

# Private Journals versus Public Blogs: The Impact of Peer Readership on Low-stakes Reflective Writing

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Drew Foster<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article isolates and observes the impact of peer readership on low-stakes reflective writing assignments in two large Introduction to Sociology classes. Through a comparative content analysis of over 2,000 private reflective journal entries and semipublic reflective blog posts, I find that both practices produce distinct forms of reflection. I argue that these differences can be understood in terms of the risks that students take in their writing. Journals, which do not incorporate peer readership, appear to compel students to take more *personal* risks and engage in *emotional* labor to process assigned materials. Blogs, which do incorporate peer readership, enable students to take more *intellectual* risks and engage in *logical* mental endeavors. The results suggest that instructors should be cognizant of the variety of risks their assignments are likely to compel students to make as they determine how best to engage students in reflection on sociological materials and ideas.

## Keywords

reflection, low-stakes writing, journals, blogging, peer readership

Reflection is essential to the learning process. Thoughtfully reflecting on new information enables learners to make connections between disparate ideas in assigned materials, consider the resonance of abstract concepts with the real world, and reconstitute new information on their own terms and in their own language. While reflecting on assigned materials in sociology classrooms has customarily been accomplished by having students write class journals or logs (Fisher 1996; Picca, Starks, and Gunderson 2013), online class blogs have been lauded as a uniquely productive means of reflection in recent years (Hall and Davison 2007; Pearson 2010). Blog enthusiasts suggest that this result emanates from the pressures exerted by peer readership, which can bolster motivation and writing quality.

However, scholarship that explores the particular impact of peer readership on reflective assignments is sparse. Specifically, in spite of some pedagogy scholars' vigorous endorsement of reflective class

blogs, almost no research exists that directly compares learning outcomes of blogs relative to traditional forms of low-stakes reflective writing (Hall and Davison 2007; Xie, Ke, and Sharma 2008). This is an especially relevant issue for sociology pedagogy considering extant literature's emphasis on the importance of reflection in the discipline (Davis and Robinson 2006; Rusche and Jason 2011). Though research has demonstrated that blogs as reflective tools can render positive learning outcomes, whether these outcomes are the product of peer readership is yet unsettled. This article works toward settling this issue by focusing on two main goals: (1) isolating

<sup>1</sup>University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Drew Foster, University of Michigan, LSA Building Rm. 3001, 500 S. State Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1382, USA.

Email: dmfoster@umich.edu

and observing the effect of peer readership on students' reflective writing practices in sociology and (2) identifying the unique learning outcomes associated with blogs relative to more traditional reflective writing. To examine these outcomes, I conduct comparative content analysis of 2,070 blog posts and journal entries and document the pedagogical results associated with reflective blogs relative to more traditional journal writing assignments.

## REFLECTION THROUGH LOW-STAKES WRITING

Advocates of reflective exercises in the classroom take as their starting point the idea that new knowledge is constructed by individual learners rather than by instructors (Du and Wagner 2007; Leidner and Jarvenpaa 1995). Students "learn" by building their own cognitive structures and mental models during reflective moments of pedagogy (Jonassen 1994). In practice, formal reflection aids in linking the contents of course materials to life experiences in order to make learning more personal and thereby more lasting (Fisher 1996).

Writing is a preferred method of engaging students in reflection (Moynihan 1989; Rusche and Jason 2011). College teachers have found that "low-stakes" writing assignments completed at regular intervals can yield positive learning outcomes through reflection and maintain a sense of accountability regarding readings. In contrast to high-stakes writing, which typically takes the form of longer essays and is intended to formally evaluate students' understanding, the goal of low-stakes writing is to spur students to think further about assigned materials in a casual and exploratory way (Svinicki and McKeachie 2011). Precision and mastery are not the goals in this style of writing. Subsequently, low-stakes writing has been shown to bolster fluency, confidence, creativity, organization, and risk taking by compelling students to find their own language for difficult concepts in the course (Hudd, Smart, and Delohery 2011; Pearson 2010), which is linked to greater comprehension and retention of new ideas (Svinicki and McKeachie 2011).

