

Dialogic teaching in an online environment: Book raps

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines a blended learning context known as book raps where children read and respond to literary texts. In this particular e-literacy environment, readers discuss their opinions of a book under the guidance of a moderator known as a rap coordinator who provides stimulus questions known as rap points. The paper demonstrates how question design as prompts for online interaction is crucial to the success of the discussion. It critiques the pedagogic underpinning of data taken from a book rap where young primary children in Australian schools read the picture book, Mrs Millie's Painting (Ottley, 1997), and then interacted using emails. As students use both face2face in the classroom under the guidance of their teacher and asynchronous online discussion in the raps, dialogue is crucial to this learning context. The principles of dialogic teaching are used as an analytical framework to examine support provided by the moderator to develop students' social and cognitive online interactions. The paper argues that the design of the discursive interactions created for the rap impacts on students' critical appreciation of the book they read.

KEYWORDS: Critical literacy, discourse analysis, dialogic teaching, children's literature, online learning, reading.

Dear Rappers,

Our exciting Mrs Millie's Painting book rap begins this week, and I am looking forward to a very bright and colourful time with you all. This week, our task is to introduce ourselves, so let me begin by telling you about myself. My name is Mrs *, and I am the Teacher-Librarian at * Public School in *. I will be your Coordinator for the Mrs Millie book rap. The class I am working with for this rap, a composite Year 2/3, will tell you about * and our school when they introduce themselves. We are keen to meet all our fellow Mrs Millie rappers, so as soon as you can this week (commencing Monday 22nd October), construct a group Introduction and send it, and all student messages, to this email address: Mrs_millies_painting_rap@*

INTRODUCTION

Book Raps were first designed as a way of integrating technology and literature by providing children with opportunities to discuss books in an authentic online learning context (McGee, 1998). They are an example of pedagogy designed to operate as a learning/teaching cycle. As a form of information and computer technology (ICT) used in the classroom, raps are celebrated and upheld as an example of e-literacy (McGee, 1998; Stubbs, 1999; Unsworth, Thomas, Simpson & Asha, 2005). When compared with other forms of online discussion, book raps have been shown to be fairly successful at achieving positive outcomes for teaching students about critical literacy (Love & Simpson, 2006; Simpson & Ollila, 2004; Simpson, 2010). In this article, an example of a book rap will be closely examined by following "shifts and changes in the discourse through which the teaching/learning is effected" (Christie, 2002, p. 23).

Book raps are classified as blended learning, because face2face teaching is combined with online interaction using emails and blogs. The email above shows part of the first prompt sent by the rap coordinator to start the rap off by asking students to join in with information about their school. The kind of email /blog interaction that occurs is made possible by the affordances of Web2.0 and have been analysed in this paper as a form of archived dialogue. The paper highlights the importance of discussion in scaffolding students' critical appreciation of literary texts where some of the "talk" occurs online. The study is underpinned by previous research on talk that has investigated teacher-pupil and pupil discourse in traditional classrooms (Christie, 2002; Alexander, 2000; Mercer, 2000) but relocates it within the field of e-literacy. As online learning environments such as book raps proliferate, it is necessary to ensure that they employ good pedagogy whilst offering potentially dynamic, interactive teaching opportunities (Salmon, 2004; Owen, 2004; Love & Simpson, 2006; Bell, 2009).

Approaches to critical awareness in the Australian education system create the expectation that primary school students will develop different understandings of text response, starting with personal response in early years of schooling and ending with review by the end of primary school (BOS, 1998). Literacy educators are concerned with the explicit teaching of critical awareness and note that children need help learning how to think about texts in different ways. For example, research shows that in order to write successful reviews, students need well-scaffolded experience, learning how opinion is linguistically constructed in order to "articulate an emotional response to text; make moral or ethical evaluations of main characters, their attitudes, their relationships and their behaviour; and evaluate the aesthetic qualities of the literary work being studied" (Rothery & Stenglin, 2000, p. 225). This paper asserts that the directions given to students by the rap coordinator through rap points shape the cognitive approach students take in their interactions about the text. In this way the rap coordinator is responsible for promoting lines of enquiry. For example, if a question asks students to think about the author's motive behind a character's action, then students will consider the text as a creation. In contrast, if a question asks students to think about a character's appearance, then they will focus more on the surface of the text and its descriptive language. The former question positions the reader to think more critically about the text than the latter. Both questions are valid, yet the first directs students to a more critical level of text awareness. In order to explore the ways the rap coordinator of this particular rap has prompted students to respond, the discussion below employs the principles of dialogic teaching to assess the variety of approaches taken by the rap points.

