

---

# Increasing Qatari Students' Motivation Through the Use of Blogs: The Case of WCMC-Q Qatari Students

**Krystyna Golkowska and Rachid Bendriss**

*Cornell Medical College, P.O. Box 24144, Doha, Qatar*

*Telephone: 974-4492-8221, Fax: 974-4492-8222*

*E-mail:*

*Krystyna Golkowska: [Krg2005@qatar-med.cornell.edu](mailto:Krg2005@qatar-med.cornell.edu)*

*Rachid Bendriss: [Rab2029@qatar-med.cornell.edu](mailto:Rab2029@qatar-med.cornell.edu)*

---

*Growing up in an oral culture, students in the Middle East often start their university studies with insufficient reading comprehension and critical thinking skills, which negatively impacts their performance in institutions following a Western style curriculum. Both the literature and anecdotal evidence emphasize the need for helping Arab students to become fluent readers. The authors, who teach in the Pre-Medical Education Program at Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar, advocate combining explicit instruction in reading strategies with activities that encourage extensive reading. This article describes their pilot project aimed at increasing students' motivation for reading through the use of a Web 2.0 technology tool.*

## Introduction

In the Gulf region, many Arab students enter institutions of tertiary education without adequate preparation. Their failure to acquire academic literacy can be attributed to various causes, with diglossia and orality playing an especially prominent role. There is clearly a lack of reading culture or voluntary reading in Arab societies. It has been reported that Arab adults stop reading or read less at the age of 19-25 (Shannon, 2003; Synovate Market Research Agency, 2007). Moreover, in the context that privileges orality, schools do not do enough to build literacy skills. As reported by Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller (2001), reading instruction in the region stops at the middle school level because teachers focus on content area courses rather than on fluency development and comprehension strategies. Obviously, building reading comprehension and reading habits takes time. To read with pleasure and confidence students need a certain level of reading fluency, which in turn comes only with repeated exposure to texts. Not surprisingly, students with poor reading skills read much less than others, which affects their background knowledge and impacts future learning in all areas (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1997).

In this situation, to increase Arab students' chances of academic success instructors need to focus on helping them become fluent and confident readers in as little time as possible. The authors, who teach pre-medical Qatari students at Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar, advocate a two-prong approach combining intensive practice in reading strategies with activities that encourage extensive reading. The present article discusses their pilot project using blogs as a tool of increasing students' motivation.

## **Literature Review**

Research on developmental education asserts that foundation reading and writing courses enhance student achievement in tertiary education (Napoli & Hiltner, 1993). In their investigation of reading comprehension strategies, Mastropieri and Scruggs (1997) found a positive influence of multipass reading strategies on learners' reading comprehension. Multipass, a strategy similar to SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review), makes readers progress through a text three times. The first step, called survey pass, familiarizes students with the text organization and main ideas and prompts them to summarize in their own words. The second step, "size-up pass," asks students to read questions in the material, skim it to answer them, and paraphrase the answers. The final step is sort-out pass that prompts readers to self-assess their understanding of the content and remembering of the main ideas (Mastropieri and Scruggs, 1997). According to Slaght, Harben, and Pallant (2009), "reading strategies can be viewed as techniques that are consciously applied in the reading of a text...Effective readers have a range of effective reading strategies at their disposal" (p.13).

The strategic approach to reading instruction at the college foundation level builds reading skills that can be used automatically and effectively across the curriculum. However, it also needs to be complemented with activities and assignments that encourage extensive reading. Unless students form the habit of reading on a regular basis, they will make little progress, hence the need for designing activities that engage learners and increase their motivation. In the digital age such attempts are bound to be more successful if they involve the most popular means of communication.

