

Take It Out of Class: Exploring Virtual Literature Circles

Integrating technology into literature discussion enables authentic reading experiences that honor the voices of students who have diverse ideas, communication styles, and confidence levels.

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When my daughter was 10, I interviewed her for a class project aimed at investigating reading habits. We discussed what she enjoyed reading and the approaches her teachers used to teach reading. In particular, she talked about her frustration as a member of a fourth-grade literature circle. She noted that “a lot of people don’t take it seriously and change the subject” and that “most girls are serious about reading but boys aren’t and so they, well, most boys in my class aren’t, and so they don’t pay attention to you when you try and talk.”

Obviously, my daughter’s experience runs counter to desired outcomes. Classroom literature circles were designed as a way to enable students to make choices about their readings and explore their ideas in small, peer-led discussions. In his book *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs & Reading Groups*, Daniels (2002) described literature circles as a cooperative learning, student-led experience for students around a common text. Once students read a predetermined number of pages, the group meets to discuss the reading. Daniels explained, “The goal of literature circles is to have natural and sophisticated discussions of literature” (p. 100).

Researchers have identified significant advantages for using literature circles in the classroom. For example, Almasi (1995) argued that “students who talk about what they read are more likely to engage in reading” (p. 20). Additionally, Klages, Pate, and Conforti (2007) suggested that collaboration required by literature circles increased motivation, influenced positive social and communicative skills, and allowed students to gain vital understandings. Holt and Bell (2000) also identified benefits for literature circles:

As we read and talk about reading, we are searching for works of value that encourage students to feel, to question, to explore human values, and to examine traditions and cultures—works that provoke them to think about how they view the world. (p. 5)

Finally, research studies reported that students engaged in literature circles demonstrated increased comprehension, higher level thinking, and an ability to engage more deeply with text (Eeds & Wells, 1989).

Threaded discussions foster energetic interactions between students and teachers and promote active and collaborative learning.

Literature circles are not without limitations. Similar to the problem my daughter described, some educators have reported difficulties teachers and students faced using literature circles in the classroom. Wolsey (2004) explained that cooperative learning roles assigned to students often stilted conversations, resulting in students' reading responses from their role sheets. In these instances, students do not react to each other or question each other; instead, they simply give each other their answers.

Additionally, Clarke and Holwadel (2007) identified several frustrations in their attempts to run literature circles in a middle-school classroom. As soon as teachers left, group cohesion dissolved. Students resorted to bullying, name-calling, and arguing. Teachers understood that classroom climate was causing their groups to spiral out of control, but constant interruptions for school celebrations and days of testing as well as chronic absenteeism plaguing the school were difficult hurdles to overcome.

Given both the advantages and limitations of face-to-face literature circles, researchers today are examining many online literacy practices for complementing classroom reading pedagogy (Larson, 2009). Educators investigating students' reading habits continue to report higher numbers of students engaging with technology (National School Boards Association [NSBA], 2007). According to an NSBA (2007) survey, students with computer access spend over nine hours a week chatting, text messaging, blogging, and visiting online communities.

Clearly, the Internet has changed education in profound ways (Klages et al., 2007). Several studies have reported the potency for online threaded discussions in classrooms (Andresen, 2009). Kirk and Orr (2003) reported on instructional benefits from incorporating threaded discussion forums. According to the authors, threaded discussions fostered energetic interactions between students and their teachers, promoted active learning and collaborative learning, motivated better student engagement, and allowed for easier discussions of controversial topics.

Thus, asynchronous discussion board technology may complement the literature circle design; perhaps, in cyberspace, benefits of student-led collaborative literature circles may mitigate some of its aforementioned limitations. Many studies examining virtual literature circles offer general information for merging technology and literature circles. This "nuts and bolts" information provides "practical advice for using online discussions" (Knowlton & Knowlton, 2001, p. 38). For example, Wolsey (2004) offered several hot links regarding aspects for incorporating online literature circles in K-12 classrooms. Similarly, Larson (2008) and Moreillon (2009) described several possibilities for Web 2.0 integration. Both articles pointed to student satisfaction and pedagogical implications as motivating factors for moving literature circles into cyberspace.

