Embracing social media in the classroom - are we in or out?

By Tania Sheko

Unlike us, our students are not aware of technology as something separate from themselves and the way they function. Their mobile devices seamlessly integrate their online and offline behaviour and relationships. If we look deeper into this new way of connecting and interacting with others, we see much that is valuable and can be adapted to extend and enhance traditional teaching and learning. As teacher-librarians supporting students in a connected world, where do we want to be — on the inside or the outside of these learning networks?

What do we know of social media and its relevance to education? As educators, what is our attitude to the role of social media in teaching and learning at school? Social media is often associated with the dangerous, controversial or banal. Sensational news reports personify social media as a predator. Facebook teens are portrayed as wasting their time posting inappropriate photos of themselves and their friends, while Twitter users allegedly have nothing better to do than provide regular reports about what they're eating or post photos of cats. Schools often ban Facebook and confiscate mobile phones in an attempt to force students to get on with the serious business of study.

In a content-driven curriculum focused squarely on the final ATAR, social media is not likely to feature as an intrinsic part of the curriculum — and yet the first of key trends identified in **The NMC Edition Horizon Report 2012: K-12 edition** (p. 7) states that 'education paradigms are shifting to include online learning, hybrid learning and collaborative models.'

> *Students already spend much of their free time on the Internet, learning and exchanging new information through various resources, including social networks. Institutions that embrace face-to-face/online hybrid learning models have the potential to leverage the online skills learners have already developed independent of academia*. (p. 7)

In her article, '**What teens get about the internet that parents don't**,' **Mimi Ito** describes how teenagers use the internet for passion driven, self-initiated learning. Although she is learning to play viola, Mimi's daughter wants to learn to play guitar. When her mother reminds her that she is already spending money on viola lessons, her daughter explains that she has been learning from YouTube tutorials on the internet. The viola is a strategically selected instrument to help Mimi's daughter obtain a competitive edge when she finishes school, but the guitar is more in line with her interests. 'For her, the Internet has been a lifeline for self-directed learning and connection to peers.'

How much of what teens do online is regarded by educators as valuable learning? Do we view their online activity as a waste of time? In light of the key trends and emerging technologies identified in the **NMC Horizon Report**, shouldn't we review social media's role in schools and consider the value of networked learning outside school hours? Shouldn't we recognise the fact that Mimi's daughter, as many other teens, is controlling her own learning, and that this learning can take place anytime and anywhere, is free, and is customised to suit the individual's learning style?

How much of what teens do online is regarded by educators as valuable learning?

> *Young people are desperate for learning that is relevant and part of the fabric of their social lives, where they are making choices about how, when, and what to learn, without it all being mapped for them in advance.*

If learning is spilling into out-of-school time, shouldn't we think about where we might expect to find the passion? And if we recognise the value of 'recreational' learning, how can this help us create learning opportunities which invite the passion and self-direction of our students?

Last year my elder son graduated from the University of Melbourne with a Bachelor of Arts in Politics and Psychology. During this time he spent many recreational hours researching on the internet an area of interest he was passionate about - urban development. This year, thanks to the flexibility of the **Melbourne Curriculum** (previously known as the Melbourne Model), he is able to study Urban Planning as his specialisation within a Master's Degree. He has followed his passion and devoted many hours of self-initiated online learning in his own time, and arrived at a career choice suited to his interests in a way not previously predicted.

The **Curriculum for Excellence** is Scotland's educational response to global change — equipping people to deal successfully with the challenges of the early 21st century.

The North Alliance in Scotland has created a **short film** explaining the background to the Curriculum of Excellence and how it links to community learning and development principles. Central to the film is the message that, with the challenges of a globalised world, schools can no longer provide students with a complete toolkit for their futures.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=MyBsRn2vIlE

. . . we need to acknowledge that the toolkit we must prepare for our students is not about content, but about skills.