The benefits of using technology in the ESL/EFL classroom have long been widely recognized. In this context, recent years have seen a considerable growth of interest in blogging. It has been observed that a web log, or blog, can play a vital role in engaging second language students and motivating them to write more. Since blogging provides a forum for sharing and publishing one's thoughts and responses publicly, it is considered a hybrid genre (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus & Wright, 2004). It creates a sense of learning community thanks to the exchange of ideas and comments through students' entries and their responses to peers' posts. According to Ward (2004), "a blog provides a genuine audience, is authentically communicative, process driven, peer reviewed, provides a disinhibiting context and offers a completely new form with un-chartered creative potential" (p. 3). These characteristics are fundamental to the creation of an environment where

second language learners can feel relaxed and safe to experiment with their writing and appreciate their membership in the academic community.

The use of weblogs in a composition class provides several benefits. First, blogs provide a genuine audience because in this medium “the audience is not only anticipated but expected, and thus influences and structures the very manner in which the writer articulates, composes, and distributes the self-document” (Kitzmann, 2003, p. 1). Therefore, when students write online, their writing identity becomes more meaningful, since the audience is authentic and interactive.

The second benefit to the use of blogging in class is that it reinforces the process approach to writing. As students regularly update their blogs or the class blog they are reminded that writing is a continual process. Thus, instruction incorporating blogs “combine[s] the best elements of portfolio-driven courses where student work is collected, edited, and assessed, with the immediacy of publishing for a virtual audience” (Kennedy, 2003, p. 4). In addition, writing in a blog incorporates peer review because students may critique, advise, and give suggestions synchronously or asynchronously.

Not only do blogs encourage students to write more, but they also promote the development of reading skills. The blogosphere provides students with countless opportunities to read authentic material on a variety of topics that interest them. Blogs also promote active reading “because through writing, the writer becomes more aware of the notion of audience; and through blogging, s/he becomes more familiar with the corresponding idea of purpose” (Ward, 2004, p. 6). For all these reasons, it seems that incorporating blogs can prove a valuable tool in promoting extensive reading among Qatari students.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of the pilot study described here was to find out if combining technology with explicit instruction in reading strategies and encouragement of extensive reading would have a positive impact on the students’ attitude to reading and perception of their competence. By incorporating blogging in a module designed to promote extracurricular reading activities, the researchers hoped to increase the participants’ motivation to read.

## **Research Questions**

Building on their previous investigation into early reading habits of Arab students (Bendriss & Golkowska, 2011), the researchers hypothesized that even a small increase in fluency due to explicit instruction in reading skills combined with an emphasis

on active reading would have a positive impact on students' attitude to reading and self-perception as competent readers. To improve motivation, the researchers decided to incorporate the use of blogs and allow students to choose a text out of a selection tailored to their interests and proficiency. The pilot study sought answers to the following questions:

- Does the suggested approach result in students' increased confidence and more positive attitude to reading?
- What do students perceive as the most important factor leading to improved reading competence?
- Is incorporating blogs effective as a means of encouraging active reading?
- Do students prefer to read the same text as a group or individually selected texts?

With reference to the last question, it needs to be added that the design of the present study was a variation on a previously implemented module in which all the students read the same novel and responded to it in traditional reading journals. A comparison of the two methods is planned to take place in a later phase of the project.

## **Methods**

### ***Background and participants***

Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar (WCMC-Q) is one of the six major North American universities in Education City in Qatar and the first medical school in the Middle East. It consists of the Foundation Program, Pre-Medical Education Program, and Medical Education Program. The mission of the Foundation Program is to strengthen students' language skills and knowledge in basic sciences to prepare them for the rigors of studying medicine. Upon completion of the Foundation Program, students enroll in a two-year Pre-Medical program, take the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT), and apply to the four-year Medical Program.

The present study involved a total of 21 (12 female, 9 male) Foundation and premedical students whose first language was Arabic. The participants were 17 to 21 years old and came from Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and Sudan. On average, they had studied English for about three years prior to enrolling in college.