CONTEXT

This paper examines a set of rap points that were designed to improve the critical awareness of students aged 8-10 years of age exploring the picture book *Mrs Millie's Painting* by Matt Ottley (1997). Mrs Millie is an elderly lady who loves to grow flowers and paints very colourful pictures. The story tells of Mrs Millie's struggle to gain happiness through her artistic reworking of the everyday world. When an exhibit of her unusual flowers is rejected at a local flower show, she retreats to her home to paint. No one sees her for a long time, but the other characters begin to notice that her garden grows more and more exotic and exciting. The book addresses issues of self-confidence, artistic vision and environmental awareness, all of which are suitable for

early primary students. It is a picture book that portrays a story using vibrant colour and luxuriant plant growth to interpret visually the vivacity of human life. The language and illustrations encourage readers to consider personal values and self-worth whilst celebrating artistic freedom. The use of abundant plant life and colour to represent Mrs Millie's initial restraint and eventual freedom from social restrictions is highly symbolic. The text offers rich interpretative possibilities, even for very young readers. The selection of *Mrs Millie's Painting* (Ottley, 1997) encourages students to consider artistic/emotional and societal issues with guidance.

Book raps are hosted on a moderated website where teachers and librarians can sign up their students to join a temporary learning community to stimulate critical discussion about literary texts (Stubbs, 1999). There are several versions in Australia with various rules and structures. This paper focuses on the model hosted by the Department of Education and Training in New South Wales (DET) <http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/raps/index.htm>. Through the official DET site, teachers can access support materials such as rap points that scaffold weekly discussion topics, rap sheets to guide students' learning and the book rap discussion list or blog to which students post their responses.

Raps are designed to encourage students to develop a range of reading practices by examining literary texts through a variety of response activities. As much as traditional research into the role of talk in learning and teaching emphasises the social and affective functions of talk rather than its cognitive power (Alexander 2003), it is important to examine what effect the "nature" of the talk (Bernstein, 1996) has on students' learning opportunities. For example, a rap point that asks students what their favourite part of a book is will encourage responses based on affect such as *I like the part of the book where....* A follow-on rap point that is designed according to principles of cumulative learning could then probe for justification. In this way a sequence of well-designed rap points could eventually lead to discussions based on critical awareness of the text as a constructed object.

As book raps are a form of blended learning, there are two main contexts for interaction that stimulate discussion. Students are given instruction from two sources, an online moderator (the rap coordinator) and their classroom teacher. Each "teacher" sets up a different kind of pedagogic interaction with his or her students. The rap coordinator stimulates asynchronous communication by posting weekly rap point activities on the email/blog discussion list. The classroom teacher encourages face2face discussion of the rap points before postings are made online (Simpson, 2006a). Individual or jointly constructed responses are then posted to the discussion list/blog for others in the community to read. Previous research on the impact of teachers on student learning (Wells, 1999; Bernstein, 1996; Willes, 1983) suggests that both the rap coordinator and the classroom teacher share the responsibility to build talk around the task to ensure learning occurs. However, as the goal of this paper is to investigate an online learning context, the dialogic opportunities that the rap coordinator creates through the rap the design and online administration will be the main focus of discussion rather than talk in class.

