attributing those differences to individual, intrinsic characteristics.

In the excerpt that follows, Nina wrote about differences between her own and her relatives’ political beliefs. In considering these differences Nina identified ways that social and institutional factors shaped these beliefs.

*My position in a lot of arguments is that of the dissenter, but I don’t give too much away. No offense, but to them, the Bush administration has been good to them. They haven’t felt the hardships that a lot of the families have had to face under him. . . They have felt his tax cuts and got to keep most their money, and so thus, they’re sold on his policies. It’s disturbing how big a factor money can have on someone. My parents have suffered, a lot of people have suffered under this administration, my mother is still paying off surgery she got in September, a surgery she needed badly, but our insurance wouldn’t cover it. . . But they don’t see that. They don’t see what most of the country faces. They are in their little bubble and trust me, when people feel safe, the last thing you want to do is pop that bubble.*

It is notable in this excerpt that although Nina clearly disagreed with her relatives’ political beliefs, she both pointed out that she did not mean to offend them (“no offense. . .”) and she took care not to characterize her relatives as individually misguided for holding these beliefs. Instead, she identified how social and systemic factors, rather than individual differences, shaped these beliefs and created logical, socially constructed reasons for her relatives to hold the beliefs that they did and for her immediate family to feel differently. Connecting beliefs to social and institutional influences is central to understanding how social worlds are constructed. For Nina, this understanding came about as she negotiated her personal issues with her relatives in a space with an ambiguous audience.

As Nina began to understand the social and systemic ways that beliefs are constructed within social worlds, she also identified and critiqued (Beach and Myers 2001) ways in which her own identity shifted across her various social worlds. Like other bloggers in Nina’s age group, blogging seemed a practice conducive to Nina’s de-centering and reconstructing of her identity (Taricani 2008; West 2008). As Nina explored the complexity of her own identity within her relatives’ world, she positioned herself

not in staunch opposition to her relatives, but rather as conflicted about how she constructed her identity in this world. The following excerpt in which Nina discussed religious beliefs illustrates this point.

*I don't agree with my [relatives] in case you haven't noticed. But they don't necessarily know I don't agree because I don't want to upset them or make them think differently of me. But the fact that I don't make my beliefs public to them makes me feel like a coward, and makes me feel like I'm lying to them... I HATE THAT I HAVE THESE THOUGHTS! I hate that it is a wedge between me and them. I hate how religion can do that, how beliefs can do that. I feel guilty because they treat me so dang well, and are probably the most awesome group of people EVER. And yet I still feel this way toward their religion and everything.*

Nina began this excerpt by expressing an awareness of how her audience might interpret her blog (“in case you haven’t noticed...”). This awareness seemed to provide Nina with an impetus for explaining her conflicted position in more detail and with more nuance. Nina’s writing in this excerpt demonstrates the tension she felt between loving her relatives and strongly disagreeing with their beliefs. In exploring this tension, Nina acknowledged the conflict she felt in her identity positioning in this social world. Here Nina gained an understanding of identity as performed within the context of beliefs, rules, and norms of particular social worlds and as shifting across various social worlds.

For Nina, the social worlds blog served as a space that productively supported both personal and audience-aware writing. Nina ultimately gained an understanding of beliefs as constructed within social worlds based on social and systemic factors. This understanding led Nina to examine the tensions she felt in her own identity positioning and facilitated her understanding of the fluidity of identity across various social worlds.

#### *Kevin: Expressing and reconsidering beliefs through blogging*

Kevin was a white middle class student who, like Monica, was reserved in class and reticent to speak even when called upon. Kevin seemed to have little social power in the school at large and little interest in socializing with his peers. Kevin was from a deeply religious, Roman Catholic family – his religious faith was very important to him and he chose to write about the social world of his church for the blogging project.

Kevin is an example of a student who was initially resistant to the notion of lived worlds as socially constructed – in fact, Kevin was often resistant to ideas DeAnn presented in class on the whole. In classroom settings Kevin typically displayed this resistance by disconnecting with discussion and becoming silent. However, as previous scholarship suggests (Witte 2007), in spite of Kevin’s resistant stance to classroom activities, he was highly engaged in the blogging assignment both because it allowed him to use a technology he appreciated and because it allowed him to discuss an issue of his choosing that is rarely discussed in schools – his religious background. Although Kevin did not initially engage with the concept of inquiry into social worlds, his engagement with the blogging assignment in general and his dialogic responses to comments made by his peers ultimately led him to acknowledge ways that the social world of his church was less static and universal than he had originally presumed.

Initially, Kevin’s blog read like a personal journal, chiefly serving to reinforce his beliefs as universally correct and his identity as intrinsic and static. For instance, in the following excerpt, Kevin wrote about the solidity of his identity based on his religious beliefs.

