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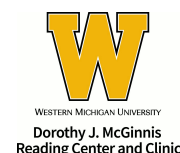
Enhancing Nonfiction Reading Comprehension Through Online Book Discussions

Angela Falter Thomas, Bowling Green University

———————— **Abstract** ————————

The introduction of Common Core State Standards has many middle grade school teachers concerned with implementing standards while retaining student reading engagement and motivation strategies. This study analyzes the effectiveness of providing social networking strategies in online book discussion groups on enhancing middle grade student reading engagement and motivation. Additionally, this study reaffirmed that offering students a choice fostered more autonomous learning habits. Finally, as a result of facilitating these online book discussions, graduate students were able to learn and develop more effective strategies and skills for engaging and motivating middle grade student reading. It is hoped that this study will not only assist middle grade teachers in providing learning strategies to effectively implement Common Core State Standards, but also assist teacher education students as a result of direct experience in facilitating online book discussion groups.

As a teacher educator, I'm sometimes asked to assist teachers who are struggling or frustrated. Often these situations involve a teacher who has a desire to learn effective, new strategies, as well as requests for incorporating the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Jeri (all names are pseudonyms) contacted me to assist in implementing the CCSS's call for increased emphasis in the use of informational text. She was also looking for new, engaging methods in doing so.

As a result of Jeri's invitation, she and I decided to investigate the outcomes of scaffolded online book discussions of her seventh grade students facilitated by graduate students. Specifically, we examined whether her students' participation in online book discussions would improve the comprehension of informational text, and whether it would improve their use of reading strategies. This article describes the online book discussions she used with her seventh grade reading classes and our findings as a result of data collection and analysis.

Literature Review

Close Reading

According to Goodwin & Miller (2013), quantity is not the only factor all that matters in reading, the quality of what students read is also important. Students need to read and comprehend nonfiction texts as often as they do narrative texts. Typically, students reading nonfiction cannot simply glide over unfamiliar words as it may cause a loss in ongoing meaning. Reading nonfiction text typically requires careful attention and deeper thought while students grapple with new understandings.

Close reading is a type of guided instruction in which students explore a complex and worthy text, mining it for information and actively exploring meaning on various levels is referred to as close reading (Shanahan, 2014). According to Owocki (2014), "Close reading is the practice of carefully and thoroughly attending to what an author is saying and of working to uncover the layers of meaning that are so often embedded within complex text" (p. 3). It is taking a mindful, meticulous look, making connections while reading. Close reading suggests careful attention to the text, the relevant experience, the thought and memory of the reader, and attention to the responses and

interpretations of other readers (Beers & Probst, 2013).

Close reading did not evolve from the CCSS. While the CCSS emphasize close reading of nonfiction texts (Burke, 2013), close reading is not a new concept. According to Akhavan (2014), close reading should be utilized when we want to make a critical analysis of what we read. It should be used when teachers want students to examine purpose, determine deep meaning, and tackle texts that might be above students' current reading level.

Nonfiction Text

The call for nonfiction text in the CCSS comes, in part, from knowledge that most of the reading engaged in by students in secondary education and beyond is nonfiction text. Carefully examining the CCSS, however, one learns the purpose of increasing attention to nonfiction texts is not just for students to have a greater appreciation of and facility with a range of text genres; it is also meant to ensure that students build knowledge and are prepared to read and write in all content areas (Cervetti & Heibert, 2014).

As students move through the grade levels, students' ability to read and obtain information from nonfiction becomes more and more essential to their academic success. Text, whose primary purpose is to convey information, surrounds students in the upper grades. Achievement in schooling, the workplace, and society depends on one's ability to comprehend informational material (Duke, 2004).

According to Fisher and Frey (2013), the reasons for increasing nonfiction text include the need to improve content knowledge, meet demands of digital environments, and improve the fourth-grade slump. Additionally, the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) has steadily increased the use of informational passages on its assessments. Furthermore, the CCSS calls for a major investment in the time teachers spend instructing students to raise their ability to comprehend information (Fisher & Frey, 2013). Integrating nonfiction literacy experiences can help students understand complex concepts, analyze data, and think logically. It allows students to have access to various literacy experiences.