## ***Procedure***

The study began at the end of the fall 2011 semester and continued over the winter break. In the last weeks of the fall, the researchers provided their students with a number of fiction and nonfiction books to choose from and to read in their free time. During the book selection meeting the students perused the books and exchanged reactions to the titles, cover pages, and the back cover testimonials. In the spirit of extensive reading principles, they had the total freedom to pick any book they wanted. The following is a list of the texts they decided to read:

- Albom, Mitch. *Have a Little Faith*
- Asher, Jay. *13 Reasons Why* by Brown, Dan. *Angels and Demons*.
- Coelho, Paulo. *The Pilgrimage*.
- Fitzgerald, F.Scott. *The Great Gatsby*
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*.
- Khaled Hosseini. *The Kite Runner*.
- Frances Mayes. *Under the Tuscan Sun*.
- McCarthy, Cormac *The Road*.
- Mullen, Thomas. *The Last Town on Earth*.
- Nigam, Sanjay. *The Snake Charmer*.
- Pausch, Randy. *The Last Lecture*.
- Picoult, Jodi. *My Sister's Keeper*.
- Sacks, Oliver. *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*.
- Sachs, Jessica Snyder. *Good Germs, Bad Germs*.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

After the students chose a name for the blog, the researchers created a blog on *Wordpress.org* and registered the participants as authorized users. The bloggers were asked to post ten entries that captured their emotions, thoughts, ideas, reactions, or observations about the texts they read. To create a lively conversation and interest in the other texts, the students were also asked to reply to at least three blog entries by their classmates, give a book presentation, and write a book review.

## ***Instrumentation***

Data for this study came from four sources. First, the participants completed a demographic questionnaire at the start of their academic year to elicit information about their age, gender, educational and cultural background. Second, the Arab Survey of

Reading Attitude (ASRA) was used to collect data on the participants' attitude towards reading, their perceptions on the improvement of reading fluency, and factors that played the most important part in increasing their reading motivation. Next, at the end of the spring semester, the students completed the Blogging Impact on Reading Survey (BIRS) to gather information about their impressions of whether blogging played any role in motivating them to read more. Both of the two latter surveys included open-ended questions about the students' overall experience. Finally, a number of study participants representing a range of reading proficiency were interviewed to explore their reactions to the blog experience and the role of other reading activities in their reading motivation.

### ***Data Collection***

The participants in the study completed the demographic questionnaire in the beginning of the 2011 fall semester, whereas the Arab Survey of Reading Attitude (ASRA) and the Blogging Impact on Reading Survey (BIRS) were administered at the end of the 2012 spring semester. The survey questions used the Likert Scale ranging from "Very Strongly", "Strongly", "Moderately", "Slightly" to "Not at All". The interviews were conducted and recorded at the end of the spring semester.

## **Results**

The survey confirmed that in high school most of the students had not engaged in voluntary reading and had not been encouraged to read for pleasure; they had not been introduced to reading strategies either. These results are consistent with the researchers' previous study on Qatari students' early reading habits (Bendriss & Golkowska, 2011). The following comments were fairly typical:

*In high school I did not read a lot except the assignments we were given. Once I joined a college I started reading more often and enjoy it because of new reading skills I learned.*

*High school did not help me a lot with reading, but I was reading to improve my language in English and to have more knowledge in Arabic.*

The respondents stated that their reading fluency had improved since entering their first year in college. As shown in Table 1, the number of the participants who believed strongly or very strongly that this was the case was quite high:

Table 1: Reading fluency improvement since entering first-year college

Response	Number of Responses	Percentage of Improvement
Very strongly	5	22%
Strongly	14	61%
Moderately	3	13%
Slightly	0	0%
Not at all	1	4%

A significant number of the respondents also perceived a change in their attitude to reading (see Table 2).