Gone is the time of my own schooling when an expert teacher and one textbook were all that were needed. Now it's about equipping students with the skills needed to be lifelong learners. Mimi's daughter and my son are already lifelong learners, and I'm not certain that they learned those skills at school. But if we're to be relevant, and if we're to engage students and connect them to what they're passionate about, or provide them with the opportunity to discover what that is, we need to acknowledge that the toolkit we must prepare for our students is not about content, but about skills.

As the video points out, there is a new emphasis on learner engagement, and the idea that the learner has to take responsibility for his or her own decisions, and to be involved in his or her progress. In his book, *Net Smart: How to Thrive Online*, Howard Rheingold postulates that 'we're in a period where the cutting edge of change has moved from the technology to the literacies made possible by the technology' (p. 3), and that:

> *what matters the most with present-day new literacies are not just the encoding and decoding skills an individual needs to know to join the community of literates but also the ability to use those skills socially, in concert with others, in an effective way*. (p. 4)

I've always been appreciative of the freedom afforded to teacher-librarians to focus on skills over content. Our holistic focus on learning positions us to develop the skills needed for our students' futures — critical thinking, evaluation and management of information, not just for a research project but for essential life skills. There is no reason why this toolkit should not expand to include network literacies.

In **another article**, Mimi Ito provides more examples of students learning independently on the internet, for example:

> *a teenager who developed her creative writing skills, in large part by interacting with peers on the Internet, and who was eventually offered admissions to selective colleges on the basis of her strong writing samples*.

Or

> *a young man who learned how to make a living as a professional web comics artist by connecting with knowledge and communities of artists on the Internet.*

Also,

> *a public school in Chicago experimenting with a two-week period each term where students work on complex and collaborative projects where they need to define roles, problem solve together, and share their work with a broader community*.

These are all good examples of effective connected learning:

Connected learning is when you're pursuing knowledge and expertise around something you care deeply about, and you're supported by friends and institutions who share and recognise this common passion or purpose (**Connected Learning: An Agenda for Social Change**).

As the coordinator of the interest group for student writers at Melbourne High School, I know that students are sometimes involved in learning networks in their spare time. One of my students is involved in an online fiction community, **fanfiction.net**. This community allows him to share his writing, to have a voice, to receive constructive feedback, and improve his writing. Furthermore, he is self-motivated, engaged, and feels he is a valued member of a real life community of peers and adults. And he does all of this of his own free will in his own time.

Herein lies one of the challenges we face in education today which is identified in **The NMC Horizon Report** - that 'K-12 education must address the increased blending of formal and informal learning', and that:

in order for students to get a well-rounded education with real world experience, they must also engage in more informal in-class activities as well as learning to learn outside the classroom (p. 9).

I propose that social media, used thoughtfully and expertly in the classroom, addresses the challenges identified in **The NMC Horizon Report**, and is in line with the emerging trends. Social media provides the opportunity to develop essential skills and literacies 'in concert with others' (Rheingold, ***Net Smart: How to Thrive Online***) - connecting to others, extending beyond the classroom to find experts, or simply another class of students, asking important questions, sharing, discussing, serendipitous/accidental learning and discoveries, relational learning, engagement, self-direction, and community supported learning. How different is this kind of learning from the teacher-centred traditional classroom? If students perform only for the teacher, if the teacher is the main assessor and audience, what is the driving motivation apart from the attainment of marks?

With this in mind, what should our attitude be to the mobile technologies that many of our students bring to school, and which are often banned or confiscated?

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Howard Rheingold urges educators to embrace these mobile technologies:

Knowing that you have a printing press, broadcasting station, community hall, marketplace, school, and library for all knowledge in your pocket — and knowing how to use it for your own benefit — is what makes the difference between a consumer of electronic gadgets and an empowered citizen (**Net Smart: How to Thrive Online**, Rheingold, p.18).

If we think of our students' mobile technologies in terms of what students can do with them — writing, publishing, broadcasting, collaborating, discussing — then we have the reason for embracing social media in schools. And so, if network literacy is to be part of the school curriculum, what does this look like?

I would like to offer a small window into this kind of learning by sharing my experiences with two social media platforms at my own school.

