

Weblogs and Academic Literacy Development: Expanding Audiences and Linguistic Repertoires

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In this chapter, we describe how a second grade teacher, Wendy Seger, designed and implemented a blog-mediated approach to teaching academic writing to her English language learners. We begin with a description of the professional development partnership that brought together the three authors—Dong-shin Shin, Meg Gebhard, and Wendy Seger—and the conceptual framework informing this project. Next, we explain how Seger and Shin enacted this approach in Seger’s classroom. Specifically, we describe how Seger and Shin designed a class blog to support students in using the “language of schooling” (Schleppegrell, 2004, p. 30). As this volume makes clear, creating meaningful and authentic uses of language and technology in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) is crucial if schools are to support English language learners in a rapidly changing world (Averill, Chambers, & Dantas-Whitney, 2000; Rilling & Csomay, 2000; Shin, 2006; Warschauer, 2006). In this discussion, we provide samples and analyses of students’ blogging practices. These samples show that the students received comments on the content of their stories from peers and family members in ways that led to important online and face-to-face interactions regarding in-school and out-of-school experiences (e.g., issues of playground bullying, family events). In addition, through these blog-mediated practices, students also provided each other with feedback regarding the linguistic choices made in drafting and posting their stories on the blog. These online and face-to-face exchanges show evidence that English language learners attended to the linguistic features of their classmates’ texts in ways that reflected the genre-based pedagogy that Seger provided (e.g., teaching word choices, sentence structures, and organizational

patterns). In addition, these samples show that families interacted with students' texts in ways that expanded the role literacy and computer-mediated communication can play in building connections between school, home, and the community.

CONTEXT

The ACCELA Alliance

In the summer of 2005, Wendy Seger began thinking about new ways of designing curriculum and instruction for her incoming class of second graders. In planning how she wanted to approach the new school year, Seger reflected on her work with the Access to Critical Content and English Language Acquisition (ACCELA) Alliance. ACCELA is a federally funded professional development partnership between the University of Massachusetts Amherst, in the United States and two local urban school districts. ACCELA supports teachers, administrators, teacher educators, and researchers in understanding and responding to the combined influences of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act,¹ statewide curriculum frameworks, state exams, and the passage of an English-only referendum. To date, ACCELA has funded approximately 65 teachers, including Seger, in working toward master's degrees in education and earning state licenses in reading and in teaching ESL (see Gebhard, Harman, & Seger, 2007; Gebhard & Willett, 2008; Willett, 2005). Based on her participation in ACCELA, Seger had three goals in mind as she mapped out her approach to teaching language arts to her new students. First, she was committed to teaching English language learners to read and write grade-level texts by providing them with opportunities to communicate about topics they cared about and write for audiences that mattered to them (Gebhard, Harman, & Seger, 2007). Second, she wanted to provide them with explicit instruction in the linguistic features of the genres second graders are typically asked to read and write, as specified in the state's curriculum frameworks and as assessed by high-stakes exams (e.g., Gebhard, Habana Hafner, & Wright, 2004; Schleppegrell & Go, 2007). Third, she wanted to incorporate greater use of computer-mediated technology in her classroom as a way of supporting gains in students' academic literacy development (Kinzer & Leander, 2003; Luke, 2003; Warschauer, 2006).

In thinking through how she might achieve these goals, Seger contacted Shin to discuss innovative ways to use technology in her classroom to facilitate English language learners' academic literacy development. At that time, Shin was an

¹ Authorized in 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act is a federal law in the United States that was designed to transform public education. The legislation created an accountability system for primary and secondary schools that tests students in English using statewide assessments administered in elementary and secondary schools. The system is considered "high-stakes" because many states will not allow students to graduate from high school without passing specified exams. In addition, states can take action against schools for persistent low scores.

ACCELA research assistant, helping teachers carry out their own inquiry studies in their classrooms and ACCELA graduate courses. She assisted the teachers in developing research questions, collecting data, analyzing the collected data, and presenting study results. In collaboration, Seger and Shin analyzed state and district curricular frameworks and then designed curricular interventions that aligned with these frameworks but were also responsive to local issues and student interests.