Table 2: Change in attitude to reading

Response	Number of Responses	Percentage of Improvement
Very good	7	30%
Good	11	48%
Fair	3	13%
Poor	1	4%
Other	1	4%

The participants talked at length about the change in their attitude towards reading in the follow up interviews. It is interesting to note that in describing how they had learned to enjoy reading, some students specifically referred to the reading strategies they had learned:

*I read for pleasure now. Drinking karak (local tea with milk drink) or perhaps coffee while reading. Skimming through the pages before going deep in the article or essay.*

*My love towards reading books in high school just developed as I entered WCMCQ. I used to read less because I did not have access to a lot of books and my friends in high school did not read a lot. Now in WCMCQ there is a library where I can check out books, and friends that read a lot can recommend some books to read.*

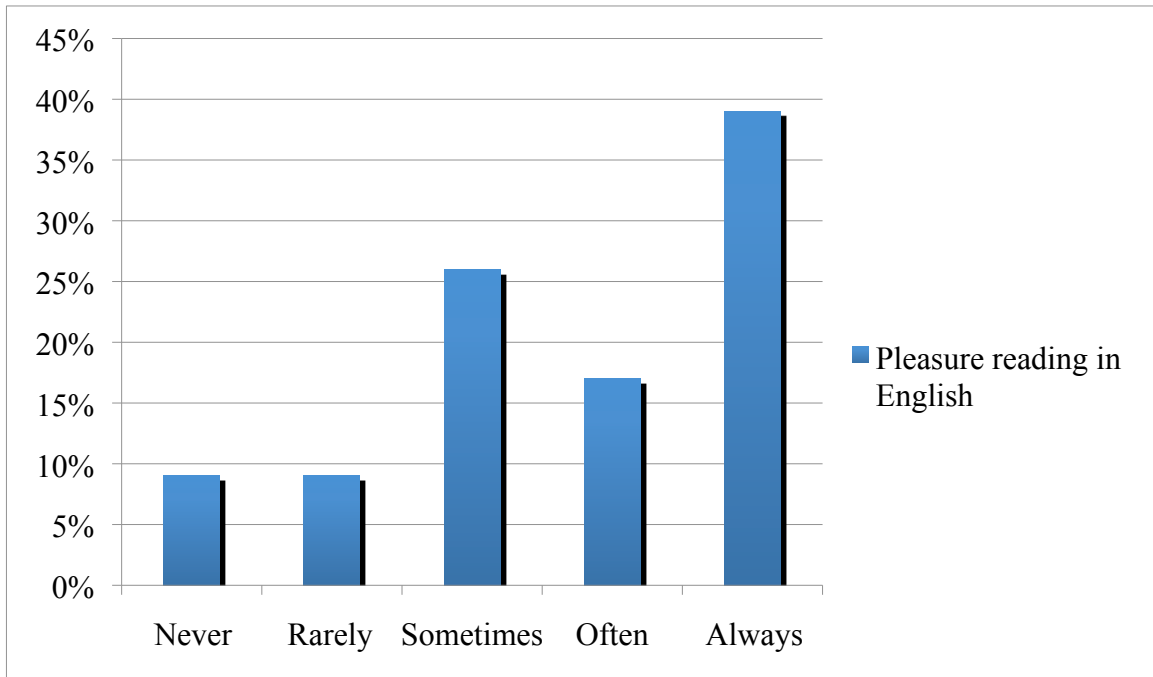
*Even though I still get bored from reading, I believe that it is my success key, as the famous quote states, " the more you read, the more you know, and the more you lead." Thus, I am trying to change myself into a good and inshallah (God willing) an active reader.*

*Reading is fun and beneficial, probably not in the short-run but for sure in the long one.*

*After high school, my reading skills developed and I learned a lot of close-reading techniques, literary analysis. I also learned to look for intertextual communication (allusions) as well as nuances in texts.*

