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Writing for Real Purpose



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Working to transform his classroom, fifth grade teacher John Blain of Buffalo (New York) public schools infused technology into his literature lessons by adding an online literature discussion to his more traditional classroom discussion.

Students were assigned to read Kate DiCamillo's books *Because of Winn-Dixie* and *The Tiger Rising*. Blain then set up a threaded discussion at Nicenet (www.nicenet.org), a free online classroom assistant that is a cross between a blog and a wiki. Blain created some discussion threads and invited students to respond to the questions. He also encouraged the students to generate their own questions and discussion threads on any aspect of the book that interested, confused, or intrigued them. Students responded to the discussions at their convenience within a specified time period. Blain then used the students' comments posted online to generate classroom discussion.

Students used this forum to question the action of characters, explore major themes, and connect events in the books to their own lives. There were open-ended questions such as:

1. Do you believe Otis was a dangerous criminal and Gloria Dump a witch, as some people assumed in the book?
2. Miss Franny wanted a library full of books for her birthday. Do you think it was a wise choice? Why or why not?

These questions required students to write either in support of or against the actions of a particular character in the text. Whichever side students took, they supported their opinions with evidence from the book or their own lives.

During this discussion, the volume of reading and writing increased tremendously, as did student engagement and motivation, as shown by the large number of discussion threads and student-initiated discussions. Most students responded from their homes,

By Chinwe H. Ikpeze

English Language Arts

and those who did not have access to the Internet at home clustered around classroom computers trying to join the discussions online. They were all eager to respond to their classmates, either to support or to argue against certain points of view.

It was clear these students were engaged because they were writing for a real purpose and for a real audience—their peers. The conversations afforded students the opportunity to engage in real-life writing similar to what they usually did outside of school.

Prior to discussing the book online, students searched the Internet to learn about DiCamillo and her background through virtual field trips. They also talked about aspects of the book in small groups. Threaded discussions

provided another avenue for students to share their knowledge of the book, and they also allowed different types of learners to showcase their strengths.

The discussion format proved to be an empowering activity that enabled students to take control of their learning. It gave them a voice in their learning because they could express themselves without feeling intimidated by the presence of others, including their teachers. The online discussion also created a learning place where students could read, write, and explore around the clock.

—Chinwe H. Ikpeze is an assistant professor of literacy at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, New York.

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