

Blogging the Novel

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Blogging Our Way into a Novel Study Unit

BY KONRAD GLOGOWSKI

Blogs, also known as weblogs, appealed to me as a teacher of language arts because of their potential use as electronic writing journals. They offered the possibility of providing each student with an easy-to-use online writing journal or electronic portfolio. I decided to use them in my Grade 8 Language Arts class to promote engagement and ownership. In addition to having their own iblogs, the students had access to the blogs of all their classmates and could comment on the work of their peers by posting a response to a specific entry on an individual blog. As a teacher and a researcher, I was interested in the impact of blogging on the emergence of competent and literate modes of thinking and communicating in a senior elementary school classroom.

The following series of interactions is one of many that ensued within the class blogging community. Much like many other virtual conversations in the community, it emerged in response to a single entry written about *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank, one of three texts we had been discussing in class.

In one of her first entries on Anne Frank's diary, Vanessa shows that, in addition to using her own blog to record her thoughts, she is an active reader who visits other blogs and responds to her classmates:

Many people often talk about how Anne had a very different personality portrayed on the inside than the outside however I have a point to make. [...] Throughout the beginning of this diary, and actually almost the entire diary, Anne constantly was trying to find her identity. She was always trying to judge herself, and comment on all the remarks shot at her. Was she really selfish? Was she really immature? [...] If you were stuck inside a room, hiding from almost everyone out there, wouldn't you start to wonder why EVERYONE seems to hate you? Then, when your mother and 'friends' constantly criticize you, wouldn't you feel that you needed to change yourself or find out just really who you were? No wonder Anne spent so much time trying to figure out who she should be.

Vanessa begins by stating that she is responding to discussions that had taken place in the online community. She wrote her entry not because she had been asked to write a response, but because she chose to react to

entries posted online. As soon as she posted her response and addressed the question of Anne's personality — a question that many of her classmates had been writing about — the community engaged with her entry.

Vanessa's entry on Anne's personality generated 21 comments, some supporting her views and some challenging her opinion and interpretation of Anne Frank's actions and personality. In addition, two of Vanessa's classmates decided not to leave a comment on her blog, but to write more exhaustive responses on their own blogs. Those responses also received comments, including some posted by Vanessa who continued her deep engagement with the text and the work of her classmates by following the growth of her post throughout the class blogosphere.

The responses, posted in the form of comments, focused on specific aspects of Vanessa's entry. Terry, the author of the first comment, zeroed in on Anne's identity:

I agree when you write that "Throughout the beginning of this diary, and actually almost the entire diary, Anne constantly was trying to find her identity. She was always trying to judge herself, and comment on all the remarks shot at her." I think you're right — she is always trying to find herself. She's always questioning who she is and why people respond to her the way they do. I think she's very insecure, too. I think that's why she doesn't really confront people or tell them her thoughts . . . it's almost like she hides in her diary because like she says at the beginning somewhere (in the second entry). I think that she wants the diary to be her friend. So she feels safe with her diary and it's easier to be herself on paper. Her diary doesn't judge.

In his comment, Terry used a reference to a specific passage in the diary and thus helped to start a conversation. Terry states that he agrees with Vanessa, but he also continues the conversation by expanding on the concept of identity formation. He suggests to Vanessa that the diary is more than just a notebook. It is a significant part of Anne's personality and a kind of coping mechanism.

Before Vanessa had a chance to respond, the conversation was enriched by yet another student. Alexandra's thoughts suggest to both Vanessa and Terry that they should consider another point of view:

I agree that Anne is constantly trying to find herself and I agree that the diary is a kind of friend to her but after reading the sections that she wrote before the hiding I thought that Anne was very confident and actually very full of herself. So we're all feeling sorry for her but look at the incident with her math teacher . . . who in our class today would do that?! She doesn't doubt herself there . . . I wish I had the confidence she does!

Alexandra's comment redirected the flow of the conversation by drawing Terry's and Vanessa's attention to an important discrepancy. Alexandra is referring to Anne's response to an assignment she was given as punishment for talking in class. Anne wrote a response in which she tried to prove in a creative and humorous way that she was genetically predisposed to talking and that nothing could be done about what she calls her "feminine characteristic." Alexandra rightly points out that this incident suggests that Anne is a confident young woman who does not need to hide behind her diary.

As a teacher observing this exchange, I was tempted to post a response, but I refrained. I wanted to explain that both points of view are valid: Anne does use her diary as a coping mechanism and she also displays much confidence before going into hiding. I was also tempted to use the comments as a basis for a class discussion. However, I chose not to respond and began to look for opportunities to assist my students in a more conversational and less formal way.

I was waiting for an opportunity to enter the conversation not only as their teacher, but as yet another reader who wants to share views on Anne's personality. I also wanted to see whether the conversation would lead the students to the conclusion I wanted them to reach on their own — that Anne becomes a very different person once she's hiding in the Secret Annex and that, throughout her diary, we are given insightful glimpses into her growing maturity.

