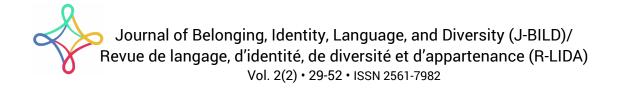Thinning the Classroom Walls:
Graduate Student Perspectives on Blogging as Pedagogy

ALISON CRUMP, Marianopolis College

ABSTRACT. In this digital age, learning is happening in many places and spaces outside classrooms; however, pedagogies do not always reflect or connect with digital and open access spaces for learning. In this article, I share results from a research project I did with former graduate students on their experiences contributing to a course blog for a course I taught in fall 2016. Data come from a focus group and survey. Findings show that blogging as pedagogy, from the perspectives of the graduate students, provided an opportunity for peer and collaborative learning, which enriched their own self-reflections on their learning. In addition, writing for a legitimate audience beyond a single instructor and beyond the walls of the classroom, created a third space where the students could have their own opinions and voices validated. I argue that thinning the classroom walls through open pedagogies, such as blogging, is essential for fostering skills that graduate students need for their emerging scholarly identities.

RÉSUMÉ. En cette ère numérique, l'apprentissage s'effectue dans de nombreux endroits et espaces en dehors des salles de classe. Toutefois, les pédagogies ne permettent pas ou ne sont pas toujours liées aux espaces numériques de libre accès pour l'apprentissage. Dans cet article, je partage les résultats d'un projet de recherche mené auprès de mes anciens étudiants quant à leurs expériences à contribuer à un blogue dans le cadre d'un cours donné à l'automne 2016. Les données proviennent d'un groupe de discussion et d'un questionnaire. Les résultats démontrent que la pédagogie par le blogue, du point de vue des étudiants aux cycles supérieurs, permet l'apprentissage collaboratif et par les pairs, ce qui enrichit leur analyse réflexive individuelle sur leur apprentissage. De plus, l'écriture pour un auditoire légitime, au-delà de l'enseignant et au-delà des murs de la classe, crée un troisième espace où les étudiants peuvent faire valider leurs opinions et voix propres. Je soutiens que de développer une pédagogie ouverte, comme le blogue, est essentiel pour favoriser les habiletés nécessaires aux étudiants des cycles supérieurs afin de constater l'émergence de leur identité universitaire.

Keywords: *blogging, pedagogy, community of practice, graduate studies, public scholarship.*
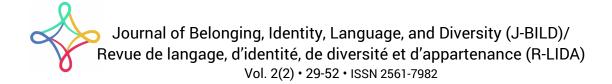
INTRODUCTION

In this digital age, learning is happening in many places and spaces outside classrooms. Collins and Halverson (2009) remarked that despite this, pedagogies do not always provide opportunities to connect with those spaces of learning. In this article, I share results from research I did with some of my former graduate students on their experiences blogging for a graduate course I taught in fall 2016. The article begins with a discussion about blogging as pedagogy. I then outline the context of the blogging as pedagogy research project and describe the research project. This project was designed to enrich my own reflections on my pedagogical intentions to thin our classroom walls through blogging with students' perspectives.

I taught undergraduate and graduate courses in (second) language education at McGill in Montreal for over a decade. When I taught the course that is the focus of this article, it was my first time integrating open access learning in a face-to-face course. Before that, I relied on a more conventional pedagogical approach, which had students hand in a number of learning artifacts during the term and then produce a larger final piece at the end of the course. In this approach, students are, for the most part, writing and demonstrating their knowledge for an audience of one—the instructor. Their knowledge is developed and displayed inside the closed walls of the classroom. Every year, I see excellent term papers that could meaningfully contribute to others' teaching practices or pedagogies, but in the traditional model, opportunities for sharing and expanding knowledge are limited, since only the instructor sees the work. After making a change to my pedagogical approach to open up spaces for connected peer- and publicly-engaged learning, I am no longer convinced that a model that emphasizes displaying knowledge to a singular audience is best serving our students. This is especially true in the field of education, which is unquestionably about engaging in public and social work. As teacher educators, we teach our students about social constructivism and reinforce that learning is social. If we embrace the philosophy that scholarship is "making knowledge together" (Paré, 2016), we need to be providing students with "opportunities to demonstrate their learning in legitimate contexts outside the classroom" (Collins & Halverson, 2009, p. 25). This has inspired me to push beyond the walls of the classroom in my teaching. I did this through blogging as pedagogy.
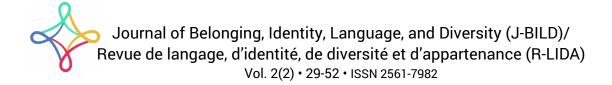
BLOGGING AS PEDAGOGY

I am certainly not the first person to use blogging and other social media platforms as a way to extend learning beyond the classroom in a philosophy of open access and