The first is my plan this year to use the social network, **Goodreads.com**, to create a reading community in response to a desire to find new and more relevant ways of enriching the reading experiences of our students.

In my blog post, 'Creating a reading community — Goodreads', I've described my motivation for using Goodreads with our students:

What I had in mind was much more than reading promotion; it was the creation of a reading community. At Melbourne High School our year 9 and 10 English teachers are responding positively to our Goodreads promotions.

Goodreads is the best of social media. I think it can work very effectively in schools. Just as blogging provides students with a real audience, peer as well as global, so does the Goodreads platform extend reading from a solitary experience to one which can be shared with a whole community. While the **Premiers' Reading Challenge** is a positive step in encouraging young people to read, I'm looking at more than the completion of a limited list of recommended reading, I'm interested in a platform where

students can see what their peers are reading, where they can have a conversation around their reading.

Reading can be much more than completing a book; within Goodreads it can involve:

— rating

— designating a shelf

— reading reviews

— writing reviews

— connecting with classmates to see what they're reading, rating, reviewing

— connecting with broader community for the same class community for a text studied – the whole unit can take place within the class group

— easily finding similar books in the genre, author or a series

— following people to see what they're reading, eg students could get ideas from each other or follow their teacher's list to broaden their reading scope

— following people to see their ratings and reviews

— joining or creating discussions

— **following authors and becoming a fan** to see their biography, see what books they've written, their series, what they're reading, their latest activity eg. reviews/discussions;sending them a message, comparing your reading tastes to theirs; discovering their blogs and book trailers/videos

— creating your own groups or joining public ones.

Melbourne High School is full of boys who respond to being stretched and challenged. They are often reading at a sophisticated level and appreciate the opportunity to read beyond a generic list for their age group. Goodreads allows students to browse eclectic group topics, for example, the group for **The Year of Reading Proust** or **Old Norse Literature**.

The virtual **Book shelves** default to 'read', 'currently reading' and 'to-read.' Students can add more individualised shelves to their profile, organising books by genre, reading challenge, books loved or loathed, by discussion group, and more. The possibilities for teachers are varied. I can imagine rich discussion of texts including all students in a way not possible in class. Social media connects students to each other, and beyond the classroom; it creates opportunities for real conversations, for many literacies, for digital citizenship.

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Students will feel at home in the Facebook-like functioning of Goodreads. They are so used to being connected; it makes more sense to them and is more engaging than a traditional classroom where they don't often share their learning. It's fun and it really does encourage reading.

I'm looking forward to seeing how teachers customise Goodreads to their classes and teaching styles. I'm hoping we'll inspire in our students a love of literature, ideas, good stories, powerful characters, clever plots and controversial issues in the form of books. Flexibility of social media platforms for teachers allows them to customise lessons to their own style and specifications. I'm happy to share **my Libguides guidelines page** to support Goodreads use.

The second example of social media I'd like to share is my experience in working with an English teacher and two year 9 classes using blogging.

In a blog post entitled '**Window to the real world: student reflection and evaluation of their blogging experience**', I reflect upon and evaluate the use of social media in the English classroom:

When Nick Fairlie asked if I could help him do something different with his students, we decided to try out Posterous as a blogging platform. We created a main teachers' blog which we used for instruction and writing prompts, and the two classes of students created their own blogs which we linked to the teachers' blog.

'Our aims for this project:

— to provide a collaborative and open online platform for student in the hope that an authentic and peer readership (beyond that of the teacher) would develop an authentic writing voice.

— to increase student motivation through the dialogue in the commenting section of the blogs as well as through the ownership of the students' own personalised blogs.

— to create a community of thinkers and writers across two classes by linking all blogs to Nick's blog

— to motivate students' writing through dialogue with a broader and global reading audience

— to provide opportunity for personal dialogue with Australian authors (Isobelle Carmody and Michael Gerard Bauer)'.

'After blogging with two year 9 English classes for a year, it was time to provide students with the opportunity to reflect on and evaluate their experiences. I wrote a post entitled 'Reflect about your blogging experience' with a broad range of questions but open response format.

