



The Digital Divide: One Middle School Teacher Attempts to Connect with His Students in Online Literature Discussions

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores a middle school teacher's and his students' perceptions of the differences between online synchronous literature discussions and face-to-face literature discussions. Each member of this literature group participated in two face-to-face and two online literature discussions. Participants were interviewed twice to discuss their perceptions of both experiences. From these interviews, the following themes emerged: 1) Shifting Participation Roles, 2) Controlling the Discussion, and 3) Contending with Technological Obstacles to Discussion. The goal of this study is to help teachers who perceive the value of collaboration and social interaction in the learning process see the value of using computer based technologies in their classrooms.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Joellen Maples, Ph.D. is an assistant professor in the Literacy Department at St. John Fisher College. She formerly taught middle school reading and language arts for 11 years. Her research interests include exploring effective strategies for facilitating democratic dialogue and critical thinking skills through the reading of young adult literature and online discussion about literature. She can be reached at jmaples@sjfc.edu.

More and more, teachers are increasingly being encouraged to incorporate technology-supported learning opportunities into their classrooms. With the advent of Web 2.0 and students' increased use of text messaging, instant messaging, and forums such as Facebook and Myspace, students are often times more equipped than teachers to participate in technology-supported learning opportunities. Such new Internet technologies hold implications for teachers who hope to decrease the polarization of in-school and out-of-school literacy practices and close the gap between the school curriculum and the students who are taught.

Taking into account this disconnect that exists between schools and technology and potentially even teachers' and students' view of technology, I designed this study to explore one teacher's and his students' perceptions of participating in face-to-face literature discussions and online literature discussions. I worked for a month with a first year middle school reading teacher and three of his middle school students who participated in a literature group centered around a novel that the students read in class. After participating in two face-to-face discussions, the literature group had two discussions in an online synchronous chat. This afforded an opportunity to see if the literature discussions changed through the use of technology. Crystal (2001) describes synchronous communication: "In a synchronous situation, a user enters a chat room and joins an ongoing conversation in real time, sending named contributions which are inserted into a permanently scrolling screen along with contributions from other participants" (p. 11). Much potential is in the synchronous chat medium as it affords a kind of "virtual classroom"



communicative space where teachers can engage in real-time chat with their students and facilitate discussion about literature while learning the linguistic properties of this new medium. At the same time, adolescents get the opportunity to use new Internet technologies in ways typically prevented in school. This study provides insight into the disconnect that may occur between teachers and students and their perceptions of their use of technology in the classroom. The research question guiding my study was the following: How do eighth grade inner city middle school students and their middle school reading teacher perceive literature discussions in a face-to-face literature group versus in an online literature group?

Why Talk About Literature?

Literacy educators understand the value of talk in the classroom as an important part of the learning process. Talking about literature allows for existing ideas and explanations to find voice, and thus, to be taken up, considered, and reinterpreted. As Barnes and Todd (1995) explain, “Talk is flexible; in talk [students] can try out new ways of thinking and reshape an idea in mid-sentence, respond immediately to the hints and doubts of others, and collaborate in shaping meanings they could not hope to reach alone” (p. 15). In the process of comprehending literature, talk serves as a valuable tool to increase understanding. Bloem (2004) asserts, “Children need time to talk, verbally or in writing, yet when time gets short, talk is what is pushed out of the curriculum first. But, for many of us, it is talk that leads to understanding” (p. 54). Understanding is increased by the reconstruction of existing ideas through talking to others.

Through talk, students are able to share their own interpretations of texts and broaden their ideas through others’ thoughts. As Crafton (1991) explains, “It’s tough not to assume a different perspective, achieve a deeper understanding, extend or refine an idea if there are opportunities to talk before, during, and after a literacy event” (p. 12). When students try on different perspectives and extend their ideas, they come closer to achieving what Barnes (1993) describes as exploratory talk in contrast to the presentational talk that teachers have students use. When talk is understood as an “exploratory” tool--interrelated with reading, writing, and listening-- students and teachers can explore ideas, to “try out new ways of thinking...reshape an idea in mid-sentence, respond immediately to the hints and doubts of others, and collaborate in shaping meanings they could not hope to reach alone” (Barnes & Todd, 1995, p. 15). Barnes and Todd explain that such collaborative talk is necessary in the “reconstruction of existing ideas in the light of the new experiences, new ideas, new ways of thinking and understanding” (p. 24). Talk, then, is not a final product, but rather an in-process, on-going way of improving understanding.