The specific expectation for students in grades 6-8 is that they will cite evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text (Owocki, 2014). Students are expected to cite from both

fiction and nonfiction texts. Citing evidence from nonfiction text is useful to middle school students as they engage in reasoning about concepts in various subject areas, use text-based information to justify answers and solve problems, and evaluate point of view or argument (Owocki, 2014). Attending closely and critically to text can build a knowledge base to help make thoughtful and substantive contributions to the many different conversations of their lives.

According to Miller (2013), the quality and diversity of nonfiction have improved dramatically over the years. Lacking exposure, access, or experience with reading nonfiction in their classes, older students read fewer nonfiction books. When students have access and exposure to engaging informational texts, their motivation and interest in reading nonfiction improves (Moss & Hendershot, 2002).

Nonfiction texts typically incorporate information from an array of subject areas, including math, science, social studies, technology, art, music, and writing. Nonfiction texts often include text structures that differ greatly from narrative texts. Therefore, according to Blachowicz & Ogle (2001), students must learn to read expository texts (e.g., texts that emphasize cause and effect) as these texts differ structurally and organizationally from narrative texts. Ensuring that students can understand informational text is essential; nonfiction constitutes much of adult reading and writing and is an integral part of the literacies in today's society (Stead, 2014).

Teachers can foster students' growing interest and reading of informational texts by positioning students to navigate the affordances of difficulty, graphics, and content (Zapata & Maloch, 2014). When creating lessons and activities for students, teachers should include informational texts, which improves students' expository writing and increases their awareness of nonfiction texts. When teachers offer more informational texts and use nonfiction in meaningful ways, students become better nonfiction readers and find greater significance (Miller, 2013).

According to Miller (2013), reading informational texts can help students build background knowledge, increase their confidence, and discover authors and topics that feed further reading. Students are quite capable of learning about, and from, informational texts when given opportunities. When working with informational texts, students grow in their comprehension of the texts and in their use of these genres, strategies, and structures in their own

writing (Zapata & Maloch, 2014). According to Duke (2004), teachers should put informational texts in the hands of students, guide them to and through authentic activities with those texts, engage the students in active dialogue around those texts, and be explicit about comprehension strategies, text structures, and features as warranted by students' developing understandings and performance in those texts.

Informational texts provide students with authentic models for organizing and presenting information in writing. They can also provide rich examples of descriptive writing, figurative language, and imagery concepts traditionally taught by teachers using fiction (Miller, 2013). In a recent review of research about informational texts in classrooms, Maloch and Bomer (2013) identified four important principles: making informational texts available and accessible to students, providing authentic opportunities for engagement, engaging students through interactive reading opportunities, and being explicit when necessary.

Online Discussions

Students reading and participating in discussions are catalysts to independent thinking, understanding, and decision making (Harvey & Goudvis, 2013). Discussion is critical to the process of helping students learn to comprehend and construct meaning. Studies have shown that discussions support understanding and learning from text because they offer occasions for students to share information. When sharing information from text, students typically include prior knowledge as well as what was understood and recalled from the text, which contributes to more coherent understandings (Cervetti & Hiebert, 2014). Discussion groups allow students to react personally in an authentic literacy experience (Cooper, Kiger, Robinson, & Slansky, 2014).

When students consistently interact with each other, discussions of both specific texts and content seem more thoughtful (Harvey & Goudvis, 2013). According to Scharber (2009), online book clubs feed on students' interest in new literacy practices while complementing traditional reading practices. Traditionally, literature circles were held in class as face-to-face interactions among several small groups of students; however, with Internet access becoming more widespread, moving traditional literature circles online can help meet the needs of today's students. The basic idea is to adapt the book discussions from the physical classroom to the online classroom. As stated by

Day and Kroon (2010), "Online literature circles are very similar to face-to-face ones, except students talk about the books they have read in small virtual groups using online programs…" (p. 19). The online literature circle encourages digital interaction, fosters student participation, and meets a variety of student needs.