The students responded honestly and thoughtfully. Their reflections were based on a retrospective analysis of their blogging experiences and addressed a wide range of aspects to result in rich analysis and valuable metacognition. In all cases, despite varying degrees of recorded satisfaction with the blogging tasks, students acknowledged an enriching experience including learning they didn't expect but appreciated.

The mix of personal writing in a public space was challenging, and we expected this. I've observed that initial apprehension was replaced by the excitement of being read by an authentic audience including that of peers and also of those from the other side of the world. Students felt increasingly safer in the supported environment with specific guidelines for appropriate and positive online responses and interaction.

It's interesting that such a competitive and mark-oriented cohort has taken the time to write so much and so well in their own time when nothing was assessed. The comments in the students' final evaluative post attest to engagement due to factors outside the reward of marks. The community of thinkers and writers which developed allowed students to feel that their writing mattered, and that their personalisation of their space and style enhanced their sense of self. Many students identified the blogs as a highlight of the year's English classes and hoped to continue blogging next year.

Certainly the experience further developed students' tolerance of others' ideas, and pushed them out of the comfort of their own views, often resulting in a wider reading to gain a greater context for their own writing. In some cases students initiated further involvement in online writing and reviewing spaces for their personal satisfaction.

Our aim in this project was explore the possibilities of writing as metacognition, providing opportunities for students to think deeply question and write honestly – not what they thought the teacher would want to read but as a form of personal consciousness. We were aware of the confronting nature of these tasks but we are also convinced that the outcomes have been even more valuable than expected. Although we focused on metacognition above pure writing exercises, we realised that the writing improved in sophistication and fluency as a result of the flow of ideas.'

The blogging project has been a highly motivating and enjoyable experience for us as teachers, and the students' reflections and evaluations also attest to their enjoyment of the experience. There is always room for improvement, and the students have provided us with ideas for a modified approach for next year. We have been continually impressed with the high quality of thinking and writing overall, as has the global community of readers who have attested to this in their numbers and positive comments.

I would like to feature some of the student comments as examples of the kind of learning that arises from a successful use of social media in the classroom.

In his post, Simon has eloquently expressed the transformative possibilities of an open community of writers enabled by blogging:

> 'This Posterous adventure has brought a new beginning to my use of the social network. Looking back at the few posts I've published to the world, I can see the journey I have taken, but it is not over yet. For all I know, I may not be what I know; there are still some things I haven't explored. This experience is like one of an engaging classroom; you never want the bell to ring. I have planted precious seeds that are now fully grown evergreen trees. I have the motivation to express my ideas and about myself, even if it is in the blog form. I have discovered new ways to express my word art. I have explored a vast network of shared information. I have discussed controversial issues. I have expressed myself. And now I am here. Reading everyone else's comments and posts was also a fully rewarding experience. I could grasp the perceptions of things from different angles. I could get more takes on a different item. I could get to know other people. Blogging was a different experience, but it still is an open gate full of opportunity and answers. That's how amazing it can be. So thank you everyone for staying with me till the end of the year.'

In his post, Krishnak appreciated being able to read what his peers had written:

> 'Reading other blogs also allowed me to gain a perspective on the opinions of others. What others thought about and what others wrote about opened my eyes to new ideas. The interaction between fellow bloggers allowed us to expand on new ideas and thoughts about life, and also helped me to gain an insight to what people with a different background thought about the same topic.'

In his post, Jialew reflected on how blogging improved his writing:

> 'Writing had always been one of my many dislikes, with the help of classmates I started to grow out of that shell and approach the task. By reading their posts I gained an insight of what they had put into their posts, and most importantly what their views of the world is like.'

He understood how difficult good quality commenting actually was:

> 'Commenting may look simple, but I found it very hard, especially commenting on the friends' posts. Thinking about it rendered my thoughts and contention blank, I had no clue what to do.'