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connected learning (e.g., Cormier, 2010; Honeychurch, Stewart, Bali, Hogue, & Cormier, 2016; Nunan & Richards, 2014; Richardson & Mancabelli, 2011; Steel, Cohen, Hurley, & Joy, 2012). Stewart (2015) argued that social networks are sites of scholarship, and in fact, extend beyond Boyer's (1990) four components of scholarship—discovery, integration, application, and teaching—by "fostering extensive cross-disciplinary, public ties and rewarding connection, collaboration, and curation between individuals rather than roles or institutions" (Stewart, 2015, p. 1). In socially networked learning, power hierarchies that are sustained in the peer review system, which reinforces the idea that certain people can authoritatively comment on the value of an individual's scholarly work, are challenged. Blogging can provide a low-stakes writing space for peer learning and collaborative production of knowledge; in other words, it can foster the emergence of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), a group of people who have common interests and can learn more about them through their interactions within the community than they would on their own. Blogging as pedagogy also allows for a shift from teacher-centred to student-driven inquiry-based learning and provides students with diverse sources of knowledge (Collins & Halverson, 2009). In the field of education research, there has been particular interest in blogging as a learning tool for English Language Learners (e.g., Alrubail, 2015; Campbell, 2003; de Almeida Soares, 2008; Richards, 2014; Stanley, 2005) and for pre-service teachers' professional development (e.g., Hramiak, Boulton, & Irwin, 2009; Justice et al., 2013; Nambiar & Thang, 2016; Oner & Adadan, 2011).

What I have not seen as much in the scholarship is a focus on the role of blogging as a pedagogy for graduate studies. One exception is Guerin, Carter, and Aitchison's (2015) case study on the use of a blog called Doctoral Writing SIG (Special Interest Group: https://doctoralwriting.wordpress.com) to support doctoral students' writing. The researchers found that the blog fostered a supportive community of practice where doctoral students could get feedback and valuable advice on their writing. In a blog post published in the New York Times, Will Richardson (2017), long-time advocate for integration of media and technology in K-12 education, wrote that because the why, what, and with whom of learning has changed, and learners have more control over their learning. As Richardson (2012) elsewhere argued, this shift puts the onus on teachers to "unlearn and relearn much of our own practice" and rethink our roles as educators. He suggested that we do this by thinning the classroom walls and sending work out into the world; making connections beyond the classroom; and learning along with our students (Richardson, 2012).

For me, these three recommendations resonate deeply with graduate-level teaching as well. Graduate courses are often designed with the goal to help students develop the skills graduate students need for thesis research. In the traditional model of academic

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scholarship, which privileges peer review, the emphasis is on students demonstrating to a professor that they can take a stance on a research issue, critically analyze and synthesize large bodies of scholarship, write a research paper, and do in-class presentations. However, we are at an important juncture for re-thinking our roles as educators at the graduate level. The Canadian Tri-Council agencies now require that publicly-funded research be published in open source platforms (Government of Canada, 2016), and we are seeing a shift in higher education towards publicly-engaged scholarship across the disciplines (e.g., the Canadian Association of Graduate Studies' (CAGS) project to Rethink the PhD; University of British Columbia's Public Scholars Initiative, which supports diverse forms of collaborative doctoral scholarship; and, the increasing popularity of public scholarship competitions for graduate students, such as the 3-Minute Thesis, or 3MT).
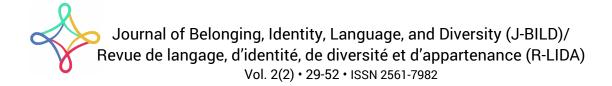
As educators, we need to recognize what it means to be a scholar in the digital age of open access scholarship and how this impacts our pedagogies. We need to embrace pedagogical approaches that support our graduate students' identities as emerging scholars in this changing higher education context. Blogging as pedagogy is one such approach.

CONTEXT

In Fall 2016, I taught a graduate course in McGill's Faculty of Education called Educational Sociolinguistics. In the course syllabus, I described the course as follows:

> The course takes as a premise that language (as a noun and as a verb) is a social construct and a social practice shaped by language ideologies. With this foundation, the course explores the social, cultural, and political dimensions of (second) language education. It pays special attention to areas of sociolinguistics most pertinent to language education, including language variation, language attitudes and ideologies, teacher and learner identity, language contact, multilingualism, and language planning and policy.

My 2016 cohort was the largest graduate class I have ever had, with 37 students. Most of the students had language teaching experience, in formal and non-formal learning contexts around the world. Many of the students were in their first term of graduate studies at McGill and more than two thirds were international students (primarily from Asian countries) or from out of province, so new to Montreal. When planning the course, I knew that I would not have a teaching assistant and that I would need to find ways to make spaces for the students' diverse perspectives on and experiences with language

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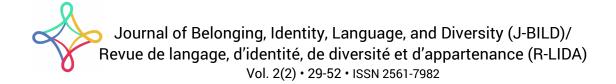Vol. 2(2) • 29-52 • ISSN 2561-7982

education and sociolinguistics. I was not confident that the face-to-face classroom hours alone would be sufficient.

I designed the course with pedagogical intentionality to allow for scholarly work that would extend beyond the traditional closed walls of the classroom and give everyone an opportunity to participate in collaborative and connected learning. I did this by creating a course blog (https://educationalsociolinguistics.wordpress.com) that we would all contribute to. The blogging assignment was called "sociolinguistic noticing" (see Appendix 1). It asked students to write about connections between what we were reading or talking about in class and their experiences teaching or learning a (second) language. On the first day of class, I spoke about the blog in the context of making connections between contributing to and becoming part of an open access scholarly community and the important identity work that graduate students do as they develop their scholarly identities. When I had previously taught the same course, I had set up this assignment on a closed online discussion forum. I wrote about my rationale for moving this assignment to a public-facing blog my first blog post for the course:

