

by Rebekah O'Dell

How Blogging Saved Sustained Silent Reading

I'll admit it: I'm a control freak. Nowhere is this more true than in my classroom. It's one of the great privileges of teacher-dom – we are each the king or queen of our own cinder-block-walled castle. Still, even I knew the jig was up when tenth-grade Dimitris proudly sauntered into class on the last day of the grading period with a life size “sculpture” of Harry Potter, crafted primarily out of two-liter soda bottles, Dimitris' hockey-jersey-turned-Quiddich-jersey, and a pair of plastic glasses.

Yes, he had beaten me at my own game.

My problems with Dimitris' product were many. First, I (wrongly) assumed the sculpture that I had suggested on a whim would be table-sized. Harry was over five feet tall. Where would I put him? What would I do with him? Secondly, though I am a staunch proponent of students choosing to read what interests them, I did not believe any *Harry Potter* book was an appropriate choice for an advanced tenth grade English student. Thirdly, there was no way that I could look at Dimitris' ‘sculpture’ and see it as any kind of reflection of thoughtful, critical reading. Yet, he had followed all of my carefully-considered instructions. He completed the assignment that was given to him. I had Harry, but I had no evidence of Dimitris' reading.

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For years I had self-righteously stood behind my belief that an objective test does not accurately reflect reading. Frankly, I don't *really* want to know how many days Lennie and George are on the ranch or how many men sit at MacBeth's banquet table. Harry Potter shocked some honesty into me, though, and I realized that while a multiple choice test doesn't necessarily show the readerly qualities I wish to assess, neither do shadow boxes, posters, dramatic presentations, or even sculptures.

I had to throw my old models away; I had to find a way to assess what actually matters while still holding students accountable for their reading.

Ditching sustained silent reading wasn't an option; it is undeniable that sustained silent reading (SSR) works. The National Endowment for the Arts' recent study concluded that students score higher on standardized reading tests when they read more for fun (2007). Not only does it help in test preparation, but Kelly Gallagher notes that students who engage in SSR have increased opportunity to build prior knowledge and background, which will help them invaluablely in the world beyond high school (43). In fact, Gallagher recommends that up to 50% of a student's reading should be recreational rather than assigned (82). Laura Robb contends that “Vocabulary power is

closely connected to daily independent reading, both in and out of school, and should be a part of every language arts curriculum” (172).

Beyond the academic skills developed by SSR, regular, independent reading of student-chosen texts provides many students with their only opportunity for developing a vibrant recreational reading life. For me, this is perhaps the most compelling argument for SSR. I want students who leave my classroom to be life-long readers, not simply readers for a grade.

My problem wasn't with the reading—I *loved* the reading. My problem was with the question of how to hold students accountable for meaningful, thoughtful reading of books I hadn't read myself—books I only witnessed students reading for 20-30 minutes two or three times per week. Projects had gotten out of hand and rarely reflected reading. Book talks for many students became a unique experiment in paraphrasing Amazon book reviews. Even reading conferences with my students didn't always ring true. None of these assessments were actually assessing anything. Nor were these assessments authentic examples of what real readers do. Real readers don't make posters or give book talks to take multiple-choice tests. Real readers participate in book clubs, evangelize for titles they love, and write reviews on their blogs!

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When I lighted upon Troy Hicks' *The Digital Writing Workshop*, it all began to come together. Hicks recommends blogging for students in order to create digital writing portfolios, collaborative texts, and as a way for teachers to effectively conference with students about their writing (27). Hicks

argues that when blogs are used correctly, they actually teach students new literacies and 21st-century skills that are becoming vital in the world beyond K-12 education. Taking Hicks' ideas and running with them, I

reasoned that by engaging my students in writing book review blogs, I would not only have a better way to assess what they are reading, but I would also be engaging them in 21st-century writing that will move them beyond the walls of high school and out into the real world of meaningful digital communication.

I began by immersing my students in great book review blogs written by real people – some teenagers and some adults. We looked at what makes

a good review and what makes a lackluster review. This also provided a wonderful opportunity to discuss web safety and privacy issues. We then agreed on some basic standards for crafting a great blog posting. We started simply; we agreed that a good posting should:

- Contain more than just plot summary
- Conform to Edited American English grammar and mechanics conventions

- Use multiple paragraphs to break up ideas
- Contain quotes and details without too many spoilers
- Contain opinions and critical analysis
- Become a dialog between the writer and blog readers

Further, we agreed that students would make one posting per week—these posts would reflect what they had read and thought about their reading during that week. Thus, not all postings were full reviews. However, a complete review was posted after a book was finished. In order to facilitate dialog, students were offered extra credit to read and comment thoughtfully on one another's blogs. I started a blog as well that students could use as an example for their own writing.

After some initial begging for poster-projects again (After all, they had mastered that game!), most students became believers. By using a public blogging website (wordpress.com), anyone in the world could see the students' reviews. This became a fantastic motivator—particularly when authors and publishers began taking note of students' blogs. A few authors have commented on reviews written by students and sent free books, posters, and t-shirts. Publishers have even started to send us advance reading copies of titles awaiting publication. Students are particularly interested in getting a sneak peek at books that are not yet available to the public and swaying opinion with their reviews.

Although there are students (and will likely always be students) who do the bare mini-

mum, this has generally been a great success. Many students report that they will continue their blog after school lets out. Beyond student engagement, though, I have finally found a way to hold students accountable for their reading. Students can no longer fail to bring a book to class for SSR and magically show up at the end of the quarter with a project—if they haven't been blogging, I know they haven't been reading.

I am also better equipped to help students with their reading through their blogs. Through their writing about reading, I have a much better idea of what students are under-

standing and with what they are struggling. I receive a weekly glimpse into what excites them about reading and what books they just cannot get into. I can help them find books that match their interests, and I can point them toward reviews written by their peers so that they don't have to take my word for it. Students know that in addition to me reading and assessing the blog, peers, parents, other teachers, authors, and publishing houses are also awaiting their next post. In short, students have become accountable for their reading not *only* to me but to the world.

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