1-1-2011

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Face-to-face Approach

During the late 1990's, as an eighth grade English Language Arts teacher in Illinois, I implemented literature circles in my classroom, engaging students in rich discussions around meaningful texts. Students would read novels independently and then gather in small groups by organizing their desks in circles to discuss what was most meaningful to them. "Two potent ideas – independent reading and cooperative learning – come together in the classroom activity called literature circles" (Daniels, 1994, p.12). Literature circles provide students the opportunity to explore texts and dialogue with peers (Short, Harste & Burke, 1996; Peterson & Eeds, 1990). Although variations exist, the essence of literature circles includes a small, temporary discussion group reading the same text conducting a self-sustaining discussion (Daniels, 1994). When students gather for discussion, student insights and questions drive dialogue, not the teacher's agenda (Brabham & Vilaume, 2000). These discussions allow students to develop new perspectives on literature and life—"Literature circles involve children in expanding and critiquing their understandings about their reading through dialogue with other readers" (Short, Harste & Burke, 1996, p. 195).

Daniels (1994) explains that although book groups have existed for decades, student-run discussions within the classroom really came to be in the 1980s. Short, Harste, and Burke featured literature circles in their book, *Creating Classrooms for Authors* (1988). Since that time, literature circles have been used with both elementary and secondary students, in regular education classes and special education classes, with monolingual and bilingual students, and with gifted, average, and remedial readers (Daniels, 1994). Literature circles have become a tried and true practice within many classrooms as students gather in small groups to discuss a text face-to-face.

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I chose to use literature circles because I believe what Rosenblatt (1995) writes, that "a novel or poem or play remains merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols" (p. 24). That is, the meaning-making process, where a reader and the text engage, is a two-way, reciprocal relationship. Literature circles are structured to promote personal meaning making and transactional thought (Peterson & Eeds, 1990). With these notions of meaning making, I also recognized that learning occurs through the active construction of knowledge within a given environment (Mitchell & Myles, 1988). That is, we learn not as isolated individuals, but as active members of society who engage in dialogue. Vygotsky (1986) initiated thinking that learning occurs through dialogue, and that in dialogue, learners interact with sources of knowledge in social settings as well as take an active part in reconstructing knowledge within their own minds. The social aspects of learning lend themselves to the nature of literature discussions, which provide students the opportunity to explore texts and dialogue with peers (Daniels, 1994; Peterson & Eeds, 1990). Therefore, based on my observations and the growth exhibited by the students, the practice of literature circles has followed me throughout the years.

During 2004 to 2006, I participated in a service learning project between a local university and a local high school. Placed into the role of supervisor, I taught university interns how to facilitate literature circles with high school students. Each intern worked with a group of high school students reading a shared young adult novel and then discussing the text in a student-led discussion group.

Conversations peppered the room on any given Tuesday or Thursday as students engaged with texts, constructing meaning and making connections. I heard students and interns collaboratively working through books, voicing their metacognitive thinking such as how they were asking questions, visualizing, and rereading. Literature circles again proved to be a powerful way for students to engage with texts, while providing them a space to discuss face-to-face what's important and meaningful to them.

New Approach Context

During the Fall 2008 semester, I began exploring the use of online literature discussions to enhance the literacy learning experiences of students. I always valued face-to-face literature circles in the classroom, but I wondered how I could expand this concept to include more voices, more transactions. Additionally, I began to consider how we prepare children for their literacy futures. In the past, the focus has almost always been the book (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro & Cammack, 2004). However, we need to expand our vision of literacy to understand what it means to lead literate 21st century lives. Students use 21st century literacy skills to engage in web blogs, videocasts, e-mail, instant messages, WebQuests, and online discussions. These new mediums influence student literacy learning both in and out of school (Scharber, 2009; Knobel & Lankshear, 2006; Leu et al., 2004). It's no longer just about the book; literacy includes reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and media study, many times involving electronic or online mediums.

With this understanding of reading and 21st century literacy skills, I asked my university graduate students to engage in online literature discussions around a shared text with high school juniors. Ginny and Lesley (pseudonyms) were two graduate students in that class, and after this experience with online literature discussions, they both volunteered to collaborate with me in the future with their sixth grade students. In the past, Ginny and Lesley both used face-to-face literature circles in their classrooms as sixth grade teachers. Their goals for these literature circles were focused on providing students space to dialogue in hopes of students taking up "new perspectives on literature, their lives, and their reading processes" (Short, Harste & Burke, 1996, p. 195). So, when Ginny, Lesley, and I started discussing the use of online literature discussions, we were careful to keep our purposes in mind (originally stemming from our experiences with face-to-face literature circles)—encouraging personal transactions with texts and student collaboration around a shared novel.