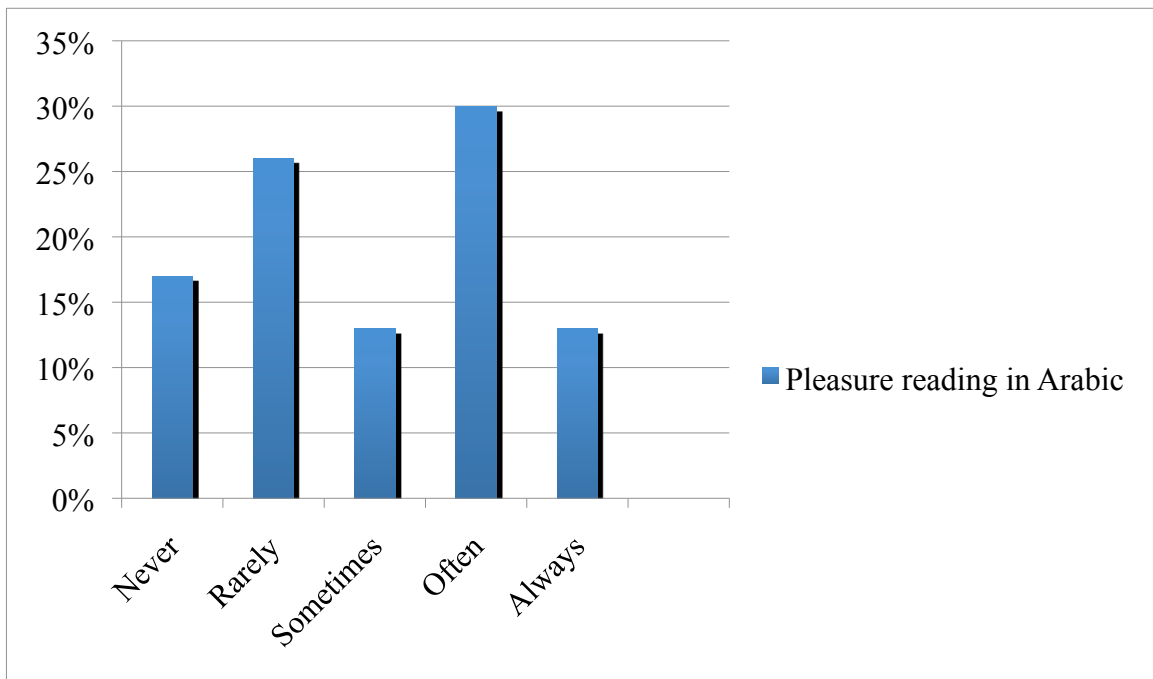
*Before high school or to be honest, I have not read a book throughout my whole life. After high school, when I entered WCMC-Q, I finally got a chance to read and finish my first novel, which is *The Road*. I was so proud of myself and I can't wait to read other fascinating books with a similar genre to *The Road*.*

Interestingly, the participants expressed a preference for reading in English. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, in response to the questions whether they read for pleasure in English or Arabic, 39% versus 13% chose the answer “Always” with reference to English.



*Figure 1: Pleasure reading in English*





*Figure 2: Pleasure reading in Arabic*

It is possible to see this preference as resulting from, among other things, exposure to interesting subject matter as well as active reading practiced with English texts.

Study participants also indicated that among the most important factors that increased their motivation to read were better reading fluency (30%) and the opportunity to read with ample access to texts (26%). Figure 3 below illustrates the factors that increased students' motivation to read.