According to Latendresse (2004), literature circles are beneficial for students in the middle grades since adolescents enjoy participating in small groups and having the freedom to interpret texts in light of their experiences. When discussing texts in online literature circles, students' conversations also appear to be less forced and more natural (Barack, 2011). Utilizing online literature circles provides students with opportunities to collaborate with classmates while incorporating digital literacies.

Sociocultural Perspectives

Sociocultural theory largely supports the use of online book discussions in education. These perspectives of literacy also emphasize the role of the larger environment in the shaping of literacy practices (Coombs, 2013). Sociocultural theories focus on what people do with the texts, the ways in which literacy is used in one's real-world contexts. Conceptualizing literacy as something one does, as opposed to one's skills or abilities, shows authentic ways people engage with texts (Perry, 2012). Viewing literacy as a socially contextualized practice demonstrates that practices may vary and be dynamic.

Scaffolding

Lev Vygotsky (1978) believed that social interactions played a crucial role in child development. Vygotsky asserted that social learning allowed for more knowledgeable people to share their expertise with others. Vygotsky's beliefs illustrate that more knowledgeable individuals can play a critical role in the information learned by students. If such individuals become involved in the educational process, they can share experiences and knowledge that the students may not receive otherwise.

Vygotsky (1962) introduced the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). ZPD describes the difference between what a learner can do on one's own and what learners can do with the help and guidance of a more capable other. As learners are supported for a period of time, they become more capable of completing educational tasks independently as

supports are gradually removed. This theory is directly linked to online book discussions as student discussion may be guided or subject to scaffolding by a more capable adult or student. As students begin to understand how to keep their conversations moving, the scaffolds can slowly be removed. Similarly, Barack (2011) explains that students participating in online book clubs are coached on how to engage in digital discussions and how to use appropriate language and avoid slang and "text speak."

Technology to Motivate

Motivation also plays a large factor in the use of online discussions. As discussed by Scharber (2009), "Despite technology's purported role in the decrease of pleasure reading, online book clubs may offer a motivating and convenient environment to encourage voluntary book reading" (p. 433). Often times, students are involved in technological experiences outside of school because they are interested in technology and its uses. As educators, it is our hope to find mediums that intrinsically motivate students to learn and engage in independent reading. When discussing students who participated in an online literature circle, Larson (2009) says, "…excitement about using technology transferred to literacy and the books the students were reading…and [h]earing about other books and reading conversations about the other novels motivated some sixth graders to seek out other titles and read more books" (p. 22).

Context of the Study

The Common Core State Standards (2010) call for building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction (Cervetti & Hiebert, 2014; Fisher & Frey, 2013; Pennington, Obenchain & Brock, 2014; Miller, 2013). Informational texts play an important part in developing students' content knowledge. In grades 6-12, ELA programs shift the balance of texts and instructional time toward reading substantially more literary nonfiction. This literary nonfiction includes speeches, essays, biographies, and opinion pieces, as well as historical, technical, and scientific documents (Coleman & Pimental, 2012).

Jeri (all names are pseudonyms), a frustrated seventh grade reading teacher, contacted me in the fall for help in meeting the requirements of the CCSS, specifically the incorporation of nonfiction. Together we sat down to discuss, debate, and determine how she could successfully include nonfiction while helping her students comprehend text, and ultimately the content they would read. Additionally, Jeri wanted her students to learn more about the

literacy strategies of establishing connections and making inferences, since she had determined these to be weak areas for many of her students.

At one point in our initial meeting, Jeri joked that whereas the CCSS call for nonfiction to be read, and at new levels, her seventh graders were not interested in mandates at any level; they were "social creatures" only interested in talking with peers and in social networking! Her comment turned our discussion to many questions: Could she somehow use social networking to get her students reading nonfiction? Could social networking allow her students talk to each other and discuss nonfiction? How could students learn needed reading strategies? Could my contacts at the university be utilized somehow to help her students? After additional research, meetings, and discussions, we came to the conclusion of trying online book discussion groups with her seventh grade students, facilitated by graduate students from my university who were all licensed teachers taking a semester-long graduate course on methods of teaching reading. We decided to use Maloch and Bomer's (2013) principles which included making informational texts available, having authentic opportunities for engagement, providing interactive reading opportunities, and being explicit when necessary.

