USING INTERACTIVE TECHNOLOGY TO SUPPORT READING REFLECTIONS IN LITERATURE CIRCLES FOR UPPER INTERMEDIATE STUDENTS

By

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Abstract

This study was designed to examine intermediate student responses to literature written online and with pen and paper. In particular, I looked at student engagement through the use of an online discussion forum. This study was completed in a grade six and seven classroom with twelve participants. I found that while there were few differences in the quality of the literary responses given by students online and on paper, student reported engagement in the discussion forum was very high for a number of reasons, including the social aspect of online discussion forums, the perceived notion of fair talk time, and the ability of the students to see the thinking of all their peers.
Acknowledgements

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**Introduction**

I have always loved reading. As a teacher I strive to instill in my students this same love. I have found that my students are much more interested in what they are reading when they have a choice about what to read. I have also found that my students are very social, they like to talk. Using the literature circle format allows my students to talk about their reading with their peers and gets them to engage in the readings even more.

Literature circles have become hugely popular in last decade in my school district as in many other places in North America. Numerous educators and researchers have written and researched the phenomenon (Atwell, 2009; Brownlie, 2005; Daniels, 2002; Fielding & Pearson 1994). They all agree that allowing student choice in what they are reading is an important tool in creating student success in reading activities. They believe that literature circles with their small discussion groups create environments in which students engage in their learning and have a positive learning experience. As I have developed as a teacher, I, too, have come to believe that a large part of literacy is being able to discuss and write about what we read. As a teacher, I strive to instill in my students the idea that reading is both a pleasure and an education unto itself. We read for pleasure and entertainment and to inform ourselves. I teach the upper intermediate grades and spend much time working within literature circles with my students.

I am very interested in reading responses. I expect my students to spend some of their time with the novels that they have chosen, writing reading reflections. I also include small group discussions about the books that they are reading. At times, the students have already written a formal reflection to the novel that they are expected to
share as a starting point to discussing the book. At other times, the students are expected
to come informally prepared to discuss the novels based on sticky notes or opinions jotted
down on paper. I believe, based on what I have seen and read, that my students improve
in their ability to make significant connections to the text and to themselves throughout
the school year. They also increase their ability to understand the stories on a more
complex level. Reading and writing often go hand in hand. Teachers ask their students
to write about what they read on a regular basis. Throughout a literature circle unit my
students are asked to read, discuss and respond in writing to the books they have read.
Initially, their discussions and responses are very much about surface issues and events
that occur in the stories they read. I find their discussions and responses very superficial,
as if they cannot find their own voice to give opinions about what they read.

Through various discussions with my students I know that they spend vast
quantities of time online and on their computers. They love to ‘chat’ online and conduct
much of their out of school social lives on screen, instant messaging or chatting through
online gaming sites. Because, I suspect, my students will be more forthcoming online,
sometimes to a fault, I would like to find out if using an interactive technology tool to
respond to literature improves student responses.

**Purpose of Study**

As discussed above, literature circles are a way of engaging students in reading
and writing about their reading in ways that will enhance their understanding of reading.
However, while literature circles are successful in supporting understanding of reading, I
have found the book conversations, intrinsic to literature circles, to be lacking. Literature
circle conversations are often stilted and students continue to have difficulty in
independently conducting a group conversation on the books they read. This difficulty may stem from a variety of sources, including teacher interference, reluctance on the student’s part to contribute his or her own unique ideas, and time constraints. This study is designed to investigate whether the technology, with which many students are familiar, might support students in more sustained, sophisticated and independent conversations about books.

**Research Question**

The computer has increasingly become a universal tool for communication. Millions of people now use it to make connections with friends, family and for business. Facebook is one such social networking site, claiming to have over 350 million different users as of December 2009. This is a growth rate of 200 million people since January 2009 (Owyang, 2009). People have signed up with this site in order to communicate and many students are active and fearless users of this and other social networking sites.

Teachers and teacher researchers are becoming increasingly interested in identifying ways in which the computer and the Internet can facilitate student learning. Additionally, teachers are beginning to explore the role of computers in teaching literature and literacy. Because many of our students are already fluent in the use of this tool, it seems a natural fit to try and incorporate it into our teaching. Students have enthusiastically taken-up the communication aspect of the technology; as teachers we can tap into this existing student enthusiasm and knowledge base. Social networking sites now offer both a safe and familiar environment that support student interaction and space for authentic written responses to readings. Additionally, such online sites allow the teacher to monitor student online conversations. The research question for this study,
therefore, explores whether student interest in and experience with online environments might support student engagement in literature circles. The research question is:

- Is there a difference in the types of reflections on books students provide, and the students' engagement level, when interacting with their peers and teachers online as compared to writing as a solitary pen and paper experience?

**Literature Review**

**Reading Response theory and literature circles**

Louise Rosenblatt (2005) was one of the first to introduce the theory of reading response. She argues that while it is true that we read for literary enjoyment and also to gain information, we seldom read only for one type of experience. Reading for information, the efferent experience is also an enjoyable experience that draws on our feelings and past experiences. Reading literature for the aesthetic experience can also include the acquisition of information about a variety of topics. Rosenblatt (2005) believes that every time we read a text we may have a completely different experience of it. Readers bring their own experiences, feelings and opinions with them to the experience of reading. In order to create meaning from the words on the page the reader must draw on past experiences to make new meanings. If a child is reading for a literary purpose she must be able to experience the text.

Rosenblatt (2005) believes that while most teachers have been very well meaning in their quest to ensure understanding, asking questions to guarantee that the child understands the text, such questioning often directs the child to read strictly for information and not for the aesthetic value of the text. It is through the transaction with
the text that the reader can fully understand and have a complete experience of the poem, story, or novel being read.