Why Go Online to Talk About Literature?

The effects of computer mediated communication (CMC) on teaching and learning have been researched with inconsistent and contradictory results (Im & Lee, 2004). Studies that support the benefits of CMC to education are as numerous as those that are against it. This dichotomy makes building a case for or against the use of CMC particularly problematic.

However, benefits for using CMC in the educational setting are many. From a constructivist perspective, CMC enhances social interaction between students and the instructor and creates a shift toward social learning (Kearsley, 2000; Sutton, 2001). Not only does it increase those bonds, but it provides opportunities for more students to participate. Palloff and Pratt (1999) found that creating an online community established connectedness, deeper exchange of ideas, risk-taking, and freedom to negotiate during disagreements to reach common



educational goals. This social interaction is important for creating learning experiences and increasing discussion in the CMC environments. Unlike traditional classrooms in which teachers dominate the discussions, CMC allows all voices to be heard, and even students who are shy, feel less intimidated to participate online (Black, 2005). However, some argue that it is necessary for instructors in online discussions to be more aggressive in maintaining a focused discussion, providing feedback, and posing differing views to foster thinking and discussion (Lim & Cheah, 2003). In fact, if student online participation is low, it can be related to the poor quality of guidance by the instructor, which results in ineffective learning for the students (Tallent-Runnels et al.).

Anonymity in online learners can affect student behavior, which in turn can affect the overall learning experience. As a result, some students may not be concerned about consequences for their behavior as “users are able to express and experiment with aspects of their personality that social inhibition would generally encourage them to suppress” (Murphy & Collins, 1997, p.181-182). Conversely, creating participants’ anonymity supports a more democratic learning environment for all involved. In this sense, CMC provides equitable learning experiences for students as they all have access to the floor, and the instructor is less likely to dominate (Lapadat, 2002). A shift in power for teachers and students is created by leveling the playing field. The teacher’s role shifts from imparting knowledge to helping students create meaning in a learning community (Heuer & King, 2004).

Within cyberspace, students can challenge traditional student-teacher roles and produce alternative ones. Cooper and Selfe (1990) point out that through the use of CMC, “such conferences are capable of making student-teacher and student-student exchanges more egalitarian, reducing the dominance of the teacher and the role of accommodation behavior in discussion and increasing the importance of the students’ discourse” (p. 851-852). Through egalitarian exchanges, the spirit of competition resides within ideas rather than personalities. As such, the online forum may have potential implications for the learning experience and in particular, discussion.

CMC in Middle School Literacy Practices

There is a variety of research that describes the use of computer mediated communication at the middle school level in regards to literacy specifically. Some studies examine the use of CMC in the middle school (Grisham & Wolsey, 2006; Carico & Logan, 2004; Agee & Altarriba 2009); other studies explore how CMC uses outside of school influence the new literacies within schools (Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2005; Lewis & Fabos, 2005); still other researchers try to promote the use of CMC in the classroom (Owen, 2003).

Both asynchronous and synchronous CMC have been used at the middle school level. Carico and Logan (2004) used email, bulletin boards, and online chats to enhance the teaching and learning of literature. Through this implementation of CMC, they found “broadened perspectives, increased knowledge, enhanced communication skills, and more satisfying and effective reading practices” (p. 293). Through the use of synchronous chats, the researchers discovered the middle school students were more enthusiastic and used the archived chats as a tool for examining discussion. Their findings were not unlike findings at the university level in that shyer students participated more; everyone had an equal chance to be heard; and the teacher’s role changed out of the transmission mode. Finally, they felt that using CMC in the



classroom had the promise of improving communication and exploring literature through discussions while meeting classroom objectives.