Site & Participants

Bayside Middle School is a public school located in a small city in the Midwest. It serves approximately 425 students in grades six, seven, and eight. Of the student body, 47% of students received free or reduced lunches and are classified as economically disadvantaged. In 2012, students moved into a brand new, state-of-the-art, technology advanced school building. This district's operating spending per pupil is $9,219, which is approximately $1,400 above the state average.

Sixty-three seventh graders obtained parental permission to participate in this study, which was approved by the university's institutional review board. Ninety percent of these participants were Caucasian, 6% Hispanic, and 4% African American; their ages ranged from 12-14 years old. According to data gathered by the school district from a STAR reading assessment, the study participants' reading levels ranged from third grade to eighth grade.

The 19 facilitators were graduate-level students who had earned their Bachelor's degrees and were licensed teachers pursuing a Masters of Arts in Reading at a large state university located in the Midwest. They ranged in age

from 22-36 with one male and 18 females. Three of the graduate students were full time teachers with their own classrooms, whereas the other 16 were full time graduate students who had completed student teaching but did not yet have their first teaching positions. Jeri, the seventh graders' reading teacher, was in her fourth year of teaching.

Procedures

Jeri was most comfortable with the content area of social studies, therefore, we went to speak with the seventh grade social studies teacher at Bayside Middle to see what topics and areas of social studies the students would be learning about that next semester; collecting that information helped us identify appropriate books. We turned to titlewave.com to locate good books to use. We first searched for appropriate reading levels, interest levels, and topics. We then narrowed this down by copyright date and, ultimately, cost to purchase the titles we could not obtain through for free through a library. In the end we made a list of 20 nonfiction titles covering social studies topics, and the school principal ordered 3-4 copies of each title so that students would each have their own book for this project.

In December, Jeri took one class period to conduct brief book talks about each of the 20 titles. She had her students rank-order their first through fourth choice of book and was able to assign each of her students to one of four choices. Meanwhile, the graduate students were randomly assigned books. Via email they were told the title and author and that they needed to obtain the text prior to the start of classes in January.

Jeri had 21 students in each of her three sections of seventh grade reading. Each section met for 50 minutes, Monday through Friday. In my graduate-level reading methods course beginning the next semester, I was to have a total of 19 students, meeting face- to- face once a week for three hours. Jeri and I decided to use mixed-ability groups; we randomly put the small groups of seventh grade students with each graduate student facilitator. In the end, each group had 3-4 student members.

Obtaining computer access was not difficult since the students attended a technology-advanced school. Students had six desktop computers available in their classroom. They also had a class set of computers on a cart that could be brought into the classroom, access to a technology lab of 30 computers, as well as a library with 10 computers.

Schoology is an online learning management system that teachers and schools use to create accounts and build courses or display materials such as files, assignments, and quizzes online for their students to access wherever they are able to log into the Internet. This free, secure social networking site was selected as the platform for the online book discussions as they were already using in their school. Students had previously set up accounts and were required to submit some of their assignments to their reading teacher via Schoology.

Schoology also allows users to share content, collaborate, and have discussions. The sharing can occur with all users, in a one-on-one private manner, or with small groups. Groups can also be created so that only the group members can read each other's posts and respond, which was done in order to help students feel more comfortable in knowing that only group members would be reading what they wrote. The seventh graders were told they could also send private posts directly to their graduate student if they did not wantgroup members to read their comments. Jeri and I were also registered members of every group, however, we only read the students' posts and never posted ourselves.

Prior to the seventh graders and the graduate-level students communicating with each other in Schoology, the graduate students were instructed on using higher-level questioning to encourage deeper thinking and to improve comprehension. They were also taught about incorporating in their online posts the teaching of the strategies Jeri requested (establishing connections and making inferences) and how to scaffold student learning. Finally, graduate students were taught methods to motivate early adolescents to read, including developing rapport in a professional manner.