When Vanessa, Terry, and two other students, Ryan and Veronica, responded to Alexandra's comment, it was clear that the students were on their way to a deep engagement with text. Veronica wrote:

Yeah, Alex you're right . . . she was so confident and actually I find her kind of arrogant to think that she can

out-smart the teacher like that and just do her own thing! I wouldn't have the guts to that that! Look at what she says after the teacher read her poem to the class: "Since then I am allowed to talk, never get extra work, in fact Keptor always jokes about it" So, yeah I think she's a bit too high on herself and her creativity. I mean it's great to be able to write so well and kinda trick the teacher into letting you talk in class but, ok, who would do that today . . . seriously . . . I think she was very confident and I don't agree that she was trying to find herself . . . look at the entry (June 21, 1942) she knows who she is very well! But then she kinda falls apart and is not sure of anything. Why?

Veronica addressed an important change in Anne's personality: the impact of adolescence and going into hiding on her identity. She also referred to a specific passage to provide support. The next entry, posted by Ryan, included a reference to a specific passage in the diary, as well:

I think both Alex and Veronica are right — Anne is really full of herself and I think she also really wants attention: look at that passage where she talks about boyfriends . . . it's June 20th, 1942: She says that boys fall in love with her "immediately"! IMMEDIATELY!!!! Who says that?! Seriously! Immediately?? She says a boy "won't allow me out of his sight." I think she's very arrogant here and very sure of herself.

Veronica responded:

Ok, that's all true and it makes her sound very cocky but look at when this happens . . . it's like we talked in class, she has everything in this part of her life: she has loving parents and they are well-off and she doesn't have a care in the world. She kind of reminds me of us, you know? I don't talk about boyfriends like that but I think we're just as carefree as she was, think about it guys — think about your life and the life of kids in other countries today. We're very fortunate and she was too.

When Vanessa responded to these comments, it was clear that she had thought carefully about the views her classmates had shared with her:

I think I get it . . . the part before they go into hiding she is more like us, just a regular teenager who really doesn't have much to worry about in life so she writes about everyday things, and her writing is not as deep as later on because she just has a regular happy life. But then when

they go into the Secret Annex her life is so different and there are more conflicts because they're all in the same place stuck together. I think she is very confident and cocky as Veronica says in the first few entries because she had a happy life and was spoiled by her parents. She was getting all this attention and was very friendly and creative so maybe it all went to her head? So, I think you're right, but I'm talking about after they are in the Secret Annex. What happened to her confidence? It's like she's a different person! Look how unsure of herself she is, and like I said before, she spends all this time questioning her identity. She's a different person.

I never thought about it this way, but it makes perfect sense, Alex! Of course it's maturity! Because later on life gets so tough for her and she has to grow up fast and deal with things that we don't have to deal with and we're her age.

Terry:

Yeah, that's what I meant — she has to deal with all this stuff like parents criticizing her and sibling rivalry and always being told what to do and not being able to just leave and go for a walk and chat with friends or go on MSN. That makes her really different and there's all this pressure that she has to deal with.

Alexandra:

Right, that's what I meant to say: Before she had no pressures and now she does and doesn't know how to deal with it but it gives her "adult" things to write about. That's why her entries are so different after she goes into hiding and that's why she has no confidence in these entries. I think it's all new to her and she's trying to find her self. Like Terry and Vanessa said at the beginning, she uses the diary to cope. I think at first the diary is just like a place to record what happens in her life but then it's a place to think things through and have a friend to talk to.

Veronica:

I just found this loooong entry — January 2, 1944 — where she feels sorry for being so unkind to her mom. I think this really shows her maturity and how she uses the diary to cope and find her identity. I think this could be one of those "Self-portraits"! Take a look at it . . . I think it's a pretty good entry!

Vanessa:

Thanks for posting that entry. Now I remember reading it, but I must've been tired when I read it because the things she says didn't jump out the way they did now. Anne says, "Anne, how could you!" and she also says, "Anne, is it really you who mentioned hate?" But my favourite part is when she says this: "I have been trying to understand the Anne of a year ago and to excuse her, because my conscience isn't clear as long as I leave you with these accusations, without being able to explain, on looking back, how it happened." I think it shows she's matured because she knows she made mistakes.

Terry:

Great quote, Vanessa! I just re-read it too and I think you're right. There is so much here that shows how she has matured. She actually stops to think about her behaviour when they first moved into the Secret Annex. She says that she's trying to understand Anne which I think shows that she has a good idea of who she is now and how she treated people wrongly before. This shows maturity. I know I often find it hard to admit I was wrong.

Alexandra:

Guys, you're forgetting that she also explains here why she thinks she acted the way she did when interacting with adults. Thanks for posting this, BTW! I also had to re-read this and I don't remember this entry being so important when I first read this. I had to look up "subjectively" and I also asked my parents because she says:

"I suffer now — and suffered then — from moods which kept my head under water (so to speak) and only allowed me to see the things subjectively without enabling me to consider quietly the words of the other side."