Given the increased use of email/blogs in schools, it is timely to investigate what the "e" of e-literacy achieves to enrich pedagogy and support new learning opportunities (Simpson, 2004). A key question emerges from this context: Where do concepts of dialogic talk fit in a blended learning opportunity that encourages online discussion of

children's literature alongside traditional face2face interaction? As talk has been named "the principal tool" for creating shared understandings in classroom contexts (Mercer, 2004, p. 145) that "empowers socially and cognitively" (Alexander, 2003, p. 35), then the social networking capability of e-literacy has the potential to contribute to learning. But there is a risk that book raps could fall into the trap of reproducing old pedagogic practices in new technological skins (Green, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Lankshear & Snyder, 2000). Research has shown that some computer interactions encourage the same kind of Initiate, Respond, Feedback (IRF) patterns as found in traditional classrooms (Mercer, Littleton, & Wegereff, 2004). So educational uses of online technology such as book raps need to be investigated as "millions of words have been written about the technology and its potential, but not much about what the teachers and learners actually do online" (Salmon, 2004, p. 12).

DIALOGIC TEACHING

The concept of dialogic teaching focuses on the impact of interaction on children's learning. Previous research on classroom talk has examined the ratio of pupil to teacher talk in terms of asymmetric pedagogic patterns that allow teachers to dominate interactions (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). Dialogic teaching focuses on how classrooms can be organised to "harness the power of talk to engage children, stimulate and extend their thinking, and advance their learning and understanding" (Alexander, 2004, p. 37). Blended learning may create contexts within which the ratio of pupil-teacher interaction can be increased due to asymmetric response time, that is, more children can "talk" with the teacher, as the teacher does not need to simultaneously answer each child in real time. As answers may be delayed because questions are archived, teachers are enabled to respond to more students individually. It can be suggested that blended learning creates more response time. However, access to more learning time does not necessarily achieve more learning. Rather, the importance rests with the pedagogic design of the blended learning opportunity. Therefore, the set of key principles encapsulated in the term Dialogic Teaching that emerged from Alexander's international comparison of five systems of primary school education (Alexander, 2000) has been employed to investigate the quality of teacher-pupil discourse within book raps.

The principles are:

1. *Collectivity*: teachers and children address learning tasks together, whether as a group or as a class;
2. *Reciprocity*: teachers and children listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints;
3. *Cumulation*: teachers and children build on their own and each others' ideas and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and enquiry;
4. *Support*: children articulate their ideas freely, without fear of embarrassment over "wrong" answers; and they help each other to reach common understandings;
5. *Purposefulness*: the dialogue is planned and transacted with specific learning outcomes clearly in view.

An investigation based on principles of dialogic teaching requires close attention to be paid to a range of typical classroom features such as: context of talk, purpose of questions, form of answers, feedback received, roles and procedures for pupil-pupil interaction and the connection between answers and follow-on questions (Alexander, 2003). Whilst it is clear that such features could be found in the traditional classroom context, it is not so obvious that the features will be visible in the online component of a blended learning context such as book raps. Therefore, part of the scholarly contribution this paper achieves is to verify the alignment between Alexander's principles of dialogic teaching and the features of the blended learning context, focussing particularly on purpose of questions and the connection between answers and follow-on questions.

METHODS

This paper analyses a rap coordinator's pedagogic design to investigate the ways in which learning opportunities are created in a Book Rap. The analytical approach chosen to examine the rap point data uses a range of dialogic structures as markers for the educative use of talk taken from Alexander's international study of pedagogic design (Alexander, 2000, pp. 526-527). These include:

- *discussion* (teacher-class, teacher-group, pupil-pupil): the exchange of ideas with a view to sharing information and solving problems [and]
- *scaffolded dialogue* (teacher-class, teacher-group, teacher-pupil or pupil-pupil): achieving common understanding through structured and cumulative questioning and discussion which guide and prompt, reduce choices, minimise risk and error, and expedite handover of concepts and principles.

The critique focuses on the rap coordinator's attempts to create online discussion. Data samples taken from the coordinator's postings were examined to analyse the forms of dialogic teaching that could be encouraged in the postings. The key principles exemplified most strongly in the data were distilled. Using dialogic talk analysis, a range of purposive discursive opportunities employed within the book rap could be highlighted. In addition, an analysis of the coordinator's rap points could show a tendency towards cumulative design that builds lines of reasoning and enquiry throughout the online interactions. The two examples below illustrate the use of this type of coding as coordinators set up critical discussion of literary texts in an online context.