While participating in this online book discussion study, the graduate students met with me six times over six weeks. We discussed problems, concerns, or issues they were having facilitating their small groups such as not knowing if their online students were struggling with the text, what to do if students were only briefly answering questions, or if students were posting questions that were off-topic. From the early discussions in class, I quickly learned we needed to set up a "side-bar discussion" for comments that were off topic, such as, "What is it like to be a college student?", "What do you like to do when you are not teaching?", and "Are you teaching your own class and

facilitating our groups too?" These questions were of sincere interest to the seventh graders, yet were not related to the content in their texts. Soon after, I realized the seventh graders' monitoring strategies were lacking, so I coached my students on ways to teach students to monitor what they are reading. The graduate-level students also shared instructional ideas and strategies with their peers. These ideas included including using audio files of graduate students reading to the students, attaching pictures or video links of the topic being discussed, posing a focus question, asking student to write about the topic before they start reading, and connecting their content to real world events by sharing recent newspaper articles and other media.

Since the book discussion groups contained seventh grade students from three different reading classes, and the graduate students' university course met in the evenings (which was not a convenient time for the seventh grade students) establishing a set time to be online for this work could not occur; therefore, they could not have real-time chats. As a result, asynchronous discussions took place, allowing the students to share on their own, outside the constraints of time and place.

When the seventh grade students first logged into their Schoology accounts, they watched a brief video clip that their assigned graduate student posted, introducing themselves and the book that the group would be reading. The book was introduced in a cliffhanger style to enhance students' interest in reading it. The seventh grade students responded by introducing themselves to their group's facilitator. Next, the graduate students replied and included a required amount of text to read and a prescribed due date, which was always a week in length. On or before the due date, the seventh graders logged back in and keyed in their responses to the questions posted by the graduate student in their group. Additionally, the seventh grade students posted questions for the graduate student facilitator and their small group peers. Each participant was required to make at least 24 posts or responses during this six-week project.

Although Jeri periodically checked in face- to- face with her students regarding this work and gave reminders, the students were responsible for doing the online literature circle work independently. Due to her students' busy lives outside of school, she allowed 10 minutes of silent reading in class each day just for this project. Computer time was also offered (at least briefly) each day in case the students needed to be online for this project. For all students,

especially for those who did not have online access at home, Jeri allowed use of the classroom computers before and after school, during lunch, study hall, or free time in the students' schedules.

While facilitating the discussions, the graduate-level students posed questions to build rapport and develop the seventh graders' use of reading strategies to improve comprehension of the informational text. The questions were designed to foster discussion, critical thinking, and extension beyond the book. The graduate-level students attempted to engage the seventh graders in dialogue to guide and prompt students' abilities to monitor, make connections, and infer while reading and thinking about the text.

Methods

This study utilizes a pre-post (without control group), quasi-experimental, intrinsic case study design. Quasi-experimental designs are used to study outcome comparison of an intervention without using randomization of participants into control and intervention groups. Specifically, a pre-post without control group quasi-experimental design investigates the outcomes of interest within the same participants, both before and after an intervention, to see if the intervention impacted the outcomes of interest (Cook & Campbell, 1979). In this study, the online book discussion groups facilitated by graduate students are the intervention. Participants studied, pre-and post-study, are seventh grade students. The student outcomes of interest, being compared before and after intervention, are their perceived abilities to comprehend nonfiction text and to utilize reading strategies of inferring, monitoring, and making connections. In this case study, the focus of research is to develop a deeper understanding and assess the impact this specific case (the online book discussion intervention) itself (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Instrumentation

Qualitative research methods were utilized in this study to gain a more holistic portrayal of the seventh grade students' online book discussion experience. An interview was conducted with the reading teacher before and after the project to obtain a more in-depth understanding of the seventh graders' engagement and motivation, as well as their levels of comprehension and use of reading strategies. The seventh grade participants completed a pre-and a post-survey, and selected students participated in pre-and post-focus group interviews. The data collection and analysis also included all of the

online discussion posts.

Interviews

A research assistant conducted two open-ended interviews with the reading teacher as a way to obtain, supplement, and extend knowledge of Jeri's thoughts and interpretations regarding the online project and its effect on the students' comprehension and motivation. The semi-structured interview format (Flick, 2014) was selected so the teacher could provide more detailed information to set questions, while allowing for some spontaneous questions or comments. The questions focused on the students' participation in the online book discussions, and included questions about the learning of three strategies often used when exploring nonfiction: inferring, monitoring, and making connections (e.g., "Describe what you saw your students experience while participating in their online book discussions compared to what you previously witnessed with your traditional way of teaching reading strategies"). Each interview was digitally recorded and later transcribed for analysis. The teacher was probed to provide detailed responses to the research questions and how the online book discussions helped students learn. Deeper meanings were sought in the teacher's answers by asking for examples and explanations of any comments that were not specific.