He appreciated the global connections -

> 'Being able to connect to people outside of a restricted classroom is interesting, especially when you think about the distance that that separates the writers and viewers.'

Technical problems are unavoidable. Students should be given the opportunity to become independent problem solvers, not to expect everything to work smoothly, and not to be afraid of experimenting with solutions. He faced technical issues and worked through them.

Kobie understood that the demands of writing in the comments section were much more rigorous than casual comments in Facebook.

> 'Commenting was . . . to be honest, difficult. Mostly because it felt awkward; being told to comment on your classmates writing and critique it felt strange . . .'

This response is understandable for a few reasons. Firstly, commenting is responding to others' writing, and should ideally be a natural and voluntary thing. Young people use commenting in a conversational way without any particular structure, often using 'text speak', and not necessarily as constructive criticism. Commenting is a valuable aspect of written dialogue which needs practice. To make it easier for students, we could provide examples of rich, authentic commenting. Students already have a choice as to which students' posts they respond to.

Eric Wong eventually understood the value of the online writing community:

'I initially didn't like the fact that i had this blog to myself but as time passed, i found out that this blog belonged to the world and especially my classmates.'

Hanan understood the importance of exposure to differing viewpoints:

'You may agree or disagree with other bloggers, but this creates an interesting conversation on what is being discussed.'

William understood the value of the open writing platform enabling a community of writers:

'The fact that we can see other blogs means we can get a profound and meaningful view into the minds of the people we learn, forge deep relationships with and see every day.'

William expresses beautifully the transition from initial apprehension to embracing the blog as a place for 'soul searching' and heartfelt writing:

'When we first began writing our blogs, I felt slightly apprehensive. I almost felt as if it was meaningless; who in the right mind would read the ramblings of teenage boys? This was the first time I had ever "blogged", and I just followed the instructions of my teacher and the actions of my peers. But as I typed, I found it wasn't hard at all. It was almost as if I was releasing a burden from my mind onto virtual paper. It was in a sense, soul searching. As I wrote, I started examining myself; my desires, my hopes and actions. I started examining the world and its happenings closer than I had ever done before. I explored key fundamental issues with today's society and myself.

The apprehensiveness disappeared almost instantly. I enjoy writing immensely and it was a natural process; it felt productive (since it was homework and I was improving my English skills at the same time) and somewhat enjoyable at the same time. If only all our homework was like this! The liberty and freedom to express your creativity and thoughts is my favourite part of blogging. I didn't have to think of things to write; it just came to me as I wrote in a logical order.'

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Unlike some students, who found the open-endedness of post prompts challenging, William embraced them:

'Best of all, it felt casual. We were told that there was no pressure, and we could write anything we wanted. This lack of restriction meant that anything I thought would immediately get written down. I feel blogging has been an invaluable experience and it has been the most enjoyable type of homework we get for English.'

Hayden's response is testament to the challenge of writing prompts which encouraged higher order thinking and pushed students' thinking and writing to a high standard:

'I found that the hardest part of blogging was always to start. I could never consider a way to start my blogs without serious thinking.'

He understood the value of learning with and from his classmates:

'I feel as though all of this was simply a program where we, the students, improve each other's abilities without the assistance of a teacher.'

He appreciated being able to personalise his blog space:

'The fact that I could customize my wall meant that I was able to feel much comfortable with viewing my space and writing the blogs to my heart's content.'

Simon understood the value of the global audience:

'I think it's great that we are writing for the world, and knowing that you are really makes you go that extra mile to make it the best.'

Tony solved his problem of writers' block by broadening his reading and expanding his exposure to different ideas. This kind of independence and initiative is undoubtedly valuable:

> 'When I started blogging on posterous, I felt the challenges of writing. My first blog was tedious and I couldn't think of nothing to write about. I didn't have developed ideas. The hardest part about blogging is thinking what to write which will impress the global audience. As a result, I began to read the newspaper daily to accumulate some fresh ideas. The editorial section was full of sophisticated ideas that I could not fully comprehend. As you read more and more, you take more in and begin to realise there are different ideas, elements and aspects you have not even thought about.'