Additional studies have examined students' responses from teacher-generated, prompt-driven discussion boards. These studies attempted to quantify student responses to document that students were becoming deeper and more critical readers. Thomas and Hofmeister (2002) quantitatively scored the "levels of cognition" evident in responses on a four-point scale they created where they rated students' responses as "very simplistic and text dependent (1 point)" to "text-independent response with complexity (4 points)" (p. 237). The authors provided a sample student response for each category. Ultimately, the authors concluded that while students' cognition did not necessarily become more "complex" over time, it did differ depending on teachers' prompts.

In a similar manner, Love (2006) examined Australian students' discussion posts for negotiating affective, ethical, or critical stances in reading. The author concluded that students' online discussions did not demonstrate a sophisticated critical stance for reading.

Beeghly (2005) and Larson (2009) also examined students' responses. Specifically, Beeghly reported that students posed questions and asked for clarification from each other and that online discussions occurred naturally without her direction. She reported that her students believed that "discussing a book online over a period of time enhanced both their individual understanding and the quality of their group's discussion" (p. 16). Larson found many similar

benefits when students constructed their own discussion ideas. Unlike groups that responded to teachers' prompts, student-created prompts allowed for group ownership and a sense of socially constructed meanings that students found beneficial.

Although online literature circles are burgeoning, studies exploring both the ways students respond to each other and the ways they discuss text in an open, student-led forum are sparse. Additionally, many educators' fears that cyberspace may isolate students and prevent them from connecting with each other and texts in ways possible with face-to-face literature circles called for further research. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to explore not only the impact of technology integration with literature circles but also to explore ways participants engaged with each other and shared texts through online threaded discussion boards.

The following large question framed the research: How does integrating technology with literature circles affect group dynamics and students' reading responses? Specifically, I asked what happens when literature circles move out of classrooms and into cyberspace. Using Rosenblatt's (1995) transactional theory of reading as a lens, I examined discussion board transcripts generated from group discussions to explore ways the merger affected students' engagement with their self-selected texts and with each other as members of a reading club.

Methodology

This exploratory study used qualitative research methods to understand ways participants responded to self-selected texts in online book discussions. I approached participants' online responses from a social constructionist perspective, which assumes humans' actions are shaped by the meanings they construct through their social interactions with others (Crotty, 1998).

I studied three groups of graduate students who were either preservice or early career teachers enrolled in a summer session class called *Creating Literate Communities*. The course was designed to provide firsthand experience with literature circles by modeling the practice of being members of a book club; the professor asked students to investigate their own reading practices.

The monthlong course required students to attend face-to-face classes the first and last weeks of the semester; the middle two weeks were devoted entirely to online literature discussions. The professor explained expectations for virtual literature circle:

Each literature circle is expected to initiate and sustain an online conversation with everyone in the group contributing at least one post per day. Definitely avoid lengthy plot summative evaluations of the reading. The goal here is to connect with each other as well as with the texts you are reading.

My role in the class was one of researcher; the course filled the research apprenticeship requirement of my doctoral degree. I used online literature circles in the community college where I teach, so the professor asked me to collaborate with him on launching his traditional summer book club course online. We decided on the hybrid approach (a mixture of face-to-face and online delivery) described above. Although I attended the face-to-face sessions and I was privy to students' discussions and online postings, I did not have an evaluation role.

Thus, I collected the bulk of my data from groups' discussion threads around self-selected texts. Book groups formed arbitrarily the first day of class when participants who drew matching quotes became a group. Once groups formed, the professor and I held a short, one-hour session in the computer lab to introduce students to the eLearning Commons platform, a web-based learning management system that is used for online course management by the university.

After computer training, groups met face-to-face to discuss shared texts and any time frame they planned to use. I rotated between groups and listened to ways they organized their two-week activities. In these discussions, members decided on books based on quick availability and interest; bestsellers topped all lists. Similarly, participants decided to rotate responsibility for beginning discussion threads. Group 2 assigned each member a day to begin posts, whereas Group 1 decided that each member must begin two threads for each novel. Additionally, I gathered field notes from in-class discussions, and I interviewed students individually through e-mail regarding their experiences with virtual literature circles.