Focus Group Interviews

To explore participant perspectives, the study began and ended with semi-structured focus groups (Robinson, 2012), which were conducted by a research assistant. Sociocultural perspectives assume that readers negotiate meaning through participation in social interactions, therefore, a pre- and a post -focus group interview was conducted with two sets of students to capture their perspectives about the online book discussion experience, and their ability to comprehend nonfiction and use strategies. Six students were randomly selected to participate in focus group A, and six students were again randomly selected to participate in focus group B; the four focus group meetings lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. A researcher used an empty classroom to conduct the group interviews during the students' study hall or lunch without adults present. During the focus groups, participants were promoted with four questions in a semi-structured format. Each focus group interview was also digitally recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Online Posts

All of the online discussion posts of the participants, as well as the graduate-level university facilitators, were examined on Schoology in order to learn the specific "conversation" of each small group.

Surveys

To obtain knowledge from the students, all seventh grade participants used Qualtrics, an online survey program, to complete a survey at two time points: before they started working with their university graduate student facilitator, and after their book discussions were completed. This survey was made up of open-ended questions about their perceptions about comprehending text and participating in online book discussions. Items on the pre-survey were identical to items on the post-survey with the exception of facilitator focus. Specifically, pre-survey items asked seventh grade students about their perceptions of online book discussions pertaining to any previous experiences or thoughts, whereas post-survey items were about online book discussion interactions with the graduate-level student facilitating them in this project. Questions also focused on student thoughts about their comprehension as a result of participating in the online book discussions and how teachers could make their experience more educational.

Data Analysis

To control for researcher bias and to help make sense of the data, I enlisted in the help of another researcher to help conduct the data analysis. We established intercoder agreement through an analysis of discordance. Before getting started on this study's official analysis, we both independently coded and discussed random samples of posts and transcriptions until 85% agreement was researched. This exceeds the acceptable level of 80% agreement between coders (Miles & Huberman, 2014).

We first worked independently with each set of data, using selective coding to highlight the most common categories and to explain themes (Creswell, 2007). Data sets were analyzed and salient themes were devised and integrated to support assertions. Manual coding for salient themes were informed by strategies recommended by Dyson and Genishi (2005) and Saldana (2013). Additionally, a research assistant entered the same data and used the computer software QSR NVivo9 to create categories and codes. Finally, we all

three met together to discuss our results. Three dominant themes emerged: choice of text (66 statements), social networking (99 statements), and scaffolding strategies (82 statements). The data analysis allowed us to develop the assertions described in the following section.

Outcomes from the Intervention

The online informational book discussion findings were two-fold: there were findings related to students and to teachers. The findings related to students revealed that text choice and social networking engage and motivate adolescents, which contribute to productivity in online- book discussions. The findings related to teachers revealed that scaffolded strategies are effective. In this section, each of the identified themes are examined, and the spoken words of the seventh graders are used to further illuminate these ideas.

Choice of Text

One practice contributing to the students' productivity was the process of selecting books. The teacher allowing the students to select their own book, after introducing them through book talks, was an important factor in the students reading the text. One student said, "This is the first time we've ever been allowed to pick our own reading in this class and this is the first time I've ever read in this class." Another student said, "I didn't get my first choice of book, but I got one of my choices. That was huge because I liked my book and probably wouldn't have read it otherwise."

Social Networking

Another important practice involved the students collaboratively interacting with each other on the internet through Schoology. Students reported valuing their book discussion groups for providing them with insightful explanations and knowledge that led to constructing new understandings. One student reported about the quality, "Discussing online was more helpful because I had time to think about what I was going to say and ask. I can't do that in class because I feel like I have to hurry up and speak before I lose my turn." Another seventh grader talked about accountability, "I didn't want to let anyone down. If someone posted a question, I actually felt responsible for figuring it out and getting back to them."