Another study analyzed the implementation of CMC with the use of asynchronous threaded discussion groups to discuss adolescent literature (Grisham & Wolsey, 2006). Benefits from this experience for the middle school students were that, “they were able to create a community through which they had control of the conversation, the meanings they jointly constructed, and the connections they wanted to make to their own lives and worlds” (p. 649). Grisham and Wolsey saw the use of CMC as valuable for students especially at the middle school level for which the accountability movement dictates the curriculum and its pacing. CMC gives students a chance to escape tightly constrained teacher-centered classrooms while still learning. Through their analysis of transcripts, the researchers found that students had deeper responses to one another in the asynchronous discussion threads than in paper journals or face-to-face interaction.

Another area for research of CMC in the middle school studied outside uses of CMC and how those literacy practices affect the classroom. Guzzetti and Gamboa’s (2005) research is a case study of two middle school girls and their use of online journaling outside of school. The researchers believe that CMC activities must be studied outside the context of schools before implications for instruction can be made. Furthermore, they contend that understanding adolescents’ outside literacies provide information about how students develop and practice their communication abilities. If teachers understand this relationship, they can tailor meaningful literacy events in the classroom. The two participants in the study did not believe personal aspects of online journaling had a place in schools. Rather they believed that teachers should be aware of such CMC technologies and be able to direct students to appropriate sites. Although Guzzetti and Gamboa do not recommend using online journals in the classroom, they do recommend that students have the opportunity to write in alternative styles and less traditional forms of expression. Also, literacy practices in CMC provide an opportunity for teachers to reconsider what constitutes writing in the classroom.

Another study examined instant messaging in which five of the seven participants were middle school students (Lewis & Fabos, 2005). Lewis and Fabos acknowledged an influence to do this study was the lack of research on instant messaging (IMs) and chat rooms that focus on educational or literacy-related topics. Their findings revealed that the social identities and subject positions found in IMs were important factors when considering adolescents and their literacy practices. Like Guzzetti and Gamboa (2005), Lewis and Fabos do not recommend the use of instant messaging in the classroom, but rather suggest how to apply the literacy practices to school instruction. Teachers can focus on the different types of writing, and students can discuss the concept of audience, shifting topics, writing style, and voice found in IMs and their applications in writing itself.

Finally, Owen (2003) recommends using blogs in several ways in the classroom because they have great potential as an extension to the traditional classroom. Students could use them as personal journals, bulletin board discussions on literature or writing, and even as an electronic portfolio of written work. CMC provides opportunities for student-centered learning at the middle school level. Articles like Owen’s provide rationale for educators to consider implementing CMC into the classroom. This study serves to add to the literature on using CMC with literacy practices.



Motivation for the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of a middle school teacher and his students. I was curious if the teacher-student discussion dynamics would differ between participation in two face-to-face literature discussions and two online literature discussions, as the students might be more tech-savvy than the teacher in the online forum. Also, I wanted to discover if the discussions were different in other significant ways. Technology can provide a promising forum for fostering dialogue, increasing interaction and collaboration, and enhancing learning for marginalized students (Gambrell, 2004). A literature group served as an appropriate platform to observe how students socially and cognitively construct meaning, and much knowledge can be gained from looking at the online experience itself from the perspective of the participants.

Context of the Study

The context for this study was twofold as it involved the face-to-face reading classroom and the online synchronous chat space. Both contexts were accessed at an urban school in the southern United States. The first context, the reading classroom, was comprised of a four person literature discussion group (one teacher, three eighth graders). The group was originally formed by the teacher to review stories read in the class to improve student comprehension. The discussion group members were assigned by the reading teacher, Mr. Knight (all participant names mentioned are pseudonyms). His class was a low achieving reading group and all students were below at least one grade level. The class met the last period of the day (2:40-3:25). This discussion group worked together at various times during the school year deemed appropriate by the teacher. However, for the purpose of this study, they were observed for one month as they read the novel *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis. Each classroom discussion was audio-taped and transcribed.

The online chat space was comprised of the same four person literature discussion group who continued to read *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. I used the chat tool in Moodle, a free online course management system which instantly archived the chat transcripts. This same group met online the last period of the day and was observed for one month. The number of chat sessions was equal to the number of face-to-face sessions. The opportunity to participate in an online discourse community provided a socially and academically inclusive space for students typically excluded from discursive knowledge-building opportunities.