Class journals (also referred to as logs or memos) have become a staple means of engaging students in consistent, low-stakes reflection on course materials (Fisher 1996; Reinertsen and Wells 1993; Wong et al. 1995; Xie et al. 2008). Often accounting for a relatively small proportion of a student's final grade, a class journal is typically made up of short written assignments that are produced recurrently over a whole term. Some instructors allow students to "free

write" in their journals by way of independently recapping each week's materials, while others direct the reflection process by having students respond to designated questions or prompts for each entry (Rusche and Jason 2011). Journals are a convenient method for reflection because they require students to do the essential work of making connections between assigned materials and their own lives in a format that is both informal and periodic (Fisher 1996).

Journals and other low-stakes reflective assignments are a popular pedagogical tool in sociology courses. In a comprehensive survey of sociology course syllabi, Grauerholz, Eisele, and Stark (2013) found that over 47 percent of courses require short reflective writing assignments, and over 12 percent specifically require class journals. Reflection is particularly essential in the discipline considering the widely acknowledged imperative for students to develop vigorous sociological imaginations; routine written contemplations that connect students' individual experiences to the larger social trends under study can capacitate students to "look beyond . . . individuals to the larger social contexts in which they live" (Mills [1959] 2011:5).

Indeed, studies on pedagogy in sociology confirm that class journals are a fixture in a wide variety of sociology classrooms. Recent research published in *Teaching Sociology* reports that journals are utilized in the sociology classroom to have students reflect on their personal consumption habits (Grauerholz and Bubriskie-McKenzie 2012); the impact of race, class, and gender in their everyday lives (Picca et al. 2013); their fieldwork in community-based research classes (Bach and Weinzimmer 2011); their day-to-day experiences of fear and safety (Hollander 2000); and the application of class materials to newspaper stories (Reinertsen and DaCruz 1996). With such a wide range of social phenomena to address, particularly in introductory and survey courses, it is clear that reflection assignments can be a valuable tool to animate learning in sociology curricula.

### *From Journals to Blogs*

Class blogs are a natural extension of class journals in the digital age. Blogs are online repositories of individual entries or "posts" that are ordinarily displayed in reverse chronological order. They have facilitated the instantaneous act of micropublishing for hundreds of millions of people: WordPress, currently one of the most popular blogging platforms, reports that more than 61 million new posts and 55

million new comments are produced each month in 120 different languages on its platform alone (WordPress 2014). Importantly, one of the primary functions of blogs since their inception in the late 1990s has been to provide individuals with a means of personal reflection on the world (Oravec 2003).

In the classroom context, research indicates that student-produced blogs can render significant pedagogical benefits. Blogs allow students to attach comments to one another's reflections, enabling asynchronous discussion that can begin before class starts and continue after it ends. In this way, researchers have found that blogs help to create and sustain a "community of inquiry" (Martindale and Wiley 2004) in which students interact as both readers and writers to *co-construct* their own learning (Ducate and Lomicka 2008). Through in-depth content analysis of blogs by students, Hall and Davison (2007) found that students tend to independently generate positive and supportive environments for reflection with their peers, particularly in terms of offering aid to one another and clarifying concepts. Additionally, writing regular blog posts helps ensure that students keep up with assigned readings and helps the instructor gauge which areas of the assignments were particularly interesting or difficult for students (Pearson 2010; Svinicki and McKeachie 2011). Finally, that blogs can remain indefinitely published and accessible in cyberspace means that they offer a unique sense of classroom permanence (Martindale and Wiley 2004).

Class blogs also introduce the element of routine peer readership, which is a substantial difference from most class journals. There can certainly be an element of peer readership inserted into journal assignments, such as by assigning journal partners (see Rusche and Jason 2011). However, a key distinction with blogs is that they are typically open to one's entire class rather than to one or two peers. Much research suggests that part of the pedagogic value rendered from blogs and tools like them is a product of students' awareness that their peers could read their work (e.g., Ammarell 2000; Coutinho 2007; Du and Wagner 2007; Ferdig and Trammell 2004; Godwin-Jones 2006; Martindale and Wiley 2004; Nardi et al. 2004; Valentine 2001). In an early study on peer readership among seventh graders, Cohen and Riel (1989) found that students who were writing for an audience of their peers scored higher on measures of content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics than their counterparts who submitted their essays just to their teacher. More recent studies of blogging at

the college level report similar findings. For example, Martindale and Wiley (2004) found that students were motivated to write more regularly and with greater clarity knowing that fellow students were reading their blogs, and Godwin-Jones (2003) attributed greater thoughtfulness in content and structure to the specter of writing for an audience of potential acquaintances. Some scholars have even suggested that peer readership in blogs has the potential to reduce plagiarism through peer pressure (Johnston 2002; Oravec 2002).