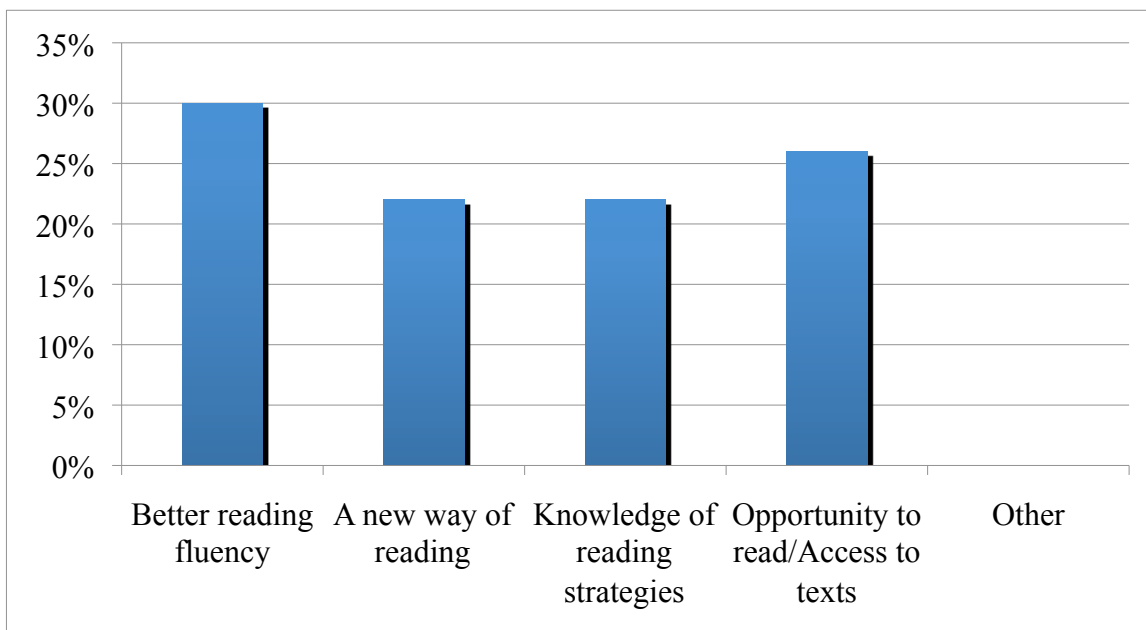


Figure 3: Factors that increased motivation for reading

Asked about their opinion on incorporating blogs into the reading program, the students expressed enthusiastic support for the idea. The themes that emerged from their comments revolved around the opportunity for self-expression, communicating their opinions to others, and a sense of pride in belonging to a reading community. As the following comments illustrate, this experience of expressing their thoughts and feelings and sharing them with others acted as a powerful motivator:

*Being able to speak my mind was great, and getting positive feedback on my entries made me want to write more.*

*I actually enjoyed blogging a lot. I thought it was a great experience of expressing my thoughts and ideas and sharing them with others.*

*I thought the blogging experience was really fun, because after reading each chapter from my book, I went and wrote about the chapter. At the end of finishing my last blog entry, I read all my blogs again and remembered everything about the book.*

*My family also read my entries and understood the important elements of the book.*

*It was good especially that we stayed in contact outside campus. Also, getting feedback from what you write widens your horizon, meaning that it makes you think of aspects in the story that you have never thought of while reading.*

Interestingly, the students also commented on the positive impact blogging had on their

critical thinking and on their awareness of themselves as writers addressing a specific audience:

*This was a good experience to originate ideas. The blog made me more aware of my writing.*

*The idea of creating a blog for the foundation class was an excellent choice because I would love others to read my posts and to think about the things that I write.*

*Through the blog, I could share my experience about any book I read and could read about other students' experiences. It was just so similar to the way I usually do with my friends whenever we gather, but by writing, and hence it can help improve my writing skills.*

## **Discussion**

The findings confirmed most of the researchers' hypotheses. It was anticipated that the students would see themselves as better readers after taking courses at WCMC-Q. The fact that as many as 83% of the participants in the survey stated that their ability to read had improved is nevertheless quite impressive. It is this increased confidence captured in the student survey that the pilot project aimed to create. Moreover, the students' perception corresponded to the instructors' assessment. Measured by objective tests in the fall and spring semesters, the students' progress was in some cases less than spectacular but nevertheless substantial.

The fact that the participants in the survey attributed the improvement in their reading competence equally to learning reading strategies and a different way of reading validated the researchers' two-pronged approach. In high school the students were not taught reading strategies, were not asked to read actively, and were assigned books they found inaccessible and irrelevant. With no model for engaging texts and no encouragement of reading for pleasure, they found it hard to develop the motivation for reading. At WCMC-Q, however, learning how to read and how to engage texts turned them into more confident readers and allowed them to discover the joy of reading.