> I decided to take this part of the course beyond the classroom walls and face outwards, to the public. Sociolinguists are, at the core, interested in understanding how language is used (or not used) in social practices and settings. We are not often interested in remaining within closed walls. Language teachers who are sociolinguists are interested in understanding the implications of sociolinguistics to theories and practices of language learning in formal and non-formal educational contexts. And so, why keep our sociolinguistic noticing to ourselves? Why not open up this forum and turn it to the public? Why not engage with a broader audience and, in so doing, expand our own thinking and understanding? (September 8, 2016)
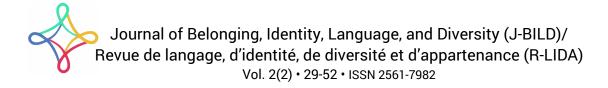
The students were expected to write three blog posts over the 13 weeks of the semester. They could choose when they wanted to write their posts and I evaluated them based on content. There was also a small percentage of the grade for this assignment for blog engagement; that is, commenting on at least six other blog posts. I did not evaluate the content of the comments, but simply whether or not they posted the minimum number of comments. To manage this, I asked students to email me at the end of the course with a list of the URLs of the posts they had commented on. Many students exceeded the minimum of six required comments. Although there was no grade for the content of the comments, I was very impressed with the respect the students showed for each other's work—many comments were longer than the blog posts themselves, provided additional resources and suggestions, and were constructive and thought-provoking.

I also participated in the blog by writing posts throughout the course and commenting on students' posts. As Keiren, one of the participants in the focus group said, "it really helped me that you had already prepared a blog to start it. It gave us an idea of what we were expected to do." Another participant, Monica, also commented on my participation in the blog: "at the very beginning, you posted your comments and you kind of set up a role model for us. What kind of content we should post, and what length that we need to post." My participation served as a model for students, but it was also a way for me to engage in learning with and from the students.

Blogging was a new pedagogical venture for me, and I expected it would be new for the students as well. As such, I built in a few measures to appease what I expected could cause some anxiety for the students. First, I gave students the option to write and publish under a pseudonym. Fifteen of the 37 students opted to use a pseudonym. Also, I set up a discussion forum on our closed learning management system where students could ask for feedback from peers on a blog post before publishing it to the blog. This closed space was only used twice. I was somewhat surprised that they didn't use the feedback forum more but realized during the course that the students were comfortable enough with each other to share feedback on the blog itself. In terms of technical support, I provided students with detailed instructions on how to submit a blog post, how to embed media, and how to post comments. I expected there to be some technical support questions along the way, but there were none. At a practical level, I set the blog up so I was the sole author of the blog. Students submitted their posts to me and then I published them. This allowed me to ensure that there was never anything inappropriate published on the course blog. This was never an issue, although there were a few times when I sent the author an email and asked them to add forgotten references and re-submit.

When we started the term and I introduced the blog assignment, I did not know if we would find an audience beyond the class cohort. Over the 13 weeks of our course, we published 113 blog posts and posted almost 400 comments. By the end of the course, there were over 5000 hits from 37 countries, with more every day even though the course is over (as of the date of publication, there have been over 11,000 hits). I think it is fair to say that we did indeed find an audience. What does that mean for the learning experience of the students who contributed to the blog? Over the course of the term, I had many of my own reflections on the blogging as pedagogy experience; however, in this article, I did not want to write on behalf of my students, but rather give them the chance to share their own perspectives and reflections. This motivated the research project I undertook after the course ended.
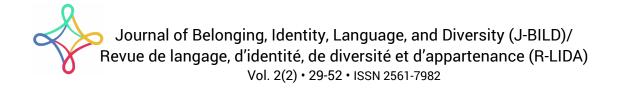
METHODS, PARTICIPANTS, AND DATA

Methods

The goal of this project was to better understand students' experiences with the course blog. I designed a qualitative inquiry that used two methods to generate data: focus group and a survey. Both were based on the same set of open-ended questions (see Appendix 2). In January 2017, after the course was over and I had submitted my final grades, and after receiving approval from McGill's Research Ethics Board, I reached out to my former cohort and invited them to participate in a focus group discussion. I explained that this was the first of two steps in the research project and that they would hear from me again shortly with an invitation to participate in an anonymous online survey. I included the survey in the research design because I anticipated that those who volunteered to participate in the focus group would be students who had had positive experiences with blogging. In addition, I was aware that the focus group participants might be inclined to share only positive aspects of their experiences because of the inherent power differential between us. The anonymous survey was included in the research design to help address the possibility of a biased skew towards the positive. The survey also offered the whole class cohort the opportunity to participate in the study and share their perspectives on blogging.

Participants

The participants in this study were drawn on the basis of the availability of volunteers; that is, it was a non-random convenience sampling (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). There were five students who volunteered to participate in the focus group: Monica, Sky, Keiren, and Vera, and Miley (all pseudonyms). All but Monica were in their first year of graduate studies at McGill, and all are either international students or from another province in Canada.

When we started arranging the focus group schedule, Monica was not able to find a time when she could meet with the rest of the group. She suggested that I meet her over Skype. As a result, I did one Skype interview and one focus group with the other four participants. I did the focus group first, which allowed me to carry threads from the group conversation into the interview with Monica. The interview lasted 30 minutes and the focus group discussion was one hour. I audio recorded both and transcribed the recordings the day after the interview and focus group, respectively. After this first phase, I sent the entire cohort of former students the link to an anonymous online survey that had five open-ended questions. There were ten survey respondents (36.7% response rate).