Through ACCELA, Seger was introduced to four guiding principles regarding second language (L2) academic literacy development (Gebhard, Harman, & Seger, 2007; Gebhard & Willett, 2008; Willett, Harman, Lozano, Hogan, & Ruback, 2007). These principles are based on Halliday's theory of systemic functional linguistics and genre-based pedagogy (Benesch, 2001; Christie, 2002; Cope & Kalantzis, 1993; Derewianka, 1990; Gibbons, 2006; Hyland, 2007; Martin & Rose 2007; New London Group, 1996; Rothery, 1996; Schleppegrell, 2004; Schleppegrell & Colombi, 2002; Schleppegrell & Go, 2007). These principles are as follows:

Language is a dynamic and functional system of linguistic choices. It is not a set of uniform rules learned through drill and practice. In other words, throughout our lives, we all consciously and unconsciously learn to make different linguistic choices regarding how to pronounce words, make specific word choices, use different grammatical structures, and organize information in particular ways. We make these choices depending on what we are communicating about, who we are communicating with, and the nature of the context we are in. Moreover, we also make different linguistic choices depending on whether we are communicating face-to-face, online, or in writing. From this perspective of language development, the job of teachers is to broaden English language learners' abilities to use language more expertly across a variety of social and academic contexts depending on the ideas they are trying to communicate, the relationships they are trying to establish or maintain, and the mode through which they are interacting.

Academic language differs from everyday language in significant ways. For English language learners, these differences are even greater and take on even more significance because they are required to read and write about unfamiliar topics using technical language and draw on resources to establish meaning that may differ from the language practices they use at home. As such, teachers need to make explicit the workings of school-based genres and support all students, but especially English language learners, in becoming critically aware of the differences between everyday and academic language.

Teaching academic language means more than teaching vocabulary; it requires teachers to actively scaffold disciplinary genres. In other words, in addition to lexical items, teachers and students must also attend to linguistic choices at the sentence and organizational levels. They must also learn to attend to different visual information such as images, charts, graphs, and formatting conventions, all of which are important aspects of academic literacy development.

This attention, or more specifically, scaffolding (see Gibbons, 2002), can take the form of providing English language learners with multiple models of a certain type of text (e.g., narratives, expository essays, science laboratory reports, persuasive business letters); highlighting the expected linguistic characteristics of this text type; and providing students with feedback as they begin to expand their repertoires in using the linguistic features of this specific genre. It also means tracking changes in students' use of targeted linguistic features as a way of reflecting on and modifying instruction and assessing their academic language development over time.

The goal of academic language instruction is not to replace valuable home and peer ways of using language. Rather, ACCELA works to acknowledge and value the multiple social and linguistic worlds to which English language learners already belong, while at the same time teach them to read and write across the curriculum. An important aspect of this effort includes valuing home language practices so students can stay connected to their communities and participate more fully in a multilingual, multicultural economic and political world (New London Group, 1996).

Seger's Second Grade Class

Seger taught at Fuentes Elementary School, located in a midsized city in Western Massachusetts. During the 2005–2006 school year, Fuentes served 698 students, 75.5% of whom were identified as Hispanic and 34.5% officially designated as English language learners. In addition, 90.3% were eligible for free or reduced-price lunches that are granted to students from low-income families below the U.S. federal government poverty line. It is also important to note that because of NCLB, the state previously had designated Fuentes as underperforming because of poor results on mandated state exams. There were 20 students in Seger's second grade class. Fifteen were identified as Latino, two as African American, one as White, one as Chinese, and one as Ghanaian. In addition, four students were repeating second grade because of previous academic difficulties.

CURRICULUM, TASKS, MATERIALS

Access to Technology

Before designing the curriculum, Seger and Shin first needed to provide Seger's students and their families with access and instruction in using technology, because only 30 % of the students in the class reported having regular access to a computer in their homes. Moreover, like many urban schools serving poor communities, Seger worked in a building with a limited number of computers, and much of what was available was outdated or in need of repair. To solve this problem, ACCELA provided Seger with eight laptops for the academic year. In addition, Seger and Shin contacted a local library within walking distance of the

school to see if students and their families could use these more updated facilities. As a result, Seger and Shin were able to provide students and their families with access and training in using technology every Friday morning for the duration of the school year. They also worked with the school principal and the district technology coordinator to ensure that classroom practices complied with district policies and were responsive to administrative concerns (e.g., issues surrounding appropriate content, safety, and confidentiality).