Studying Group Discussions

Data Collection

Parameters for guiding groups' choices were open. The professor did not dictate how many texts groups must read or lengths of texts. All three groups chose at least one book that also had a film version to watch together; two groups chose to read two novels while one group picked three texts. For the present study, I examined complete discussion threads from one novel for each group. I examined *Stardust* by Neil Gaiman from Group 1, *Towelhead* by Alicia Erian from Group 2, and *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd from Group 3. Aside from overall expectations for literature circles mentioned above, the professor allowed participants the freedom to operate in manners that respected their classmates and themselves.

Theoretical Framework and Data Analysis

Grounded theory methods provided a dynamic set of tools to examine the experience of making meaning as a member of a literature circle (Charmaz, 2006). Specifically, Charmaz delineated several germane components. For example, initial codes and categories derived from participants' discussions instead of from a preexisting framework of group dynamics applied to discussions. I followed initial line-by-line coding with focused coding and theoretical coding, attempting to understand relationships that existed within and between groups' responses. Finally, I created memos describing families of responses that I noted in my early coding efforts.

In initial line-by-line, gerund-type coding, posts might be double-coded. For example, the post "something Suzie said got me thinking about an article called 'White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack' which is so much like..." might be coded Group Harmony (GH) for helping to create group harmony and Text Connections-text-to-text (TCtt) for connecting text to another text. Yet in an attempt to avoid an abundance of double-coded posts in focused coding (second iteration), I focused on the writer's main purpose.

Given the previous example, while the participant does actively address her classmate, the primary purpose of this post seems to be to share a connection between two texts. Deciphering participants' primary purpose is arguably a subjective exercise. To account for this limitation, I asked my colleague who also teaches English to code a 25-post sample of participants' responses. Our codes were similar on 23 of 25 sample posts (92%).

Findings

Participants' online responses produced a wealth of rich data illustrating how they engaged with text and each other as members of virtual literature circles. In this section, I present ways participants' discussions exemplified their collective meaning negotiations, as well as how they responded as readers to shared texts. Table 1 shows the group members, the corresponding texts, and the number of topic threads each group posted for its book. All participants' names are pseudonyms, and their responses are excerpted verbatim from threaded discussion posts.

Two overarching themes emerged from participants' responses that directly addressed the research question: (1) Groups actively promoted socially constructed membership, and (2) posts demonstrated engaged reading processes. I assigned several codes to participants' posts. The thematic category Promoting Group Membership comprised posts centered on creating group harmony (GH) and posts where participants negotiated text meanings (NM). In the category Engaged Reading Processes were four smaller codes: text-to-self (TS), text-to-text (TT), text-to-world (TW), and aesthetic reading (AR).

Promoting Group Membership

Constructivists posit that, ultimately, human beings depend on social interactions with others to learn. Influenced by Vygotsky, they describe optimal learning situations as social interactions that enable learners to focus on concepts they have not yet mastered by providing expert assistance. Educators have worried that moving from face-to-face interactions to online discussions might isolate their students and strip classrooms of their collaborative atmospheres (Beeghly,

Table 1 Description of Groups and Works

| Group | Novel | Participants | Topic threads |
|-------|---|---|---|
| 1 | <i>Stardust</i> by Neil Gaiman | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 4 women, 1 man: Helen, Allison, Tim, Janet, Karen ■ Posted 13–15 times | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 76 total posts ■ 10 topic threads ■ 2 days of posting |
| 2 | <i>Towelhead</i> by Alicia Erian | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 4 women, 1 man: Sarah, Jeff, Elaine, Ruth, Natalie ■ Posted 8–12 times | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 46 total posts ■ 6 topic threads ■ 4 days of posting |
| 3 | <i>The Secret Life of Bees</i> by Elizabeth Monk Kidd | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 5 women: Suzie, April, Ruby, Jana, Kylie ■ Posted 4–17 times | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 61 total posts ■ 7 topic threads ■ 6 days of posting |

2005). Both teachers and students alike report fearing that impersonal computers will disconnect and alienate them from a classroom community (Smith, Ferguson, & Mieke, 2001).