**Approaches to using literature circles in the classroom**

Having learned about the concept of literature circles early in my teaching career and also being lucky enough to work closely with a teacher-librarian who felt passionately about the idea, I have long since given up the class novel. The idea of a literature circle where students could discuss their own understandings of the novels they were reading in small groups held immense appeal. I view reading as a transactional experience (Rosenblatt, 2005). Rosenblatt’s theory of aesthetic reading - reading for pleasure and efferent reading – reading critically or for information, translates well into practice in relation to literature circle readings. In my classroom, students are able to choose what they wish to read from a prescribed reading list. Five to six copies of six or seven novels to make a total of thirty books for an intermediate class are optimal in a literature circle kit (Brownlie, 2005; Daniels, 2002). This allows for book groups of four or five students. The books should range in reading levels so that all students have a chance for success. In addition to these thirty novels, Brownlie (2005) also suggests having additional novels that follow the same theme for students who finish early or need extra encouragement. This allows my students to have the aesthetic experience of reading, discussing and making connections to something they have chosen. However, because the literature circle books have been chosen around a theme or topic, my students also must have a critical eye and may perhaps learn something along the way. To truly enjoy literature, we must engage with it. Literature circles allow students to experience
literature in a way that the class novel, with its ‘only one answer can be correct’ confines, cannot.

Student voice in the classroom

By allowing students to have a voice in the classroom, students take ownership of meaning (Daniels, 2006). The discussion of a novel by the students themselves creates richer and more powerful experience for student readers (Brownlie, 2005). Unfortunately, not all students feel free to express themselves in the classroom environment, even in small groups. It is suggested that blogs or online discussions allow those students who would not normally speak up in class to have a voice (English, 2007; Wolsey 2004). It also allows the freedom of think-time. Students are often required to given answers quickly when having a face-to-face discussion, blogs provide time for thoughtful responses without the pressures of time (Wolsey, 2004).

In addition to allowing those students without a voice in the classroom to be heard, online discussions also permit those students who usually respond to make a more detailed or explicit responses (English, 2007). Carico and Logan (2004) found that when students were engaged in online communications through real time online chats, students were more engaged and demonstrated more participation in the discussions. Because of the anonymity that the online chats provided the participants mostly felt free to fully express themselves.

Online chats offer students a chance to discuss books without the ever present need to ensure that the teacher is getting what he or she wants. Too often, students find when they come to a group to talk about a book that they must have the discussion that the teacher wants, thereby silencing the student voice (Almasi, O’Flahavan, & Arya,
2001). For the most part, by creating online discussion groups the teacher is taken out of the equation, allowing the student to feel freer in the way that they respond to their readings. With the teacher’s agenda for the discussion out of the picture, the students are free to take the discussion and their interpretation of the book or story in whatever direction they choose, in short, the students own the discussion. Carico and Logan (2004), suggest that students became much more engaged and involved in the books when they are engaged in online discussions. Students were also able to support their thinking based on prior knowledge, personal experience and information from the texts themselves. Students relied less on the teacher to give them the right answer and found the evidence they needed to continue with their discussion of the books.

**Building a sense of community with on line responses to literature**

Because of the pressures on teachers, many teachers have difficulty creating a classroom environment where the teacher is not the imparter of information. In a community of learning, the learner and the teacher work together to gain understanding. The learner becomes both a source and a receptacle of information. When students feel that they have ownership of their own learning without the focus on the teacher, they work together in groups to develop their own ideas, thus developing the skills necessary to create appropriate discussion (Jewel & Pratt, 1999).

A sense of community is one of the areas that many researchers have focused on when using interactive technology. It is thought that students, especially in the upper intermediate and high school classrooms, have a strong need for community. It is through this sense of belonging that students are able to make sense of who they are and what they are learning. Grisham and Wosley (2004) state, “Community is the soul of
These authors believe that the computer can aid in the development of a community for the classroom or for a small group in the classroom. Their study found that through threaded discussions students 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). It is through their community building that students are able to engage with their learning. Student engagement is very important to the learning process, without engagement student learning is diminished. Creating opportunities to build community either through face-to-face discussion or through online discussion allows for student engagement (Atwell, as cited in Pearson, 1994). Students take some part in facilitating conversations while the teacher is present, but they are much more willing to take on this role when the teacher is not present. When the teacher is leading a group discussion there is more dependence on the teacher to reorganize the thinking and to help get the discussion back on track. Without the teacher present the groups are much more inclined to talk to each other and listen much more carefully (Short, Kaufman, Kauser & Crawford, 1999).

**Having an authentic audience when writing about reading**

Wollman-Bonilla and Werchadlo (1999) identified that writing helps students create meaning. The participant children in this study were clearly engaged in the read-alouds; their written comments directed at the teacher, demonstrated that they were enjoying the aesthetic nature of the read-alouds. While writing clearly enhances the understanding of students, reading online discussions also allow for the introduction of writing for an audience. It has been found that having an audience for student writing
created an authentic writing experience (Dean, 2000). Students, who believe that what they are writing is important and should be heard or read, have a better writing experience. “Best practice in writing instruction has taught teachers that the presence of an audience can increase engagement with and depth of writing” (Kajder & Bull, 2003, p. 33). A powerful use of the Internet is to publish student responses to literature (Leu, 2004). Donald Leu believes the Internet gives students an audience to share their thinking with and the ability to see what others think about what they are reading. Writing for a purpose and for a real audience makes writing a much more authentic experience for students. They can see what they have written is having an impact on someone else. The fact that the audience can also respond to student writing also makes the writer much more responsible for what they write. They must back up their thinking with support from a variety of sources in order to make their argument all the more valid (Mohr & Orr, 2009).

**Using technology to build a future for our students**

Many educators are beginning to take notice of the computer and the many educational tools it possesses. The computer and Internet are touted as an important tool in the teaching of reading and writing. Donald Leu (2004) is a firm believer in the integration of the Internet into the teaching of reading. He believes we should “integrate the internet more systematically with our literature and literacy programs. By doing so, we will be preparing our students for the world they will inherit” (p. 502). He argues that not using the computer as an instructional tool in our classrooms deprives our children of the ability to prepare themselves properly for the future. We are also failing to teach our students the literacy skills they will need in the new digital age (Leu, Castek,
The new age of technology or digital information age will require students to be able to have skill at their fingertips that we can only dream of. Leu, Castek, Henry, Coiro, McMullan (2004) believe that it is through the teaching of many of these skills and through the development of thinking and learning aptitudes that our students will succeed. Others also believe that the use of technology in appropriate ways can teach students "real world skills" (Kajder & Bull, 2003).