He suggested that his writing had improved due to his reading audience:

> 'I am fully aware that my writing has changed over the course of my posting experience. My ideas, sentence structure and fluency have improved drastically, ameliorating my overall writing. I believe it is because I have to put lots of effort to come up with these deep thoughts. It is important to have an audience for my writing because they can critique my work. They can help me find the flaws of my piece of work and improve it, make it unblemished.'

Tony's blogging experience has led him to explore other online writing opportunities:

> 'Due to the fact I like blogging quite a lot, I have started writing blogs and comprehensive guides for several websites such as maplewiki and basilmarket. I write on them because I use to play the game MapleStory and I found it quite enjoyable. I want to help out new players in the best way possible. I already have about 24,000 views on my guides. I am going to continue blogging as a hobby. Thank you Mr Fairlie and Ms. Sheko for introducing this to me.'

This is an example of how an initial understanding of blogging satisfaction can lead to the initiation of further, authentic writing outside school. In this case the student has chosen to write for personal satisfaction, identifying an area of expertise and sharing this with a global audience. The student has gone beyond the confines of writing for assessment only.

Michael gave an honest and poetic evaluation of the value of his peers' blog posts:

> 'As you scroll down the countless posts of the two classes of year 9, you will inevitably find shards of preciousness — sometimes golden dust; other times, fool's gold.

> But, undeniably, the thing that gives away the shine of a man is the title of his blog.

> You really do dig deep with blogs.'

Patrick appreciated the development of quality writing through the posts, and acknowledged an improvement:

> 'This was the first time I had made a blog which is why in the beginning of my Posterous space, my posts were short and had little content for pondering. As time goes by and as I practise, my posts get longer and contains a far better quality of content up until now although there had been some variations. This made me to believe that creating a blog could actually supplement and even improve my English writing skills.'

We had no trouble with inappropriate comments, as Patrick stated:

> 'Fortunately there was no cases of trolling or cyber bullying which is unlikely due to the nature of my audience.'

Alan identified the peer and global audience responsible for the improvement and enhancement of writing skills and broadening of perspective:

> 'Through the blogging my writing has changed. Ideas are easier to put into words and I now have a different perspective on topics. I feel it is important to be able to read other people's blogs so that you can gain another perspective on the topic and it is also important to be able to comment and ask questions so that you can fully understand what they are saying. It is also important to comment with overseas people so that we can get an even wider view on the topic. Overseas commentator also made

the blogging experience more enjoyable as you felt your views were being read by more people. Through blogging I was able to get a better understanding of myself and others.'

Vinh was honest in his evaluation of the blogging experience. Blogging opened up experiences he would not normally seek out:

'A blog, in its core, is basically a part of your mind. Just typed out, and shared with the world. I don't see myself in the future as being the artsy, blog-keeping type but i think this years' experience has opened me up to a whole new side to the internet, which I would never have bothered to explore.'

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Writing to a public audience was challenging to Vinh:

'I don't really like putting myself and my thoughts up for public judgement. Even if its anonymous. In a way, you could call me quote introverted, i like keeping things to myself.'

He found writing fluency of ideas challenging, especially since English is his second language. The example of metacognition here is worth noting:

'At first, I had quite a bit of difficulty making my writing fluid and connecting ideas effectively, just because I was, literally, translating my thoughts as i wrote them down. The way I think also made this harder as I tend to think in chunks of ideas, rather than words or single ideas. Sometimes these chunks all link together nicely and so i write fluently and quickly. Other times i get stuck. Having these chunks in Vietnamese also doesn't help the block.'

Blogging has opened up a new world for Nathan (see post here):

'Blogging hasn't changed my style of writing, but it has reignited my passion to do some recreational reading and writing. I now realise that the world of literature and writing is endless and I should never be empty of ideas if I have the right determination and will.'

Lachie appreciated the value of having an authentic audience for writing:

'It was also a great experience to have such a diverse audience to write for. Writing without an audience is pointless. You may as well be talking to a wall. Nobody hears your opinions, your beliefs if you have no audience.'

