

USING BLOGGING SOFTWARE TO PROVIDE ADDITIONAL WRITING INSTRUCTION

Dr. Lin B. CARVER
Graduate Studies in Education
Saint Leo University, Florida, USA

Dr. Carol TODD
Early Childhood Education and Human Development
Rio Salado College, Arizona, USA

ABSTRACT

Classroom teachers sometimes struggle trying to find time during the typical school day to provide the writing instruction students need to be successful. This study examined 29 fifth through twelfth grade classroom teachers' survey responses about their perception of the effectiveness of using an online blogging tool, Kidblog, to plan and provide writing instruction for a struggling writer through survey responses and reflective journal entries. In addition, qualitative data from 16 of the 29 teachers were collected through their journals. After eight weeks of using the blogging tool, teachers perceived the tool to be more effective than they had originally thought it would be. The teachers reported that they were able to evaluate their individual student's writing progress to determine next steps in writing instruction. They perceived that student engagement with the writing process increased during the study. Additionally, using an online format encouraged teachers to incorporate other online tools into their instruction. However, barriers to using the blogging tool were also identified. Teachers reported that they would have liked the opportunity for more face-to-face interaction with their students and they also indicated that students may need strong keyboarding skills to effectively use the Kidblog tool. Additionally, prior to implementing the tool, teachers identified practice should have been provided for the teachers, as some found the blogging software difficult to use.

Keywords: K-12 writing instruction, blogging, struggling writers, Kidblog, technology, writing tutoring.

INTRODUCTION

Writing has been identified as a basic and essential skill for all individuals because it provides the basis for communicating information and learning (Graham & Perin, 2007). Even though it is a basic and essential skill, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that only 33% of eighth graders and 24% of twelfth graders were considered to be proficient writers (Salahu-Din, Persky, & Miller, 2008). Consequently, many students are not proficient writers, and this places them at a "considerable disadvantage" (Graham, 2008, p. 1) in the school setting and in life. Writing is the "gateway for employment and promotion, especially in salaried positions"; this complex skill requires considerable time and effort to master (Graham, 2008, p. 1).

However, many of today's 21st century learners embrace reading and composing information regularly using online technology. Lenhart and Fox (2006) reported that approximately 12 million Americans maintain a blog and 57 million read them. These blogs are particularly popular with upper elementary through middle school students (Lacina & Griffith, 2012). Blogs can have many purposes. They can be used for self-

expression; however, a blog can also serve as a place to publish writing or as a forum for receiving feedback on writing (Lacina & Block, 2012; Witte, 2007).

Given the ease and frequency with which blogging is used, it could also be used by teachers as a venue to increase and individualize writing instruction to help students improve their writing proficiency. Leu and Kinzer (2000), in their research on literacy and technology, found that "the convergence of literacy instruction with Internet technologies is fundamentally reshaping the nature of literacy instruction as teachers seek to prepare children for the futures they deserve" (p. 111).

This study examined 29 teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of using blogs to provide additional opportunities beyond the classroom setting for individual writing instruction with secondary writers who scored below grade level expectations based on a Six Traits scoring rubric (Education Northwest, 2014). The Six Traits rubric was chosen because it is research-based, provides specific information about student performance, and can be used in conjunction with many classroom instructional activities. Because the rubric is not genre specific, it can be used with various types of content no matter the content area in which the teacher chooses to focus (Spence, 2010).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much research has been completed examining the characteristics of effective writing instruction. Bruning and Horn (2000) indicated that writing teachers who were effective were passionate about writing while making the writing process creative and fun. Effective writing teachers had high expectations for students and were able to relate writing to their students' daily lives. Teachers stated that they believed that all students had the ability to grow and improve in their writing (Santangelo & Olinghouse, 2009). Santangelo and Olinghouse (2009) found that effective writing teachers built a collaborative writing community by encouraging a positive supportive classroom environment showcasing student writing. Student-teacher relationships were strengthened through the support provided for struggling writers' efforts and persistence. Effective writing instructors encouraged revision and refining of students' writing through an iterative process for learning and improvement instead of focusing on having students complete a single graded piece (Bruning & Horn, 2000).