Challenges to the current research on online discussions

Gao & Putman (2009) challenge the research concerning online discussion. While their research focuses on the use of online discussion in learning content area subjects and not the general use of online discussions for literature and literacy learning, their arguments are nonetheless compelling. Gao and Putnam (2009) believe that not enough research has been done on the use of online discussions. They identify three main problems: a lack of learner-content interaction, a lack of meaningful learner-learner interaction and a lack of in-depth discussion. They believe that while there seems to be some support for the use of online discussion formats, teachers do not help their students to be as successful as they could be. In order to be successful students must know what they are expected to do in the discussion forum. Gao and Putnam think that online discussions should be embedded with the prior knowledge that students will need, as well as having teacher created questions to guide the discussions. However, it can be argued that while students do need to have a strong understanding of the expectations of their work, embedding questions and other information into the discussion puts the focus sharply back onto the teacher and limits the discussion points that might be raised by students. In short, the ownership of the discussion is back in the hands of the teacher.
Summary

The computer is a powerful tool for teaching literature and literacy. Most, if not all, students come to the classroom with knowledge of or a desire to use this tool to communicate. Many already are. Using the communication capabilities of the internet and other computer programs can help students create a community to develop a voice in the learning environment, create authentic writing experiences through the acknowledgement of an audience and develop strong skills for their future, particularly when fostering responses to literature. A tool as powerful and useful as this cannot be ignored in our classrooms.

Methods

Context and Participants

This is a qualitative teacher research study using surveys and student writing samples. The study was designed to investigate how using an open format web based journal response impacts the development of reflections to literature throughout a literature circle unit as well as its impact on student engagement.

I was on leave during the time of my study. However, two teachers from my home school graciously allowed me to take over their classroom for part of their language arts program. We worked together twice a week to teach and learn from the students. I was familiar with the students (and they with me) having taught many of them the year prior to this study. The other students quickly learned my expectations for the classroom and we swiftly developed a rhythm that worked for all of us. Being a teacher researcher means that I was able to bring a strong understanding of who the students are and their backgrounds. Hubbard and Power (2003) state “Because of our presence over time at our
research sites, we teachers bring a depth of awareness to our data that outside researchers cannot begin to match” (p. xiv). Being both the teacher and the researcher means wearing two distinct hats in the classroom. However, each hat has helped further develop the other. Without the teacher, the researcher would not be able to look at the data in the same way, and my students would not be able to learn even as I did. Without the researcher, the teacher cannot look as critically at teaching methods and student learning.

In my study, my two colleagues and I examined the students written reflections to literature written after group discussions both on paper and online in a forum open only to the students of the class. We wondered if there would be any difference in the types of reflections the students gave. In addition, we explored the possibility of increased engagement through the use of the online forum.

Site

The school for the study was located in Western Canada in a medium sized city suburb of Vancouver, British Columbia. The public school had just become a traditional school. While still maintaining progressive and engaging instructional practices, the school was returning to a traditional and formalized code of behaviour and dress. The school enrolled 380 students in kindergarten through grade seven.

At the time of the study, the school had a very large Indo-Canadian population. The school was located in a mostly middle-class neighborhood with students from a wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds. Approximately 160 students were identified as English as an additional language students throughout the school and received second language support, 70% of this number were in the primary grades. The school offered Language Enhancement Kindergarten for those students beginning their schooling with
little or no English language. In addition to kindergarten support the school also offered a kindergarten readiness program for preschoolers and ‘Ready Set Learn’ for parents to help their preschoolers develop early literacy skills. The school also hosted an after school Punjabi language program with over 60 students in regular weekly attendance. The school also has a number of aboriginal students that take part in aboriginal class once a week.

The school is also home to a grade four and five Social Learning classroom. These are students who, for reasons of behaviour, are not a good fit in the regular classroom. While the school usually sends these students to another school for the upper intermediate grades, there are often students who remain attached to the program in the school for grade six and seven. These students are integrated into the regular classroom slowly and with the support of an educational assistant.

The school plan contains a goal to show growth in grade level reading components. The staff and administration made a commitment to this plan with professional development days to support the attainment of this goal.

Participants

Twenty-nine students in grades six and seven were a part of the classroom in which the study took place. While only twelve students consented to participate in the study, the lessons were taught to the class as a whole. Two teachers shared this class assignment each working 50% of the week. In total, there were eleven grade six students and nineteen grade seven students, of which seventeen were boys and thirteen were girls. Integrated into the class for language arts was one student from the Social Learning classroom who came with occasional support from an aide. The classroom had a total of
five students with Individualized Education Plans (IEP), written for a variety of reasons including behaviour and Math Stretch (a district run program that takes students who demonstrate strong mathematical problem solving abilities). However, the majority of the IEP’s were written to help students with reading and writing difficulties.

There were six girls and six boys, eleven from grade six and one boy from grade seven, who participated in the research. A range of abilities was present in the sample. Grades in Language Arts range from ‘A’ to ‘C-’. Two students had IEP’s written for them one for behaviour and one for reading and writing difficulties. None of the students were excluded based on their academic abilities. All of the student participants handed in written responses to the books they read, both handwritten and online responses, and completed two surveys.

**Instructional Implementation**

A total of eleven visits to the grade six/seven classroom were made over the course of eight weeks. On average, each week, there were two lessons: a double block, one and a half hours, and a single block, just under 1 hour. Because the entire class was also involved in the production of a school wide musical, there was some interference with several lessons. However, most of the students were in class during all of the lessons taught.

