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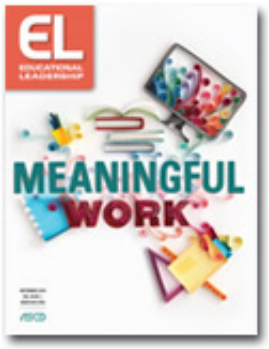
Giving Students Meaningful Work Pages 50-54



The Virtual Circle

Stacy Kitsis

When a teacher added online discussion, her literature circles thrived.

Digital Natives. Millennials. The Net Generation. People have been calling my students a lot of names lately. Label them how you please, few seem to deny that today's teens, who can't remember a time before the Internet and cell phones, are different—and in danger of experiencing their education as irrelevant to their wired lives. In *Born Digital* (2008), Palfrey and Gasser write that teachers can either embrace the power of new technology or react with fear and suspicion, leaving our students to navigate these waters on their own. They also dare us "not to use technology in the curriculum more, but to use it more effectively" (p. 247).

I recently took up that challenge in my own classroom in Arlington, Massachusetts, a suburban community just northwest of Boston. Together, my students and I embarked on a yearlong experiment using social-networking technology to enhance small-group literature discussions. Could these tools make our work more meaningful?

I had used a class blog for several years to announce assignments and communicate with parents, and occasionally for students to share short responses to homework prompts. What I had not done was use a blog as a virtual meeting space for small groups. This is what I attempted in my 11th and 12th grade English classes, using literature circles as our proving ground.

The Old Way

In traditional literature circles, students read books of their own choosing in small groups that meet regularly for discussion (Daniels, 2002). In my classes, students picked from about a dozen supplementary titles that were thematically related to the curriculum. In a senior elective called Literature of War and Genocide, for example, choices included the Holocaust memoir *Survival in Auschwitz* by Primo Levi; the classic nonfiction work *Hiroshima* by John Hersey; and *Imagining Argentina* by Lawrence Thornton, a magical realism novel about the 1970s abductions carried out by the Argentine military. Students ranked their choices on a ballot, and I made the final assignments, ensuring balanced groups of four or five members. Almost all students got their first or second choice, and those who didn't got priority consideration next time.

The literature circles met roughly once a week for three or four weeks per book. As a culminating activity, each group completed a final project, such as a book review or style imitation. Students prepared for discussions by keeping reading journals or notes, and I assigned jobs to each group member to ensure that everyone participated. Despite the planning, however, conversations frequently stalled, even when students liked their books. Could team-based online learning infuse my limping literature circles with new energy?

The New Way

The new literature circles used technology to reinforce rather than replace face-to-face discussion. Groups met once a week in person, and members posted comments on a group blog between meetings.

I chose blogging over other Internet tools because blogs are simple to set up, posts are simple to write and comment on, and the comment threads preserve the linear feel of a class discussion.

There are several inexpensive and user-friendly options for education blogs. My classes use Blogger, which is free and does not require knowledge of any of the markup languages used to format text online. Will Richardson's book *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms* (2006) is an excellent resource for more help.

I used my already-established class blog for the discussions, creating one post for each literature circle. Each circle wrote discussion prompts that I quickly approved and added to the comments section of the relevant post so that students could respond. Another option would be to create a blog for each literature circle, with a separate post for each discussion prompt.

Prompts ranged from general ("Talk about a moment that stood out to you") to specific ("As of page 179, how is Mother coming to terms with her own identity?"). Themes that emerged from both online and offline conversations were later incorporated into final projects in which the group creatively shared the book with the rest of the class.

In the beginning, assignments were highly structured; students were required to contribute one comment between each weekly discussion and adhere to a limited length (usually 200 words) for each comment. These requirements ensured that the conversation was not too cumbersome to read and that no one voice dominated.

I also provided a rubric covering ideas and topic development, including the use of evidence from the text; voice and style; proper mechanics; and "contribution to the learning community," which we defined as meaningfully building on a previous comment or stimulating the discussion with original observations or questions. (See the complete rubric at www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed_lead/el_201009_kitsis_rubric.pdf.) At the same time, I reminded my students that digressions, questions, and new directions are a natural part of real conversations about books. Eventually, some groups were able to continue their discussions without formal prompts, but others continued to need direction to guide their conversations.

Benefits for Students

Our students are constantly connected to one another through what may seem to outsiders to be a mind-boggling stream of status updates, text messages, and tweets. Today's learners crave immediacy, reacting quickly and expecting the same from others. They are also highly social, often preferring interactive or team-based learning environments (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). Social-networking technology can provide the rapid responses students value without putting an undue strain on the teacher.

My students' level of engagement, a key measure of how meaningful *they* find the work, was high. When I asked students to share with me their impressions of the assignment, Alex wrote, "It was interesting to look at the blog right before going to bed and to see how my peers had responded to my posts." Compare his interest to that of students we have all seen stuffing meticulously graded papers into backpacks or trashcans without a second glance. In my classes, I saw students who almost never turned in traditional homework regularly contribute to the blog.

Another exciting benefit of my experiment was the extension of the classroom space. Groups had more opportunities to interact, and this increased interaction seemed to spill over into the weekly face-to-face discussions; blogging helped students think through their writing and provided a common jumping-off point. Stephanie explained:

> Usually in literature circles there's a stilted period where no one knows what exactly to start talking about … but Alex would come in and start off with, "I really liked this point [from the blog]. Can we talk about it?" and we would be able to sustain a discussion from there.

Online, my students demonstrated the active reading I seek in the classroom. They asked questions ranging from simple clarification to those requiring analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. They made predictions. They drew frequent connections to their own lives, to the world around them, and to ideas in their other coursework. In one conversation, students talked about the genocide in Rwanda and the roots of racism in the United States. Another group of students connected the recurring line "So it goes" from Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* to his second novel, *The Sirens of Titan*.

