

Engaging Students in Online Literature Circle Conversations

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Abstract: This paper describes the implementation of online literature circles in a reading course for a teacher education program. The goal of implementing this instructional method was two-fold: (1) to increase and enhance online discussion participation and (2) to model effective practice of this strategy for purposes of teaching core literature selections in secondary level classrooms that serve highly diverse student populations (i.e., those with literacy challenges as well as those who are achieving above expectancy). These literature circles were supported with multisensory and multimedia literacy opportunities. Literature circle role responsibilities were assigned to class members and rotated to provide all group members the experience of each role. Following participation in the literature circle discussions, the teacher candidates developed their own literature circle units designed to meet the needs of secondary students with varying literacy needs. Adaptations and technology innovations designed to remove curricular barriers and promote accessibility of content were included in the instructional units. Survey data for the class identified factors that enhanced online literature circle conversations as well as those that interfered with participation.

Introduction

Ten years ago online learning was considered to be somewhat of a novelty with interesting possibilities. Today online learning has grown to an extent that would have been impossible for most institutions to predict. In the United States alone, almost four million students or 20% of the total higher education population are taking at least one online course, a statistic that has more than doubled in the past five years (Allen & Seaman, 2008). As higher education continues to embrace online learning with increasing interest, many faculty members are struggling to meet the pedagogical challenges imposed by this learning environment. While there may be many ways to examine the effectiveness of online learning, addressing student engagement as demonstrated through discussion interaction is considered to be a highly significant indicator of success. However, providing students with an opportunity to engage in stimulating class discussions is often a major hurdle for online instructors. Technical, motivational and communication variables have been identified as barriers to online learning (Olesova, Yang, Richardson, 2008). The purpose of the current study was to investigate the use of literature circles as a method for increasing effectiveness of online discussions in a teacher education class that focused on language arts in secondary programs.

State of the Art

Literature Circles and Learning Diversity

For over 300 years book clubs have provided the opportunity for readers to engage in lively discussions about literature. Book clubs are unique to literate cultures, where individuals of all ages band together to share perceptions of books. They have always

been popular in the United States, but in the 1990s there was a sharp increase in interest and activity largely credited to Oprah Winfrey who encouraged interest in social reading through her book club selections. However, but it is Harvey Daniels (1994; 2002) who is recognized as the K-12 literature circle guru as he has been responsible for launching thousands of book clubs in the public schools by providing teachers with the step-by-step guidance for successful classroom implementation. This instructional strategy has gained increasing popularity as teachers discovered the effectiveness of this approach. In 1996, the National Council for Teachers of English and the International Reading Association both endorsed the use of literature circles as a recommended strategy for encouraging students to take responsibility for reading and discussing books.

Research supports the use of this approach for students with disabilities and general reading problems (Blum, Lipsett & Yocum, 2002; Drecktrah & Chiang, 1997) as well as those with average and accelerated achievement. Literature circles can be tailored to increase oral language, reading and writing achievement in a supportive collaborative learning environment. They are largely effective because they are dynamic; they encourage maximum opportunities for student involvement. They empower students to become teachers and leaders in a collaborative milieu that encourages full participation. In the everyday classroom structure, it is typically the leaders or students who demonstrate academic strengths in certain subject areas who assume the greatest share of responsibility and attention from peers. But in literature circles, all class members are given a unique opportunity to shine. Students who are challenged by reading don't have to take a back seat in literature circles. They can be assigned or choose roles and activities that showcase their personal strengths in specific ability areas.

Online Literature Circles

Research focusing on literature circles within online learning environments has been sparse. However, the observations that are available have largely indicated that this is a promising practice for preservice teacher education (Beeghly, 2005; Pate-Mouton, Klages, Erickson & Conforti, 2004; Sullivan, 1998). Beeghly (2005) reported that her students responded positively to online literature circles because they allowed time for reflection, which was often missing in face-to-face class discussions. Beeghly's students referred to this additional opportunity as the "luxury of time" (p.19) and noted that it influenced the quality of their conversations. However, these studies did not involve role assignments, which add another layer of difficulty to the process. It is one thing to ask students to post responses to literature, but quite another to require assumption of designated literature circle roles. Studies that have investigated literature circles have been directed at participation in circle activity whereas the current project included the additional components that involved developing literature circle units for instructional purposes as well as reflection regarding the effects of participation of practice.