Scaffolding Strategies

Students responded that there were always questions and comments

Online Book Discussion Group 5

B I U ⊟ ⊟ ⇥ ⇤ ABC

Post

Most Recent ▾

Group Member4
Why was it important that Rosa got her picture taken on the same bus she was arrested on?
Comment · Like

Group Member 3
To make an inference think about the facts, including what you know outside of reading this book and just make an educated guess. But I have a question now too. Why does the book talk about the white people that were nice to Rosa and her family? Doesn't that go against how the rest of this book is written?
Comment · Like

Group Member 1
I too thought that was contradictory! The book talks about how no one was nice to the black people, and then on page 13, it talks about the white people that were nice to Rosa and her family.
Comment · Like

Group Member 3
I feel it's like when the author explains the differences between Pine Level and Montgomery. You learn that even though things are similar, there are differences. It's not that one is better than the other – they are just different. But I agree the author should have been more specific and not so confusing there.
Comment · Like

Group Member4
I found a movie trailer about Rosa Parks. http://www.imdb.com/video/screenplay/vi1660485913 It's pretty good, but my favorite person who fought for African American rights was Mary McLeod Bethune. Check out this video: http://youtu.be/kkM_YcJXF7g Let me know what you think and what do you think Mary & Rosa have in common? (Not just surface level here! Kick it up a notch!)

Updates
Discussions
Albums
Members (4)
Resources

Leave this group

Upcoming · 📅
No upcoming assignments or e

4 Members

Figure 1. *Online Book Discussion. This figure illustrates typical communication within a group.*

posted in their group, which kept them focused on the reading, and that they could get help right away when they were baffled. (Figure 1 depicts typical communication within a group.)   Students reported receiving helpful, individualized assistance when they were confused. For example, one student posted, "I don't know what our author means when he is talking about the exploits and the tirades of the emperors. Can someone help me?" Often times help came back in the form of a simple question or statement such as, "Do you remember last year in social studies when Mr. Lanten brought in those art museum pictures?" or "Watch this video clip. It shows you more and explains it better." Not only did this intervention come from the graduate students, but also from peers, which is a testimony to the value of the online small group book discussions. (Figure 2 shows students using scaffolding in their group discussion.) This outcome of scaffolding suggests the importance of mentoring and supporting students while they are reading so that they don't give up, but continue to think deeply about what they are reading.

Implications

In general, children enter school with high levels of motivation; however, that motivation tends to decline as they progress throughout their school years. Therefore, instruction and strategies must in turn be modified to meet the rigorous demands of middle school students. Whereas prior research and literature explicitly informs us that providing students with high-quality feedback (Fisher & Frey, 2013),choice of reading materials (Fisher & Frey, 2012; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Mackey, 2014; Morgan & Wagner, 2013), and allowing interaction with others (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 2009; Kagan & Kagan, 2009) are critical for student growth in learning; this has also become vital components of student motivation and engagement. Additionally, much of the conversation around twenty-first-century literacies emphasizes the importance of collaboration (Gainer, 2014), which is illuminated in this study.

Figure 2. *Student Facilitation. This figure illustrates students utilizing scaffolding in their group discussion.*

Implementing new literacies in schools requires a change in instruction (Hagood, Provost, Skinner, & Egelson, 2008); this was evident for Jeri, who tried a new method. This case study demonstrates this situation and offers a scaffolded, guided-instruction approach that allows students to work together online to foster improved productivity as well as to elicit seventh grade students' perceived improved comprehension of informational text. Whereas not all of the participants reported a positive experience (twelve percent of the students said this simply replicated face-to-face book discussions), the vast majority (88%) found the online discussions to be revolutionary, and preferred them for having improved their productivity as well as comprehension of nonfiction text.

Teacher Training Implications

If we want our teachers to be successful in providing students with effective strategies that can be used to move learning forward, we must offer guided instruction that models best practices and allow time to practice these skills in real-world contexts. It has been said that teachers often teach the way they were taught (Cruickshank, Metcalf, & Bainer Jenkins, 2009).;there are, of course, other factors that influence the way someone teaches (i.e., experiences in teacher education programs). If there are not alternate ways of teaching presented, or motivation to do this differently, teachers often rely on what they have seen in the past.