Context of the Face-to-Face and Online Literature Discussions

As the focus of this research article is to present the perceptions of the participants in regards to the experience of the face-to-face and online literature discussions, it is important to give some background information regarding the two types of discussions to add context to the interview data. Both types of discussions were focused on the novel *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis. As part of their reading experience, the students also went on a field trip to see the movie production of this text. In the face-to-face discussions, the students did not initiate topics to discuss about the novel and did not ask questions to the teacher or each other. Mr. Knight would initiate the topic and/or question, illicit a response from a student, and then evaluate the student's answer as either right or wrong. This type of discussion pattern is an example of the I-R-E (initiation/response/evaluation) three-part pattern of classroom discussion (Mehan, 1979). Cazden (1988) refers to this model as one that best fits the transmission of facts and routinized procedures. The types of questions that Mr.



Knight asked the students about the novel revolved around the following: plot questions, vocabulary questions, characterization questions, and a discussion about alternative endings to the story. Mr. Knight seemed to lead the discussion through a New Criticism lens. New Criticism is a form of literary theory that focuses on literary elements and assumes that the meaning of a text is found solely within the text.

During the online discussions, which happened after the face-to-face discussions, a change occurred. Unlike the face-to-face discussions in which Mr. Knight initiated all of the questions and determined the topics, the students began to initiate questions and topic changes in the discussion. The students asked questions of everyone in the group, shared personal experiences, and initiated topics about the book. This level of interaction and participation was different from the face-to-face discussions. In the online chats, the teacher controlled the topic minimally and there was a shared ownership between him and his students regarding questions and topics. However, Mr. Knight asked the students the same types of questions about the novel as he did in the face-to-face discussions whereas the students seemed to ask each other questions that stemmed from a reader response lens (Rosenblatt, 1978). The students compared and contrasted the book with the movie and made personal connections to the novel. Mike, one of the students, and asked his group if everyone had a closet like the one in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, where would their personal closet lead to. In addition to discussion about the book, there were references to the technology itself and misspellings that occurred as a result of the typing. These references appeared to be an obstacle to the fluidity of the discussion.

Participants

The face-to-face and online discussion groups consisted of three eighth graders and one first year reading teacher. The three students were two Caucasian males and one Caucasian female, and all were 13 years old. Their instructional levels in reading were all compatible (below one grade level) as well as their technological skills. The three students had experience using email, chat rooms, and instant messaging outside of school daily. The students had been in middle school together for three years and in class together since August of that year. The teacher who was a Caucasian male in his early 30s had experience in emailing and did not participate in chat rooms or instant messaging. However, he did text on occasion on his cell phone. He was a first year reading teacher with a Master's degree. Having an online discussion was a new effort on his part as he had never used online technology in a pedagogical way.

Methodological Approach and Rationale

A qualitative interview study was used to understand the research question of how eighth grade inner city middle school students and their middle school reading teacher perceive literature discussions in a face-to-face literature group versus in an online literature group. Each participant was interviewed twice, and all of the interviews were approximately an hour in length. The interviews were semi-structured based on a set of guiding questions that covered the following topics: participants' roles in the literature discussions, the relationships with one another in their respective roles of "teacher" and "student," and the constructed meaning of the online experience. The focus of the interviews was to capture the participants' perspectives on the experience of taking part in face-to-face and online literature discussions. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Pseudonyms were created to protect the participants' identities.



Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed typologically. This type of analysis involves “dividing everything observed into groups of categories on the basis of some canon for disaggregating the whole phenomenon under study” (Hatch, 2002, p.152). Hatch (2002) suggests that this type of analysis is appropriate for interview data and artifact data that are collected with a specific purpose. For the interview data, I identified typologies to be analyzed. As I read the data, I marked entries related to the typologies. I looked for patterns and themes within the established typologies, deciding if those themes were supported by the data. Then, I selected data excerpts that supported the themes that emerged out of the interviews.

