Computer-Mediated Literature Circles:

Getting On-board with Being Online

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Introduction

Everyone is talking about the advantages of literature circles. I have achieved little success with them in my own classroom. The search for a remedy or a new path is what I am on. Why am I not using on-line journaling within my literature circles in my fourth grade class? It is a format that I enjoy for myself. But, is this a format that I actually want to encourage with my students? Is it possible to create safe communities for honest and heart-felt discussion between fourth graders via the Internet? The discussion of children expressing themselves on-line is one that is a new field of study. Our world is being shaped by the computer screens that invade our homes and classrooms. Some look at them as advantageous and necessary, while others as problem-causers. We have to redefine our ideas and practices of what is acceptable and helpful as we raise and educate this generation of children.

At the beginning of my journey I restructured my idea of community and network. The road continued to the door of what exposure children have had using the Internet for communication. I followed the path and discovered what some instructors are already trying with their students in this arena.

Phillip Agre looked at how community and networks complement each other. He stated that communities are a group of people practicing something as well as overcoming underlying differences. Networking seems to be the common terminology or modes used to achieve that. Networking our education communities allows us to be involved in more than one social world and overcome the distances we might encounter face-to-face.

Community in the Classroom

Does journaling help students? Should it be private or public? Phillip Ullrich and Susan Lutgendorf looked at how journaling about stressful events affected the individual (Ullrich and Lutgendorf, 2002). The study divided the participants into three groups: one which journaled about personally experienced stressful events on an emotional and cognitive level, the other journaled about personally experienced stressful events only on an emotional level, and the third journaled about media related stressful events on an emotional and cognitive level. They discovered that those who wrote about the facts of the events and how they fit into their schema in addition to the emotions they experienced received more benefit than those who did not. Those who focused solely on emotions actually experienced increased physical ailments.

One of the components of community in my classroom that is important to me is respect for diversity. Can students create respectful bonds with their classmates using the web-based format? Allison Bryant, Ashley Sanders-Jackson, and Amber Smallwood investigated whether adolescent Internet users were forming weaker social ties on-line than off-line (Bryant, Sanders-Jackson and Smallwood, 2006). They also looked at the overlap of friends within the networks and the SIT usage of socially isolated teens. SIT is defined as “socially interactive technology.” Bryant, Sanders-Jackson, and Smallwood believe that SITs are redefining the social networks of our teenagers. Interpretation of their data led them to put forth that being involved in an on-line social network improves the speed of personal communication. One of the benefits is that on-line relationships have the possibility of exposing teenagers to a broader range of thought and experience, thus opening up their perspective. The on-line communication proved to be less emotional than face-to-face communication so one might be freer to explore thoughts more fully. They found that about the same percentage of students who spend time doing homework, also spend time online- so why not use this time in an educationally productive way?

Technology within Literature Circles

This whole idea of using technology within my literature circles makes me nervous. Being a paper and pencil person, technology intimidates me. Hoping to incorporate technology into the journal writing used in her reading methods course, Jane Sullivan added on-line journaling for discussion (Sullivan, 1998). She paired pre-service teachers with elementary student literature circles and asked them all to journal about what the book they were reading. They discussed character development, themes, and similarities between themselves and the characters, back and forth via e-mail. Although at the beginning they experienced technical difficulties, this had a positive impact on student motivation to read and expression of personal responses to literature.

It makes sense to me that their will be positives and negatives in making the students’ thoughts and writings public within our literature blogs. I have felt challenged, but also threatened by the requirement of having to post things. DavidHuffaker and Sandra Calvert sought to look at language use and identity establishment of male and female teenagers using weblogs, commonly called blogs (Huffaker and Calvert, 2005). They proposed many benefits of SITs used with adolescents. Blogs offer a place of self-expression for the students. Their study showed that with on-line journaling, student’s definition of self became more flexible. The ability to archive the journal entries encouraged the student to examine progression of thought and growth. The students seemed to feel empowered in language on-line. Surprisingly, they found very few gender differences in language usage, expressed emotions, information given, etc.

I personally am motivated to use on-line blogs within my literature circles, but how do I motivate my students? Gary Stiler and Thomas Philleo wanted to develop a better way for pre-service teachers to reflect on their studies (Phileo and Stiller, 2003). Students were reporting that the current practices of reflection were not profitable. They felt on-line blogs would increase enthusiasm for and quality of writing as they reflected on what they were learning. The acknowledgement that journaling is hard so the addition of online discussion groups should come in steps. After the students become accustomed to journaling on-line, then the discussion groups should be added. The teacher will need to plan out adequate time for this structure allowing time for students to become familiar with getting on-line, teacher to outline objectives, and appropriate amount of reading, responding, and writing time for each participant. This is not something that the teacher can be disengaged from- she must stay involved.

Computer-Mediated Discussion Groups

Is computer-mediated journaling really going to make a difference? Would this truly help my students develop into better readers and writers or just give me more behind the scenes work to do? Scott Althaus studied computer-mediated discussion groups and found many positive effects of them (Althaus, 1996). It is his belief that in-class discussions are mainly for students who are quick thinkers, quick talkers, and successful attention getters. The on-line discussion groups create a more even playing field for those who require a little bit longer reflecting on material and composing their thoughts. The other benefit I found and totally agreed with was that computer-mediated discussions also created a safe and fairer place for people of all abilities to express themselves. Students that are physically handicapped and even speech impeded students are afforded a safer place. Their peers are not so aware and not so negatively persuaded by their handicaps. He cited a study by Clark Quinn that stated that word usage increased when discussion was accomplished on-line (as cited in Althaus, 1996, p. 3). The increase shown was from twelve words used by the average student in a response during in-class discussions to 106 words used in a response during a computer-mediated discussion.

It is Donna Alvermann who challenges me at my core. Just when I was thinking highly of myself, she reminded me that I am basically a transmission model teacher whereas I need to develop a participatory approach (Alvermann, 2001). I am the adult in that room. I need to be willing to go to them—not require a child to come up to my level. Yes, I have the pressures of my students performing on the high stakes standardized test. But that is not why I went into teaching. Teaching to that test is not teaching at all- it is prepping. I am not a prepper. To adopt a participatory approach, I must incorporate their development through peer interaction. This, it seems, can be successfully done via the computer-mediated discussions. If it is true that 73% of adolescents use the Internet and 13 million adolescents instant message then this is evidently where I need to meet them (Lenhart, Rainie and Lewis, 2001). I cannot create an external reason for them to become literate and critical. I must piggy back on what I realize as I look at those statistics. I must use the computer to encourage reading, reflection, response, and respect.

Conclusion

I intend to introduce computer-mediated discussion within literature circles to increase student reflection, writing time, and writing quality. My first step will be to enlist someone to help me understand and establish the network structure on the computers. Then I will introduce the idea of on-line communities, develop a common networking language, and academic as well as social goals for the students within those communities. The real growth will come when I ask the students to report on the happenings and developments from the reading and then to relate it to their own life and the emotions they experienced. I will use my new-found knowledge of reading workshops to give support and ideas for the students’ discussions as scaffolding until they are able to regulate these themselves. My hope is two-fold: one, that this will expose the students to a broad range of experiences, thoughts, and opinions that will produce personal growth and the a new found tolerance and respect for those involved and two, that the students’ composing and typing will improve. It is to the task of reading, reflecting, responding, and writing that I now turn.