During the first year of collaboration, the sixth grade students were paired with graduate students (most of whom were classroom teachers) enrolled in my university reading methods courses. In this arrangement, each group contained 2-4 participants. Together, the sixth grade students and graduate students discussed a shared novel using the university purchased and supported online platform of Blackboard. During the second year of the study, the sixth grade students were paired with both graduate students and other sixth graders from the opposite school. That is, Ginny's students were paired with both my students and Lesley's students while Lesley's students were paired with both my students and Ginny's students. In this arrangement, each group contained 4-5 participants. Together, the sixth grade students and graduate students discussed a shared novel using a free Internet platform, nicenet.org.

However, in order to understand online literature discussions, I conducted a qualitative study to examine specifically how teachers conceptualize the use of online literature discussions to enhance literacy practices and learning during a novel study (Stolle, 2010). While researchers are exploring new trends in literacy education that engage students in 21st century literacy skills (Karchmer, Mallette, Kara-Soteriou & Leu, 2005; Kist, 2010; Rozema & Webb, 2008), questions remain regarding how teachers perceive and then use online discussions within a novel study. Therefore, this inquiry sought to explore the conceptualizations of two middle school Language Arts teachers who attempted to use online discussions to enhance student literacy learning within a novel study.

Ginny and Lesley were the primary participants. That is, their perceptions were the focus of the study. The 60 graduate reading candidates enrolled in the university courses I taught were secondary participants who served to corroborate the findings, confirming and disconfirming the primary participants' conceptualizations. The data collected from the participants include: (1) email correspondence, (2) notes from verbal interactions, (3) a survey given to the graduate reading candidates, (4) in-depth interviews with the classroom teachers, and (5) a researcher's journal.

In order to make sense of the data, I followed Strauss's (1995) three-step analysis using the process of open coding, axial coding and selective coding. This coding process allowed me to systematically decide how the codes and categories relate to each other and what stories they tell. Then, I linked these stories to the theoretical framework, thus coming up with my findings.

Findings

All of the teachers in this study see online literature discussions as beneficial to literacy learning. However, in noting the benefits, the teachers also wrestle with tensions that cause them to approach online literacy with some caution. The following themes explore the teachers' conceptualizations of online literature discussions, noting both the benefits and tensions within the conceptualizations.

Authenticity – benefits

The teachers believe that online literature discussions provide authentic experiences that engage students in literacy learning. That is, as students write their responses to the novel, they must consider their audience because other group members will read their responses. In that way, language becomes important. Students must consider how they craft their texts in order to communicate an effective message.

Both Ginny and Lesley verbalized that they chose to engage their students in the online literature discussions because they felt the notion of an authentic audience was important. Lesley specifically noted that learning experiences in the classroom can become "schoolized," and students fail to see the relevance in their learning. However, with the online literature discussions, students had an authentic purpose for reading and writing because they were engaging in authentic dialogue around the text with students outside of their own classroom. That is, the relevance and authenticity of the online literature discussions motivated the students to read and discuss the text.

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Ginny shared that four of her students told her that they usually didn't have an interest in reading. Because of the online literature discussions, these students now wanted to read the novel so they could understand the discussion and participate in the discussion. One student even told Ginny that pairing reading, something she didn't enjoy, with the online forum, something she did enjoy, was motivating. In fact, because the online literature discussions were so engaging, many students in both classes chose to access the discussion outside of class, continuing to talk about the text beyond the classroom because they had an authentic purpose.

Authenticity – tensions.

Although the online literature dicussions created an authentic space, purpose, and audience for the students' learning, the teachers also struggled with the question: How do I assess an authentic learning experience without taking the authentic-

ity away? Ginny and Lesley explored this question each semester, feeling pressure to assign students a grade, yet they didn't quite know how to determine these grades. Drawing on Rosenblatt's (1995) work, the teachers valued the students' individual responses, yet they felt quality was important as students supported and developed their transactions with the text. Still, Ginny and Lesley feared that as soon as a grade was assigned to a transaction, the transaction was quantified, thus changing the purpose of the transaction. Their main purpose of the online literature discussions was to encourage students to make meaning and connections to the text and to build on these transactions through dialogue. Yet, Ginny and Lesley felt they needed to hold the students accountable for their work. So, the tensions remained . . . with the inclusion of accountability and assessment components, authenticity within the learning experience could be lost.