What came as a surprise in the survey and follow up interviews was the importance the participants ascribed to access to texts as a motivational factor. This finding confirms the researchers' previous observation that Qatari students lack exposure to books and need guidance or support in the process of selecting them (Bendriss & Golkowska, 2011). It is clear that the exhortation "choose something interesting to read" will not be useful in the case of novice readers who do not know what type of texts they might find

interesting. Instructors need to provide scaffolding by providing appropriate material and modeling engagement for the students.

Last but not least, the positive impact of incorporating blogs emphasizes the significance of innovative methods of teaching. Given the pervasive presence of social media in our lives, it makes sense to try to use it for educational purposes. Besides, blogging seems to work especially well for Arab learners. The fact that the students expressed a preference for reading and blogging about the same text can clearly be interpreted as desire to be part of a community, a community of readers.

## **Conclusion**

The researchers' study of Foundation and post-Foundation Qatari students at WCMC-Q indicates that access to texts and encouragement of active reading through the use of technology play an important role in changing students' attitudes towards reading. In this context the role of a library in creating a reading culture in the Middle East cannot be overemphasized. By building a print rich environment and organizing events promoting literacy, librarians can assist instructors and help prepare the new generation for professional success and personal growth.

## References

- Bendriss, R. & Golkowska, K. (2011). Early reading habits and their impact on the reading literacy of Qatari undergraduate students. *Arab World English Journal*, 2 (4), 37-57.
- Greenleaf, C., Schoenbach, R., Cziko, C., & Mueller, F. (2001). Apprenticing adolescent readers to academic literacy. *Harvard Educational Review*, 71 (1), 79-129.
- Herring, S. C., Scheidt, L. A., Bonus, S., & Wright, E. (2004). Bridging the gap: A genre analysis of weblogs. Paper presented at the *Proceedings of the Thirty-Seventh Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS-37)*. Retrieved May 15, 2012, from <http://www.csus.edu/indiv/s/stonerm/genreanalysisofweblogs.pdf>
- Kennedy, K. (2003). Writing with weblogs. *Tech learning*. In Ward, J. M. (2004). Blog assisted language learning (BALL): Push button publishing for the pupils. *The TEFL Web Journal* 3 (1), 1-16. Retrieved May 15, 2012, from [http://www.esp-world.info/articles\\_26/push%20button%20publishing%20ward%202004.pdf](http://www.esp-world.info/articles_26/push%20button%20publishing%20ward%202004.pdf)
- Kitzmann, A. (2003). That different place: Documenting the self within online environments. *Biography*, 26 (1), 48-65, 241.
- Mastropieri, M. A., & Scruggs, T. E. (1997). Best practices in promoting reading comprehension in students with learning disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education*, 18, 197-213.
- Napoli, A. R., & Hiltner, G. J. (1993). An evaluation of developmental reading instruction. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 17, 14-20.
- Shannon, J. (2003). Getting Gulf students to enjoy reading. *Perspectives*, 11(1), 21-24.
- Slaght, J., Harben, P., & Pallant, A. (2009). *English for academic study: Reading & writing*. Reading, UK: Garnet Education.
- Synovate Market Research Agency. (2007). *What Arabs read: A pan-Arab survey on readership*. Retrieved November 13, 2011 from [www.npage.org/IMG/pdf/Readership\\_FULL\\_5\\_Country\\_Report.pdf](http://www.npage.org/IMG/pdf/Readership_FULL_5_Country_Report.pdf)
- Ward, J. M. (2004). Blog assisted language learning (BALL): Push button publishing for the pupils. *The TEFL Web Journal* 3 (1), 1-16. Retrieved May 15, 2012, from [http://www.esp-world.info/articles\\_26/push%20button%20publishing%20ward%202004.pdf](http://www.esp-world.info/articles_26/push%20button%20publishing%20ward%202004.pdf)

### *Authors' Note*

Dr. Krystyna Golkowska teaches writing in the Pre-Medical Education Program at Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar, where she also serves as Director of ESL and First-Year Writing Seminars. Before coming to Doha, she taught for many years at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY. Dr. Golkowska's interests include English literature, composition, sociolinguistics, ESL/EFL, and cognitive literary studies.