Trustworthiness was the main evaluative criteria used to ensure the validity of the study; meaning how well the realities of the participants were presented. Trustworthiness of the study was maintained in several ways. The data reflected the constructed meaning of the participants. The interviews were verified by the participants through a member check to make sure their meaning was accurately portrayed. Also, during the interviews, the participants were questioned about their terminology to obtain accurate definitions. The findings are supported with the participants’ words reflecting the specific context of their online and face-to-face experiences. As findings are reported below, data excerpts from the interviews are used to support the themes presented. Each excerpt includes identification of the speaker of the quoted material using pseudonyms assigned to the participants.

Findings

This findings section reports themes that held up across the data for this middle school literature group, and data excerpts were selected that represent the perceptions of the group. This section presents a set of descriptive findings regarding this literature group and their individual perceptions of discussing literature in both a face-to-face and online context. From the interviews, the following themes that represented the participants’ perceptions of the face-to-face discussions and online discussions emerged: 1) Shifting Participation Roles, 2) Controlling the Discussion, and 3) Contending with Technological Obstacles to Discussion.

Shifting Participation Roles

Within their literature group, there were certain acceptable roles and forms of discourse that both students and teachers “tried on” and acted out. However, different roles and procedures revealed themselves in the different discussion contexts. The common type of discourse represented within the literature group was School Talk. When asked about what the classroom discourse community looked like in the face-to-face discussion, the students’ and teacher’s perceptions were in agreement:

The typical classroom setting is where the students read a book and you have a discussion either while you’re reading or discuss the thing after you read it just as a group. The student raises his hand; the teacher calls on him; the student gives his opinion, and the teacher either corrects you or encourages you. Then the teacher goes on to the next person [Mr. Knight]

The teacher asks us questions and we answer them. [Beth]



We're the students and some teachers might not care about our opinions and how it goes. Once the teacher hears the right answer, they don't want to hear nobody else's point of view. The teacher is the only one that asks all the questions, and he corrects us if we're wrong. [Mike]

These roles are not uncommon in the traditional classroom. In this type of classroom, the teacher is the authority and controls the discussion. As Thayer-Bacon & Bacon (1998) point out, the role of the teacher in this environment is "the model of authority and wisdom and as an instrument to help the individual child obtain success" (p. 9).

However, these accepted participation roles were challenged and blurred in the online chat space as both the teacher and students shared in their interviews. Initially Mr. Knight described himself in the online chat in the following manner:

I felt like a moderator who was trying to keep them on task and remind them that, Hey we're in this chat room to talk about a book. [Mr. Knight]

Later in the same interview, Mr. Knight changed what he called himself in the chat room.

I felt like a babysitter online. I was having to constantly remind them what they were supposed to be talking about. [Mr. Knight]

Not only did he notice these changes in his role online, but he also noticed a change in his students' roles which he described in the following excerpt:

In an online chat, people don't see you they see who you're trying to portray. You can put on a mask and call yourself Billy Jo or whatever and people don't know that it's you but there's no fibbin' it in person. I think that so many people that are completely 100% introverted can get into a chat room and be Superman and talk about whatever they want. But you're not seeing who that person really is. You're seeing the person that they're putting out over the internet. I've not heard of too many stories about people that are truly themselves deep down when they get on the internet. It's like when they get behind that computer screen they can be whoever they want. And like I said about my kids I mean they weren't the same kids in that chat room as they are in class everyday. [Mr. Knight]

Mr. Knight perceived his students as not being themselves online, but the students suggested in their interviews that they were more like themselves. Perhaps what might have happened was the students were not playing their role of "student" online as Bill and Mike suggest in the following excerpts:

Online you feel like you're being yourself. You go online and it's like you're just talking to your friends. [Bill]

When you are online, you feel like an open book. Being online, I'm invisible. I can be myself and say what I want to say. [Mike]

Controlling the Discussion

Another theme that emerged was the idea of control within a discussion. Mehan (1979) found that the structure of classroom discussions adhered to an initiation-reply-evaluation (I-R-E) pattern. The teacher initiates a question; the student responds to that question; and then the



teacher evaluates the student's response. Mehan used these aspects of talk to further explain the various functions of the teacher initiation. The I-R-E pattern serves not only to structure the classroom lesson, but also to frame the interactional control the teacher possesses in the classroom. Students must follow the implicit classroom order of discourse to participate in the classroom community. This type of normative order is understood as a product of the institution of school. As Mehan (1979) points out,

Students must orient their behavior to the procedures for gaining access to the floor in order to appropriately engage in classroom interaction from the point of view of the teacher. If students deviate from this normative system, sanctions are imposed by the teacher, and sometimes by other students (p. 124).