*The identity I presume in my church social world is one of a lowly follower. As the Bible says, I am a sheep that is watched over by God. There is not really another identity I can take in this social world... I think that there is no real identity anyone has but to be a follower of the church's beliefs and to be a humble human being... that is what I was brought up to believe and that's what I am going to stick with.*

In this entry Kevin used the rhetoric of the church (“lowly follower,” “sheep watched over by God,” and “humble human being”) to resist the notion that his or any of his fellow parishioners’ identities might be anything but static, or that church communities are in any way hierarchically-structured based on socially constructed beliefs, norms, roles, and expectations. The resistant stance that Kevin took toward inquiring into his church world as a socially constructed space is logical given that church communities are often built upon the notion of the universality of their beliefs and identities as well as the notion of being “called” to rather than choosing positions of power.

Despite Kevin’s resistant stance to inquiry into social worlds, the blog itself was engaging for Kevin in ways that school typically was not. This engagement led

Kevin to participate actively in the assignment even when faced with comments from his peers that were challenging and dialogic rather than simply complimentary (as were comments on Nina's blog), or superficial (as were comments on Monica's blog). For instance, Dan wrote:

*I disagree that there are not many tensions . . . Tensions between different religions and different beliefs. Tensions between religion and people who do not believe in a God. Tensions when you are made fun of for going to church or for what you believe in. Also, I think there are tensions within ourselves, at least me, about exactly what I believe in.*

Subsequently, Kevin wrote about tensions he felt between the teachings of his church and those of his school.

*My religious belief is challenged almost every day at school... There is a conflict in my brain about evolution theory... On some days the evolution theory actually makes sense then on other days I believe the beliefs of my church which is creationism. The things I am taught in school and the things I am taught in church are very hard because the evolution theory has evidence behind it and the things I learn at church do not have evidence. You have to believe. My beliefs in the church are strong and I will probably never give up my faith even though there are struggles everyday.*

In contrast to the previous excerpt, in this blog entry Kevin not only noticed tensions between the beliefs forwarded by school and those forwarded by his church, but he also acknowledged that his own stance on these beliefs was often conflicted. Further, Kevin differentiated between beliefs based on scientific evidence and those based on faith, implying that one might be able to hold contradictory beliefs simultaneously if one is able to understand how beliefs are framed through different paradigms. Understanding that tensions exist between beliefs based on the paradigms that inform those beliefs is critical to understanding worlds as socially constructed. And, acknowledging the conflict that one experience among various sets of beliefs while imagining that one might live with that conflict is a means of understanding identity as fluid and contradictory.

Although Kevin initially used his blog as a personal journal that served to reinforce his status quo beliefs and solidify his identity, his high level of engagement with the blog and challenging feedback from his peers led him to notice tensions between his church world and others, as well

as conflicts in his own identity and belief system.

### *Inquiring into Text Worlds*

As students blogged about social worlds in their lived experiences, DeAnn guided them in instruction on *To Kill a Mockingbird*. She focused instruction on the same inquiry strategies used in the blogs, using discussion prompts aligned with students' blog prompts to evoke consideration of social worlds in the novel. Students' discussions of literature in the classroom demonstrated their awareness of identity as fluid and shifting across roles in various social worlds. And, they understood social worlds as constructed based on specific rules and norms to which insiders are privy and new members must learn. For instance, in response to DeAnn's prompt for students to examine the competing social worlds of characters in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, students expressed awareness of characters' shifting identities (in this case, Calpurnia, the Finches' African-American housekeeper in *To Kill a Mockingbird*).

Trista: There's a huge difference between like her [Calpurnia's] church and when she's at Finch's household and when she's at church she like almost dumbs herself down but like and she tries to like talk to everyone else in her neighborhood and then when she's like at the household like the Finch's she like she can be like her intelligent self and not like try to fit in with all the neighbors and she kinda like has to change everything so that she can fit in with her neighbors and with the Finch's...

Jenny: I think like instead of changing herself when she's at home that she probably changes herself more when she's at the Finch's because like she seems like she's a strong woman- she probably has a good home life and at her church that's when she wanted the Finch's to impress them. You know? She didn't want them to be impressed by the Finches but she had them go and take baths and so they made it seem more like her home world was the world that she cared more about.