Seger's Language Arts Curriculum

Once issues related to access, training, and policy were addressed, the next task was to modify the curriculum to be more responsive to students' interests and the instructional needs of English language learners, who made up the majority of the class. Seger and Shin focused the blog project on apprenticing students to reading and writing the genre of simple narratives. These simple narratives, or recounts, include an orientation (e.g., the naming of the participants, time, and place) and a record of events. Recounts differ from other types of narratives in that they contain less complicating action and do not necessarily have a fully developed resolution (see Knapp & Watkins, 2005, p. 221; Martin & Rose, 2007). Given the degree to which second graders, including English language learners, are routinely asked to produce these kinds of narratives, both orally and in writing, Seger and Shin made this genre the centerpiece of their work. Moreover, they envisioned the blog as a pedagogical tool for providing students with a larger, more varied audience for their writing. They hoped this feature of blogging would increase students' engagement with text, create deeper connections between home and school, and establish a more developed understanding of the relationship between author, text, purpose, and audience. Seger used a writer's workshop approach in guiding students in the recursive process of generating ideas, receiving explicit instruction, drafting, receiving feedback, and revising. They found that introducing blogging into this approach was a natural extension of teaching the writing process.

In regard to creating the blog, many commercial companies provide free blog services, with easy-to-use templates for creating blog sites based on Web browsers. Using these readily available resources, Seger and Shin created a blog homepage called "Seger Kids" (see Figure 1).

Once the site was created, Seger followed a step-by-step process illustrated in Figure 2.

Explicit Instruction

Seger asked the students to brainstorm ideas about memorable personal experiences. Next, she modeled how students should outline their stories according to the main components of a simple narrative or recount (e.g., information about where, when, who, what, why, and how an event unfolds). She then taught

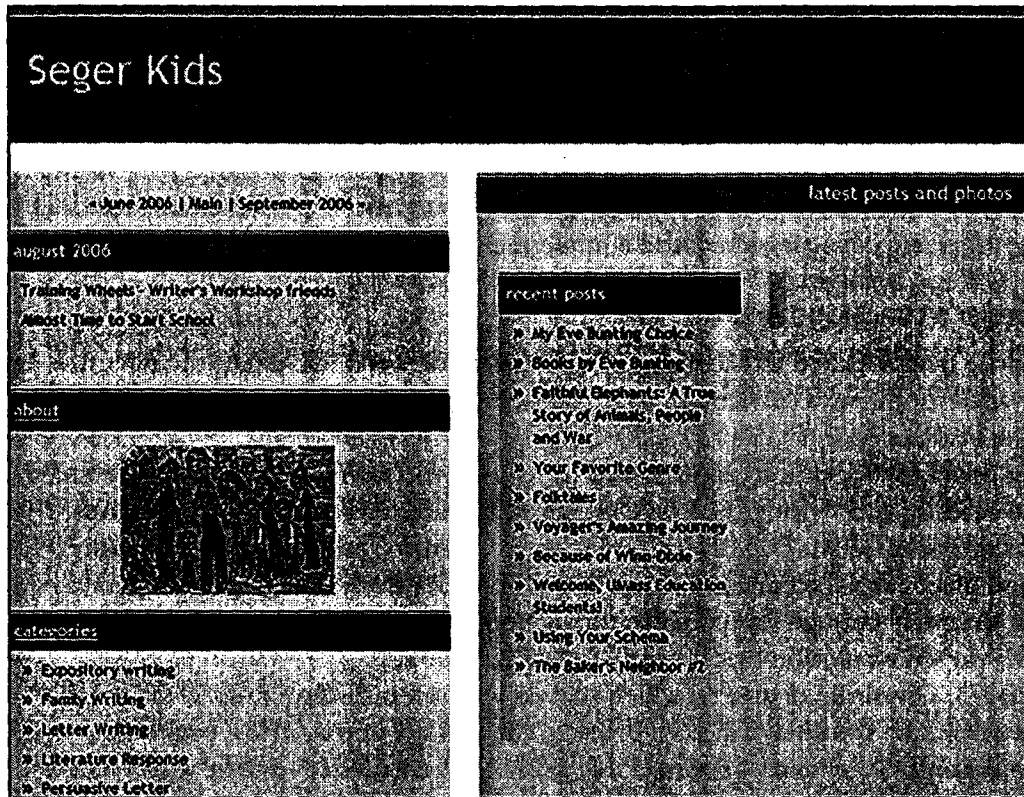


Figure 1. "Seger Kids" Weblog

her students how to organize their stories in ways that would make them more compelling to read (e.g., starting with an eye-catching beginning, having a main event, and including a closing statement). Last, she provided students with several completed stories illustrative of the genre features she hoped they would use in their own postings.