The first example is coded Purposive as the rap coordinator gave a clear signal that the purpose of talk was to elicit an introductory message from all participants and to instruct students in the correct form of the email address.

Example 1: Purposive:

*We are keen to meet all our fellow Mrs Millie rappers, so as soon as you can this week (commencing Monday 22nd October), construct a group Introduction and send it, and all student messages, to this email address: Mrs_millies_painting_rap@**

The second example is coded Cumulative as the rap coordinator was motivating students to create a character profile of Mrs Millie that was different to any other

posted. The collection of these postings in the email archive enabled the students to see a variety of ways that Mrs Millie had been portrayed.

Example 2: Cumulative:

Complete a character profile of Mrs Millie, then name some of her characteristics and tell us how you found or identified these. (If we try not to repeat what other rappers have found, we will all combine to build up a total picture of Mrs Millie.)

As demonstrated above, using the principles of Dialogic Teaching, the quality of teacher–pupil talk on learning may be assessed. It is therefore a relevant framework for a study that examines the design of online interactions. Findings may be used to highlight improvements needed for future book rap design.

Rap design

During the rap, the rap coordinator/moderator interacted with 51 different groups of students and teachers across a range of schools in different locations. Across the six weeks of the online interaction on “Mrs Millie”, five discussion “threads” were generated from coordinator-pupil emails. Each thread became a collection of pupil-coordinator postings to which each school group contributed in response to the individual rap points. Here are two example responses to rap point 1, that asked students to write Mrs Millie a letter based on the events and characters in the book:

mrs_millies_painting_rap Rap Point 1

- To: mrs_millies_painting_rap@
- Subject: mrs_millies_painting_rap rap point 1
- From: *****

Dear Mrs Millie,

We would like to ask you a few questions. Why are you so interested in flowers? Where did you get the idea to paint exotic and unusual flowers? Do you know why the flowers turned into instruments? Everyone thought it was funny when you went skinny dipping. Did you like skinny dipping? How did the paintings turn into flowers? Did Socrates like the baths you gave him? How long have you had Socrates? Did you like to beat Mrs Compost in the flower show? We don't like her. What did it feel like when you won the flower Show? When you were a child what kind of flowers did you play in? We all like you and think you would be a great grannie. Are there going to be any more books about you? THANKS FOR READING OUR LETTER!

- To: mrs_millies_painting_rap@
- Subject: mrs_millies_painting_rap Rap Point 1
- From: "*****"

Dear Wonderful Mrs. Millie,

We really love your colourful, imaginative and creative narrative because we very much enjoy it and it is so true to life. Your pictures illustrate the story so well. There are a few questions we would like to ask you: 1. What is it like to climb a beanstalk? 2. Were you shocked when you saw all the exotic flowers after you had climbed the beanstalk? 3. Do you like being a winner? Thanks for a great book. Can you write a sequel or is Sox too shy? Bye for now, The ***

Out of the total of 215 postings sent during the rap, 171 postings were pupil-to-coordinator postings mediated by the classroom teacher. The author/illustrator, Matt

Ottley, also took part in the rap, making 34 expert-pupil postings to individual schools. The coordinator made the remaining 10 teacher-pupil postings to the rap. The balance of postings between coordinator, students and author/illustrator suggest that the rap potentially offers students a powerful position in the discussion to independently voice their opinions. It is acknowledged, however, that most postings represent a collective opinion formed under the guidance of the classroom teacher. Despite this, the rate of interaction could imply a well-structured dialogue. However, close analysis below shows how weakly student contributions were scaffolded into the discussion.

FINDINGS: OVERVIEW OF THE RAP POINTS

The full set of rap points includes an introduction, three core prompts and a wrap up. The function of the introduction and wrap up points was to frame the beginning and end of the online learning context. The function of the three central points was to set the weekly activity for the students. The full set of rap points may be found in the Appendix. In the analysis, the five rap points were rated for their explicit (E) or indirect (I) alignment with each of the five principles of dialogic teaching. After analysis it was clear that there was a sense of purpose within each of the rap points. However, there was only one rap point that explicitly depended on all five principles of dialogic teaching to achieve its goal (see Table 1, below).