Data Interpretation

Interpreting the data began with transcription. As I was doing the transcriptions, I wrote my preliminary interpretive reflections on the transcripts proper in square brackets. I then used an open coding process (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), which involved reading through the transcripts and identifying words or themes that repeated, and then re-reading and refining the themes. This iterative process led to the four themes that are discussed below.
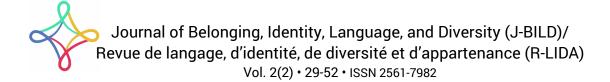
THEMES AND DISCUSSION

In this section, I share vignettes from the focus group/ interview data and extracts from the survey data according to four themes. The themes are not presented in order of significance as none were more prevalent in the data than the others. There is also considerable overlap among the themes.

Learning From and With Peers: "It's not only myself learning this course"

All participants (focus group, interview, and survey) said that when I first presented the blog assignment in class, they felt nervous, unsure, skeptical, or worried about it. However, this changed over time, as they saw the first few posts from peers. Monica, for instance, shared her initial hesitation about writing in public, but after having seen some of her peers' posts, she realized that she had things to share as well.

> You need to write down your words and I'm not good at academic writing as well, so at first I was so worried about that. . . . Then I saw maybe three or four blogs which is very interesting and I suddenly felt that maybe I can share my opinion as well. . . . I grew up in China so I have my personal experiences, and here, maybe people grew up in different areas and they have different feelings about sociolinguistics. . . . It's not only myself learning this course. For example, right now, I have other courses, but sometimes I have my opinions and I want to listen to others' opinions as well, but sometimes at the class, they speak very fast and I cannot catch up with them and I cannot raise my questions to them. And also, I have my opinions as well but I'm afraid of speaking out. But the blogging provides a platform for us to share opinions and for us to make interactions with each other. I think this is quite awesome.

For Monica, the blog gave her the experience of learning with her peers. This helped her feel that she had something unique and important to contribute to others, which was not

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something she had felt in other graduate courses. Although she was hesitant initially to contribute, Monica became a very engaged participant on the blog, writing many long and thoughtful comments in response to her peers. She also said that she appreciated how the blog was a "platform for teacher-student interaction. I think this is not common for Chinese students." Her experience resonates with what Cormier (2010) has written about how open access pedagogy shifts didactic learning, where the teacher is seen as the knowledge-provider, to community as curriculum, which fosters distributed learning across flattened relations of power.

Vera had a similar initial hesitation when I first introduced the blog assignment. Like Monica, seeing her peers' posts gave her some confidence to write her own:
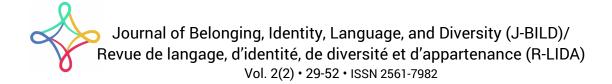
> For me, it was quite a novel idea because I've never had this kind of assignment before. And I wasn't sure what you want from a blog. Do you want us to reflect what we are talking about in class or you want us to combine our own experience? So, I was struggling for a while. But after I'd seen others' posts, it felt good.

One of the survey respondents wrote about how reading blog posts enriched their own learning: "Since I lacked working experience, I was particularly curious about what they [classmates] encountered when they were teaching. I learned a lot in others' blogs as much as in classroom."

Miley described the blog as a community-building space, where she could get to know her classmates and learn about diverse perspectives:

> I also think the blog creates a third space. Like usually we come to class, we hear presentations or lecture, then we go back home, and we never know our classmates. But the blog created a place for us to really know our classmates, their thoughts, their language, their story. And I think it feels more like a community. Feel more close to others.

There is a rich body of literature on Third Space, inspired by postcolonial theorist, Homi Bhabha (1994) and cultural geographer, Edward Soja (1996). In the context of digital communications, Stewart (2016) argued that third space "is a potentially transformative space between the roles of student and teacher, a hybrid space where identities and literacies and practices can actually *change* on both sides" (italics in original). Miley's comment lends support to the interpretation of third space as transformative.

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Keiren replied to Miley by adding that "I felt it's not just about us getting to know each other, but it's also about, it's kind of like a stepping stone to begin a conversation with people who share the same interests." Here, Keiren is speaking about the blog connecting with a community beyond our class cohort. She had been contacted by someone outside the class who had read her blog post and was interested in what she had written. This suggests that the blog helped to foster the emergence of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), which extended beyond the students in the class. That is, it brought people together who share a similar interest, which they developed further through ongoing communication and sharing of stories, experiences, and practices (Guerin, Carter, & Aitchison, 2015).
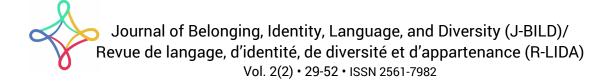
One aspect of the blog that surprised me somewhat was the degree of engagement in the comments. Because I did not grade the content or quality of the comments, I wondered if students might simply write "nice post" and get the mark for commenting. However, the comments students wrote for each other far exceeded this. As Keiren said "[Writing comments] wasn't about the grade. It was about the space we had created. And because you appreciated the fact that you were getting feedback, you wanted to provide feedback back. It was a kind of give and take. It was good." Miley added "Because we are trying to respect others' work and at the same time, we are looking for others' feedback." I see this as evidence of a sense of a learning community among peers.

Overall, the participants felt that the blog was a community-building space that fostered collaborative and connected learning, which took place beyond the classroom walls. While they expressed that they learned with and from their peers, this sense of learning community also including me (the instructor) and extended beyond the class cohort.

Reflecting: "It pushes me to reflect in daily life"

Many of the participants spoke or wrote about how contributing to the blog helped them reflect more deeply on their own teaching practices and learning. Sky, for instance, talked about how the blog pushed her to reflect and engage more deeply, both with her classmates and with the content of the course. She also appreciated being given the agency to make her own choices with respect to what to write about.