Thus, the reported pedagogical perks associated with blogs rely, in part, on a decontextualized presumption about the positive effect of peer readership. Furthermore, two of the prominent studies that have investigated peer readership in blogs (Pearson 2010; Xie et al. 2008) have used blogs in which students chose pseudonyms and therefore remained anonymous. Accordingly, these studies have made important discoveries about the impact of peer readership on writing in an anonymous context, but significantly less is known about contexts in which students know which of their peers has written a given entry. The analysis that follows aims to clarify the effect of peer readership on reflective writing practices by way of a direct comparison of the learning outcomes associated with private journal entries and public blog posts.

## METHODS

### *Data Source and Independent Variable*

I analyzed and compared the contents of 1,049 journal entries and 1,021 blog posts taken from two nearly identical Introduction to Sociology classes. The classes were large lectures that took place in the fall term of 2013 and the winter term of 2014 at the University of Michigan, a large research institution. Each class enrolled the maximum limit of 225 students, and each was broken into nine discussion sections of 25 students that met once per week. The courses were comparable in terms of the total proportion of first- and second-year students (96 percent in fall 2013 and 90 percent in winter 2014) and female students (60 percent in fall 2013 and 56 percent in winter 2014). Both courses were taught by the same faculty member using the same assigned reading list and lectures, and two of the three teaching assistants (TAs) in each class remained the same over both terms.

The syllabi used for both classes were identical with the exception of a recurring low-stakes writing assignment, which constitutes the control variable of

this study. In the first class (fall 2013), students were required to regularly write a short journal entry reflecting on the assigned materials. In the second class (winter 2014), students were required to write reflective blog posts and post them in their discussion section's class blog. In both cases, the section TA was responsible for reviewing and providing feedback on the reflection assignment; however, while the journal entries were submitted directly to the TA, blog posts were submitted on a joint class blog that could be accessed by all 25 students in one's discussion section.

One of the primary effects that this research is interested in isolating is that of peer readership on low-stakes writing assignments. Thus, students in the second class were instructed to read the blog posts posted by the other members of their 25-student discussion section each week. In order to incentivize students toward this end, students were also required to make at least nine online written comments on others' posts. Comments were to be approximately 100 words in length and substantively engage with the post, such as by agreeing or disagreeing with the author, providing an alternative viewpoint, or pointing to an external source that bears on the topic.

The requirements for both the journal assignment and the blogging assignment were described to the students in the same way. Students were told that the intention of the assignment was to have them reflect on the assigned materials for each week and focus their thoughts and questions before coming to class. While students were encouraged to be creative in their reflections, the syllabus directed their writing with the following language:

The goal of your [journal entries/blog posts] is to clarify, explore, and expand upon the ideas from the assigned readings. Thus, in each of your [journal entries/blog posts] you may consider doing one or more of the following: select one reading from the week, summarize the main point(s), and analyze how it relates to one or more readings from the current or past weeks; offer a critical analysis of one specific reading from the week and conclude with a few possible questions for discussion; link one or more of the readings from the week to a current event or to a personal experience you've had.

The reflection assignment accounted for 10 percent of each student's final grade. Students were

instructed to aim for journal entries or blog posts of between 250 and 350 words in length. Students in the first class were required to submit journal entries to their TA by 8:00 a.m. on the day of class a total of nine times over the course of the 14-week term. Since students in the second class were required to write comments on other students' blog posts in addition to writing their own reflections, they were required to write only six blog posts over the term to ensure that the volume of required writing remained comparable across both classes. Posts were to be written by 5:00 p.m. the day before class, and comments were to be made by 8:00 a.m. on the day of class. In both cases, in lieu of receiving a grade for each of their entries or posts, students received short written feedback from their TA when they submitted an item and received a final grade for the entire reflection assignment at the end of the course.