As Mehan's (1979) study shows, the I-R-E pattern of discourse is significantly different from everyday conversation. In the classroom, the turn-taking is invited or required by the teacher, who is in control of the discourse. By controlling the turn-taking, the teacher not only controls the focus of the lesson but also the interaction within the classroom. In the face-to-face discussions, Mr. Knight seemed to control the discussion by determining the topics and asking the questions. He described the control he had in the face-to-face discussions:

I could steer them in the right direction if they were starting to bring up too many things about their own lives and not relating it to the experiences of what they were reading. You just bring back up the book or a character and then it kind of just reminds them, "Oh yeah. We're talking about a book here." And they kind of got right back on it without me really having to prod them a whole lot. [Mr. Knight]

Mr. Knight then described what he perceived the students thought that their roles were in the face-to-face discussion:

They might have felt like their position in the group was that they were supposed to respond to questions. I might have asked 90% of the questions but I felt like their dialogue controlled most of the conversation. I would give them something to talk about and they kind of took over for a minute and then I'd give them something else to talk about then they'd kind of do their own thing. [Mr. Knight]

He perceived that the students' dialogue controlled most of the conversation, yet he also pointed out that he controlled what the students talked about. If they did not talk about his predetermined topic, then the students were steered and prodded. Furthermore, his description reaffirmed his role as the topic decider as he "gives" them the topics to discuss rather than co-constructing the discussion with them.

However, in their interviews, the students expressed the threat of getting in trouble if they resisted the teacher controlled face-to-face discussion. Beth described her feelings about what would happen in a face-to-face discussion if she wanted to share her feelings or extend the discussion further:

I feel like if we try to express our feelings that Mr. Knight or whoever is in the classroom will get mad and send us to the isolation desk or if we have something else to say he won't call on us. [Beth]



I followed up with Beth and asked what she thought might happen if she asked another student a question during the face-to-face discussion and she replied, “Teachers say it’s interrupting the discussion or disturbing the class. In face-to-face, we have to watch our p’s and q’s.” Her perception confirmed the formulaic discussion that Mehan (1979) and Cazden (1988) discuss as a dominant discourse pattern. The students’ perceptions of the control teachers have in face-to-face talk might relate to the I-R-E (Initiate, Respond, Evaluate) model of classroom discussion in which a teacher controls pacing, topic, and student response (Cazden, 1988).

On the other hand, this teacher’s pacing and control of the discussion was disrupted in the online space. Mr. Knight had a harder time controlling students’ behaviors or the discussion itself. In the online chat, the students participated more and the teacher less, and the students controlled the momentum of the discussion. Mr. Knight expressed his perceived loss of control in the chat room:

I felt like I had less control than in the face-to-face discussion. I wonder if I had told them, “This is a classroom and talk just like you do in the discussion there.” If I had told them something like that if they would have behaved differently in the chat room than what they had. [Mr. Knight]

When I asked him to describe what he meant by how the students behaved in the chat room and to describe what he saw happening in the chat room, he explained:

Online there were multiple conversations going on all at once rather than one conversation. If I asked Beth a question, Bill and Mike would see that as their opportunity to ask each other a question or what they were typing wasn’t pertaining to what Beth and I were trying to talk about; or if I would ask Beth a question, Bill and Mike wouldn’t just sit there, wait to hear the answer, and do their own response. It’s like there were so many different things going on at once that there was just no pattern or rhythm to any sort of one conversation. In the face-to-face discussion, there was one common conversation going on simultaneously throughout. Whereas in the online discussion, it just seemed like everybody was all over the place the whole time and I was sitting there trying to say, “Ok! Look! This is what we need to be talking about. Who can tell me this?” and meantime they’re all having a different conversation. [Mr. Knight]

Yet, Mr. Knight’s description of what was going on in the chat rooms seemed to represent an authentic discussion. Multiple discussions were occurring, students were asking one another questions, and no one participant determined the topic or the pace of the discussion. Turn-taking rules were not regarded..