Rap point	Collectivity	Reciprocity	Cumulation	Support	Purposefulness
Introduction	Implicit	Implicit	Implicit	Implicit	Explicit
Rap point 1	Implicit	Implicit	Explicit	Implicit	Explicit
Rap point 2	Explicit	Explicit	Explicit	Explicit	Explicit
Rap point 3	Implicit	Implicit	Implicit	Implicit	Explicit
Wrap up	Implicit	Implicit	Implicit	Implicit	Explicit

Table 1. Alignment of rap points to dialogic principles

In the following section, each of the rap points will be discussed individually to demonstrate how these coding judgements were made.

Introduction rap point: In the introductory rap point the coordinator introduces herself. This rap point has only been coded for explicit alignment to one principle. The judgement has been made that the rap point is clearly purposeful. However, the work could be completed by individuals without dialogic interaction. At the start of the rap, the emphasis is largely on collecting information from individuals to form a data base of who is involved. The wording of the rap point sets up the expected model to follow as: “This week, our task is to introduce ourselves, so let me begin by telling you about myself. My name is Mrs *, and I am the Teacher-Librarian at * Public School in *.” This rap point elicits individual responses from each school or class, but there is no clear guideline to ensure students share ideas or work with postings from other students to build on or respond to them.

Rap point 1: In rap point one, the rap coordinator asks students to judge the nature of a character. This rap point has been coded for explicit alignment to two principles. The judgement has been made that the rap point is clearly purposeful and also cumulative as there is a direction from the coordinator to avoid repetition in the postings. “Complete a character profile of Mrs Millie, then name some of her

characteristics and tell us how you found or identified these. If we try not to repeat what other rappers have found, we will all combine to build up a total picture of Mrs Millie". This recommendation could lead students to reading other postings, working as a group and helping each other. It definitely supports a chain of ideas that build on each other.

Rap point 2: In rap point two, the rap coordinator asks students to judge the value of changes made to physical locations according to a set of criteria, that is, what makes them *beautiful* and *friendly*? In order to find the answer to this question, the students need to use knowledge of their local environment as it is in the present and as it was in the past to make value judgements. The task is quite difficult and challenging but has little to do with building on the prior rap point. Despite this disconnect between the points, the rap point has been coded for explicit alignment to all five principles. The judgement has been made that the rap point is clearly purposeful and also cumulative, supportive, reciprocal and collective as there is a direction from the coordinator to consider the following "If you could choose, what features **would most of your class** [emphasis added] like to have where they live, and why?" Through the coordinator's carefully worded prompts, students are expected to discuss their opinions with the class and discover the common view. In this way, the second rap point shows that the rap coordinator aims to build cumulative knowledge for the students in the classroom so that alternative views are considered and answers are related to each other. It falls short of building cumulative learning across the rap, as it does not require different school groups to build on each other's postings to discover a common view across the rap.

Rap point 3: In rap point three students are expected to comprehend the events of the last six months in the picture book text. They need to determine which event is most news worthy and then follow the correct format of news "story" to submit a report to a fictional newspaper. No explicit detail is given of the specialist structure of a news report. Similar to the introductory rap point, this rap point has only been coded for explicit alignment to one principle. The judgement has been made that the rap point is clearly purposeful. However, the work could be completed by individuals, with no interaction with others. It is surprising after the last rap point that there is no attempt to build cumulative learning in the follow-on point. The coordinator sets up the activity for individuals with the instruction: "You are a super sleuth reporter for the Daily Tribune newspaper.... You investigate the case fully, and file a newspaper report on what has happened in the six months since Mrs Millie's return." This rap point could elicit individual or group responses, but there is no clear guideline to ensure students share ideas or work with others or read other postings and build on them.