He summed up the value of a global audience nicely:

'Having people from Finland and America or any other country viewing and commenting on my work is truly a great privilege and honor. However, with this comes a greater responsibility to only write appropriate comments and pieces. These connections made me feel as if my writing actually meant something, that people enjoy my writing.'

He gained a valuable insight into his peers through their writing. Herein lay the value of sharing writing with peers.

'The insight that I have gained from blogging is that there is more to people than meets the eye. That is, that you can't judge people from their exterior but what its on the inside that you should judge and that counts.'

Andrew commented that the quality of writing follows the sophistication of thoughts expressed:

'The insight that I have gained from blogging is that there is more to people than meets the eye. That is, that you can't judge people from their exterior but what is on the inside that you should judge and that counts.'

Andrew valued the authentic audience:

'Of course, without an audience, writing would be somewhat pointless. Nobody hears what we have to say, our opinions, our beliefs are just ignored.'

In his post, Sasank described his initial apprehension about sharing his thoughts with a public audience online, and admitted being reassured by the secure and supported blogging space:

> 'Before this year, i had never blogged as i was protective of my privacy. I was afraid of entering a new world, where i would be sharing things very personal to strangers. However, as the year has gone by, i have developed a confidence in myself and others, as my views have been accepted and constructively commented on.'

His observations underlined the importance of giving students the opportunity to develop the skill of constructive feedback and tolerance of others' opinions:

> " I had to comment on things which i did not agree to, and i still had to be 'nice'."

It was interesting to read that the blogging tasks set for homework were experienced differently to other homework:

> 'It also provided a great diversion from other homework, and basically just gave me some time to myself.'

He admitted that this experience had given him new confidence in his own ideas and writing:

> 'Again, it gave me more confidence and i came to know what others thought about my style of writing.'

Ilan acknowledges that a good blog post takes much thinking, time and rigorous editing.

> 'At the start blogging was a bit of a challenge. I had all of these ideas in my head, most were absolutely terrible, a couple I could form into a semi reasonable post but there is a big difference between half thought out ideas and a well written posterous post. The problem was transferring a thought front my head onto the page and making it make sense.'

The open and personal nature of post prompts allowed students to express their thoughts in a way unrelated to curriculum, and students were able to focus on refining their writing to best express their ideas:

> 'This didn't only help get the ideas out, it also helped refine them and make them more logical and understandable.'

Brendan was initially sceptical about using social media for serious writing but he was soon convinced otherwise:

> 'At first I was sceptical because I thought it would be just another Facebook however the passages written by my fellow students were not stupid and useless such as 'I'm bored'.'

For me, reading the students' comments underlined the value of students' reflection and evaluation of their blogging experiences, using Posterous spaces to create a community of readers and thinkers.

The students' reflections and evaluations capture the essence and purpose of using social media in a learning context . . .

The students' reflections and evaluations capture the essence and purpose of using social media in a learning context much more explicitly than I would be able to do. Their blogging experiences have given them the opportunity to develop network literacies in the context of meaningful, real world learning – 'in concert with others.'

And so, I ask you again - with regard to integrating social media platforms into rich teaching and learning, are you in or out?

Tania Sheko is a teacher-librarian and Director of Library at Melbourne High School. She arrived at this place having previously taught English, German, French, Russian and English as a Second Language. She spends her days immersed in online communities and serendipitously unearthing riches shared by people all over the globe. Her recent obsession is Pinterest which is a bottomless pit for all things visual in collections often curated by experts in the field. Tania rejoices in the teacher-librarian's holistic approach to education, and relishes the satisfaction of

supporting teachers and students to enhance teaching and learning, and take it out of the confines of the classroom through social networks. She is on a mission to integrate essential aspects of digital citizenship into meaningful contexts to prepare young people for the literacies of their futures. In 2010 Tania received the SLAV innovators grant, she is a Google certified teacher and she was nominated for the Best Teachers blog in the 2011 edublog awards.

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