Composing With Computers

The students drafted their stories directly on the laptop computers or on paper, depending on their preferences. While they were composing their stories, Seger offered mini-lessons about the difference between oral and written language (e.g., using periods as opposed to chained sentences with the word *and*); expanding the kinds of word choices students made, and attending to writing conventions that support readers in making sense of their postings (e.g., spelling).

Exchanging Feedback on the Blog

When students were finished with their first drafts, Shin posted their recounts on the blog for feedback. At this stage, Seger provided students with instruction on

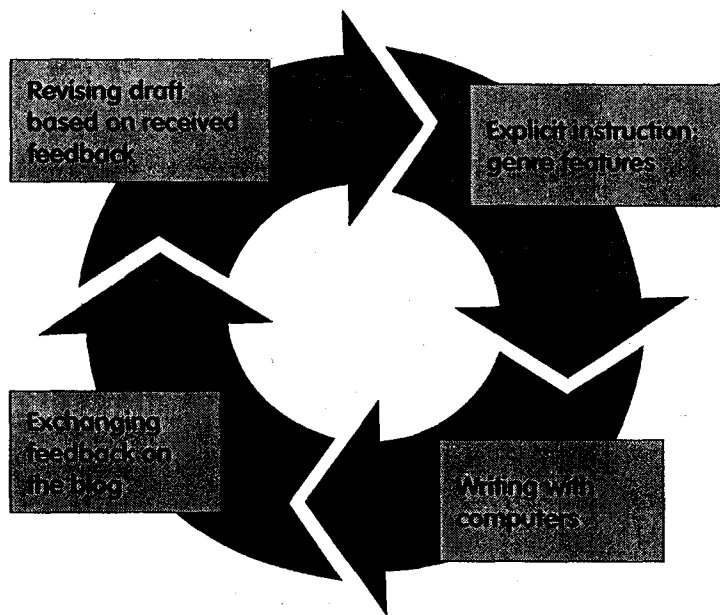


Figure 2. Blog-Mediated Writing Procedures

how to provide feedback to their peers online and consider both the content and the linguistic features of their classmates' texts.

Revising Drafts Based on Feedback

The students revised their first drafts by drawing on the comments they received from Seger, their peers, and their families. Students then posted their subsequent drafts to the class blog for additional cycles of feedback.

Using this process, the students expanded the kinds of linguistic choices available to them in response to their purpose (e.g., telling a story), their audience (friends, teachers, and family members), and the mode (e.g., online communication).

Students' Blogging Practices

Zory

Zory was one of the more English-proficient students in the class and often took a leadership role. She used the language arts block to write about activities she and her older siblings engaged in and the kinds of music they enjoyed. Zory was also eager to display her improving keyboarding skills and made a point of showing peers how she could type with both hands, "just like an adult." In one of her recounts, she wrote about a fight she had had with another girl. After struggling

to compose her story directly on the computer, Zory completed her recount on paper and then typed it on the computer. Using the model Seger had provided, Zory started her recount with an eye-catching beginning (e.g., "some times a girl has to fight for her protection") and then described the sequence of events related to the fight, followed by a closing statement:

November 22, 2006

Zory's Recounts/Story (1st draft)

Some times a girl has to fight for her protection. I know it because when girls get bothered we sometimes have to fight for some boys can leave us alone. It all started like this. First I went to the park then she past me and called me a swear. Then I said "what did you call me". She kept on walking so I walked up to her grabed her shirt asked her again "what did you call me". She still on walking . So that is when it . I ran after her grabed her shoulder and made her come with me to go get my cusent to see the fight and at the end of the fight I gave her my hardest punch that I made her such a black and blue on her face . Then she was knocked on the floor . Then I said "that's for swaring at me.

That is my story and I hope she doesn't say those words again.