Writing instruction in the K-12 classroom typically occurred through whole and small group instruction supplemented by peer or teacher conferencing (Pressley, et al., 1997). Cutler and Graham (2008) examined elementary classroom instruction and determined that approximately one hour a day was spent on writing instruction. However, half of that time was spent on basic skills such as handwriting and spelling, about a quarter of it was spent on grammar, and about nine minutes were spent on instruction in the planning and revising stages of writing. Lenhart, et al. (2008) examined the secondary classroom where they found that writing instruction in planning, revising, and editing strategies occurred infrequently, but they did not identify an average amount of time. They indicated that struggling writers especially needed additional time, modeling, and instruction to meet their needs. Graham (2008) indicated that effective writing instruction needed to include significant time, effort, preparation, explicit teaching, extended opportunities, and differentiation of instruction for all students. These struggling writers also profited from guided practice with consistent feedback, scaffolding, and numerous opportunities to work on each of the phases of the writing process.

However, it is sometimes difficult in the classroom setting for teachers to find the time needed to provide specific, personal, differentiated feedback. With technological advancements teachers now have opportunities to continue the writing instruction outside of the classroom setting. Technology can also be used to increase student engagement. Olbinger (2003) found that millennial learners tended to respond more positively to teaching practices that included technology. K-12 students typically spend

more than six hours a day interacting through technology (Ellison & Wu, 2008). Wickersham and Chambers (2006) determined that when learning included hands-on opportunities, students were more engaged. A blog, which is basically an online discussion group, could be used to provide students a hands-on, technology based opportunity to interact with others resulting in increased engagement and learning.

Townsend, Nail, Chevallier, and Browning's (2013) four-year study examined the effectiveness of extending classroom writing instruction using an online writing partnership between high school and college students. In the original phase of this study eleventh grade students submitted a paper online and then the university students would comment on well written sections and provide suggestions for revision. However, the researchers found that the lack of interaction between the two groups led to misinterpretations and hurt feelings. Because of these concerns the researchers decided the format needed to be revised.

The online relationship was revised to include a face-to-face component. Townsend et al. (2013) found that using this format the secondary students were more receptive to the college students' suggestions for refining their writing. The combination of both online and face-to-face interactions was effective in helping the high school writers improve their writing skills. Based upon the results of their study, Townsend et al (2013) identified four recommendations for improving writing instruction. They determined that to be successful writers need a sense of purpose, topics should be related to the student's personal interests, feedback needs to be begin early in the writing process, and multiple opportunities for revision should be included.

These findings paralleled the results of Imig's (2010) study. She found that online instructors needed to provide time, model writing strategies, encourage personal connections, and share written responses on a wide variety of topics. Imig's findings indicated that to increase student engagement in the writing process, the online instructor needed to be involved in the beginning of the writing piece rather just at the final stages of the project. Simply grading and commenting when the project was completed was not effective in improving the quality of the final written project.

Technology might be an effective tool for expanding writing instruction for all writers; however, struggling writers may face more significant learning challenges in the online format because they tend to have weaker reading and writing skills. These students tended to have stronger oral and aural skills, so online instruction might not effectively match their learning style (Imig, 2010). Stine (2010) examined the effectiveness of online writing instruction with college students who were placed in remediate writing classes. She found that when she used both the online and the in-class format, those students operating at the basic writing level improved their writing ability. The face-to-face sessions allowed the instructor to demonstrate technology tools and provide students ample time to practice using them before they were expected to use the technology independently at home. Stine (2010) found that technology offered students many different types of learning and writing experiences. In addition, she determined that a series of small repetitive assignments decreased students' anxiety about writing, improved writing quality, and guided students to more critical self-reflection. Stine indicated that blogs could be easily used for online writing instruction and were effective with struggling writers. These blogs allowed for a risk free environment which led to improved critical thinking and encouraged self-reflection. Stine found that blended course which included both online and face to face instruction actually provided better learning experiences for basic writers.