> It [the blog] actually pushed me to engage. Well, I think it was the content of the course coupled with the blog that pushed me to engage with things on a deeper level. There was always ideas percolating in my head for blog posts. I wrote 3 and I had probably 10 formulated in my mind that just didn't materialize. I really enjoyed it. And I liked having the freedom to choose which aspect of the course we wanted

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to engage with on a really personal level. Because that's always what you end up coming out with, too, is the parts that you really made your own. I really enjoyed that and it was a new type of learning experience for me. I have always gone through classes where things were very structured—these are the 3 topics you can choose from and these are the requirements. So, I really enjoyed having the freedom to engage with it on my terms.

Similarly, Miley commented on how knowing she would have to write blog posts made her listen actively and attentively during class and that it helped her develop her final project.

I think it really helped me to catch the fleeting ideas, fleeting thoughts in class. I know that I need to write 3 blogs so every time I think about things, I write it down. It forced me to make a lot of notes. And the first blog that I wrote, it was about my own experience and [it] developed into being my final project, which is about language attitudes and ideology. So, I think it really helped me.

Vera found that writing for the blog changed how she thinks about aspects of her daily life that she used to take for granted. It also helped her develop a sense of praxis—that important meeting of theory and practice.

For me, it pushes me to reflect in daily life. I read everyone's posts and they are talking about themselves, their own experiences. [Before], I wasn't reflecting while I was teaching. I thought that teaching and what you learned are quite separate. So, after the blogging, I tried to combine the two. Like in real life, you will notice something that is about languaging or it is about identity. So, I think it's a good way to mix what you've learned and what you are doing.

Sky also talked about how the blog pushed her to engage in deep self-reflection, a critical practice for educators:

Blogging pushes people to self-reflection because blogging is by nature much more personal. . . . It affected not just what we were blogging about, I found, but the fact that I was always thinking about potential blog posts had me engaging in personal reflection in just about everything we did. . . . Even if you don't realize it, you carry a huge set of attitudes or beliefs into the classroom or into your research, so it's fantastic to be pushed to stop and look at what those attitudes and beliefs are and if there are any that you want to change.

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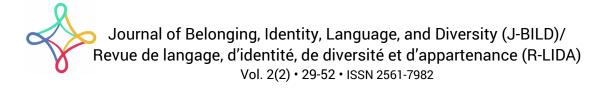Vol. 2(2) • 29-52 • ISSN 2561-7982

Earlier in the article, I explained that I had decided to include the survey in the study to guard against a sampling bias and allow for anonymous responses, which might represent diverse perspectives. On the whole, the participants expressed very positive experiences with the blogging. However, one student's experience stood apart. In the survey, this student wrote:

> I thought it [the blog] was a little tedious and lacked direction. . . . The instructions were too vague and there were no guiding questions. It was not fun when I didn't have any topic in mind to write about. . . . I had a hard time finding topics I was really interested in and it just felt like I was feigning interest for the sake of the assignment.

This perspective is important reminder to me as an educator that my own reflections on and experience of a pedagogical approach do not necessarily mean that all students shared the same position. I intentionally did not give students a great deal of guidance with respect to what to write about on the blog, though sometimes in class, I would suggest a topic that students might want to explore further in a blog post. By design, "sociolinguistic noticing" encourages the students to have ownership of their own learning and reflect on and write about issues or topics that resonated with their own experiences. This student's perspective is a good reminder that everyone comes to a learning situation with their own expectations for what will work for them as learners and this can influence how open they will be to novel approaches that do not necessarily align with those expectations.

Another indication that all 37 students were not equally as invested in the blog was that there were some students who left writing and submitting their posts until the end of term. They treated their three posts as assignments to complete and submit, rather than participating in the community-building aspect of the course.

What I found was that students who were on board with the blog were very on board and their level of engagement led them to deeply reflect on their own learning beyond the context of the blogging and to participate more actively during class, by taking notes or listening attentively. On the other hand, some were less engaged and saw the blog as another assignment to complete and did not see the potential benefits to participating actively. The reflection that most of the participants spoke to is closely related to the first theme (peer learning) as well as the next theme—knowing that they are writing for an authentic audience.

Writing for an Audience: "I could be more faithful to myself as an individual"

As I discussed in the opening of the article, the traditional pedagogical model in graduate studies is a closed model, which has students producing learning artifacts for an audience of one—the instructor. In the focus group and interview discussions, we talked quite a lot about what it meant to be writing for a public audience and how that affected the students' thinking and writing. Throughout the course, I periodically shared blog statistics on the number of visitors we had as well as what countries they were from to reinforce the message that the students were indeed sharing their work in legitimate contexts outside the classroom.

Keiren talked about feeling encouraged when someone from outside the class cohort left a comment on her post: "it was so encouraging when you got feedback or a comment. . .because it means you're writing something interesting and capturing and getting someone's attention."

Because she knew her post would be in a public space, Vera said that she wanted to make sure she was "writing something interesting and [she was] willing to explore the literature to support [her]self." She also talked about wanting to make her writing accessible:

> I was thinking about trying to make it interesting. How to make things you have read be accessible to others who haven't read the paper you've read. And they won't feel that you're just dropping a term, but it's from your own experience and I want to make it smoothly translated. That's way different, because if I write for a professor, I would presume she has read a lot and what I'm talking about, she must know this, so I don't bother that much to make it interesting.