THE END

Like all other students' postings, Zory's story triggered her classmates to respond in multiple ways. When her draft was first posted, some classmates responded by commenting on her word choices and unconventional spellings, some asked clarifying questions about the content of the story, and others praised her actions as evident in the following excerpts from the class blog:

1. Dear Zory,

You did not make sence at all because you don't have periods.

your friends,

Kerry

Posted by: [kerry](#) | [December 02, 2005 at 10:23 AM](#)

2. dear zory

I think I would knock somebody out if they call me a swear.

Posted by: [Jeremy](#) | [December 02, 2005 at 10:27 AM](#)

3. Dear Zory,

when you said I gave her a blak and blue face, what did you give her? A sandwich?

your friend Ali

Posted by: [Ali](#) | [December 02, 2005 at 10:54 AM](#)

4. Dear Ali,

you do not make sense at all because I didn't give her a sandwich. I gave her a hard punch.

Posted by: zory | March 03, 2006 at 10:59 AM

These students' comments represent the three types of feedback students gave each other. Kerry's comments addressed Zory's mistakes with conventions; she wrote that Zory's story did not make sense because it did not have periods. Kerry's feedback led Zory to add more periods in her second draft. Jeremy, on the other hand, responded to the subject of the narrative and supported Zory in punching someone who swore at her by writing, "I would knock somebody out if they call me a swear." In contrast, Ali's comments combine a focus on language and the subject. Specifically, Ali made comments related to how hard Zory punched the other girl (e.g., "blak face" meaning a "black eye" and "sandwich" meaning a "knuckle sandwich"). After Zory read all the comments, she chose to answer Ali's question. Her response indicates that she did not understand Ali's question fully, but that she wanted to be clear that she had punched her "hard." These comments led Zory to revise her story and post it with fewer conventional mistakes and a greater variety of lexical items, as the following excerpt shows.

December 06, 2005

Zory's Recounts (2nd draft)

The day she called me a swear

Sometimes a girl has to fight for her protection. I know it because when girls get bothered we sometimes have to fight. Some boys can leave us alone. It all started like this. First I went to the park. Then she past me and called me a swear. Then I said "What did you call me?" She kept on walking. So I walked up to her and grabbed her shirts. I asked her again "What did you call me?" She still kept on walking . So that is when it happened. I ran after her and grabbed her shoulder. I made her come with me to go get my cousin to see the fight. I wanted to teach my little cousin how to fight because she didn't know how to fight. At the end of the fight I gave her my hardest punch that made her such a black and blue on her face . Then she was knocked on the floor. Then I said "That's for swearing at me".

That is my story. I hope she doesn't say those words again.

THE END

These postings resulted in Seger addressing the issue of playground violence in a class face-to-face discussion, which in turn led to a further discussion of the issue online, as evidenced in the following excerpts:

1. Dear Zory,

I understand your feeling. But punching is not good.

You can tell your mom. Does your mom know this?

Your best friend,

Angie

Posted by: Angie | December 13, 2005 at 11:19 AM

2. Dear Zory

A good fight. You go girl. A girl got to be tough.

love yourfriend

diany

Posted by: diany | December 13, 2005 at 01:43 PM

3. Dear Zory,

How old where you ha ha ha? When was it ha ha ha. What was your cousins name ha ha ha. How old was your cousin ha ha ha. Where was your mom ha ha ha.

Your nosy friend

Alicia

Posted by: Alicia | January 09, 2006 at 12:31 PM

In the majority of comments on the second draft of her story, Zory's classmates were mainly interested in voicing their opinions about when use of physical force was acceptable. For example, unlike Jeremy's support, Angie wrote that she did not think that punching someone else was "good," even though she empathized with Zory's feelings. She suggested an alternative approach to the problem—telling her mother. However, Diany endorsed Zory's actions, stating that, "a girl got be tough." In contrast, Alicia, one of Zory's best friends, did not directly express her opinion about Zory's behavior. Rather, picking up on Angie's contribution, she asked where Zory's mother was, signaling that perhaps Zory's mother might not be pleased about her getting into a fight. In this same posting, Alicia also commented on the subject of Zory's story in ways that indicate that she was aware that Zory had not included all of the information she should have based on Seger's instructions in teaching the genre of simple narratives. For example, using playful "hahas," Alicia requested additional information about the setting and other participants in the narrative (e.g., when this event happened, how old she and her cousin were, the whereabouts of her mother).

