

Taking a Stand in Cyberspace

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Abstract: Using the example of Taking a Stand in Cyberspace, we articulate issues confronting school, community, and higher education groups as they create online discussions geared to deepen the level of student discourse about literature. Through a collaboration between the Vermont Center for the Book, the WEB Project, and six Vermont schools, students read and discussed three books while teachers maintained an online discussion about the student conversations and the degree to which the student discussions showed evidence of reaching selected learning goals. The experiences resulting from Taking a Stand, along with earlier initiatives, indicate that an evaluation of the opportunity to use and exhibit critical reading skills is as crucial to the improvement of student learning as an assessment of an individual student's attainment.

Introduction

In schools throughout Vermont, educators are faced with the enormous challenge of helping all students move well beyond basic reading skills towards deeper understanding, critical analysis and interpretation of text. Building on the research and lessons learned through online art exchanges among students, teachers and professional artist mentors, The Vermont Center for the Book and The Web Project sponsored Taking a Stand, (<http://www.vermontbook.org>) an online book discussion series among middle school students from six Vermont schools. Students read and discussed, in class and online, three novels dealing with young people who intentionally or inadvertently take a stand on an issue.

To establish a common focus and address previously identified concerns about reading comprehension, three standards from the Vermont Framework were selected: 1. Students read for meaning, demonstrating both an initial understanding and personal response to what is read; 2. Students make informed decisions; 3. Students respond to literary text and public documents using interpretive, critical, and evaluative processes. Generic scoring systems, keyed to state evidence for these standards, were provided as guidelines for quality.

To facilitate the educational goals, a web-based conferencing system was carefully selected that supported group collaboration and the easy ability to see discussions in list and running text formats. The software interface was essential to building dialog between participants in that it provided a common, reliable space with access to whole conversations and a robust search engine.

Evolution of the Online Experience -- One Classroom View

At Walden School, eighth graders typically spent literacy classes two weeks prior to their time online reading and participating in small-group, Great Books-style discussions, forming and responding to interpretive questions and referring to passages in the text to explain or underscore thoughts, back up opinions, and frame questions. They related issues in the books to their own lives and, in some cases, built background knowledge to gain a greater understanding of the book's context. At the end of that preparatory period, they worked with other students in small groups to select an idea or post a question, based on their class discussions and writing.

As a prelude to their online book discussions, students at the six schools got acquainted through personal introduction threads. This was initially very awkward for Walden students as they sought a way to present themselves in cyberspace to unknown others. This was particularly challenging before students had fully conceptualized the experience of online discussion, confirming what Brent Wilson articulates as he describes some of the dilemmas of engaging students in online learning communities (Wilson 1998). Prior to *Taking a Stand*, some Walden students had used e-mail, some had done chats, most imagined that communication would be relatively immediate. Few, if any, had experienced asynchronous, threaded discussions and were somewhat taken aback by the time delays. Once students received responses or read other postings, however, their interest and eagerness soared.

Students initially discussed *Nothing But the Truth*. Each school distributed groups of students among three discussion forums so that the volume of responses would be manageable and students would have opportunities to dialogue with small groups of students from each of the other schools. Even with this precautionary organizational structure in place, floods of questions, rudimentary responses, and only occasional examples of complete cycles of dialog characterized the first discussion.

As students reflected on the first book discussion, they recognized the importance of thoughtful responses and sustained dialogue. Informed by their early experiences, many students approached the second book, *Beyond Safe Boundaries*, with greater focus and understanding. These qualitative improvements were also promoted by the students' feelings of indignation and outrage about the injustices experienced by many of the characters in this book about young South Africans taking a stand against apartheid. This helped fuel passion for participating in the discussion as students were personally moved and had a stronger desire to write about the issues raised. A less overwhelming volume of responses online, generally greater focus, and more sustained dialogue resulted.

For the third book, *The Chocolate Wars*, schools were paired for discussions. This restructuring made threads even more manageable, although it left sites more vulnerable to the peculiarities of a single partner-school's computer and Internet access quirks, class trips, and scheduling conflicts. As students participated in their third discussion, incomplete cycles of online communication reduced and students increased their critical responses to other postings. The development of critical response over time stresses the importance of conducting a series of discussions rather than structuring online discussions on a book by book basis.

Results of Teacher Research and Online Discourse

Teacher online discussion remained at a functional level throughout Taking a Stand. Questions such as “How can we structure this experience so that it works well within our disparate classrooms?” took precedence over questions related to student learning. Despite previous experiences with online communication for some Taking a Stand teachers, most students and many teachers operated at the novice level in online discussions. Thus, retrospective written analyses based on transcripts of the three book discussions, a review of RMC Denver evaluation survey results, and an in-person exchange provided greater insights than did online teacher discourse as Taking a Stand progressed.