When I asked Mr. Knight why he thought the discussion had changed and why his students were different in the online chat versus the face-to-face discussion, he responded:

Online the students build a little wall around them and put themselves in a little cubicle and when they’re on that computer, they feel like they have privacy. They can talk about what they want to and they can say what they want to and it’s their buddy on the other end of the line. You know they don’t feel like they’re face-to-face with an authority figure kind of thing. You just feel kind of invincible and that you can talk about whatever you want and you have this identity that people don’t see. [Mr. Knight]



While Mr. Knight felt a loss of control in the online environment and wanted to integrate traditional classroom discourse rules into the online chat, the students expressed a feeling of freedom. With this came an empowering sense of control. Even though they were not anonymous to one another, the disembodiment created by the computer fostered their freedom. Because bodies disappear in online environments, inequities related to gender, class, race, and other socially constructed categories can be eliminated which can provide a safe space for marginalized students (Wade & Fauske, 2004). The students expressed how they experienced their freedom and control in the online space:

We can type and express our feelings without getting corrected or not being able to express our feelings and how we feel about the book or how we feel about whatever we're doing in class. [Beth]

You don't have a teacher to call your shots. In the face-to-face discussion, Mr. Knight called our shots about what we talked about. Online we called our shots to what we talked about and we stuck to what we had to, but we just opened the door to more options that we could talk about. [Mike]

Online we could talk about the book, but change the way that we talked about it. We can actually express the way that we feel. We can change the roles of who gets to ask a question and who gets to answer it. [Beth]

The students felt more control over what to talk about, and they felt that anyone could ask questions, not just the teacher. The disembodiment gave them the opportunity to feel free to share their true feelings about the book.

Contending With Technological Obstacles to Discussion

The final theme that emerged from the interview data was the technological obstacles to the discussion. Certain obstacles arise in online chats that do not occur in face-to-face discussions simply because of the technology. When technology is involved, obstacles to discussion can occur if participants cannot operate the technology or if their skills are lacking. For example, Bill participated solidly in the face-to-face discussion, but his participation dropped significantly in the online discussion simply because of his typing skills. All of the participants revealed in their interviews how the technological aspects of the online chat adversely affected the discussion. Mr. Knight described what he perceived as impediments to the online discussion:

Unlike a face-to-face discussion, where I could ask a question and get an immediate response, I'd ask a question and the kids would be trying to figure out who said what and they're looking up 10 lines above to try and remember what somebody's answer was to a previous question and I'd have to repeat the question over and over again. Or I would actually have to say, "Bill, who was your favorite character?" You didn't have the eye contact where you can just look at somebody and ask them the question. I think online was a bit overwhelming trying to keep track of who said what and by the time it scrolls half way up the screen it feel likes that conversation took place 10 minutes ago whereas



really it was you probably haven't said 2 sentences between then. But they're having trouble following it. [Mr. Knight]

Bill struggled with the typing which negatively affected his participation:

Some people might not be so good at their reading, typing, and knowing how to work computers. Everyone typing at the same time means you got messages popping at every second and I mean you just gotta read every one of them. You might fall behind. [Bill]

In the discussion section that follows, these findings are examined in terms of the existing body of literature.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore a middle school literature group's perceptions of participating in an online literature discussion versus a face-to-face discussion. Perhaps one of the most exciting aspects of using online discussions is its potential to shift and rearticulate traditional teacher/student roles, as it alters the roles of "teacher" and "student," and troubles traditional notions about how to talk about literature in school contexts. This change helps to level the playing field. The teacher's role shifts from imparting knowledge to helping students create meaning in a learning community (Heuer & King, 2004). As Wade & Fauske (2004) point out, "In peer-led discussions the teacher's authority is decentered, and students' voices govern the nature of the dialogue. This does not eliminate power relations, but it changes them" (p. 137). For some teachers, this change can be uncomfortable.