Rap wrap up: The rap wrap up firstly reiterates what has already occurred and then supports the final rap content. This rap point has been coded for explicit alignment to two principles. The judgement has been made that the rap point is clearly purposeful and also cumulative as there is a direction from the coordinator to consider what students have learned about the events in the book, what their opinions now are and what insights into the text they are left with. "Please send a message telling us of your rap experiences, if you haven't already done so." This is not a surprise, as a final rap point often prompts reflection over the range of activities. However, whilst this rap point definitely supports a chain of ideas that build on each other, it does not

necessarily insist that students read each other's postings, work as a group or help each other.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this paper has been to demonstrate how question design is crucial to the success of the discussion in the online context of the Book Rap. The analysis has used Alexander's concepts of dialogic teaching to examine the pedagogic underpinning of the rap. The framework has been used to answer the question whether the "e" literacy activity offers new learning opportunities or just reproduces old practices online.

The Mrs Millie rap was made up of a series of five rap points designed by a rap coordinator who created discussion topics based on a literary text over a number of weeks. The rap points directed students to respond to the text from a variety of perspectives including aesthetic, affective and creative. It has been noted in the findings above that although the rap points were ordered by number 1, 2, 3 and so on, one point did not necessarily build on the next. The relevance of this design to the study of book raps as a context for dialogic teaching is that each rap point tended to be self-contained. That is, the rap points represented three different approaches that could be taken to the same text. This meant that the rap points aligned strongly with some indicators of dialogic teaching but not others.

The coded rap points were successful as stand-alone activities but did not fulfil the conditions of aligning equally with the principles to balance social and the cognitive development. One of the key indicators of dialogic teaching states that teacher-pupil/pupil-pupil exchanges should be chained into "coherent lines of enquiry", whereas in this rap the individual postings have been judged as "stranded and disconnected" (Alexander, 2003, p. 37). As rap points are meant to encourage personal and critical response, it is not surprising that the analysis highlights elements of "participation" and "understanding". The most strongly aligned indicator was Purposefulness, which appeared in all rap points. The second most strongly aligned indicator was Cumulation, which appeared in two thirds of the rap points. However, despite the opportunity the book rap has to set up a social learning network, the three other indicators that would be associated with personal interaction – Collectivity, Reciprocity and Support – were not frequently nor evenly evidenced in the rap points. The two most strongly represented indicators are discussed below in detail.

Cumulation

The findings show that whilst all the rap points were structured to prompt "thoughtful answers", the design of the rap point sequence and the use of email/blogs did not actively "provoke further questions [that] are seen as the building blocks of dialogue rather than its terminal point" (Alexander, 2003, p. 37). From research completed thus far, it appears that the individual rap points encouraged a kind of "one off" (Christie, 2002, p. 94) teaching/learning experience which focuses on a set of unrelated interactions. If a cumulative learning design had been operating, students could have carried general principles from one learning incident to another. Research into learning across discipline areas has demonstrated the importance of talk in support of such connected learning (Freebody, Martin & Maton, 2008). The weakness of

cumulation in this rap design works against students making connections between individual rap points. This design aspect is highly significant to an assessment of how critical appreciation of text may be built up within raps. For example, one rap point could ask the readers to look closely at the illustrations of a text, encouraging awareness of artistic technique, the next could ask the readers to suggest their feelings about the actions of a character, encouraging a response that could be both judgemental and emotional, and the last one could ask readers to write to a review of the text encouraging critical appreciation. These are all important and valid responses to the text and fulfil the complete range of approaches a reader may take to a text. The rap points are clearly crucial to the successful positioning of students as critical readers and viewers. However, their design may lead to a disjointed learning experience as cumulation is not common within each or across all rap points.

Purposefulness

Ironically, despite the implicit reference to aesthetics in the introductory rap point, there are no rap points that ask students to consider Matt Ottley's use of colour. There are no rap points that ask students to consider whether there is a symbolic relationship between the images of the tame and then wild garden and Mrs Millie's gradual rejection of social expectations. Questions such as these and others could have led students towards a critical awareness of text composition. In order to be successful, rap points would need to guide students to consider the role that the author and illustrator have played in creating the text to which they are responding. Previous work on talk around texts has demonstrated the importance of explicit teaching about language to aid the creation of critical readers (Macken-Horarik, 1996; Rothery & Stenglin, 2000; Unsworth, 2000). Research on visual literacy also promotes the active engagement of students as viewers (Simpson, 2006b; Unsworth, 2001). As this paper is based on a picture book, it highlights the importance of considering both language and image when planning directions for new online learning contexts to encourage critical readers.