Journal entries and blog posts were written and submitted via comparable online software. For journals, students submitted entries through CTools, a comprehensive in-house software package used by the University of Michigan that includes options for instructors to upload assigned materials, review students' submitted work, and dispense grades. For blogs, students wrote and submitted posts through Blogger, a popular blogging platform. Students automatically receive Blogger accounts with their university e-mail, so no additional sign-ups were required. Both CTools' and Blogger's submission software resembles typical word-processing software, and both enable students to insert images, videos, and hyperlinks with approximately the same ease.

### *Sampling and Coding*

I drew a sample of 2,070 journal entries and blog posts. In order to keep the units of analysis consistent, I refrained from analyzing the comments attached to blogs—I analyzed only the posts themselves. The items in the sample were taken from corresponding weeks in each term to ensure that both data sets (i.e., journal entries and blog posts) reflected the same assigned materials on which students were reflecting. Furthermore, the weeks selected for sampling represent a mix from the first (weeks 4 and 5), middle (weeks 8, 9, and 10), and last (weeks 13 and 14) parts of the semester in order to minimize sampling bias toward the beginning or end of either term.

A team of three undergraduate research assistants (RAs) and I coded each of the sampled items.

Some variables were objective (such as “included an online reference”), while others were more subjective (such as “formed a personal theory on the social world”). For this reason, the RAs and I conducted two rounds of intercoder calibration before proceeding with the formal coding. In the first round, we each independently coded a random sample of 20 journal entries and blog posts, agreeing on 78 percent of the items coded. We then discussed each discrepancy and collaboratively produced working coding criteria for each variable. In the second round, we independently coded 15 more journals and blogs, reached an agreement level of 92 percent, and refined our coding criteria. To further minimize the chance of coding disagreement during the formal coding phase, we set aside any item that struck us as “on the fence” and met as a group to discuss how it should be coded.

### Dependent Variables

Quality of writing defies objective measures. Hence, the goal of the selected dependent variables is not to produce an index of “quality” of writing but rather to isolate a range of *traits* that indicate deeper reflection on and engagement with assigned materials.

I developed the eight selected traits in part from the 2004 report from the American Sociological Association Task Force on the Undergraduate Major (McKinney et al.). I also incorporated markers of productive reflection identified in pedagogy scholarship from a variety of other disciplines, including linguistics, information science, adult literacy, and nursing. Below, I provide a brief rationale for the inclusion of each variable and an explanation of how it was coded:

- *Compared two or more readings.* Identifying the similarities and differences between sources is a critical component of critical thinking in sociology (Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop 2003), and the synthesis or “integration” of assigned materials is considered a hallmark of reflective thinking (Moon 2004). Entries and posts that mentioned two or more readings and expanded on their relationship in some way were coded as 1.
- *Explained a misconception the student held.* Higher-level understanding in sociology often entails a student incorporating a new conceptual framework into her or his worldview and “unlearning misconceptions” (Bohmer and Oka 2007; Pat 2006). Identifying one’s previously held ideas and the way that the assigned class materials has adjusted them is also a cornerstone of reflective learning. Those entries and posts that explained a misconception the student held were coded as 1.
- *Took a position on an issue.* One of the most widely reported benefits of blogs by blog enthusiasts is their tendency to compel students to take positions and give opinions on controversial matters (e.g., Ammarell 2000; Coutinho 2007; Godwin-Jones 2006; Hall and Davison 2007). For an entry or post to be coded as 1 for this variable, the student had to go beyond merely agreeing or disagreeing with an author and state a substantive rationale for their position.
- *Formed a personal theory about the social world.* Recommendations from the American Sociological Association (ASA) for curriculum building in undergraduate sociology courses include teaching students to “analyze, adapt, or create a sociological model or ‘theory’” (McKinney et al. 2004:9). Furthermore, enriching a student’s ability to understand theoretical arguments and to theorize about the social world is understood to be an important step in the development of thinking sociologically (e.g., Eglitis 2010; McDuff 2012). For an entry or post to be coded as a 1 for this variable, a student merely extrapolating from the author’s point was insufficient here. The student had to make a prediction for the future or theorize about the existence of some pattern or process in society that was not specifically addressed in the reading.
- *Linked course material to a personal experience.* Connecting course materials to the personal lives of students, particularly on an emotional level, is a foundation of both effective teaching and productive reflection (Fisher 1996). Entries and posts that were coded as 1 for this variable both invoked a specific personal experience of the student’s and discussed its relation to the course material (e.g., how it confirms or refutes a finding) in some way.
- *Discussed the student’s race, class, or gender.* Understanding the impact of students’ own race, social class, and gender on their lives is part and parcel to effective pedagogy in sociology (Picca et al. 2013). The ASA suggests that sociology departments