The teachers and I team-taught the class a literature circle unit on social issues. As a part of their normal classroom language arts instruction, the students were given a choice of 10 different books each dealing with a different type of social issue (see Appendix A). Many of the students in the class had previous experience with literature circles from previous years. This made the process of guiding them through the general
expectations of literature circles quite easy. Each of the books was introduced through a prediction lesson. Students were given, in pairs or small groups, the book covers without the titles and the titles listed on a separate sheet. They were asked to predict which pairs belonged together. Once they had established their ideas, the first paragraph or page of each book was added to their collection of information. Students could then change or retain their predictions. After this activity, the teachers gave a book talk about each book and compared predictions.

The students created their own book discussion groups. Once their groups were established, the students selected one of the books available. Students were asked to read individually and were given the opportunity in class to discuss the books as a group. Each group met approximately four times over the course of the study for book discussions: myself or one of the classroom teachers led each literature circle to guide the discussions. Each group was responsible for determining the reading assignment (i.e., how much of the book should be read before the next discussion). The responsibility was given to the students to keep up with the readings. All students kept up with the readings established by their group. When a book was completed, students’ chose a new book and the process was repeated. The groups read, on average, three books.

**Written reflections**

The students were required to write individual reflections once per week. The reflections were expected to be a personal response to the book and included connections, opinions and feelings elicited during the student’s reading of the book. These reflections were not to be a retelling of the plot features of the story. The students were generally able to follow these guidelines. These responses were a way for the teacher to check for
understanding of the readings. The teachers read and marked each of the reflections and, based on the types of reflections given, a mini-lesson was taught each week. Because students seemed to need extra help in delving deeper into the novels they were reading, most mini-lessons mainly focused on aspects of plot and character. Expectations for the reflections were also taught in detail (see Appendix E).

**Online Reflections**

Once a week, student participants were also required to reflect online on the novels through the school district’s communication software. This is an internal communication tool that only the class, the teachers, and I had access to. In this venue, the students were able to view other reflections made by their classmates, respond to those reflections and write their own reflections to the novels they read. These reflections were not marked by a teacher but were monitored regularly. Students were given an initial prompt for each book to keep them on track and to help begin a threaded discussion for each individual book. This also allowed the reflections to be linked or to create conversations. One book was also linked to a news article for the students to read and to reflect upon.

**Data collection**

I focused on two of the novels the students read and looked at the types of reflections the students gave both online and on paper. The two novels presented very different social issues for the students to engage with.

The first book, *Danger Zone* by Michele Martin Bossley, is a story of a young and aggressive hockey player, Jason, who cross-checks an opponent and is ejected for the
season from the game he loves. The story follows Jason as he fights to get back on the ice. Along the way, the reader discovers Jason may have a learning disability and that this may be part of the reason for Jason’s negative attitude towards school and his fellow classmates and teammates. Themes of friendship, family and feelings of belonging are all a part of the novel. This book seemed to resonate very strongly with both the grade 6 and 7 boys.

The second book, *The Girls* by Amy Goldman Koss, is told from the point of view of five different characters. Each girl tells her story as she sees it. Maya is a part of the group one day and the next is out. She doesn’t understand what she did wrong. Candace has decided that Maya is no longer ‘in’ and the group follows her lead in ‘shunning’ her. The novel describes the emotional upheaval this causes for Maya, and the other girls in the group. Themes of friendship, betrayal and belonging are also a part of this book. While *Danger Zone* resonated with the boys, the girls of the class seemed to respond to *The Girls*, though there were several literature circle discussions with groups of boys about this novel.

**Data Sources**

**Responses.**

Student participants’ handwritten reflections to the book were photocopied and the originals were marked by the teachers and handed back to the students. Reflections by the participants that were posted on the communication software were collated in their original form and printed.
Surveys.

At the end of the study students were given a short multiple-choice survey designed to look at student engagement in the literature circle process. The survey contained a total of seven questions, the answers in multiple-choice form. All student participants in the study completed the survey about their engagement with the books and the literature circle format. The students chose the answer that best described their experience during the literature circle unit (see appendix B).

The students also completed a short written open answer survey, designed to elicit a deeper understanding of their use of the online communication software. The three question survey allowed students to explain their preferences in writing about their experience with reflecting on paper, online and orally (see appendix C).

Data Analysis

The types of responses the books garnered through the student reflections, both online and with pen and paper, were coded and compiled. The response and analysis component of the BC Performance Standards for Reading Literature (Appendix D) for grades six and seven was used. The rubric was rewritten to include language that was familiar to the students to be used for self-assessment and improvements to the reflections throughout the unit (Appendix E). Reflections were coded based on different types of responses the students made to the novels they read: opinion or judgment, connections, engagement with the text, and comments on structure. Each type of response was rated on a four point scale ranking the level of competency of the response types: 1 for Emerging, 2 for Developing, 3 for Competent, and 4 for Powerful.
The answers to the multiple-choice surveys given by the participants were compiled into an Excel spreadsheet and then graphed using Excel charts. Each graph represents one question on the survey. As well some questions were graphed together where they asked similar questions about student engagement and interactions. All the participants answered the seven-question survey.

The responses to the open answer surveys were also compiled into an Excel spreadsheet and then graphed using Excel charts. However, additional reasons given by the participants for their responses provided a wide range of issues not easily coded. While these additional responses are not included in the findings, I do reference them in the discussion.

Findings

This study was designed to investigate how using an open format web based journal response impacts the development of responses to literature throughout a literature circle unit and student engagement in responding to literature. These are the findings.

Literature Responses.

There was little or no difference in the types and quality of reflections. Online 13 (31%) of the reflections contained some kind of opinion statements while pen and paper reflections generated 9 (26%) opinion statements. Connection statements were also very similar. 11 (26%) of online reflections contained connection statements while 11 (31%) of pen and paper reflections contained connection statements. This trend continued with engagement statements at 15 (36%) for online reflections and 14 (40%) for pen and paper
reflections (Figure 1). There were few structure statements for either online or pen and paper reflections.