The traditional beliefs about teacher authority and teacher/student roles during classroom discussions, the social conventions and conversation norms of face-to-face discourse dictate that "school talk" will be linear, moving from teacher to student, and then back to the teacher. The teacher-as-expert asks most of the questions and may expect well-thought-out, well-planned, well-articulated responses that resemble more formal speech. Discussion doesn't overlap, as one person speaks at a time; students are not encouraged to talk to each other about the topic at hand while the teacher or another student is talking. Thus, turn-taking rules are explicit, with students usually raising their hands to get permission to speak (assuming the teacher allows students to bid for the floor).

In such talk, students don't interrupt one another (and certainly not the teacher), and little topic decay occurs as the teacher determines the topic through the questions he/she poses, and reclaims the floor or stops discussion altogether if talk moves "off-topic." Talk is symmetrical, neat, and tidy, overwhelmingly dominated by teachers, who have a range of tools available to them to monitor and control student participation. In traditional face-to-face classrooms, students have little power to resist teacher expectations and social conventions associated with literature discussion; it is difficult for students not to respond to teacher questions in some way, whether in words or in gestures. Too, teachers can demand student response "through physical maneuvering, verbal demands, and ultimately, banishing students from the physical classroom" (Anagnostopoulos et. al, 2005, p. 1703).

In online chats, however, traditional face-to-face classroom discourse rules and roles do not apply because the multimodal nature of the online medium requires new rules and, thus, new roles in talking about literature. Finally, much of the literature discusses the space in an online environment and how the anonymity affects the experience. In this study, many of the changes in



control were due to the disembodiment the students felt online. After all, they were not anonymous to each other, and used the computers in the same room with one another. As a result, they were not concerned about consequences for their behavior and did “develop communication habits that might be disruptive to an instructional setting” and protected by the disembodiment of the computer medium, and with few social context cues to indicate ‘proper’ ways to behave, “users are able to express and experiment with aspects of their personality that social inhibition would generally encourage them to suppress” (Murphy & Collins, 1997, p.181-182). The students’ disembodiment allowed for them to feel freer to express how they really felt and to determine what topics would be discussed about the literature. Disembodiment causes some unusual tensions not seen in a regular classroom.

Other research about online environments discusses the hindrance of the technology itself in having clear discussions. The findings confirm and further expand this aspect of the literature. Mainly studies reflect Greene’s (2005) idea about the pace of the chat as a difficulty to overcome. Not only does the pace hinder communication, but the format of chat rooms can affect discussion as well. Lapadat (2002) found that the chronological record of discourse can be frustrating to users because of the incoherence in the sequence of the discussion. As a result, speed is needed by the user both in typing and reading of the screen. The students in this study expressed difficulty adjusting to these obstacles. Other research examines the need for substantial typing skills and also considers the affect of the short wait time for participants’ to responses to a discussion thread (Murphy & Collins, 1997). These obstacles were present in this study and confirm what the literature states.

Implications

Although the study is limited due to the experience itself, some of the findings are confirmed in the existing literature as well as contribute new findings to help expand the literature. It is acknowledged that these findings are representative of the students and the teacher and their experiences within an online environment and are not representative of every secondary classroom. The findings can lend support to the existing literature on the identities and roles that exist in online discussions, the difference in who has control, and the technology element of the discussion.

Overall, online environments with secondary students need further investigation by scholars. They are an important educational setting for teachers, parents, and students. The implications for education are for teachers to acknowledge that shared power can form a partnership between students and teachers where both have a stake in the learning. The online chat room offers a new space for students to think divergently, disagree, and resist the institution with their own language. Online technologies provide a place for student writing and talk that often does not occur in traditional classrooms due to the dyadic relationship of the omniscient teacher and the passive role of the student. Students can challenge traditional student-teacher roles and produce alternative ones while taking control of their learning. Furthermore, when teachers and students enter discussion together, students can make connections between their out of school learning which can only enrich their overall learning. Finally, the online space provides a place where students can feel belonging and are able to share and construct knowledge together with their teachers.

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