To facilitate a change in teaching practices, scaffolded, online instruction proved to be an effective method. Rather than simply lecturing to graduate-level students about best practices, the students were shown best practices by providing them with opportunities to practice teaching in real-world situations with an instructor providing guidance along the way, providing the graduate-level students a safe environment to learn and grow. These graduate students had continued support and guidance from their university instructor during this field experience, which is a critical feature required for change to effectively take place (Fullan, 2006).

Middle Grades Student Learning Implications

If our goal is to help graduate-level students develop into effective educators, then we must examine how these graduate students are impacting the students they are teaching. Too often, teacher research stops at drawing inferences about what the pre-service teachers learned from our work

with them. To truly know if our teacher education programs are making a difference, it is critical to investigate the impact of this intervention on PK-12 student learning. Through this study, we are able to see seventh grade students' perceptions about their experience participating and learning in online book discussions facilitated by graduate students.

The seventh grade students' comments inform us that they believe the scaffolding they received was specific, constructive, and timely. They stated receiving help in building background knowledge and in developing their reading strategies for nonfiction text. They perceived the scaffolding helped them improve their learning because both the graduate students, and their peers, encouraged group members to share knowledge and experiences, which was essential to fostering the seventh graders' interpretations of books. Additionally, they self-reported that help was tailored to their unique and individual needs, and was received it in the midst of the learning process; Receiving this feedback throughout the learning process was helpful.

Fisher & Frey (2012) inform us that it is critical for students to be provided with time to read, self-selection of texts, and to read without having a lot of adult interferences. Whereas the seventh grade students overall did not report about having time in class to read, they did state they believe their comprehension was improved due to being allowed to have choice of text; Choice allows students to have control (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000) and is an important factor for motivation and engagement (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004). In this study, the main focus of the "choice" was in the nonfiction topic of study, not the reading level. Students reported making their selection according to the content in the books, not the challenge of the text itself.

According to Hagood (2012), teachers understand the need to invigorate their instruction with new literacies. Teachers are compelled by the rewards of engagement, learning, and changing relationships; One sees those rewards in the outcomes. The seventh graders reported that incorporating the online social networking piece of the book discussions was helpful in motivating them to read and think deeply. Ultimately, they believed they better understood the content. They also reported feeling accountable and responsible for their own learning as well as for the learning of their group mates, which they found to be empowering.

Teachers should consider the fact that middle school students are social

creatures and typically like to be with others. Participating in online book discussions can incorporate students' desire to be with others. Learning is a social activity; Vygotsky (1978) informs us that learning requires student interaction and engagement in classroom activities. As noted in this study, engaged students can be motivated to learn. According to Falter Thomas (2014), online book discussion groups can be an effective instructional strategy for middle school students who desire social interaction. This study further suggests the influence of scaffolded guided-online instruction facilitated by the graduate students in book discussions is effective for improved learning.

Conclusion

The CCSS, calling for the inclusion of more nonfiction reading, have cast informational text in a new light in today's classrooms. As always, middle school students crave socialization and opportunities to interact with others (2010).

We cannot assume that teachers in training will develop skills in best practices without deliberate, scaffolded, and guided instruction. Additionally, time to practice these skills is needed in both low-stakes, simulated learning environments, as well as within real-world contexts with students. To deliver a teacher education course that fosters providing students with high-quality feedback and scaffolding and interacting with students online (rather than simply "teaching" how to do this) takes intentional planning and instructional modeling of best practices, as well as a field experience component, to be most effective.

Allowing students to text choice and working online with other group members enhanced student motivation by providing social networking opportunities, and ultimately engaged and motivated seventh graders to contribute productively and to understand the context in their nonfiction texts Finally, the scaffolded assistance they received from both the graduate-level student facilitator as well as their peers was helpful in enhancing understanding and retention of the texts. The analysis of this online book discussion study reaffirms that scaffolded instruction, social networking, and autonomy of learning are practices that engage and motivate middle grade students to become more productive in readings, book discussion, and understanding.

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