Graham (2008) provided extensive recommendations for effective writing instruction. The current study was structured in an attempt to address four of his recommendations; providing additional dedicated time for writing, increasing student knowledge about writing, taking advantage of technological writing tools, and using assessment to gauge students' progress and need. Graham observed that technology was a particularly

important component because it enabled students to make revisions more easily than in a hand-written form and the final product looked professional. These advantages were particularly important for students who struggled with the writing process. He observed that providing additional time and increasing student knowledge were issues to consider when working with struggling writers.

Student writing was evaluated using the components of the Six Traits rubric (Education Northwest, 2014). Based on teacher evaluation, the identified struggling writers needed instruction in planning, revising, textual organization, and sentence construction. The use of KidBlog allowed for reteaching of skills and strategies that had not been mastered, the development of individual mini-lessons, and an increased frequency of teacher-student conferencing, all of which Graham (2008) identified as important components of writing instruction.

Research Questions

In this study the principles of effective writing instruction and the way these could be incorporated in writing instruction through an online blog, were examined as a basis for addressing the needs of the approximately two thirds of K-12 students who were considered not to be proficient writers (Salahu-Din, Persky, & Miller, 2008). Using blogging in conjunction with face-to-face instruction rather than focusing on student achievement this study examined teachers' perception of the effectiveness of planning for and providing instruction for secondary writers who were unable to produce appropriate grade level written papers. This study attempted to answer the following two quantitative and one qualitative questions:

Quantitative Questions and Hypotheses

- 1) Since teachers typically conference face-to-face with struggling writers, how effective will teachers perceive online writing instruction to be for their identified struggling secondary writers?

H₀₁: After using an online blogging tool, there will be no impact on teachers' perception of the effectiveness of the tool.

H_{A1}: After using an online blogging tool, there will be significant impact ($p \leq .05$) on teachers' perception of the effectiveness of the tool.

- 2) How will teachers compare the ease of planning for instruction as compared to the ease of providing instruction to the individual student using the blogging software?

H₀₁: After using an online blogging tool, there will be no impact on teachers' perception of the ease of planning for instruction or providing instruction using the tool.

H_{A1}: After using an online blogging tool, there will be significant impact ($p \leq .05$) on teachers' perception of the ease of planning for or providing instruction using the tool.

Qualitative Question

- 3) When describing an online blogging experience in their journal entries, what themes will teachers identify as important to consider when working with struggling secondary writers?

METHODOLOGY

Twenty-nine teachers in the Graduate Studies in Education Reading program at a private southern university each identified one struggling secondary writer to work with during an eight-week term. The struggling writers were identified because their classroom essays were below grade level expectancy based on a Six Traits rubric (Education Northwest, 2014).

The classroom teachers had previously worked with the identified students through individual conferencing and wanted to continue providing the writing instruction using the online blogging software. Each teacher completed a pre and post instruction survey about their experiences providing writing instruction using blogging software. Sixteen of these teachers also volunteered to take part in the second phase of the research study. During this phase they completed a reflective journal about their experience.

Data were collected using two separate data collection tools. During the first week of their graduate course the teachers were introduced to an online blogging tool, KidBlog. Kidblog was chosen because it is a secure site and did not require the secondary students to use a personal email address. During the first week of the study, teachers created an account and independently practiced using the software. Then the teachers shared the web address for their specific account with their identified student. Only one teacher and his or her identified student had access to each specific blogging account. Each teacher then provided instruction for a student on how to use the blogging program and then used the program over the next seven weeks to provide writing instruction.