Figure 1: Categories of Responses Online and Pen/Paper

Overall, the types of response statements were evenly distributed (Figure 2). Even the number of statements made for each type of response was similar. There were 42 online response statements and 35 pen and paper statements. On average students logged two pen and paper responses and slightly more than two online responses.
All the participants identified reading as something they liked to do. They also felt that handwriting a response on paper was okay. None felt that it was easy but they all identified the activity as something they felt some degree of comfort in completing. However, when asked how they felt about writing online the overwhelming majority 9 (75%) felt that writing a response online was easy and only 3 (25%) thought it was okay (Figure 3). In addition, all of the students thought that using the computer was very fun - 8 (67%) or fun - 4 (33%) (Figure 3 and 4).
Students found the interactions within both the literature circle discussion groups and being able to see and read the responses of their peers online to be helpful. 4 students (33%) found that talking in the discussion groups to be very helpful, while 10 students
(83%), the vast majority of the participants, found that reading the online responses of others was very helpful to them (Figure 5).

![Student Interaction Chart](image)

**Student Interaction**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Talking in the Literature Circle was</th>
<th>Reading other responses was</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>very helpful</td>
<td>helpful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5: Student Interaction.

**Open Answer Survey.**

When asked the type of response the student’s thought was easier to write students overwhelmingly, 10 out of the 12 participants (83%), commented on the online response form (Figure 6).

![Which type of response was easier to write?](image)

**Which type of response was easier to write?**

- 17% Pen and Paper
- 83% Computer

Figure 6: Type of responses students find easier to write.

The participants identified a number of different reasons for liking the online response form (Figure 9). Students especially liked the ability to respond to other students. Five
comments (32%) were made about replying to other students. Two comments were made about the ability to make their responses very legible online. Three comments were made about the ease in which the participants felt they could fix their mistakes. Two participants also commented on how ‘fun’ it was to respond online. Two participants also liked the speed in which they could respond to their classmates and post their responses (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Reasons students like the online response form

Only two students responded that they found the pen and paper response easier to write. Reasons for the pen and paper response included the extended time frame for creating the response when writing on paper because the participants could take the responses home to complete as well as being able to think better on paper.

Six participants (50%) felt they could say more online than in the literature circle discussion groups. Students felt that by being able to read what others wrote they had more ideas. As Donny put it, “The words flow through my hands”. They also expressed that they did not have to worry as much about being nervous and saying the wrong things.
One student also identified that online everyone’s response was included while when in the group discussions only some people participated. Another pointed out that when ideas could be communicated both parties could learn more about the book itself. Three participants (25%) felt that discussion in small groups was a much better way to communicate their ideas. As Lovejeet said, it was easier “to talk to someone face to face.” Only one participant felt they were able to communicate their ideas equally online and in small group discussions (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Online and literature circle participation by students.

All the participants agreed that it was helpful to see what others had written online. More than half the participants (7 or 58%) felt that it really helped them get ideas about what to write and what other people thought. Three participants (17%) felt that it was helpful to be able to reply and get a reply to their classmates. The interaction was important to them (Figure 9).
Like Grisham and Wolsey (2006), I also noted the use of coloured fonts and changes in the style or the size of the font used. I also noted despite regular reminders that the school district communication software was a school based discussion group and the students needed to adhere to the same expectations of creating a response online as they did on paper (proper grammar and punctuation), many responses had little to no punctuation and they were littered with spelling mistakes and slang terms. However, I must temper this with the statement that many of the handwritten responses also had little to no punctuation and contained many more spelling mistakes.

**Discussion**

There were several key findings. It is interesting to note that the types of responses generated in the reflections were very similar regardless of the media used. That is, students’ scores were similar on both online or pen and paper reflections written about the novels they read. These findings contradict previous research, which suggests
there would be a difference in the quality of reflections depending on whether they were written with pen and paper or on a computer (Haas, 1989; Owston, Murphy, & Wideman, 1992).

What did change, however, was student reported engagement in the literature circle activity. The participants of the study reported a high level of enjoyment and fun when using the technology tools in the classroom. The level of engagement in school is a positive marker for academic success (Anderson, Shirey, Wilson, & Fielding, 1987). That is, students who enjoy the process and who are engaged in the process have a high level of ownership over their own learning. This is very important in the upper intermediate grades where lack of engagement often means turned off and tuned out kids. Teachers want their students to take ownership of their learning and be positive about their education. Using technology seems to be a way to get kids to be positive and to be engaged.

There was a very positive response to the ability to read reflections completed by other students. In addition, there were no negative responses to having their own reflections read by their peers. In fact, students seemed to feel less threatened by having their thoughts read than having to discuss their thoughts in face-to-face group discussions. Participants liked the idea that the computer made it easier to fix any mistakes they made. The ease in which the students could share their ideas seemed to alleviate some of the worry of face-to-face conversations and allowed them to engage with their peers in the online discussion forums.

Students also very much appreciated the idea that they could not only read what others have read about the books they were reading but also that they could reply to the
ideas presented. They liked that they could say something online without the pressure of face-to-face conversations. As Maneet put it “when I am nervous I say things I don’t mean to say but if I was on the computer I could just press ‘backspace’.” They also commented on the fact that they were able to see everyone’s thoughts. This was a positive experience for them. Tejpal wrote “in the literature circle discussion only some people say something about the book and on the laptops everyone writes something about the book”. This suggests that the participants were aware of the audience they were writing to but were not intimidated by it. It also suggests that they were building the community that so many recommend is an important part of communication with this age group (Grisham & Wosley, 2004; Jewel & Pratt, 1999). This sense of community allowed them to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts with each other. It also contributed to the engagement level of the students. The students seemed to feel that they had a sense of ownership over their conversations. Questions to clarify understanding were never directed at the teacher but at the group members. Students felt comfortable enough to agree or disagree with statements made by others.

Baljit: Gagan I disagree with you because Jason hit him by accident and got suspended. The college girl hit on purpose and did more than one hit and she was really aggressive and rough.