Dr. Rachid Bendriss teaches English for Academic Purposes (EAP) at Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar. Prior to coming to Qatar, he taught ESL at the University of Central Florida (UCF) and EAP at Valencia College in Orlando, Florida. He also served as Assistant Director of the Center for Multilingual Multicultural Studies and International Services Center at UCF. Dr. Bendriss' areas of interest focus on EAP reading and writing, teaching with technology, and college academic readiness.

## **Appendix**

### *Sample Blog Entries*

#### **“The Kite Runner” by Khaled Hosseini**

Posted on January 23, 2012 by aljazii

“The past isn’t about regrets. It’s about the lessons learned to make you a better and stronger person.”

What Amir did was living with regrets from his past. He lived 20 years with the feeling of guiltiness about what he did to his best friend. This feeling gave him a lesson not to stand up for someone you love. What Amir did at the end was really brave. Going back to Afghanistan to stand up for his best friend’s son was heroic. Doing something like this takes a lot of strength and courage. Honestly, I did not expect that Amir would adopt Sohrab, Hassan’s son.

#### **“Angels and Demons” by Dan Brown**

Posted on February 9, 2012 by jaberon

In “Angels and Demons” by Dan Brown, the author follows the story of professor Langdon who embarks on a journey to stop the illuminati from causing destruction in the Christian world. Dan Brown reveals the absolute power of the church in religion and how science does not falsify religion but really explains it to a science dependent world. I believe that in “Angels and Demons”, the author reveals a problem that has been hidden or unsolved from the foundation of the church. The author incorporates in his book the power of the church and its conflicts with development and how it affects Christians and non-Christians.

In “Angels and Demons” by Dan Brown, professor Robert Langdon embarks on an adventure to stop the deadly illuminati cult from destroying the Christian capital as we know it. The illuminati have risen from beneath and are here to fulfill a 200-year old vengeance. They have stolen a bomb and kidnapped the four prefferiti and promised to bring the Catholic Church to the ground. Dr. Robert Langdon takes a path made by one of the illuminati leaders, called the path of illumination, to stop the deadly cult. During his adventure, Dr. Langdon discovers corruption in the pope’s office itself.

In conclusion, Dan Brown was able to portray the true world in his book. Showing a world where religions are fighting development. The problem is that science and religion are not enemies but colleagues helping poor souls find their way in this world. However, in the end all this fighting is but a search for a treasure. Faith is the ultimate goal but will it be obtained? “Faith is a gift I am yet to receive”(167).

## **Post 10: Before I Die by Jenny Downham**

Posted on January 17, 2012 by Mooshi797

All good things come to an end. It saddens me that the book had to end this way, but it portrays reality and reality doesn't always go like we want it to.

In the end of the book, Tessa is dying. She lays down there in the same bed she slept on for sixteen years. Surrounded by the same faces that welcomed her into the world, her best friend and the one she loves. She knows she is dying. They know she is dying. They can do nothing about it.

I cried so hard I could hardly breathe while reading this part. Tessa's little brother Cal, who loves her one day and hates her the other, is crying and begging her not to leave. However, when her breath becomes heavier and heavier he starts to feel sorry that she has to suffer and wishes that she would just end her pain and die.

Tessa's father whispers, "It's OK Tessa, you can go now." They were all around her, assuring her that they love her and that she has their permission to leave. She looks at their faces one last time, hears the birds flying one last time, smiles one last time, and takes a breath for the last time.



Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.