Subjectively means: (1): peculiar to a particular individual: personal (2): modified or affected by personal views, experience, or background.

So, I think she's saying here that she's been too self-obsessed and looked at all those conflicts only from her own point of view.

Ryan:

I think it takes a lot of maturity to say that she's been too subjective. Thanks for the definition, Alex! I think that she finally understands that she's been too harsh with her family. I'm not sure though, what she means by "moods." Do you think she means her way of dealing with things or does she mean personality traits?

Alexandra:

I think she means personality traits. I think she says here that she was too stubborn and thought only about herself. So, I think she blames herself for being like that, because she was too focused on herself, too much like a spoiled kid expecting everyone else to make her life easy. She says: "I hid myself within myself. I only considered myself."

Vanessa:

Guys!!! Keep reading! I found this after she says that part about acting subjectively: "I was rude and aggravating to Mummy, which, in turn, made her unhappy." I think it's a great sign of maturity because she says that the reason her mom wasn't always nice to her was because she wasn't nice to her mom.

Terry:

You're right. She says, "it was really a matter of unpleasantness and misery rebounding all the time." So, she blames the Secret Anne, kind of, right? I mean, this sounds like she's also saying that life was difficult for everyone so they all found it hard and there was a lot of conflicts and frustration.

Alexandra:

Yeah, but also look at what she says about her personality. Maybe she blames the situation but she also knows that she was wrong. If you keep reading you will see this: "I just didn't want to see all this, and pitied myself very much; but that too was unavoidable. These violent outbursts on paper were only giving vent to anger which in a normal life could have been worked off by stamping my feet a couple of times in a locked room." I think this shows that she was too selfish and never thought about anyone else in the Secret Annex.

Terry:

Hold on, so she does blame both, right, herself and the Secret Annex? She blames her personality but she also says that if they were at home, she would have reacted differently and there these feelings wouldn't get bottled up and then written down in the diary.

Vanessa:

The important thing is that she also has matured because she can look back and be cool and not still angry. She writes about being too hot-headed and too self-obsessed. She also says that being in the Annex caused many of these conflicts: I think she's right. I don't think there's anything wrong with saying that being locked up in a small space for years caused everyone to be different and that it caused many conflicts. I think this would happen to all of us . . . but just because she says that the Annex caused many conflicts doesn't mean that she had not matured or that she doesn't recognize her own mistakes. She has much more maturity here. She looks at her mistakes and then has a plan, she actually writes about what she will do next to stop these conflicts that she's been having with her mom and some other people in the Annex. I think this shows that she is very mature . . .

"The period when I caused Mummy to shed tears is over. I have grown wiser . . . I usually keep my mouth shut if I get annoyed, and so does she, so we appear to get on much better together."

I think in this entry Anne is very honest with herself. She knows she had made some mistakes and she also has a plan — she doesn't want to cause pain anymore and will keep her mouth shut if she ever has anything negative to say. This is just like what we talked about in class when Mr. G mentioned self-knowledge. I think Anne has self-knowledge now and before she was too blinded by being spoiled and her childlike personality.

So, if I think there are three stages in Anne's diary. There is the first part that we talked about [[link to the discussion](#)] when she had everything and was spoiled. . . . She was really just a kid then. Then there is the part at the beginning of hiding in the Annex where she is unpleasant to her mom and expects everyone to treat her like a princess and gets upset when they don't. And then finally there is the third stage where she recognizes that she had done some selfish and self-obsessed things and thinks calmly about who she is. Here she has a plan for the future. She knows that everyone is stressed and frustrated in the Annex and

she decides to just keep her thoughts to herself and not hurt people like she did before.

I think all this shows that she now has self-knowledge and maturity because she can point to her own mistakes and also decides not to be mean to people around her. So, this shows me that she knows how not to be subjective.

Throughout this discussion, the students encouraged one another to keep reading, challenged points of view, and collectively achieved a strong grasp of the studied text. The conversation encouraged them to engage with the text: many of them returned to entries they had already read to re-examine them in the light of new comments posted by their peers.

Vanessa's final entry shows that the online discussion had a strong impact on her understanding of Anne's

personality. Her initial post was filled with questions and, while it demonstrated a good level of engagement with the text, it lacked the critical insight that she developed later through interactions with her classmates and the text itself. The conversational tone of the interactions that emerged from her initial entry helped Vanessa engage with the text on a deeper level.

Student interactions about Anne Frank suggest that students in a blogging community see their blogs not as a series of unrelated personal writing spaces, but as a network of writers and thinkers. Their reactions and interactions give rise to sustained commentary. Readership and meaningful interactions that emerged from students' attempts to deconstruct the text created a sense of community and participation which, in turn, contributed to a deeper understanding of the text.