Donny: I agree with baljit, gagan.

Baljit: I disagree with you Gagan Jason didn’t get suspended on purpose and once he talked to his league about it he got to play in the game again. But he did only play in the last game and that was not fair for him because
he hit by accident because he couldn't stop and turned around and hit him from behind.

This thread demonstrates the enthusiasm the students had in reading each other's posts and in responding to the posts. They loved that they could agree or disagree and did so in a respectful manner usually supporting their thinking with events from the novels, something we ask them to do regularly but often do not see. This forum forces students to clarify their thinking and, the sense of an audience other than the teacher, requires that they ensure their beliefs are firmly backed by the novel they are reading.

The ability to respond to other students online seemed to be an important finding in the study. However, the students felt that being able to read what others thought was far more important. Being able to see what other reflections looked like and what content they contained allowed the students to feel more confident about their own reflections. They seemed to like knowing that their ideas had value to others: as Rutin commented, "I had more ideas when I was online. I read other people's response to the book I had more and more ideas about what I should write." The sharing and building of ideas is what constructing meaning is all about (Pearson, 1994). These students are practicing what teachers strive for when we ask them to talk about books in literature circles.

Implications

While this was a small study with a limited number of participants and the limitations are many, there are several implications that can be made. First, teachers cannot expect that technology will magically improve student performance. Technology can only be used as one tool in a teacher's vast toolbox. It can help a student present a
more legible and readable copy of his or her thinking but it cannot change the thinking a student has about his or her reading.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly technology does provide a way to create the types of conversations and meaningful discussions around books that literature circles are meant to do. Discussion in literature circles can be intimidating, there is little time to think before speaking and students cannot take back comments that might have been made too quickly. However, online discussions about books provide opportunities for talking about what one is thinking and provides the opportunity to think carefully before posting a comment and, if a comment is written too quickly, an opportunity to change what is written before posting it. Students can see what others are thinking. They can agree and disagree and easily understand that they must backup their thinking. There is enough time to think through any response that they might want to make. Students also recognize that in the online forum everyone has a chance to be heard and all opinions are important to the discussion as a whole. The level of engagement goes up and the ownership of learning is passed from the teacher to the student.

Computers and the Internet have become important tools in communicating outside of the classroom. By allowing students to use these communication tools inside the classroom, teachers can hopefully support and observe students who are engaged and excited about learning.
References


dfP_u8#v=onepage&q=interestingness%20of%20children's%20reading&f=false


Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.


Appendix A

Book List


Appendix B

Multiple-Choice Survey

*Please circle the response that best answers each question.*

1. Reading is
   a) Something I like to do
   b) Something I do because I have to
   c) Something I try to avoid

2. Writing responses on paper was
   
   Easy     OK     Difficult   Very difficult

3. Writing responses on the computer was
   
   Easy     OK     Difficult   Very difficult

4. Using the computer to write responses to the novels I read was
   
   Very fun   Fun   No different

5. Discussing the novels that I read to better understand the story was
   
   Very helpful   helpful   unhelpful   very unhelpful

6. Reading what other students wrote about the novels that I read was
   
   Very helpful   helpful   unhelpful   very unhelpful

7. If I were to complete another literature circle I would prefer to complete my responses:
   
   a) Only on line
   b) Only with paper and pen
   c) Some combination of the two.
Appendix C

Open Answer Survey

Which did you find easier; writing your responses with pen and paper or in the First Class Conference? Why?

Was it helpful to see what other students wrote?

Did you think that you were able to say more when you were online than you did when you were in the literature circle discussion? Why or why not?
Appendix D

BC Reading Rubric

# Quick Scale: Grade 6 Reading Literature

This Quick Scale is a summary of the Rating Scale that follows. Both describe student achievement in March-April of the school year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect / Classification</th>
<th>Not Yet Within Expectations</th>
<th>Meets Expectations (Minimal Level)</th>
<th>Fully Meets Expectations</th>
<th>Exceeds Expectations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SNAPSHOT</strong></td>
<td>With support, the student may be able to read short, simple, and direct selections with familiar language. Work is often vague, incomplete, or inaccurate. May need one-to-one support to complete task.</td>
<td>The student is able to read generally straightforward fiction and poetry and complete most assigned tasks. Work is often inconsistent; parts are accurate and complete; others are vague and incomplete.</td>
<td>The student is able to read generally straightforward fiction and complete assigned tasks independently. Work is generally accurate and complete, with specific references to selection.</td>
<td>The student is able to read fiction and poetry with some complex language or ideas. Work is thorough, independent, and shows some insight, with specific, well-chosen evidence. May look for challenges.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STRATEGIES</strong></td>
<td>Often does not check for understanding; focuses on sounding out new words; often gives up; unsure of the features of various genres; often guesses rather than reasoning to locate specific details</td>
<td>Checks for understanding; may need help choosing strategies; relies on sounding out and context clues; needs some direction to use knowledge of story structure and genres; inefficient in locating details</td>
<td>Checks for understanding; draws on range of strategies; uses range of word skills; may need prompting; uses knowledge of story structure and genres to predict, support; skims and rereads for details</td>
<td>Checks for understanding; chooses effectively from wide range of strategies; uses range of effective word skills; independent; uses knowledge of an increasing range of genres to predict, support; efficiently skims and rereads for details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>COMPREHENSION</strong></td>
<td>Work is vague, inaccurate, or incomplete; identifies some main characters and events; may be able to place main events in order; explains some simple cause-effect relationships; makes some simple inferences; often illogical because the student has missed literal information; unable to interpret theme or author's message</td>
<td>Provides accurate information; often vague, sometimes incomplete; identifies most main characters, events, and obvious conflicts; gives some details if asked; explains some relationships among events; makes some simple inferences; little or no support; interprets themes or author's messages simplistically</td>
<td>Clear, complete, and accurate, with specific references to the selection; describes setting, main characters, conflict, and events accurately and in some detail; may use words of the selection; explains relationships among events; makes some logical inferences with support; interprets obvious themes or author's message logically</td>
<td>Thorough and precise, with specific detail; describes setting, character, conflict, and events accurately and in own words, with relevant detail and interpretation; explains subtle relationship among events; often speculates about other possibilities; makes inferences with insight, support; interprets theme or author's message logically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RESPONSE AND ANALYSIS</strong></td>
<td>With explicit guidance, may make some simple and obvious connections; often, simple, vague, and unsupported reactions and opinions</td>
<td>Makes some concrete and obvious connections; other's simple and direct reactions and opinions; gives reasons if provided with a frame or model</td>
<td>Makes logical, relatively direct connections; offers reactions and opinions about selections, with some logical support</td>
<td>Makes and supports some insightful connections; offers and supports reactions and opinions; may show some complexity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