In this exchange, Trista and Jenny on the one hand imply that they still see Calpurnia as having one "true" identity by suggesting that she is "herself" in one social world and has to change to fit into another. However, the fact that they disagree about which of her identities is her true identity in and of itself illumi-

nates students' grappling with the fluidity of identity. This exchange also demonstrates that these two students learned to identify differences in how Calpurnia behaves and positions herself based on the competing demands of these two social worlds. For instance, although Trista drew on stereotypes related to African-American Vernacular English and Standard English, it is nonetheless significant that she noticed a difference in Calpurnia's speech patterns across the social worlds of the Finches' house and the church community. Likewise, Jenny noticed that Calpurnia held the children to different standards of cleanliness when she took them to her church than were typical on a day-to-day basis at the Finch house. In both cases these two students noticed how Calpurnia positioned herself differently based on rules and norms in each social world.

In another discussion, DeAnn asked students to consider how outsiders come to recognize the social worlds in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In responding to this prompt, students demonstrated an understanding that social worlds do not just naturally exist, but are instead constructed based on rules, norms, and values. In the following excerpt, Ted offered an explanation for why a new teacher from another town did not understand why she should not have given lunch money to Walter Cunningham, a child from a working poor family.

Ted: Well like in school the teacher, at least in the beginning the teacher hasn't met any of them – has no idea about the areas of town and they all have to tell the teacher you know alright you can't do that, he's a whatever he is-

DeAnn: A Cunningham.

Ted: Yeah, and the teacher has to be educated as to how their social worlds are outside of school.

Ted argued that the reason the teacher made the mistake of offering Walter Cunningham lunch money was that she did not understand the "areas of town" and therefore did not understand what it meant to be a Cunningham. In other words, Ted was conscious of the fact that Walter's refusal to accept lunch money could not simply be attributed to individualistic beliefs of his family, but rather was also linked to beliefs that were constructed based on the geographic and socioeconomic positioning of the Cunninghams and families like the Cunninghams relative to others kinds of families within the town of Maycomb. Additionally, rather than suggesting that the teacher simply needed to get to know the beliefs and norms of her individual students, Ted sug-

gested that she needed to learn about the social worlds of the town more generally in order to understand the roles people took on and the beliefs people held. Taken as a whole, Ted's analysis of this textual situation suggests that he understood social worlds to be constructed based on specific social and cultural norms, rules, expectations, and roles that newcomers must learn in order to successfully navigate those worlds.

### Discussion and Implications

Our data demonstrate that the blogging project aided students in understanding their lived worlds as socially constructed and their identities as fluid and shifting across those worlds. Further, we found that specific aspects of the genre of blogging aided students in inquiry into their social worlds. The documentary nature of blogging enabled Monica to detail the everyday work and atmosphere of the social world of her family restaurant and to contextualize and critique roles and identities within that social world. The ambiguity of audience intrinsic in blogging allowed Nina to explore her conflicted identity across social worlds while simultaneously considering alternative perspectives that may be held by her relatives or her readers. Finally, Kevin initially used his blog as a personal diary for solidifying his status quo beliefs, but ultimately took up conversational and dialogic aspects of blogging by considering challenging comments made by his peers and noticing tensions within his social worlds and his identity.

Our data also suggest that understandings of social worlds gained through blogging encouraged students to think more critically about social worlds in a literary text. Specifically, students noticed worlds of texts as constructed based on rules and norms, and identity as fluid and shifting across those worlds. This is promising in terms of making sense of how one digital media tool can enhance students' ability to critically examine literary texts. Further, we argue that strategies acquired by students in this project have the potential to help students see texts themselves – in all forms – as constructed, a primary goal of media literacy education (NAMLE 2007). For instance students might use these inquiry strategies to identify the social worlds represented in a particular advertising campaign and to consider how the campaign's message is constructed to appeal to the norms, values, and beliefs of people participating in similar lived worlds. Then, students might consider the merits of such a campaign, voicing constructive critiques and imagining transformations of the message.

Teachers in all disciplines might think more broadly and purposefully about digital media tools that advance students' acquisition of critical media literacy practices. In the current study blogs provided specific affordances that other more traditional tools of ELA instruction might not have enabled. Audience awareness intrinsic to blogging encouraged Nina to consider the perspectives of her readers – a consideration that a traditional journal assignment, for instance, would not have afforded because of the narrow scope of the audience and limited opportunity for dialogism in such as assignment. As teachers continue to look for ways to engage students in critical thinking skills necessary to be media literate citizens they might consider other digital media tools that would logically aide in this process. Wiki pages and other collaborative workspaces for example, may have the potential to engage students in the kind of substantive, authentic discussion that rarely happens in traditional classroom settings (Nystrand and Gamoran 1991) given time constraints, social dynamics, and power hierarchies among teachers and students.