Vera saw writing for the blog as very different from writing for just the professor because she was expected to do more than display her knowledge. It encouraged her to think about her writing differently because she wanted to engage and connect with readers when she shared her ideas.

Miley, likewise, put effort into making her blog posts interesting, not just for the benefit of the reader, but to initiate a conversation with the reader(s). She said, "I also wanted my blog to be interesting because of the audience. I wanted them to comment on it or they can share some common thoughts or provide some suggestions for me." Sky said that writing for an audience helped her approach her writing with intentionality.
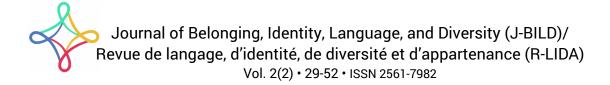
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I found too that it made me a lot more careful about how I put things together. . .it's really easy for me to fill a lot of space, but what are you saying in that space? I really found that having the constraints of keeping it to an appropriate length for a blog post pushed me to make sure that the content of every paragraph really counted. . . . I put a lot of thought into accessibility. . .because it's not just our class that can access it, it's anyone. I wanted to make sure that what I wrote was understandable and engaging to some stranger who happened to type a keyword into a search engine.

As one survey respondent shared "I felt like I could be more faithful to myself as an individual. I was able to let the 'student' take a back seat and share my thoughts as an individual." This comment resonates with the notion of third space, that potentially transformative space where new identities can emerge (Stewart, 2016). For this student, the blog was a space where they could perform an identity other than student. Another survey respondent also commented on the role of the blog in opening up spaces for to perform different identities: "I enjoyed the experience writing for the blog. It allowed me to engage with both the material and my classmates' ways of thinking about that material. A lot of the insights into the readings provided by my fellow students also opened a window into their own identities and perspectives."

Another survey respondent wrote about communicating with an audience: "It is great to have a platform where you can share your opinion with others instead of just handing in assignments without a chance to communicate. And blogging encourages you to think in the position of the readers and organize your idea in a reader-friendly way." As with the others, this participant recognized the value in writing for a legitimate audience outside the class.

In my own preliminary reflections on this project, which I shared in a non-course blog post, I wrote:

Writing for an audience beyond just the evaluator/ prof/ instructor can have an important impact on the development of students' identities as writers; that is, they can see themselves as someone with valid and important ideas. . . . The blog was a space where students could develop (or nurture) identities as writers and this is because they were writing, not just to display knowledge to the prof for marks, but to *engage* an audience, *connect* with readers, *share* ideas. In fact, the focus group participants referred to each other and their peers as authors – something I have never heard among a cohort of students before. (March 5, 2017; italics in original)

Hearing the focus group participants refer to each other and their former classmates as authors, rather than classmates, suggests to me that they emerged from the course with a sense of themselves and others as writers. This is an important insight into the potential impact of blogging as pedagogy because emerging scholars often struggle to position themselves as writers within academia (Fazel, 2018).

Overall, for the participants, writing for an audience validated their opinions and perspectives and pushed their writing skills by encouraging them to think intentionally about making their writing interesting for and accessible to a broad audience. In short, writing for an audience gave opportunity for the students to authentically engage, share, and connect, and open up identity spaces beyond 'student.'

Having a Voice: "Your own ideas are actually valued"

With a class of 37 graduate students, as I wrote earlier in the article, I did not think that the face-to-face hours of our class would allow for everyone to participate in a collaborative learning space. In addition, with the large number of international students, I expected that some would experience in-class language anxiety (i.e., stress, tension, or fear that language learners experience) that inhibited them from speaking in class. The blog was a space where everyone contributed and several of the participants, both in the focus group and the survey, commented on how the blog provided them with a place to express themselves. As Monica said,

> I really loved to read others' stories. We have talked about language anxiety and I think for me, I'm afraid of speaking in front of public and also in the classroom because of my language and sometimes I'm afraid of making mistakes. And also whenever I have some ideas when you're lecturing or people are giving their presentations, I just note down the ideas and then I will share it on the blog later.

Monica not only found the blog was a place she could share her ideas, but knowing that she had to write blog posts also encouraged her to listen actively and attentively during class. For Monica, the blog did not stand alone, but was an integral part of the whole course. In fact, there were a number of students in the cohort whose final projects developed directly from a blog post they had written, integrating feedback or suggestions they had received on their ideas in the comments.

Sky saw the aspect of voice from a different perspective. She said, "I know I'm one of the people who talks a lot in class, maybe too much. I try to tone it down, but it was really fantastic to get a chance to read blog posts from my quieter colleagues because I want to

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get to know everyone, not just the people who talk lots in class." She appreciated being able to hear her classmates' voices on the blog because she didn't in class. This suggests that she saw her classmates as colleagues and collaborators.

Likewise, a survey respondent wrote: "The blog was a great way to hear a wide range of voices; I particularly enjoyed hearing from students who had a point of view and background that was very different from mine." Once again, what echoes in this statement is that the blog was a space for the diverse voices that make up a community of learners. Miley and Vera shared a similar perspective on how the blog was a place where they felt their ideas were validated, as seen in this exchange during the focus group:

> Miley: The blog was a creative space for us to really think about our personal life. Maybe it is not academic or not that valuable to some professors, but it is very valuable for us.
> Vera: Yeah, your own ideas are actually valued.
> Miley: Yeah, it is valued.