It is clear from the blended learning context that there is a rich potential for online discussion in a book rap. The "e" in e-literacy allows turn-taking to occur in asynchronous patterns to create initial exchanges. As archives are created from these conversations, they can be used to prompt further dialogue and build rich opportunities for critical reflection. Both structured talk and pupil-pupil collaboration are "particularly potent in generating pupil's cognitive engagement and learning" (Alexander, 2000, p. 414), yet the affordances that the asynchronous discussion context offers to support children's collaborative thinking have barely been tapped into during this particular rap. As an example of blended learning design, raps clearly set up opportunities for structured dialogue, but at present the discussion is not centred on pupil-pupil interaction online. Lines of enquiry could be built into the rap points so that there would be increased pupil collaboration, yet currently there is not a clear balance between the social and cognitive purposes for talk. The "e" of eliteracy clearly encourages social interaction through the expression of personal opinion in the public space, yet there is a lack of emphasis on structuring understanding to lead to critical response online through the role of the rap moderator. The rap coordinator rarely responds to individual emails. The pedagogic design of the rap points could be set up with threads of discussion, as the blog encourages, that relate to each other to build on instead of simply come after each other. That is, the rap points could be more

explicitly cumulative. They could become stepping-stones in a progressive learning pathway that lead students through stages of greater complexity.

The analysis above demonstrates how discussion depends on the rap coordinator's rap point design to stimulate individual activity or collaborative activity. If the rap points had suggested that there was a single task for the rappers to complete as a reading community, then it would have stimulated online discussion amongst the students (Alexander, 2000, p. 408). Ironically, the syllabus-based overall purpose to stimulate critical discussion was broken down into episodic points that were so fine grained that more attention was paid to intermediate goals. Whilst the rap site encouraged "talk" through the blog format, it did not encourage pupil-to-pupil discussion on line. In general, once students post their comments to a rap point, it is rare that they will respond to someone else's posting. The blog serves largely to feed their response back to the coordinator. Much as, in a typical IRF classroom structure students can hear each other's responses but will not often react to each other's responses, so it is with raps. In the case of book raps, the rap coordinator is the one in the Feedback role, not the students. Looking through a socio-cultural lens, the rap has been set up to "organize, energise and maintain a local mini-community of enquiry" (Mercer & Littleton, 2007, p. 17). However, as the rap points did not require students to collaborate online, this rap has fallen short of making good use of its own dynamic potential.

CONCLUSION

We have considered the data from the Mrs Millie rap points for evidence of dialogic teaching as a rap coordinator inducts students into a system of knowledge about literary texts (Bourne, 2003) within an online context. The article commends the book rap, as it encourages a learning culture of inclusive activity where the structure of the rap points creates shared routines that support well-managed turn-taking. The rap coordinator offered students various access points to create critical awareness of the book they read. However, it is clear that the rap coordinator shaped student response to text in ways that scattered rather than connected ideas and fractured their knowledge development. The coordinator controlled "what is taught and learned" (Christie, 2002), as well as how dialogue was supported, in such a way that limitations were placed on the teaching potential of the rap.

In summary, although the rap supported active "listening, looking, reflecting and evaluating" (Alexander, 2003, p. 37), it was evident that there was limited alignment with the principles of dialogic teaching to build "coherent lines of reasoning and enquiry" (Alexander, 2003, p. 6). It is recommended that more dialogic learning experiences are included in the future design of book raps. Once students are positioned to respond to each other as fellow critics, they will have access to academically valued social practices that will help them to become critical readers (Bourne, 2003). The role of the rap coordinator is essential in organising online interaction, such that the learner's experience is central to knowledge construction (Salmon, 2004). For book raps to be more successful in positioning students to be literary critics, rap points need a broader pedagogic framework. The use of more strategically designed rap points could make it possible for students to learn about literary texts in a context where critical awareness is explicitly scaffolded through collectivity, reciprocity, cumulation, support and purposefulness. A change towards

this kind of pedagogic design would improve the rap potential to create stronger dialogic teaching and scaffold children's critical awareness of literary texts more successfully.