GRADE 6 READING LITERATURE
Appendix E

Marking Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Emerging</th>
<th>Developing</th>
<th>Competent</th>
<th>Powerful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(I forget to give examples from the book)</td>
<td>(I sometimes support what I say with examples and evidence from the book)</td>
<td>(I use quotes from the book and support what I say with evidence from the book)</td>
<td>(I have several examples from the story to support my ideas and use quotes effectively)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Opinions/Judgment</strong></th>
<th>I can tell some simple opinions and connections I have about the book</th>
<th>I can tell some opinions and connections I have about the book</th>
<th>I can tell my opinions about the events and characters in the story</th>
<th>I can tell how what I read connects to what I already know or believe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Connections</strong></td>
<td>I mainly talk about the actions and events in the book</td>
<td>I like to talk about the characters in the book</td>
<td>I tell you how what I read connects to my own experiences or others</td>
<td>I can identify the author’s message and support it from the story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Engagement</strong></td>
<td>I can tell you if I liked what I read</td>
<td>I can tell you how I feel about what I read</td>
<td>I can tell how I feel about the events and characters in the story and give reasons</td>
<td>I can extend the information and ideas that I read about to complex ideas, global issues, or universal themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I may be a little confused about some of the events in the book</td>
<td>Some of my response is consistent and logical</td>
<td>My response is consistent and logical</td>
<td>I notice details, structures and sometimes symbols that help me to generalize about information or characters</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F

Unit Plan: Social Issues Literature Circle

The books were carefully chosen with regards to the age and maturity of grade six and seven students as well as their varied reading levels. Special attention was paid to the vocabulary and sentence structure to determine the readability for my students.

Lesson Plan For Literature Circle Introduction

Materials:

Per group:
- Photocopy of each book cover without the title.
- Book Title on separate paper
- First page or so of each book typed in the same font and size
- Scissors and glue

Activity:

In groups, students are to predict which title goes with which book cover. Give approximately 7 - 10 minutes for this part of the activity. Remind students NOT to glue down the titles. Once the students have chosen the pairs hand out the first page of each book. Ask students to read each page and attempt to place each page with the title and cover. Remind students that this may change their predictions and this is ok because the titles were not glued down. Give approximately 15 minutes for discussion and decisions. Ask the students to determine their ‘final answers’ and have them glue their titles and covers to the first page of each book.

Ensure students understand that this is a prediction activity and that none of their answers and incorrect. Pull out the books for the Literature circles and one by one have the students check their predictions. After all the book covers and titles have been
revealed, read the first page of each book and give a brief synopsis of the book as well as
the intended audience. Students will want to know how many predictions were correct;
this can be done very informally. This takes over 20 minutes to be done properly.

Have students write down two choices for the book they would like to read from
the Literature Kit first. At this point the teacher can either begin allowing students to
chose their books or ask the students to think about their choices and hand the books out
at a later time.
First Pages of Social Issues Literature Kits

The summer wasn’t turning out the way I’d planned. First and worst, my cousin Alex had come up from Los Angeles to spend the summer in Rivertown. He’s only been with us a week when I discovered that he’s a whiner and a show-off and I think probably a big liar, too. Because of him my friend John Sun and I couldn’t go downriver on the trip we’d been planning all year. We were going to camp along the banks, fish, snare rabbits, and live off the land. At first we thought we might still go and take Alex. But that was before we met him. Anyway, Mom said we couldn’t take him. She was responsible for him and he was only twelve.

“So? We’re only thirteen,” I’d said.

“Yes, Brodie. But I know you and John can handle camping. I’m not sure about Alex.” And of course my parents said I couldn’t just go off and leave him here alone. So everything was messed up.

And then, just to make it worse, Dad asked me to be especially nice to Alex.

“He’s been having such a bad time at home,” he said. “And he’s a nice kid really he just needs some normal living.”

(Blackwater by Eve Bunting)

She was the very first person I met on my very first day at Dale Road Secondary School. We bumped into each other at the door of the hall where we’d been sent to wait for our class teachers.

“Oh, sorry,” she said.

“Me too,” I said.

She was much taller than me, and quite thin. She had a bush of brown frizzy hair and pale brown skin which was dotted all over with freckles. But what you noticed straight away was her ears. They were large, and stuck out away from her head. Like bat’s ears.

(Secret Friends by Elizabeth Laird)
The guy with the puck was only a few feet in front of me. I pumped my legs harder, my skates slicing over the ice. Swish, swish, swish, swish, BAM! I lowered my shoulder low and rammed him into the boards, taking the puck with one easy move and sending a pass to my winger.

“All right, Jason!” I heard my coach cheer.

My legs were burning. I gulped down air as I circled back into our defensive zone. The ref stopped play. Coach rattled the gate, the signal for a line change. I skated up and clumped over to our bench.

“Nice,” he said appreciatively, clapping a hand in my shoulder. “Beautiful check, Jase.”

I was still breathing hard. Sweat dripped in my eyes. I yanked off my glove and loosened my hockey mask enough to wipe my forehead, then I fastened the mask again. Calgary Minor Hockey regulations. No player can take off his helmet or his visor during a game, even for a second.