Method

The current study included 26 preservice teachers who participated in book clubs (i.e., literature circles) that involved reading core selections of Shakespeare plays and

discussing the content within the context of role related assignments. MacBeth, Julius Caesar, Romeo & Juliet, and Hamlet were selected as these are the top four Shakespeare plays for high schools in the United States (Applebee, 1993). The literature circle discussion activity took place over a five week period with students discussing one act of the play per week. The teacher candidates in the literature circles chose their book selections as well as their literature circle roles (e.g., discussion director, character sketcher, art director, literary luminary and word wizard). Following the five weeks of participation, the students completed a survey related to the quality of the experience. Students were asked to rate specific literature circle experiences on a Likert scale of one to ten, with ten indicating the highest rating and one indicating the lowest. The teacher candidates were given credit for participation in the literature circle activities.

Following this participation, the students developed a two-week literature circle unit for secondary students with diverse literacy needs. The same Shakespeare plays that the students had read for their own participation in literature circles were used as the core literature selection for the development of their instructional units, thus, giving students experience and insight into some of the problems associated with comprehension of this literature. The literature circle units were developed as Power Point presentations and distributed to the instructor and classmates.

Results

The majority of students (84%) rated the role related structure of the literature circle discussion as being valuable (i.e., rating the experience at six or above on the Likert scale of 1 to 10): 16% of the students rated the structure at 4 and 5 while no students gave a rating of 1, 2 or 3. Students were also asked to rate the amount of learning as a function of the online discussion experience. The mode rating was 5, with 21% rating the experience lower and 79% rating it higher. Evaluation of students' enjoyment of the online literature circle discussions indicated relatively high satisfaction: 63% rated their enjoyment as 6 or higher while 35% rated the experience at 5 or below. At the end of the survey, students were asked to rate the value of all learning experiences in the class. Of the 10 different assignments offered in the class, the online literature discussions were rated as 5th most valuable while the development of the literature circle instructional unit was rated as the most valuable learning activity.

Survey questions also identified variables that may have interfered or enhanced online discussions. With regard to variables that encouraged participation in the online discussions, earning points for a grade was the most important factor with 95% of the students rating this as a 6 or above on the scale. The second most important variables for encouraging discussion were responsibility for assumption of rotating group leader role and responsibility to fellow group members: 95% of the students rated these variables as 6 or above. The two lowest rated variables pertained to interest in participation in a book club discussion (58%) and enjoyment of collaborative projects (33%). Few of the factors on the survey identified significant barriers to online participation. The highest frequency response related to the interference of student scheduling demands: however, only 53%

of the class rated this factor at 6 or above. Forty-two percent of the class identified the superficiality of online discussions and asynchronous posting as being potential barriers to online communication.

With regard to general perceptions about the importance of discussions in all online classes, a little over half (57%) of the class rated this as a 6 or higher with the other 43% rating this question from 5 to 1. It should be noted that 10% did not think that online discussions had any significance in an online class. When asked what percentage of grading should be tied to discussion in an online class, the largest number of students (47%) indicated 10% with only 2 students indicating that it should be 50%.

Discussion

The results of this study suggested that literature circles can have a positive impact on discussions in online classes. This finding is supported by previous studies that examined literature circles within the context of online learning (Beeghly, 2005; Sullivan, 1998) and other research that has found value in the use of literature for asynchronous online discussions (Black, 2005). Specifically the use of role-rated discussion tasks appeared to be beneficial for the students in this study, a finding that has been supported in other research (Hay & Hanson, 1999). The results also found support for previous research that identified team work as a factor that could serve to both inhibit and increase online discussions (Olesova, Yang & Richardson, 2008). In the current study, students identified their individual responsibility to the team (or literature circle) as being a factor that encouraged participation, but they also expressed their dislike for collaborative projects, at least in relation to online classes. Olesova, Yang and Richardson (2008) found a similar situation in their study: team work caused hindrances because of the collaborative nature of assignments; however, students also identified team work as one of the factors that helped overcome barriers to online learning. Although this may seem to convey a mixed message to instructors, it probably is a realistic portrayal of student's feelings: they don't always appreciate cooperative learning, but they can see the value of it. In terms of student perceptions regarding the importance of discussions in online classes, it was somewhat surprising to find that a significant number of students did not find this interaction to be integral to the learning experience. Given the fact that there is a general consensus regarding the importance of discussions in the online classroom, the implications suggest that instructors may need to emphasize the inherent benefits of this interactivity so that students can perceive these benefits.

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