In *You Gotta Be the Book* (2008), Jeffrey Wilhelm defines education as "practice in the construction of meanings with others" (p. 201). This is exactly what I saw on our blogs. A student struggling through the opening chapters of *Catch-22* wrote,

> Detecting irony in literature is not easy for me, but I definitely recognize it with the examples previously given by Cherelle and Ellery. … I think the use of irony helps portray the corruption [of war].

Students openly admitted their confusion and worked through problem passages together. Sandhya confessed, "At one point I couldn't tell who was saying each line," as she and her group tried to make sense of an early scene in *A Farewell to Arms* depicting a meandering conversation among tipsy military men. The sense of community seemed to help my students be more patient readers.

Limiting groups to four or five members ensured that individual contributions didn't get lost in the shuffle, a complaint I had heard when I asked the whole class to respond to the same prompt on the blog. Students validated one another's contributions, and I saw interactions between bloggers who had little in common in the "real world" of school.

Just as important, after we spent time in class modeling appropriate language, students were able to challenge one another without undermining the sense of community. For example, in a discussion of *All But My Life*, a memoir by Holocaust survivor Gerda Weissmann Klein, Matt questioned his group's right to judge the narrator's actions: "I do not think it is fair to think about [what we would do] if we were in Gerda's shoes. … I cannot imagine what it would be like to have … my dreams shattered as hers were." Students learned to support their arguments and to communicate effectively and respectfully in a virtual environment, despite the absence of nonverbal cues. As they collaborated and negotiated with one another, they stopped trying to find the "right" answer and started constructing meaning.

Blogging led to much more equally distributed participation than traditional discussions did. Students who were used to engaging at a superficial level found themselves forced to expand on their contributions, and that small handful used to dominating discussions got to practice listening to their peers. Specifying the number and length of comments helped with this, but other dynamics also came into play. Tom, a prolific blogger who rarely spoke up in class, explained:

> I don't always have good thoughts when I'm in class, or a way to say it. So when I'm at the computer, I can think about exactly what I want to say, without having to worry about people moving on to a new topic.

The conversation is slowed down, making it more accessible to students who are shy or who struggle to formulate ideas quickly. Some groups used pseudonyms for their posts, which lent an air of playfulness to the conversation and forced them to judge one another's ideas on their merits, rather than on the

popularity of the writer.

The mood within each circle ranged from serious intellectual investigation to one of fun and sociability. Students often struggled with upper word limits, and half-hearted apologies to the group such as, "Sorry, I just couldn't stop writing" were common. The dynamic also provided space for students to explore individual interests, such as one student's point-by-point analysis of the scientific realism of the classic graphic novel *Watchmen*. (It turns out that teleporting an object the size of a building would indeed cause a kind of explosion because of the rapid displacement of air; but catching a bullet in your bare hands is not plausible, as it would be moving faster than the human eye can register.)

Twice last year, groups continued to post even after the assignment had ended. The *Watchmen* conversation resurrected itself when the film version was released a month later, even bringing in a few new members; and students reading Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* just kept going.

Benefits for Teachers

The virtual environment enabled me to listen in on multiple conversations without missing a word and without changing the dynamic with my presence. Because students interacted and got feedback from their peers throughout the discussion, they needed less feedback from me. Besides posting the prompts, my main involvement consisted of visiting each group for a few minutes during our weekly literature circle time to share a few reactions, point out some great observation that had gone unacknowledged, offer background information, or prod them to dig a little deeper.

Another advantage is that blogging is paper-free. I happily abandoned the messy stacks of spiralbound reading journals, often containing weeks of assignments that students completed in one furious sprint the night before they were collected. For assessment, I printed out the first few comments with a rubric and notes assessing students according to that rubric, which I gave back to students to provide a baseline, but I eventually just recorded a "check," "check-plus," or "check-minus" in my grade book. In the future, instead of grading each comment individually, I would like to experiment with holistic assessment, giving each student a single grade and narrative feedback after the discussion of each book is completed.

The finished blog itself became an important artifact that I could use to understand which prompts led to the best discussions, to decide whether to remove a book from the reading list, or to identify places where future students will be likely to experience confusion.

Do Your Homework

Like any new approach, blogging raises a number of questions that you need to think through in advance. How will you pace the work to accommodate students with limited Internet access? (A week between discussion prompts gave my students plenty of time to use school computers during study hall or visit the public library.) Will you provide an alternate assignment to those who may not wish to share their work online? Should anyone be able to read the blog, or only members of your class? Who can contribute? Will you approve each comment before it appears—ensuring that nothing inappropriate is posted, but slowing the rate of interaction—or will you monitor from a distance, intervening only if necessary?

Privacy and safety concerns are real, but they can be opportunities to teach students about protecting their digital identities. I set explicit boundaries: to give first names only, and to never give any contact information or identifying details about themselves or anyone else. Put expectations for your students in writing, especially those concerning privacy and acceptable use, and share them with parents and

administrators; require that students use separate accounts for their schoolwork and their personal lives; and learn how to keep search engines from finding your blog, a basic setting in most blogging platforms.

Don't be afraid to admit that this is a work in progress or to collaborate with your students on improvements. Their technological savvy can work to your advantage, and your candor may help smooth over any bumps along the way.

For my students and me, the literature circles were a resounding success, and I plan to continue using them, refining the process each year. The blog itself has become a wonderful source of encouragement for me. After a difficult day, visiting the archived posts of some of my students' most exciting discussions reminds me why I teach.

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