As we have reflected on the project we have considered ways in which we could maximize utilization of blogs to further advance critical textual understandings. Students' critical thinking skills could be enhanced by exposure to specific strategies for more dialogically challenging and questioning each other's assumptions through the comments feature of the blog. Doing so would enable students to develop a more finely honed ability to critique messages, values, and norms forwarded within specific social worlds. Kevin's classmates' use of the comments feature had a major impact on his blogging experience, encouraging him to re-examine and question his beliefs and to gain new understandings of his own social world as constructed and fluid. However, most comments on other students' blogs in this project were characterized by surface-level agreement and support, or digression from the initial blog (see Appendix B). Similarly, there was very little dialogue between students who commented on a given blog or between those students and the author of the blog. Utecht (2009) recommends teaching students explicit differences between simply complimenting others on their blog posts and making substantive comments that move conversations forward. Zawalinski (2009) suggests using tools such as a *synthesis scaffold* – which helps students to make meaning of comments made in reference to a specific blog post and develop new ideas that draw upon that synthesis – to teach students how to respond dialogically to comments made

about their blogs. Increasing dialogism in students' interactions would more fully leverage the potential of blogs toward helping students question norms, beliefs and values forwarded within lived and text worlds.

Additionally, although we used the blog to teach students strategies for inquiry into the constructed nature of literary texts, we did not use the blog for discussion of the text itself. We did see an increase in students' understandings of the socially constructed aspects of social worlds represented in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but we believe use of blogs to discuss this text might have led students to even greater understandings of social worlds in this text given our finding that the generic elements of blogs were useful for students in locating constructed aspects of their lived social worlds.

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## Appendix A

### *Instruction for Blogging Project*

#### **General Expectations**

This website has been developed for the purpose of allowing you a space to blog about your lived social worlds. When using this forum, you should feel comfortable expressing yourself freely. Do not feel the need to submit or be constrained by the type of writing you would do for an essay. You should allow yourself some “stream of consciousness” writing. However, you do need to remember that this blog is for class and, therefore, your language and word choice should be appropriate for school.

#### **A Deeper Examination of One Lived Social World through Blogging**

While we read *To Kill a Mockingbird* and engage in discussions and activities related to the novel, you will complete an ongoing assignment in which you analyze one of your social worlds. This assignment will entail observing your lived social world and keeping a blog about this social world using the journal prompts/questions as a guide for this writing.

**Step One:** Choose a lived social world that you would like to examine more closely. This social world should be one that you actively participate in on a regular basis.

**Step Two:** After choosing a social world, over the course of the reading of the novel, maintain a blog in which you write about/answer the following prompts/questions:

1. Describe the social world.
2. As a member of this social world, define the concerns, issues, or dilemmas.
3. Describe the practices of this social world.
4. Describe the roles/identities you take up in this social world.
5. Describe the rules/norms of this social world.
6. Describe the beliefs of this social world.
7. Describe your positioning in this social world.
8. What values and beliefs are privileged in this social world?
9. What tensions arise for you as a member of this social world?

Your blog should include as much detail as possible in order to adequately answer each question. It is expected that you will have one journal entry for each prompt/question, with a total of nine entries at the conclusion of the reading of the novel. Your blog will be checked three times to make sure you are making adequate progress.

**Step Three:** For each posting you contribute to the blog, you also need to respond to/build on a classmate’s blog posting.

**Step Four:** Be ready to share your analysis of your social world with the class.

### Appendix B

#### *Summary of Students' Comments on their Peers' Blogs*

<b>Type of comment</b>	<b>Example</b>	<b>Number of comments per category</b>	<b>Percent relative to total number of student comments (210)</b>
Surface-level Agreement, Sympathy, or Comparison/Contrast	"I know exactly what you mean when there is automatic hierarchy in your family. Every family has it. It usually is based on age, which makes total sense. It would be so weird if my little sister was higher up on 'the scale' than me."	75	35.7%
Taking up Blog Post to Develop an Original Idea	"As a fellow "new" kid, I find that I relate well to how you speak of the situation. When I first came here, everybody wanted to know everything about me because it was "new." And then, it wore off, and I got kicked out of that popular group. That's how the system is designed to be. Public school is not meant to be a place to be unique. The uniqueness comes secondary, as a result of the different types of people present in the environment."	57	27.1%
Supporting/Encouraging	"I definitely enjoyed reading your blogs. They could be the most boring thing in the world and you can make them worth reading!"	42	20.0%
Questioning/Challenging	"In reference to evolution, you say that you have a hard time believing what you are taught in church because it conflicts so much with evolution. Have you ever considered a more scientific view to Christianity?"	26	12.4%
Asking for Clarification or Elaboration	"I thought it was interesting that you addressed the social worlds within sports because that is a major part of most students' lives. Maybe you could later discuss issues like if this is a liability or an asset to a team, or some strange combination of both."	2	1.0%
Misc.	Off task comments, jokes, etc.	8	4.0%