should structure their curricula to underscore the centrality of race, class, and gender (McKinney et al. 2004). Entries and posts were coded as 1 when the student not only invoked his or her race, class, or gender but also explained in some way how it informed his or her outlook or experience.

- *Integrated an external source or reference.* Research suggests that composing blogs bolsters students' likelihood of integrating pertinent sources that they find online into their writing (e.g., Oravec 2003; Tekinarslan 2008). Contextualizing sociological concepts by relating them to real-world matters is a long-standing and valuable practice in the teaching of sociology (Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop 2003; Reinertsen and DaCruz 1996; M. Schwartz and Smith 2010). Entries and posts that included and discussed a graph, chart, image, video, or hyperlink were coded as 1 for this variable.
- *Made more than three grammatical or mechanical mistakes.* This variable was intended to operationalize the overall carefulness that the student exercised while writing the assignment. Previous research suggests that peer readership makes students more careful in sentence structure and clarity (Godwin-Jones 2003; Martindale and Wiley 2004). While the definition of a mistake was somewhat at the discretion of the coder, in defining our criteria for this variable, the RAs and I agreed to tallying mistakes in subject-verb agreement, tense switches, run-on sentences, incorrect capitalization, and missing letters or words. Entries and posts that contained three or more of this type of mistake were coded as 1, and all others were coded as 0.

## ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Table 1 summarizes the results of the comparative content analysis of the two data sets. I conducted analysis of the data in Stata 11. I derived frequencies and percentages to produce initial descriptions of the data and used a chi-square test for independence to determine whether the rates of difference between the two data sets were statistically significant. A large sample size (1,049 journal entries and 1,021 blog posts) helped to produce relatively high levels of confidence that the differences observed between the data sets were not due to statistical chance.

Two of the most significant differences between journal entries and blog posts were their likelihoods of comparing multiple readings and of linking course material to the student's personal experiences, both of which were more likely to occur in journals. Approximately one third of all journal entries compared two or more readings, compared to just under one fourth of blog posts (chi-square = 23.23,  $p = .000$ ). Expectedly, in both blogs and journals, when students discussed the relationship between assigned materials, they often chose multiple readings that fell under the same conceptual umbrella, such as race, the media, or religion.

Similarly, journals entries linked assigned materials to the personal experiences of the student-authors more frequently than blog posts (33.2 percent vs. 27.0 percent; chi-square = 9.46,  $p = .002$ ). While some invocations of personal experience were relatively surface level, such as relating readings on educational inequality to the student's own high school experience, many were particularly private and intimate. For example, a few students discussed Rosenhan's ([1973] 2010) article on sanity in relation to their own struggles with mental disorders; others responded to readings on poverty by elaborating their personal trials with living on food stamps or the joblessness of their parents.

Additionally, journals seem to render more entries in which students explain a misconception they held and ones in which students make more grammatical and mechanical mistakes. While the percentage of students who detailed a misconception from both data sets was small, journal entries were more than twice as likely as blogs to contain such an admission (chi-square = 9.23,  $p = .002$ ). Common examples of misconceptions students attended to in their reflections include the true distribution of wealth in the United States, the shortness of the history of marrying "for love" in the West, and the extent of gang violence in urban spaces.

The marker I used to approximate the overall carefulness with which a student wrote the assignment, making more than three grammatical or mechanical mistakes, appeared slightly more often in journal entries than blogs as well. Journals were 3 percent more likely (chi-square = 5.76,  $p = .016$ ) to contain three or more mistakes than blogs. As expected, the most common mistakes were missing letters or words, subject-verb agreement, and tense switches.