Teachers began by having each student post a one page expository essay that had been created for a school assignment. The teachers analyzed the assignment based on the Six Traits (Education Northwest, 2014) rubric and identified the specific areas where the students would profit from additional instruction. Over the remainder of the eight-week term the blogging tool was used to provide online individualized writing instruction of the same type the teachers would have previously provided during classroom conferences. This instruction took the form of providing specific suggestions for areas needing refinement, modeling ways to correct students' errors, and identifying specified online tools to address students' areas of difficulties.

A mixed method design was used to collect the data. Quantitative data was collected through a Likert scale survey ranging from 1 to 5 (with 1 being strongly agree and 5 being strongly disagree). The survey was administered twice online, once during the first week of the study and again at the completion of the eight-week term. Teachers' responses were organized into three categories: general impressions about providing writing instruction through blogging, ease of planning for blogging writing instruction, and ease of providing blogging writing instruction. T scores for dependent means and probability levels were then calculated to determine whether the differences in the means between the first week and the eighth week were significant.

In addition to the survey, 16 teachers completed a reflective journal identifying the strengths and difficulties they experienced during the online writing instruction and their perceptions about the student's learning. Qualitative data were collected through coding teacher reflective journals for emerging themes. The researchers employed open and axial coding methodologies.

FINDINGS

The individual survey questions are included in Appendix A. The data from the specific questions were combined into three categories. The participants recorded their responses using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (disagree strongly). The quantitative data from each of the three survey categories are recorded in Table 1. Paired t-tests were used to analyze the means of the three categories from Week 1 and Week 8. The differences between the means in each category exceeded the 95% confidence interval, so in each case the null hypothesis was rejected. The higher the score, the more difficult the teachers perceived the use of the blogging tool to be. It is evident from the qualitative data that actually using the online blogging tool positively impacted teachers' perceptions of its effectiveness as a possible tool for providing supplemental writing instruction.

Table: 1
Mean Scores Comparing Week 1 and 8 by Survey Category

<u>Category</u>	<u>Mean Week 1</u>	<u>Mean Week 8</u>	<u>P* =</u>
General Impressions about using Online Blogging for Writing Instruction	2.978	2.575	.02230
Providing Instruction through Online Blogging	2.920	2.608	.00729
Planning for Instruction through Online Blogging	2.660	2.484	.00822

*p denotes probability

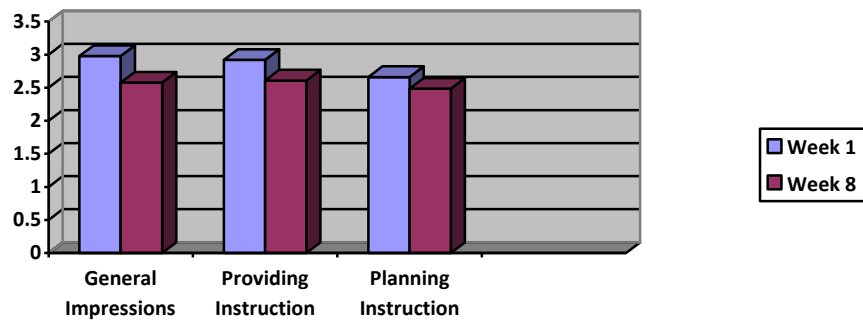


Figure: 1
Mean Scores comparing Week 1 and 8 by Category. This figure illustrates the decrease in difficulty of using blogging by category.

To determine the mean for the general impressions category about using online blogging for writing instruction, data from four questions about blogging were combined. These questions included teachers' perceptions about the ease of using blogging for: writing instruction, analyzing the relationship between teaching and student achievement, connecting new concepts to prior knowledge, and adjusting instruction to meet student needs. During the first week the mean was almost neutral (3.0) in the general perceptions area and by the end of the research study the mean was about half way between agree (2.0) and neutral (3.0).