Multiple perspectives – benefits

As students engaged in the online literature discussions, it was exciting to hear from students who were typically quieter than their peers in the classroom. Lesley specifically shared about one student who rarely spoke in class, but online, this student flourished, sharing developed and insightful ideas. In this way, the online forum provided students an alternative space for discussion where students

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could move away from oral communication that requires immediate response to using the written word which provides more time for thought, reflection, and revision in one's response.

Additionally, the online literature discussions allowed the students to hear more voices, more transactions. Both Ginny and Lesley verbally shared with me that another one of their hopes in having their students participate in the online discussions was to expose the students to various perspectives. Ginny's school is situated in a rural area with limited diversity. Therefore, in collaborating with university students and Lesley's 6th grade students, Ginny's students were able to interact with a more diverse population and hear new perspectives about the text. In this way, students had the chance to hear their personal transactions affirmed and/or challenged, pushing them to think in new and complex ways—learning occurred through the written dialogue (Vygotsky, 1986). Lesley highlighted an example of this in the students' posts while discussing bullying around an incident in the text. One student posed a question regarding a character's actions. Another student answered the question, sharing her interpretation of this character's action, thus causing a third student to share how reading the other student's response helped her to reconsidered her own initial interpretation of the incident in the text and her perceptions of bullies in general. In this way, Lesley noted students' learning as they provided each other alternative perspectives that challenged their thinking.

Multiple perspectives – tensions

Although we saw students explore new perspectives and take up new ideas, the teachers were still left with questions such as: How do you encourage students to fully explore alternative perspectives? How do you encourage students to dig deeper in their reflections? Each semester the teachers tried various formats for generating the discussion and moving students to deep reflection. They experimented with both providing some structure for students with optional guided questions for each chapter and leaving the students free to respond as they felt led. Ginny and Lesley found the free responses to be the most fruitful and productive for discussion, but they always contemplated ways they could continue to move their students to deeper, more robust thinking and sharing. They tried teacher modeling, student modeling, and various forms of accountability, but still found there was no perfect answer—the tension remained.

Identity development – benefits

As discussed earlier, the online literature discussions provided students with an alternative space to discuss their thoughts and ideas. That is, those who may not prefer to talk in class were now sharing through the written word. Ginny and Lesley saw this shift in space important for the students' identity development. Not only were Ginny and Lesley valuing various learning styles (verbal vs. written), but they were also working to provide a space where students felt empowered to share their voice. Ginny and Lesley ultimately believed they achieved this goal. That is, they perceived that the students understood their transactions were valued, an important step in developing the students' identities as readers and writers.

One student shared with Ginny that he had never seen himself as a reader, but since engaging in the online literature discussions, he now did see himself as a reader who could talk about a book. In this way, the online literature discussion provided this student space to discover his identity as a reader. Additionally, as students engaged in the discussion, the space also provided them choice in the direction of the discussion. Because their transactions were valued and encouraged, students autonomously led the discussions, again seeing themselves as genuine readers and writers engaging in an authentic task.

Identity development – tensions

Identity development proved to be important as Ginny and Lesley worked with the students, helping them to see themselves as readers and writers. However, questions still remained such as: How does identity impact the responses students post? That is, how does gender, ability, language proficiency, etc. impact one's willingness to engage?

These questions are challenging to answer. One idea Ginny and Lesley considered was the notion of anonymity. Could online literature discussions provide students with more of a sense of anonymity? Ginny and Lesley felt students needed to use their own names to identify themselves within the forum so the teachers could monitor the students' behaviors. However, in reflection, the teachers did consider using pseudonyms within the forums so students could post anonymously, thus eliminating the pressures based on identity markers.

What does it all mean?

In reflecting on all of my past experiences with both face-to-face literature circles and online literature discussions, I still believe the use of student-led discussions is a tried and true practice that should continue in classrooms. However, as I consider the tensions the teachers articulated, and the questions they asked, technology was not the driving force. That is, these tensions exist with/without technology. The questions Ginny and Lesley asked within their use of online literature discussions I recall asking since my early days with face-to-face literature circles. I've always wondered how I can preserve the authenticity of the learning experience while still assessing student learning, how I can encourage students to reflect in deeper, more complex ways, and how I can manage the effects identity development have on the discussions with students. While these are not new questions, the context of an online environment forces us to rethink/reconceptualize our teaching methods and classroom practice.

I find that I am a proponent of both face-to-face literature circles and online literature discussions—both serve important purposes. As I look to the future and the needs of our 21st century learners, online literature discussions provide us with an additional way to engage technologically-savvy students in a meaningful, authentic activity around a text that empowers and encourages while promoting collaborative meaning-making.

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