Virtual discussions from my participants suggested this worry is mostly unfounded. In fact, many posts demonstrated students' overt efforts to connect with each other personally while also offering diverse ideas about their chosen texts; not one topic thread was cold or perfunctory even when students were dealing with housekeeping-type items. Thus, Promoting Group Membership is a large thematic category that encompassed posts I included as attempts to establish group harmony (GH) and posts that centered on socially and collectively negotiated meanings (NM). Several excerpts from online discussions illustrate responses indicative of different categories.

Group Harmony (GH). I selected the term *group harmony* to describe participants' attempts to connect with each other personally. Responses that I coded as helping create group harmony included piggybacking an earlier idea, validating information from another's post, posing additional questions, and responding to another member's idea.

Common in most threads, participants directed ideas and responses to specific group members throughout online discussions. Early topic threads or posts, however, often appeared as letters to each other,

as opposed to group discussion. For example, the second, third, and fourth posts from Group 1's *Stardust* (all composed the first day of online work) are addressed to specific group members: "Helen, In the last chapter we read for today..."

By the second day of posting in the thread, responses evolved from letter-like dyadic posts to collective group conversations. In fact, in final posts from the aforementioned thread, authors use the pronoun *we* to refer to themselves collectively: "Also, I do not find it ironic that we see the hair man again, I'm sure we will figure this out by the end, it's a pattern, right?"

This shift in how responses are composed and the pronouns used reflects a growing sense of membership and belonging. Participants are moving beyond "This is my idea" to a negotiated sense of "Here's what we think, but we're still working on it."

Participants also made efforts to validate and affirm the ideas of others, aiding the groups' cohesion. For example, responses such as "What you've shared is quite insightful; thanks" and "Janet, you are right, it does fit the novel" were typical of all three groups.

Group 3 (reading *The Secret Life of Bees*) provided the only threads where disagreements existed. Two members were openly critical of the book and its author. Yet despite this book's seemingly divisive nature, members made sure to support each

Online discussions provide an archive for students to reengage with the conversation.

other's ideas. A pro-novel participant wrote, "thank you April and Suzie for affirming me! I really appreciate it. ☺" One of the critical participants wrote, "I am sorry, you guys, to be pooppy about this book." The back and forth between members illustrated the personal and committed relationships between members.

Although participants worked to create supportive atmospheres where members felt comfortable expressing ideas, Group 3 had to confront a group member who was not adhering to the schedule they created. After waiting two days for the participant to post, they sent an e-mail. The discussion board reflected their dilemma:

I sent you an email earlier this morning about this... Since you hadn't posted to last Friday's prompt, Monday's prompt, or Tuesday's prompt (as of 11ish this morning), we decided that I would post the prompt for Wednesday. (See "Lily's Dream World") This means that you're now responsible for posting a prompt on Friday. I hope this is ok...we didn't really have much of a choice. (April)

Thus, a virtual world is not necessarily a perfect world. Members do not respond in uniform numbers or have equal commitments to the discussion. Yet unlike face-to-face discussions where absent students have few means for catching up, online discussions provide an archive for students to reengage with the conversation. For example, the participant who April addressed posted several hours later, apologizing:

No worries—I've been in a huge moving fiasco for the past few days, no internet, no car—so it's been a little hectic. However, I did read all the posts up to this point and I posted to the earlier threads, so I think I'm back on track. But like I said, no worries, it's not a big deal and I definitely don't mind starting the discussion on Friday. When and where are we watching this movie? Just curious. (Ruby)

The words and actions of this participant demonstrate that she feels a sense of responsibility toward her

group. She not only apologizes but also asks a question of the collective (we) group. Other behaviors similarly suggested the sense of belonging felt by participants. As Ruby mentioned, all three groups decided to meet for a movie night where they watched one of their novel selections together. Several threads emerged from movie night where participants discussed their expectations, satisfactions, and disappointments with the films.

Negotiated Meanings (NM). As members of literature circles, participants actively discussed elements of fiction while also working collectively to clarify and expand their understandings of the text. Negotiated meaning responses described participants' grappling with the story and working to make sense of the novel. These posts included everything from summary to interpretation. For example, actions such as summarizing, citing, clarifying, analyzing, interpreting, and questioning the text were all included in this category.