The means from five questions were combined in each of the other two categories in Table 1. Teacher perceptions about ease of instruction in five of the Six Traits of Writing (Education Northwest, 2014) (ideas, organization, voice, word choice, and conventions) were examined in both the providing for Instruction and Planning for Instruction categories. The differences between the means in each of the categories exceeded probability of $p \leq .05$. In addition, the data indicated that the teachers had a more positive perception after using the online blogging tool than they did before they used the tool.

In the second phase of the data analysis, each of the researchers independently analyzed the 16 teachers' qualitative reflective journals for emerging themes. The data were then transcribed, described, classified (open and axial coding methods) and interpreted forming the data analysis process. Using open coding methodology, the researchers read through the qualitative, narrative data several times to create "chunks" of data seeking meaning that emerged from the data. The researchers also used an inductive reasoning process to generate themes and ideas and axial coding methodology to identify

relationships from among themes. A deductive process to confirm or negate ideas or hypotheses was not utilized.

Each researcher coded the data and reviewed it for inter-rater reliability. During this process, the researchers debriefed to identify any variations in coding and coexistent themes. Following the interrater reliability check, the researchers finalized the data results in overarching themes leading to recommendations. Data interpretation allowed the researchers to theorize toward developing patterns and meanings or in other words to “make sense” of the data. Using an analytic inductive reasoning process, data coding and concomitant interpretation, the researchers were able to:

- Ascertain the common themes or recurring regularities that emerged from the data (Patton, 2002). This entailed internal homogeneity or the extent to which data belonged to a certain category or theme or dovetailed with a category of theme. This also entailed external heterogeneity or the extent to which the data did not belong in a category and to identify that the differences between categories was clear (Patton, 2002).
- Test the data for convergence, or identify how the data did not make connections with themes or categories or align with the research questions and broader environmental scan purpose.
- Identify deviations from the common themes and, when possible, to provide explanations of the deviations. Deviant cases or data that diverged from the categories or themes was given careful consideration and examination as to why it did not “fit” into the categories or themes.
- Bring forth the stories or a narrative enquiry that emerged from the data analysis from which to draw recommendations.
- Bring forth patterns or themes that may suggest additional data that needs to be collected.
- Align the themes and narrative stories that emerged with the review of literature.

Data analysis and interpretation provided the structure for the ensuing results, analysis, and recommendations. Interrater reliability was evident in the themes identified. In the reflective journals both positive themes and barriers were apparent. References to the four positive themes occurred more frequently than references to the barriers. Table 2 indicates the most common positive themes. About a third of the teachers (n = 6) indicated that students found using the software enjoyable and motivating (n = 6) and that the blogging tool helped to build students’ confidence (n = 6). Almost half of the teachers (n = 7) reported that they were able to evaluate student progress, while about a quarter (n = 4) indicated that they were able to effectively incorporated other online tools to provide additional practice and further increase student engagement.

Four barriers were also identified (see Table 3). A quarter of the teachers (n = 4) reported students were frustrated trying to navigate the software and the students did not have strong enough keyboarding skills. Although not as frequent, teacher frustration with the software (n = 3) and missed face-to-face interaction (n = 2) were also reported.

Table: 2
Positive Themes Identified from the Teachers’ Reflective Journals and their Frequency

<u>Theme</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
Blogging built student confidence in writing	6	37.5%
Students found blogging software enjoyable and motivating	6	37.5%
Teachers were able to evaluate student progress	7	43.75%
Teachers combined blogging software with other online tools	4	25%

Table: 3

Barrier Themes Identified from the Teachers' Reflective Journals and their Frequency

Theme	n	%
Students were frustrated using the blogging software	4	25%
Teachers were frustrated using the blogging software	3	18.75%
Teachers missed personal interaction with students	2	12.5%
Teachers thought students needed more proficient keyboarding skills	4	25%

In addition to identifying recurring themes, the researchers also classified each of the journals as to whether they conveyed positive or negative comments about their blogging experience. Slightly more than half of the teachers (56.25%) reported only positive comments about using blogging software for writing instruction. About a third of the teachers (31.25%) recorded both positive and negative comments about their experience using the blogging software. Only about one tenth (12.5%) of the teachers recorded only negative comments about the blogging experience.