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Appendix: Data sample set: *Mrs Millie's Painting*

Introduction to the rap from Coordinator:

Dear Rappers,

Our exciting Mrs Millie's Painting book rap begins this week, and I am looking forward to a very bright and colourful time with you all. This week, our task is to introduce ourselves, so let me begin by telling you about myself. My name is Mrs *, and I am the Teacher-Librarian at * Public School in *. I will be your Coordinator for the Mrs Millie book rap. The class I am working with for this rap, a composite Year 2/3, will tell you about * and our school when they introduce themselves. We are keen to meet all our fellow Mrs Millie rappers, so as soon as you can this week (commencing Monday 22nd October), construct a group Introduction and send it, and all student messages, to this email address: Mrs_millies_painting_rap@*

It helps if our subject lines are clear, so for your Introductory message, please type Introduction from * and your school name in the Subject. Have your Rap Maps ready to record where all our rappers live as they introduce themselves. If possible, try to check your emails every day during the Rap.

I look forward to meeting you, and exploring Mrs Millie with you during the next few weeks.

Happy rapping, Mrs * (Book Rap Coordinator)

Rap point 1

The illustrations and events in Mrs Millie's painting give us important information about the character of Mrs Millie: her past and present circumstances, interests, worries and choices.

Complete a character profile of Mrs Millie, then name some of her characteristics and tell us how you found or identified these.

(If we try not to repeat what other rappers have found, we will all combine to build up a total picture of Mrs Millie) When you know her well, EITHER:

- construct a brief literary description of this wonderful character OR

- write Mrs Millie a letter

Send your literary description or letter to the rap.

If you met Mrs Millie, what would you do or say?

In developing your literary description or letter, explore issues of Mrs Millie's life and/or personality you have discovered through your character profile.

Happy rapping,

Mrs *

Rap point 2

Mrs Millie missed having her own garden, but she made the best of where she lived by transforming it into a more beautiful and friendly place. How has your community made where you live special? Describe how your class, school, or a particular place in your community has been transformed into a more beautiful and friendly environment. If you could choose, what features would most of your class like to have where they live, and why?

Rap point 3

Dear Rappers,

Here we go with rap point 3. This is a time to let your imaginations flow! I'm sure you will come up with some great ideas. Here's our last rap point! You are a super sleuth reporter for the Daily Tribune newspaper. You have heard of some interesting happenings in your area since one of the residents, a Mrs Millie, returned from an amazing trip. Apparently, this Mrs Millie has become quite a sensation and the neighbourhood has an intriguing story to tell. You investigate the case fully, and file a newspaper report on what has happened in the six months since Mrs Millie's return.

Rap wrap up

Dear Rappers,

Unfortunately today (Friday) is the last official day of our exciting Mrs Millies Painting book rap. We have had a wonderful time, and I know everyone has enjoyed reading the great messages you have

been sending. Congratulations on all your hard work, and for keeping going, even when interruptions and computer problems made things difficult. During this rap we have got to know Mrs Millie very well, explored beautiful environments, imagined a future for Mrs Millie, looked at Socrates and how he is such a great friend, and thought about how Matt Ottley has affected us as readers. Its all been great fun.

Apart from reading your interesting thoughts on our rap points, the highlights for me have been the wonderful letters from Mrs Millie herself. What a treat these have been, and I know her letters will be on display in our library for a long time to come. Our world needs heaps of people like Mrs Millie, and I'm sure she has inspired many of us. Thank you Matt for being such a star rapper, and for telling us how you created Mrs Millie's Painting.

Thank you rappers, for all your great work: you have kept on task, worked together in your group and sent thoughtful rap messages. Your teachers have worked hard too and deserve a big thank you for helping you with all the challenges. I hope you have enjoyed this rap and learnt lots from participating.

Please send a message telling us of your rap experiences, if you haven't already done so. It is not too late, as the rap will stay active for the next little while. Just check your email from time to time.

Send your last rap messages to:

Mrs_millies_painting_rap@list.schools.nsw.edu.au

Thank you again for your great work. I look forward to rapping with you again.

Best wishes, Mrs *