For instance, Group 1 participants reading *Stardust* initially described their confusion with some of the magical elements in Gaiman's novel. Participants openly discussed their confusion, collectively making sense of the novel:

But I need some clarification because I'm still unclear about pages 91–93. 'It was night in the glade . . . and then it said nothing at all, and there was silence in the glade'...what is that? (Helen)

The following post answered Helen's confusion, using the collective pronoun *we* to help sort out unclear plot elements:

It's a description of the actual fall of the star from the view from the woods. We later find out that the star exists in the form of a lady and that she was struck down from the sky by the topaz stone the Lord of Stormholder throws into the sky before he dies. (Allison)

All told, participants did not provide argumentative, analytic, essay-type posts; rather, their discussions were conversational and understanding was ongoing. Participants offered tentative ideas where they asked group members for feedback; their feedback then led to a tweaking of original ideas, with each member adding original bits and pieces to a shared meaning.

Discussions from all groups were neither stilted nor sterile, as can sometimes be the case with face-to-face literature circles (Wolsey, 2004). My findings dovetail well with Knowlton and Knowlton (2001), who advised educators that technology integration should facilitate “conversation among a classroom community where contributions of both teachers and students are valued and treated as a viable contribution to an educational dialogue” (p. 39).

Engaged Reading Processes

Literature circles complement Rosenblatt’s (1995) transactional view of reading; additionally, online literature circles offer a written record of students’ personal growth as readers as well as their movement between reading stances. Rosenblatt (1988) described reading as “interplay between reader and text” (p. 10) and the importance of reading stance. The notion of a reading stance suggested that readers were constantly “bringing certain aspects into the center of attention and pushing others into the fringes” (p. 7).

For Rosenblatt, reading stance existed on a continuum with “efferent stance” on one end and “aesthetic stance” on the opposite end (p. 12). According to Rosenblatt, the efferent stance described the reader’s desire to retain or carry away information; the stance was less concerned with the full experience of reading. Conversely, in the aesthetic stance, readers were more concerned with the full reading experience, and thus they attend to more items on the periphery.

My participants’ discussions demonstrated both of Rosenblatt’s reading stances; thus, I described these posts as demonstrating engaged reading processes. Through their descriptions of personal connections with their books and their evaluations and judgments of characters, scenes, and contemporary issues, participants demonstrated highly engaged and sophisticated reading practices.

Teachers trained in reader-response methods often ask students to connect their readings to themselves, other texts, and the world (Hancock, 1993). Not surprisingly, given that participants were all teachers or soon-to-be teachers, participants discussed ways their books connected with their own lives, with other texts, and with the world at large.

Although participants connected their books to other texts most frequently, all three groups discussed how their texts connected to them personally and to the larger world. Coded responses such as relating a personal story, drawing parallels, or connecting to character were all contained by the category Text Connections (TC).

Text-to-Self (TS). Personal connections to literature allow students to understand themselves, their peers, and the text (Atwell, 1998). Hancock’s (1993) investigation of students’ literature journals indicated that personal connections to text elicited personal involvement and a higher understanding of text. Participants in all three groups made numerous personal connections to characters and situations.

Group 2 (reading *Towelhead*) discussed how difficult it was for them to identify with the main character, Jasira:

I am having a very hard time with my impatience with Jasira. The point of view from a thirteen year old raging with hormones is a little overwhelming. I find myself frustrated with her. I find it very difficult to relate to Jasira at all. (Sarah)

I have to say from a personal perspective, I grew up in a very dysfunctional family, but I did not necessarily think about sex in the same way as Jasira. She seems very shallow in that it occupies most of her thoughts. I will admit that sex was definitely on my mind, but I was more concerned with social aspects of school. She is very animalistic and I think is sexually objectified by men and doesn’t seem to notice. (Ruth)

I completely agree. The situations are plausible, and the motives are even there to explain them. It seems like Erian overcompensated in her attempt to channel a pre-adolescent voice, and ended up with a character who borders on being in a vegetative state. Gender aside, I don’t think I ever could have related to Jasira; not that her recklessness seems that foreign, but that she has no psychological depth whatsoever. (Jeff)

Students began by attempting to identify with Jasira; however, their difficulties allowed them to probe the character as the author’s creation. Their willingness to push beyond a simple “I don’t like her, she’s nothing like me” response sparked continued discussion and continued reflection.