Blog posts scored higher in two areas: taking a position on an issue and developing a personal

**Table 1.** Comparative Content Analysis of Reflective Journal Entries and Blog Posts.

Variable	Journal entries		Blog posts		Significance level
	Raw score	%	Raw score	%	
Compared two or more readings	355	33.8	247	24.2	$p < .01$
Explained a misconception they held	39	3.7	16	1.6	$p < .01$
Took a position on an issue	78	7.4	145	14.2	$p < .01$
Formed a personal theory	102	9.7	127	12.6	$p < .05$
Linked material to a personal experience	349	33.2	276	27.0	$p < .01$
Discussed author's race, class, or gender	111	10.6	111	10.9	<i>ns</i>
Included an online source	61	5.8	56	5.5	<i>ns</i>
Made more than three grammatical/mechanical mistakes	111	10.6	78	7.5	$p < .05$

theory about the social world. Blogs were approximately twice as likely to prompt a student to take a position on a divisive issue (chi-square = 24.72,  $p = .000$ ). For example, in learning structure and agency by way of readings about the American dream, several students wrote opinionated blogs about the relative importance of the welfare system and the efficacy of "hard work." Later in the term, Pepper Schwartz's ([1994] 2011) article on peer marriage prompted students to state and defend opinions on same-sex marriage and stay-at-home dads—a strong majority of the students were in favor of these phenomena.

Related to opinions were personal theories that students developed to explain some process or pattern in society. Blogs rendered such theories at a marginally higher rate than journals (12.6 percent vs. 9.7 percent; chi-square = 3.91,  $p = .048$ ), and passages that were coded as having developed a personal theory varied widely in content. For example, some students produced theoretical ideas to explain the impact of technology on social networks.

I also feel that due to the advances in modern technology people are starting to become less socially interactive with one another. For example, If someone sees someone else reading one of their favorite books and they

have a conversation with each other, that helps enhance their skills to interact with one another. On the other hand, with today's technology you would not even have that chance to speak with someone about your favorite book because you would never know what they're reading about in the first place . . . (blog post, March 28, 2014)

Other students theorized about how social categorization works in response to readings on stratification and about how the media systematically depicts the ruling class in response to film clips of working-class families.

Finally, two of the eight variables did not register statistically significant differences between journals and blogs. An online source—such as a video, image, or hyperlink to a news story—was only slightly more likely to be included in a journal entry than in a blog post. What is more, neither assignment moved students to include an outside source with much frequency at all (5.8 percent of journals and 5.5 percent of blogs), despite the assignment description's suggestion for students to do so. Perhaps more interestingly, despite the course contents' strong emphasis on social identity, neither assignment was more likely to compel a student to invoke her or his race, class, or gender—both produced relatively low rates of about 11 percent on this variable.

In sum, the findings regarding productive reflection are mixed. Neither the journal assignment nor the blogging assignment produced entries that contained higher rates of all or a majority of the selected traits. One general conclusion one can draw from these findings is that journals and blogs each have their own strengths in terms of their ability to engage students in deep reflection. In what follows, I offer my interpretation of these strengths and discuss their relationship to peer readership.

## DISCUSSION

These data could be interpreted in a number of ways, but after reviewing and coding several hundred reflective pieces, I am inclined to make sense of these differences in terms of the type of *risks* that students take in their reflection. Specifically, students appear to be overall more likely to take greater *intellectual risks* in blogs, which they know will be read and commented upon by their peers. Conversely, journals—the more private option—compel students to be vulnerable and take more *personal risks* in their reflection.

In blog posts, students were significantly more likely to take a position on a controversial issue and to develop a personal theory about the social world. What many of the opinions and theories students produced had in common was the fact that they were debatable. Engaging in either or both of these two reflective pursuits potentially opens the author up to attack and critique. That is to say, both constitute intellectually risky moves in which the student is more likely to be forced to marshal evidence and engage in *logical* mental endeavors.

For example, in a blog post reflecting on Eitzen's ([2004] 2010) article about various macro-level social changes leading to an "atrophy" of social life, the student-author makes a case against Eitzen's strategic ignorance of the beneficial results of many of the changes he highlights. She concludes, "Overall, Eitzen should focus on the positive attributes of social atrophy because we cannot stop the progression of technology and communication. It is better to understand the modifications, and have a positive outlook on how they change society" (blog post, April 15, 2014). Later, a classmate attached a comment to this post that affirmed the student-author's assessment of the piece but disagreed by offering additional evidence in service to Eitzen's argument. The commenter argued that new technology is only increasingly likely to keep people from communicating face-to-face with others and that this is inherently negative for social

solidarity. Admittedly, most comments on blogs were wholly in agreement with the posts' authors. Still, the prospect of debate or critique from peers (albeit friendly and affirmative) is what makes such practices intellectually risky.