Following the pattern that emerged with the first round of postings, Seger picked up the topic and led the whole class in a discussion of the issue of fighting the next day. Again, Seger highlighted why they should avoid this kind of behavior and helped students generate alternative ways of dealing with insults and anger. Zory eventually softened her opinion regarding the acceptable use of force.

At a culminating event, the class presented the narratives to their families, teachers, principal, and visitors from the school district. For this audience, Zory said her views about fighting had changed, stating, "It's not right to punch kids even if they use bad words."

Maria

Maria was repeating second grade because she performed poorly on district reading and writing assessments. Her parents were concerned about her academic performance and participated frequently in school-related activities. In addition, Maria's mom had access to technology while working at a temporary job at a local bank and often used the class blog to read class postings and respond to her daughter's work. The degree to which the class blog facilitated family involvement in Maria's emergent literacy practices was evident from the beginning of the project. For example, early in the school year, Seger invited parents to school to share memorable stories about their children growing up. Maria's mother visited school with her younger sister and made a presentation with Maria about her first birthday party. After this presentation, Maria wrote a recount of her first birthday party and posted her draft to the class blog. Maria received comments on her story from her mother as well as her peers.

1. I am very proud of your work with your 1st Birthday story. I have printed it out and hung it up on the wall at work. Everybody in my job has read it and say it is very nice and interesting. I hope you keep up the good work and keep making mommy happy.

I love you very much.

Talk to you soon.

Posted by: mom | December 20, 2005 at 02:42 PM

2. Dear Mom,

Thank you.

Love,

Maria

Posted by: Maria | December 21, 2005 at 01:50 PM

Maria's mother praised her work and mentioned that her coworkers also appreciated Maria's "very nice and interesting" story. Maria responded with a heartfelt thank you and showed her mother's comments proudly to her peers and teachers. Seger and Shin believed interactions like these motivated Maria not only to participate actively in blogging, but also to be more focused on her writing in general. In addition, over the course of the year, her mother continued to visit the class blog and encouraged Maria to work hard in school as the following example shows:

Hi, Baby

What are you doing today, You have not wrote back yet. That okay, I am just writing to see what is new for story writing. I hope you write back soon.

Love you,

Mom

Posted by: Mom | April 04, 2006 at 12:47 PM

As described above, through blog-mediated writing, Zory and Maria could discuss issues and events that mattered to them with the audiences that they cared about. This aspect of blogging allowed the students to bring their interests into their schooling and to learn academic genres meaningfully. It also provided parents with a new venue for participating in their children's schoolwork.

REFLECTIONS

Through the blog project, Seger experienced not only benefits to her teaching, but also challenges that are worth sharing with other teachers who plan to use this instructional technology in their classrooms. In terms of benefits, blog-mediated writing expanded the purposes and audiences for English language writing activities. While directly interacting with an expanded audience, these students had the opportunity to learn an academic genre as confident and capable language learners. Through collaboration with peers, the students also helped each other attend to organizational structures, grammatical structures, word choices, and conventional features associated with a specific genre. They also exchanged opinions about the actions and positions their peers revealed in their postings. The feedback exchanged among the students was not only supportive of their academic literacy, but also socially meaningful as they developed friendships with their peers. Blog-mediated writing allowed the students to see that learning academic writing occurs through collaborations between author and reader.

Regarding the challenges related to using a blog for teaching academic genres, we want to address the management issues inherent in working with computers in a tight school schedule. Considering the busy schedules imposed by other mandated curricular work, we recommend that when working with students who have limited computer experience, teachers should consider having them type only the final draft of their stories. Also, it is important that teachers discuss the public dimensions of writing on a blog with expanded audiences before their students start blogging, and that writing on a class blog has different consequences from writing in a journal entry notebook. Student writers need to be aware that they are responsible for the consequences of their word choices. Another point that we would like to note is that students can easily become overly competitive about receiving more feedback comments from peers. It is necessary to guide the students in exchanging and using feedback comments in constructive ways.

Lastly, we emphasize the importance of collaborations involving school, home, community, and university for educational transformations that draw on powerful uses of technology, especially in economically struggling communities that rely on under-resourced schools for access to technology.

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