Text-to-Text (TT). Along with personally connecting to the text, participants also discussed how their works connected to other texts, from classics to popular culture. Several *Stardust* threads demonstrated Group 1's interest in how Gaiman's novel adhered to fairy-tale genres. Plot became secondary as participants connected the importance of Greek mythology in creating the story:

I wonder if the Pan that Gaiman's referring to is the Greek Pan, the, um, like wood nymph-y character? (Allison)

Also, and this is something I did don't think about until just now, 'Pantheism' is the religious belief—though not a theistic one—for God and Nature being synonymous. I'm not an expert on it, but it does seem to fit the situation, being as the pair we're talking about Pan in reference to nature, so it could also be that. (Tim)

We've said a lot about Pan, but what about Pan's Labyrinth? I think it's interesting how fairy tales borrow from one another's mythology. (Karen)

One last thing I found out: the name of the ship in *Stardust* is the *Perdita*. *Perdita* is the name of one of the female characters in Shakespeare's 'The Winter's Tale.' (Tim)

Also, to make another Shakespeare/Gaiman/Harry Potter connection, one of the other characters in 'The Winter's Tale' is name Hermione. It's like a giant web! (Allison)

The "giant web" that Allison wrote about demonstrates participants' willingness to apply the immediate text they shared to other texts. Together they crossed genre boundaries, histories, and cultures.

Text-to-World (TW). Finally, all three groups used their books as springboards to discuss sensitive topics, such as child abuse and racism. Group 3 (reading *The Secret Life of Bees*) used the book's themes to spark several interesting discussions of race in modern-day America. Participants' personal disappointments with the book became less important as they grappled with its implications:

I apologize if I offend anyone who liked the book, but I think that it is terribly written but can spark a great discussion on race relations during the Civil Rights Era and also now. (Suzie)

I've never considered skin color a big deal, so when the narrator takes long passages to describe just how 'black' a certain character is, I find myself a little disturbed. If you have to be told that African-Americans are 'just like us' I think you have issues that can't be fixed by just reading this book. (April)

The echoing and repetition of racism, of skin color, love, hate, family, I loved it all and I couldn't put the book down. (Jana)

White privilege is definitely still alive and well. While we have come a long way from the Civil Rights Era, I believe that many white people do not see how fractured this country is in terms of opportunity. (Suzie)

Because of my background, I view race issues in a unique way. Whether this is a good thing or a bad thing, I was sheltered most of my life from the whole 'race' thing, so in the last 5 years, I have been processing different ideas. I really enjoy hearing from others and especially you girls and what you think about the race issues in this book. I have learned A LOT just by reading your thoughts and understandings. Thanks for sharing so openly! (Kylie)

Although the participants in this group were ambivalent about many aspects of this novel, Suzie's post provided a means for examining the book that many participants found overly trite. Moreover, sensitive topics, such as racism, often stymie group discussions (Beeghly, 2005); however, in these virtual discussions I believe participants contributed openly and honestly.

Aesthetic Reading (AR). Hancock (1993) described aesthetic threads as those that elicit emotional interactions with the text. Rosenblatt (1988) explained, "The aesthetic reader experiences, savors, the qualities of the structured ideas, situations, scenes, personalities, emotions, called forth, participating in the tensions conflicts, and resolutions as they unfold" (p. 7). Posts that demonstrated when participants reveled in the sensation or experience of reading were coded as aesthetic reading. These responses demonstrated both areas where the text evoked a personal delight as well as disappointment with the author's craft. Rosenblatt described these types of responses: "This evocation, and not the text, is the object of the reader's 'response' and 'interpretation' both during and after the reading event" (p. 5).

As described in participants' text connections, groups often pursued tangents generated by their

stories. However, I coded participants' responses as aesthetic when the text itself—its plot, characters, even themes—was pushed to the periphery. Codes in this category included delighting in language, evaluating author's craft, questioning author's intent, and finding satisfaction or dissatisfaction in narration.

Group 1 had many responses that embodied aesthetic responses. Participants in this group delighted in the language of their novel, *Stardust*, which Tim described as “whimsical and faux-fairy-tail-ish.” The group's delights and criticisms best exemplified an aesthetic reading stance. Their final post echoed aesthetic experiences typical of all three groups:

I'll venture out on my own and say that looking up the small stuff is akin to finding easter eggs on a nature walk. You're supposed to enjoy the experience, but if you survey the land close enough, you'll just find something a little extra!