DISCUSSION

The data from the surveys and the journals revealed that individual teachers had mixed reactions to the blogging experience. Some teachers found using the blogging software for writing instruction to be a positive experience while others experienced some difficulty operating the software program. However, overall both the quantitative and qualitative data seemed to lead to the same conclusions. Even though the teachers were initially unsure about whether blogging would be an effective way to provide additional instruction for struggling writers, after using the blogging tool for eight weeks most of the teachers agreed that instruction using the blogging tool was effective in helping struggling writers improve their writing skills.

Similar to Townsend et al.'s (2013) study a few of the teachers noted the need for personal interaction with students. For example, teachers wanted to have the one-on-one, face-to-face, personal interaction in addition to blogging. The results supported the findings noted in Pressley et al.'s (1997) and Imig's (2010) research studies. In fact, one teacher wrote "*[student's name] is a student who would benefit greatly from direct teacher instruction with her writing...she needs explicit oral directions and one-to-one teacher assistance to improve her writing.*" Consequently blogging by itself did not provide enough for these struggling writers. Blogging used in conjunction with classroom instruction seemed to be perceived as a more effective approach.

The data from the two Likert scale surveys indicated that teachers' impressions of the effectiveness of using blogging software improved between the beginning and the end of the study in all areas. Teachers originally indicated that providing instruction would be more difficult than identifying areas of need and planning for instruction. Teachers indicated at the end of the study that identifying the area of need remained easier than providing the actual instruction. Although the teachers indicated that both areas were easier than they thought they would be.

The most frequently recurring themes in the journals were (a) the effectiveness of the blogging tool for evaluating student progress and (b) using the blogging tool increased student engagement and motivation in the writing process. However, the process was not positive for all teachers or students. Some of the teachers indicated they and/or their student found the software frustrating and they wished they had more time to learn the software before using it with a student.

Teachers need to be thoroughly familiar with the blogging tool before attempting to use it with students. One week of practice was not enough for some teachers to effectively incorporate the blogging tool into their teaching practice. Consequently, teachers might need more practice before feeling confident enough to use the tool with students.

Moreover, even when teachers noted secondary students' progress using blogging as a way to improve writing, hesitation to use technology was noted by some teachers. On the positive side, one teacher recognized this and stated "... I had a harder time adjusting than my student did however. It was hard to get used to not being able to meet with my student one-on-one." Still another wrote, "When I first began on KidBlog, I did not agree that I could teach writing skills that way...by the end of blogging, I could see that it was actually doable." It is of particular interest that after the study was completed, this teacher decided to use KidBlog with her entire class. Having begun with just one student, she felt confident about implementing it with a larger group.

In addition to answering the research questions, the teachers' journals provided some suggestions that might make the use of the blogging software even more effective. Teachers indicated that when using the online tool, it was more effective if students had strong keyboarding skills. Students who had less well-developed typing skills, found the software to be difficult to use. In addition, teachers also observed that using the blogging tool was an effective format for incorporating other online tools. Since the students were already online it was easy to include links to direct them to other sites that could be used for additional practice or to expand the writing instruction.

CONCLUSIONS

The data indicated that both of the alternate hypotheses should be accepted. After using an online blogging tool, there was a significant impact on teachers' perception of the effectiveness of the tool. And after using an online blogging tool, there was a significant impact on teachers' perception of the ease of planning for or providing instruction using the tool.

The analysis of the themes revealed that individual teachers had mixed reactions to the blogging experience. While most teachers agreed the blogging experience had instructional benefits, some found the experience frustrating for them and their students. They also indicated that one week of practice was not sufficient for mastery of the blogging tool.

FUTURE STUDY

As other research about online instruction has found, the data from this study supported teachers' perceptions about the effectiveness of using blogging software to provide additional instruction for struggling secondary writers. But because of the limited time frame and focus on a single assignment, pre and post Six Traits scores were not compared consequently quantitative measures of student achievement were not included in this study.