On the other hand, explaining a misconception or linking the material to a personal experience—two of the practices journals more frequently elicited—constitute more personally risky forms of reflection. Admitting that one was wrong about something or exposing a relatively private detail about oneself both open the student-author up to personal scrutiny and are potentially threatening to one's esteem. In contrast to the logical labor associated with intellectual risks, I see personal risks as more likely to force a student to engage in *emotional* mental endeavors in their reflection.

In describing misconceptions that they had held, many students used self-deprecating language, like "I can't believe I used to think . . ." or "I was so stupid to believe . . ." To offer an illustrative example, one student lamented the rather rigid conception of gender roles he had held before reading for the unit focusing on that topic and concluded his journal entry with "After reading these articles, I realized how little I knew about the difference between sex and gender" (journal entry, October 25, 2013). Similarly, tying readings to personal experiences often provoked language that was guilty or repentant in tone. For example, a student who came from a wealthy suburb summarized his high school experience in a journal entry and then stated, "I feel guilty for being white and for being from the upper middle class because I did nothing to deserve everything that was handed to me" (journal entry, November 24, 2013). Another example comes from a student responding to Pascoe's ([2007] 2010) work on the usage of the epithet *fag* among high schools boys: "From my own experience, I have observed the term being used in a joking manner. In fact, I used it myself in high school, and I feel terrible about it now" (journal entry, October 23, 2013). All of this amounted to journal entries generally reading as more emotionally loaded than blog posts.

The specter of peer readership is significant here. I argue that one can observe students taking less personal and emotional risks in blogs because they are aware that their peers (rather than only their instructor) will read their insights. This is in line with previous findings that private journals compel students to disclose true feelings and anxieties because they believe they are under less scrutiny (Hall and Davison 2007) and because they

believe their instructors want them to offer personal revelations (Swartzlander, Pace, and Stamler 1993). This may also partially explain why students' blogs were less likely to have significant grammatical and mechanical mistakes, as students may have wanted to give off a more careful and polished impression in front of an audience of peers. Similarly, students seem to take more intellectual and scholarly risks in blogs, partly because they perceive that form of reflection as more performative and as containing a higher potential to appear bright, insightful, and of value in front a particularly high-stakes audience—their peers.

## CONCLUSION

This research has shown that neither private journals nor public blogs produce definitively higher-quality reflections from students. Instead, each is more likely to elicit different forms of productive reflection. I have proposed that one can make sense of these differences in terms of the risks that students take in their writing. Private journals, which do not incorporate peer readership, appear to enable student to take more personal risks and engage in emotional mental labor to process assigned materials. Public blogs, which do incorporate peer readership, appear to compel students to take more intellectual risks and engage in mental endeavors more associated with logic and rationality. Instructors can utilize these insights strategically as they determine how best to engage students in written reflection on the topics under study, which, in sociology, are often controversial and politicized.

This study further indicates that qualitative research on peer readership is an important next step. In particular, research that seeks specifically to understand if and why students are truly more likely to be intellectually risky in blogs is necessary. In my view, a promising initial hypothesis would incorporate an understanding of blogs as potential tools of status management among peers. Furthermore, some of the differences observed in this study may also be explained by the climate of friendliness and collegiality that is cultivated in the classroom; it may well be that students are more likely to take risks in front of their peers online if they are on friendlier terms with them or there is a more casual discussion climate in their offline learning time. This might have implications for the risks students take in upper-division classes or smaller classes, where students are more likely to be acquainted with one another, as well as in online

classes, where students are not likely to be acquainted. Research that accounts for how students think about risks in writing and for the unique classroom contexts in which students take these risks would further augment our understanding of reflection practices.

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Drew Foster** is a doctoral candidate in sociology at the University of Michigan. He is currently completing a dissertation on the creation of lay medical knowledge by chronic pain sufferers in online health communities.