Benefits of Online Literature Circles

Despite Daniels's (2002) work describing the benefits of using classroom literature circles, too often classroom practices adhere to a rigid definition of what constitutes reading instruction in schools (Probst, 2004). Influenced by Rosenblatt's (1995) work, Probst argued that reading for information remains the most common reading taught and evaluated in schools. Devoid of the linguistic reservoir described as necessary by Rosenblatt, Probst posited reading in school is merely a prescriptive process. He wrote, “Raised on a diet of multiple-choice questions, students come to view thinking as a process of choosing from among several statements” (p. 74). According to Probst, the overemphasis of the efferent stance has stripped away students' motivation to become readers because it has little to do with students themselves.

My findings illustrate the importance of virtual literature circles for reaching Daniels's (2002) goal for natural and sophisticated discussion around text; however, additional benefits unique to the asynchronous online format also emerged. Most notably, posting to a discussion board required students to craft their responses in writing before posting. Hancock (1993) described the benefits of extending personal literature responses through writing: “Written response

to literature is a powerful means of preserving those special transactions with books that make reading a rewarding, personal journey” (p. 467).

Likewise, the threaded topics I analyzed demonstrated evidence of thoughtful responses about the text and for others' ideas. Beeghly (2005) and Larson (2008) described that participants enjoyed the time discussion boards provided to think before responding and to gather and organize their ideas before posting.

My data also revealed that virtual literature circles facilitate socially constructed learning opportunities. Participants openly validated their peers' ideas before coconstructing an agreed-upon interpretation of events. It was common for topic threads to evolve into shared understandings and ownership. For example, one participant wrote, “We've had a wonderful discussion over this book. I hope it keeps up over the other books too!” Moreover, the personal connections and relationships created through small, student-led discussions enabled deeper, more thought-provoking discussions of texts.

Additionally, since asynchronous discussions were not real-time chats, students could continue to revisit their ideas in a recursive thought process. They did not have to worry about being interrupted or distracted by competing ideas (Beeghly, 2005). April explained what she most enjoyed about the online discussion format:

It's also nice because several conversations can occur simultaneously under different subject headings, which would be near impossible in a face-to-face situation. Too, these subjects can be revisited at a later time after one has had time to mull over it—oftentimes in conversations, you have a late-realized epiphany that would be difficult to resurface once the conversation has moved on.

Whereas full-class discussions and face-to-face discussions are often dominated by small numbers of students (Daniels, 2002), all three virtual literature circles involved nearly equal participation among members. Ideas from naturally shy students came across as powerfully as more vocal students.

Virtual literature circles facilitate socially constructed learning opportunities.

Using Online Literature Circles in the Classroom

My daughter, now 14, has changed many of her original book group beliefs; specifically, she now readily admits to enjoying conversations with “the boys.” Yet, the warning implied by her elementary school experiences remains a salient concern for teachers: How do we honor the voices of students with diverse ideas, communication styles, and confidence levels while also developing authentic reading experiences?

As schools continue to push for more technology integration, best reading practices, and higher standardized test scores, educators should embrace the use of new literacies in instruction, such as virtual literature circles (Larson, 2009). Virtual literature circles reward student autonomy, encourage responsible active learning, and provide heat and energy to discussions. Additionally, because asynchronous discussions provide written transcripts, they can become powerful tools for classroom teachers. Discussion transcripts may be used as teaching tools in minilesson activities (Larson, 2009), they may be powerful models for one-on-one conferences, and they may be used to demonstrate or justify to administrators and parents the importance of small, student-led literature discussions.

Ultimately, my study corroborated Dringus’s (2001) findings around online learning experiences. Like Dringus, I found that “an energy level in an online learning environment, an energy that is the collective effort expended by a group” that could not be replicated by face-to-face discussion. Thus, my experience with virtual literature circles was successful. Virtual literature circles facilitated collaborative, socially constructed affiliations while also compelling students to engage deeply with text. It’s the same desire I hold for my college students and my daughter when they experience text.

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