Hockey has too many rules, if you ask me. If I didn’t love the game so much, I wouldn’t be here. They make you remember everything. Equipment, penalties, strategies, you name it. But I guess that’s partly why it’s so much fun – it’s not easy, you know? So you feel awesome when you do really great.

(Danger Zone by M. Bossley)

The Model T lurched and shuddered to a stop. Kwok-Ken Wong could hear the rain drumming steadily onto the canvas roof above and into the big tin tubs on the truck’s open deck. Water dripped dark from the fire-escape ladder hanging on the nearby building and washed over the cobblestones down towards the sewer. The storm had driven the scavenging cats indoor and capped the dank smells of garbage.

Kwok scanned the alley with anxious eyes. The laneway stood empty. He breathed with relief. Still, he sank lower into the hard, well worn seat. Once, two teen-aged girls had come chasing through, laughing and giggling. They had stopped when they saw Kwok working. He had been so ashamed he wouldn’t look at them.

(Breakaway by Paul Yee)
Last Saturday, I stumbled half asleep into the kitchen, aiming for a bowl of granola, thinking it was just any old Saturday morning. But when I came through the kitchen door, my little sister, Lena, yelled, “Maya’s awake! Can I tell her? Can I, please?”

My dad nodded.
“Tell me what?” I asked sleepily.
“Daddy’s taking us to Six Flags, Magic Mountain TODAY!” Leena screamed.
“And we can each bring a friend!”
“Really?” I was suddenly wide awake. “Really?”
Dad’s smile grew. “Eat something first,” he said.
“YA-HOO!” I yelled. My sister was jumping around the kitchen and I jumped with her.

(The Girls by Amy Goldman Koss)

This is the story of last summer. The summer I stayed with my nan, while Mum took Charlotte to America. The summer I met Alice. . .

Bold. Bad Alice! Alice who told lies. Who was aggressive; anti-social; who couldn’t be trusted. Just about no one had a good word to say for bad Alice.

It was Steven who first told me about her. Steven was Nan’s desperate attempt to find me a friend for all the long hot months I was going to be staying with her. His mum and dad were members of Nan’s church. I don’t go to church myself, it’s something I never even think about, but Nan goes all the time. She got what Mum calls ‘the bug’ a few years back, when she went to hear some preacher guy from California, and go hooked. She takes it very seriously. She’s not holy or anything she doesn’t go on about it. Like, she wouldn’t ever try to convert me to her way of thinking. But I know that it means a lot to her so even though I don’t share here beliefs I do my best to respect her feelings. It seems only fair.

Anyway she’d gone and invited these people over for tea, Sunday afternoon.

(Bad Alice by Jean Ure)
I didn’t see it coming. That’s what they say, of course – that the kids never see it coming. But I still wasn’t ready when they told me.

It wasn’t fair – any of it. I had just come from my dance class, feeling tired but excited the way you do after dancing. It was one of those perfect October days. The leaves were just turning yellow and orange. Kids were playing and shouting out on the street. My little brother, Jacob, yelled as he tore past me on his bike. Then he and his friend jumped off their bikes to play some kind of tag. From what I could see, it looked like Jacob was “it.”

My father had to call Jacob three times before he would stop the game for supper. Then Jacob came charging into the house, the way he does. My mom yelled at him not to slam the door. Of course, Jacob let the door slam anyhow. Just like always.

(My Broken Family by Paul Kropp)

Hi my name is Haley Madison, and I’ve spent most of my life so far being considered a total geek. I was born pretty normal, but after seven years of school and a series of, um... accidents... I was banished to Nerdsville, population: Me.

You know, being lonely in a giant school full of kids is not a happy situation. I couldn’t get up the nerve to talk to anybody, so I kept to myself and no one bothered me... much.

Then, as luck would have it, my body decided to play a really mean trick on me. It went totally crazy, and I don’t just mean the normal stuff that happens to girls, either – I mean, I had something extra-weird going on. Things started randomly flying around or breaking when I was really upset. When I was too lazy to reach for the remote control, it would just up and float over to me... that’s when I knew something pretty freaky was going on.

(Queen Bee by Chynna Clugston)
Other Literature circle Activities

Weekly Reflections

Students are required to hand in weekly reflections based on their readings. Reflections should include connections the students have made, (self to text, text to text or text to world), opinions about the book, the events and the characters and feelings the novel has evoked. These are marked weekly and feedback given to help the students refine their reflections and develop a deeper understanding of the novels they read.

Character report cards

Students will choose one character from one of the novels of the Lit Kit. This should be a character they feel some connection to or feel they know quite well. The students choose three characteristics that they feel describe the character to some degree. They must give a grade for this characteristic – and A would mean the character displays all the traits necessary for the characteristic while a C or C- means that they display some of the traits but on the whole do not display this characteristic. They must have two examples from the text that back up their thinking about the character, and should be able to cite the page the information came from.

Story Maps

I generally ask the students to choose the way that they complete story maps. They students are given a variety of types of story maps to choose from so that they can chose the one that best reflects their strengths. Some of the students choose to complete a story map that is more illustrated than written while others choose to write more than they illustrate. Some of the story maps are very structured while others allow the students to
express the story as they see fit. Generally my students become quite good at choosing the story map that best suits their needs and abilities.

**Venn Diagrams**

I would use a Venn Diagram to compare two characters from the Lit Kit. This is a similar activity to the Character report cards, involving two characters rather than one. Each description should be given an example from the text with a page number.

**Story Arc**

In addition to the story map, my students usually get a lesson in the story arc. Students are expected to describe the story arc of one of the novels from the Lit Kit. This requires the students to be succinct, yet descriptive, a difficult task for them. They must also identify the setting and the main characters giving a brief description of each.

**Artifact Boxes**

As a final assignment, for the Lit Circles, students will be asked to complete an Artifact Box. They must choose one book from the Lit Kit and select five artifacts that have meaning to the story. These artifacts can be actual objects or can be created by illustration or other means. Each artifact must have an explanation as to why it was chosen and what it means to the story.