Miley and Vera are both international students who did not speak a great deal during class. The blog gave them the opportunity to have their ideas and knowledge validated by their peers.
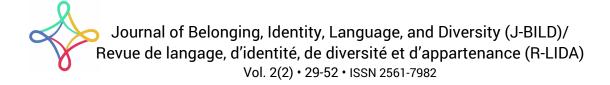
Knowing that their ideas were valued encouraged participants to engage more deeply during class (e.g., by active listening and note-taking). This seems to have been especially important for students who did not feel comfortable talking in class. The blog allowed for everyone to be heard and the participants saw this co-constructed learning as valuable. When learners feel that they have a voice that is valued by others, this contributes to a sense of community and collaborative learning. This is the real work of scholarship.

Before turning to my closing thoughts, I would like to share a few pedagogical notes on challenges I experienced as part of my reflection on the blogging assignment.

PEDAGOGICAL NOTES

As with all teaching, but especially when trying a new approach, there is always room for reflection and refining. Over the term, there were a few challenges that I experienced with the blog assignment, which could be mitigated with slightly different pedagogical design.

The first challenge had to do with the blog posting schedule. Because I wanted to create space for student agency in the course, I did not give deadlines for blog posts. I simply told
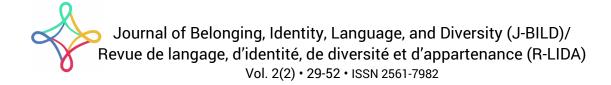
them that they had to contribute three posts before the end of the term. What this meant was that some students left some or all their posts until the end of term even though I tried to encourage them to write throughout the term. In the focus group, I talked about what this was like from my perspective:

> A lot of people left blog posts till the end, so then it was too crazy because I had all the final projects to grade as well. I felt so badly because I was reading these amazing blog posts and I wanted to respond and write back, but I just couldn't do it. . . . I had a bit of a blog crisis in December. I tried to nudge people to post before the end of term. Maybe that's something I need to think about in my planning for the future, not to let it [the blog assignment] go right to the end of the course, but maybe a couple of weeks before. I tried to reply to and comment on all the posts, but by the end, when there were so many, I was reading them, and they were so good and there was so much I wanted to say, but I couldn't.

At the end of the course, the blog lost some of the richness of collaborative knowledge-making that I had seen throughout the earlier part of the term. One of the survey respondents suggested that I provide three deadlines for the posts, so students would need to write one post per month. This is something I would consider in the future.

Another aspect of the blog that presented a challenge for some participants was the lack of feedback they received on their writing (grammar/ style). I evaluated the posts on the basis of three criteria: 1) Evidence of critical engagement of course readings and concepts: that is, making links between the readings and their experiences/ observations as a language learner/ speaker/ teacher and asking questions to push their own and others' thinking forward; 2) integrating other articles/ blog posts; and 3) language. I tried to comment on all the posts and give feedback on the content of the posts, and this proved to me an immensely time-consuming goal. Two of the survey respondents wrote that they would have liked to have received feedback on the language in the blog posts in order to improve their writing. With the class size I had, and the number of blog posts and comments being published, this was not feasible. I would like to encourage any teacher who is considering integrating blogging into their pedagogy to carefully consider the time investment needed to remain actively engaged with the blog throughout the course. I do agree that feedback on writing would add an important layer to the pedagogical design. This would have been a great task for a teaching assistant, if I had had one.

Another challenge was shared by one of the survey respondents, who commented on the difficulty of finding topics to write about.

The challenge for me is thinking about and choosing the topic to write about because I don't want to just analyze a theory. I want to vividly tell a story or describe a language phenomenon worth noticing. Of course, it's not easy. At first, I had to spend a long time searching my mind for a piece of story. But later I became alert to what and how people use languages and it became easy gradually.
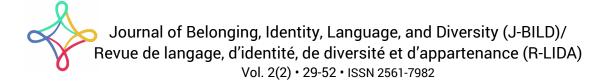
One way to help manage this would be to brainstorm possible topics for blog posts in class. However, since the goal of "sociolinguistic noticing" was to provide an opportunity for individuals to reflect on how their own experiences teaching and learning a (second) language related to what we were covering in the course, I intentionally did not provide much direction with respect to the blog topics. That said, this is an aspect of the design that could be better scaffolded in the future.

Another aspect to blogging pedagogy that I would like to build into future course designs comes from a suggestion by a survey respondent who wrote, "I think blogging was hard for me because I wasn't exactly sure what I was allowed to write and what I wasn't, or what was appropriate and what was not. If we had a quick exercise about safety in writing blogs, it may have helped." I appreciate the students' feedback and suggestions—my future blogging pedagogy will be enriched because of their contributions.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Blogging as pedagogy, from the perspectives of graduate students, provided an opportunity for the students to become a community of practice, where they learned collaboratively from their peers and others, which enriched their own self-reflections on their learning. In addition, writing for a legitimate audience beyond a single instructor and beyond the walls of the classroom, gave them a space where they could have their own opinions and voices validated, where they could hear others' voices, and it allowed them to position themselves as writers, an identity that is crucial for emerging scholars to be able to perform.