The small sample size and the limited time frame make it difficult to generalize the findings to a wider population of secondary students. Teachers perceived that the blogging software was effective for working with an individual struggling secondary writer who already had a relationship with the teacher. However the particular software used, was not as user friendly as some of the teachers would have preferred. It would be interesting to know if writing instruction through blogging is effective if the teacher-student relationship is not already established.

In addition, a comparison of students' academic writing growth between struggling writers who receive supplemental writing instruction online and those who receive the same supplemental writing instruction face-to-face setting would provide additional information. Not all teachers in the study used the blogging tool in the same way. Further studies could explore the impact of constructing online lessons in various ways and the impact these varying formats have on student writing progress.

This study attempts to present teachers with another option for providing support for struggling writers. But, as with any study, the study raises more questions beyond the few that it answers.

BIODATA and CONTACT ADDRESSES of the AUTHORS



Dr. Lin B. CARVER earned her Ph. D. in Literacy Curriculum and Instruction and has additional cognates in Educational Leadership and Instructional Design. She worked in public and private K-12 schools for twenty years as a classroom teacher, math specialist, reading specialist, and a literacy coach. She is currently the Reading Program Administrator at Saint Leo University where she has designed and taught reading, assessment, and leadership courses in the Reading, Exceptional Student Education, and Instructional Leadership programs. She serves on various committees and her research interests include student motivation and engagement, assessment, and literacy. She has written three books (Teaching Syllable Patterns, Reading Basics for All Teachers, and Coaching: Making a Difference for Students and Teachers) and numerous articles and chapters.

Lin B. Carver, Ph. D.
Graduate Studies in Education
Saint Leo University, 33701 State Road 52
Saint Leo, FL 33574-6665
Phone: (352) 588-8387
E-mail: melinda.carver@saintleo.edu



Dr. Carol TODD is the Coordinator of New Program Development, Early Childhood Education and Human Development, Rio Salado College in Tempe, Arizona. Throughout her career she has taught and designed courses in special education, educational leadership and research at public and private universities. She has presented and published her work in special education, autism and effective uses of technology at national and international conferences. She consults with foundations and organizations in school and nonprofit leadership and capacity building.

Carol TODD, Ph.D.
Coordinator of New Program Development
Rio Salado College
2323 West 14th Street
Tempe, Arizona 85281 U.S.A.
E-mail: caroltodd@caroltodd.com

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APPENDIX

Indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement.

Mark each statement with Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree

Pedagogical Reflection on Writing Instruction using an Online Blogging Tool

- 1. Using an online blogging tool, I am comfortable providing writing instruction for an individual student.**
- 2. Using an online blogging tool, I am able to provide instruction in ideas for writing.**
- 3. Using an online blogging tool, I am able to provide instruction in organization of writing.**
- 4. Using an online blogging tool, I am able to provide instruction in voice for writing.**
- 5. Using an online blogging tool, I am able to provide instruction in word choice for writing.**
- 6. Using an online blogging tool, I am able to provide instruction in conventions of writing.**
- 7. Using an online blogging tool, I am able to analyze the effectiveness of instruction in ideas for writing.**
- 8. Using an online blogging tool, I am able to analyze the effectiveness of instruction in organization of writing.**
- 9. Using an online blogging tool, I am able to analyze the effectiveness of instruction in voice for writing.**
- 10. Using an online blogging tool, I am able to analyze the effectiveness of instruction in word choice for writing.**
- 11. Using an online blogging tool, I am able to analyze the effectiveness of instruction in conventions of writing.**
- 12. Using an online blogging tool, I am able to analyze the relationship between teaching practices and student learning.**
- 13. Using an online blogging tool, I am able to connect new writing concepts to students' prior knowledge.**
- 14. Using an online blogging tool, I am able to adjust methods and strategies based on students' relative performance.**