Fisher (2011) stated that "learning is only as powerful as the networks it occurs in" (p. 59). With some exceptions, blogging in the course did provide opportunities for powerful connected learning. However, approaches to thinning the classroom walls seem to be less common in graduate studies. I strongly believe that graduate students should complete their degrees with the conventionally expected skills of being able to write academic papers and present scholarly work at conference. However, in the context of the shift in higher education towards open access, the findings of this study reinforce the importance of providing graduate students with opportunities to connect with a wider public in
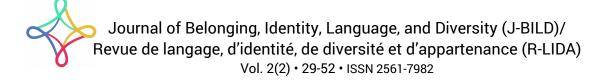
meaningful knowledge-making. Engaging, connecting, and sharing ideas—these are a critical part of developing an identity as an emerging scholar, and should be impacting our in-class pedagogies with graduate learners. Thinning the classroom walls through open pedagogies, such as blogging, is essential for fostering spaces for graduate students need to discover and perform scholarly identities. Blogging as pedagogy is just one way to thin the classroom walls. My hope is that this article may encourage other graduate educators to explore open pedagogies that help thin the classroom walls and engage students in public and networked scholarship.

In closing, I would like to sincerely thank my cohort of former students for bravely embarking on this pedagogical adventure with me, as well as the participants for sharing their insights and suggestions with me. It was a truly enriching and humbling experience to join in this blogging as pedagogy journey with them.

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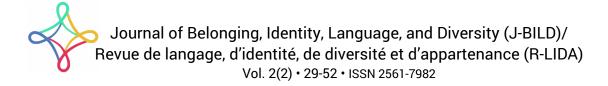
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APPENDIX 1

EDSL 624: Educational Sociolinguistics

Assignment 2: Sociolinguistic Noticing – Course Blog (30%)

I am a firm believer in scholarship as public discourse; that is, scholarship that is open, accessible, and connected to other people. As such, I have set up a course blog (educationalsociolinguistics.wordpress.com), which will serve as our public-facing course space. Through the blog, we will have the opportunity to engage with the wider community. We will seek out connections with others, through blog posts, Twitter (if you have an account), Facebook groups, and other academics.
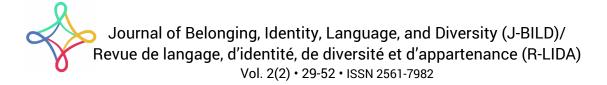
Purpose

The purpose of this assignment is to engage in deep noticing of sociolinguistic issues and consider how they relate to language education and do so in an open forum.

Minimum expectations

- At least 3 original posts any time over the 13 weeks (8% each = 24%), **roughly 500 words each**.
- In your posts, make connections between something we have read, talked about, or that you're thinking about, and your experiences teaching or learning a (second) language. You may also want to offer a critique (see Note 1) of one of the readings we have done in class. You are expected to demonstrate a critical engagement with the course topics. **Pose questions to elicit responses and engage your readers.** What do you want to know more about?
    - If you want someone to read your draft before posting, ask your peers in the class for feedback in the MyCourses discussion thread called "Peer feedback, please".
- The remaining 6% of the marks for this assignment are for engagement; that is, responding to 6 other blog posts (1 response = 1%). I will not evaluate the content of your responses, but will track that you are engaged in contributing to the discussion on the blog.
- It is possible that people outside our class will respond, too. It is good blog etiquette to respond to readers.
- You are welcome to exceed the minimum expectations for posting to the blog.

Note 1: Critique does not only mean being negative. You can offer a good critique, if you think an article/ study is deserving. Tell us why you think it is good (e.g., Is it methodologically sound? Does it offer a new theoretical perspective on an issue?, etc.), or not.

* See the document "Blog Instructions" in MyCourses for step-by-step instructions on how to submit your blog post.

Evaluation Criteria

- Evidence of critical engagement of course readings and concepts: that is, making links between the readings and your experiences/ observations as a language learner/ speaker/ teacher and asking questions to push your own and others' thinking forward
- Integrating other articles/ blog posts
- Language is error free

Grading Scheme

A (exceptional): Expectations of the assignment have been surpassed and demonstrate creativity and originality. Work shows in-depth understanding and critical awareness of links between the individual assignment and other class readings and activities, in line with the goals and major themes of the course itself and goes beyond the course content and material. Language and format of the work are exceedingly well-structured, eloquent and error free.
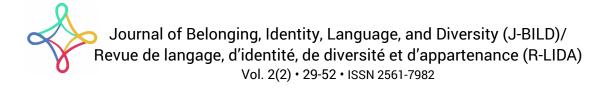
A- (very good): Understandings and insights in the work are apparent, and there is evidence of critical engagement with the subject matter. Expectations are met, and some are surpassed. The language and format of the work are very well-structured and error free.

B+ (good): Expectations of the assignment have been met. Understandings and insights are apparent, and there is some evidence of critical engagement. The language and format of the work are well structured but may contain a few errors.

B (acceptable): Basic expectations of the assignment have been mostly met. Understandings, insights and evidence of critical engagement are somewhat apparent. The organization and structure of the work lack consistency and the work contains more than a few language errors.

B- (adequate): Some expectations of the assignment have been met. Work lacks organizational structure, logical coherence and clarity with frequent language errors.

F (Fail) (inadequate): Does not meet expectations.

APPENDIX 2

Survey Questions

1. What was your overall experience writing for and contributing to the EDSL 624 blog?
2. How did you feel when you first heard about the blog assignment? (How) did your feelings about it change over the term? If so, why?
3. In what way was writing for the blog different from/ similar to writing on discussion forums on MyCourses?
4. Did you experience any challenges or obstacles with the blogging assignment? If so, how could these be mitigated or addressed?
5. Please feel free to share any other thoughts or feedback.