One university paper (Kruse and Quinn 1999 p.5-7) summarizes the flow of discourse from the classroom vantage:

“Although there are overarching factors affecting the flow of a discussion that are related to students’ level of experience, teachers observed some patterns during discussions of each of the three books:

- In class, good level of involvement in early discussions.
- First few days of online discussion seems like a “make or break” time. If students find another student’s posting interesting, or if they receive what they consider to be a thoughtful or relevant response, there is motivation to continue.
- Somewhere just past the midway point of a two-week cycle, interest and activity peaked as there was a variety of conversations happening and students chose ones to respond to.
- Often, as discussions just got going, the flow was not as smooth as it might otherwise have been, due to factors such as trips, residencies, illnesses and general scheduling. The flow was then very dependent on the quality and quantity of responses; if there was too much lag time or if responses didn’t feel thorough or apropos, students felt frustrated and began to lose interest.
- In some cases participating schools posted and disappeared, leaving students at the other school only able to respond to each other.
- As the window closed, some discussions had come to a natural conclusion, while others abruptly ended. It would have been possible to continue, but schedules did not seem to coincide and students were then on to the next book. The need for closure became critical; as one student mentioned, ‘The ending of some discussions was like falling off a cliff.’ ”

Relationship between Standards, Assessment and Community Facilitation

Three standards with accompanying generic scoring guides provided a predetermined tool of analysis for student discussions online. An example from “Students make informed decisions” follows:

Level 3: Seeks information and bases decisions on evidence from reliable sources;

describes and explains decisions based on evidence; differentiates between decisions based on fact and those based on opinions; recognizes others' points of view and assess decisions from others' perspectives; and analyzes and considers alternative decisions;

Level 2: Seeks information and bases decisions on evidence from reliable sources; describes and explains decisions based on evidence;

Level 1: States opinions and thoughts. Little reference to specific facts.

Scoring student discussions against this rubric showed that the students in the 3 classrooms, which supported an inquiry, based approach from the outset scored consistently at Level 1 or Level 2 while students from the other 3 classrooms scored consistently at Level 1. Growth over time from Level 1 to Level 2 was seen in four of the six participating schools.

Example of a Level 2 Comment

Scoring of individual posts does not serve as an exclusive indicator that online discussions have been successful. For instance, even though the above example “meets the standard” (Level 2) at an individual level, an examination of the entire thread reveals a single question followed by a single response. Hence, dialog has not occurred. Instead, this online episode mimics a typical “question and test response” approach to reading and discussion.

In reading and reviewing transcripts, it became apparent that genuine discourse unfolded online over a series of postings as students talked their way through an engaging question. Each new entry added evidence that the dialog as a whole was approaching the agreed upon criteria for critical reading. Looking at episodes of dialog such as the one on the following page reveals that through successive posts, other pieces of evidence from the selected learning goals, such as showing different points of view and multiple interpretations of text, emerge. Moreover, this dialog example comes closer to fulfilling established definitions of learning communities, especially those depicted by Jenlink and Carr as they differentiate between “discussion conversation” and dialogue conversation” and Bereiter who writes about “progressive discourse.” (Sherry, in press).

The perspectives of individual performance (single posts) and ensemble activity (dialog

episode) provide a system for monitoring a discussion as it progresses so that participants and facilitators can examine whether or not the opportunity to engage in critical conversations about literature has been provided. Then, follow-up presentations or essays can be used to determine if individual students have improved upon their abilities to read critically.

Example of a Dialog Episode

Lessons for Further Improvement

The lessons that emerged from Taking a Stand point toward some simple next steps both for the participating schools and the facilitating community organization. From a teacher's point of view, student individual postings can be monitored through a simple assessment instrument while the co-facilitating organization, in this case Vermont Center for the Book, looks at the overall dialog for opportunities that explicate the learning goals. In order to assess whether or not the opportunity to learn has indeed resulted in actual student learning, essay exams or similar types of traditional assessments can be administered once the online discussions have been finished. To ensure that this cycle leads to the desired results of the network, we emphasize the following lessons:

1. *Begin with common learning goals AND common methods of teaching.* Selecting standards is only part of ensuring a common focus; a common approach to teaching is also necessary. In this case, inquiry based learning led to progress toward desired results faster than a traditional "test question/response" approach. Furthermore, an inquiry based approach to discussions is directly aligned with the learning results and assessment systems that have been established by the network.

2. *Model the common approach in-person and online.* Site analysis reveals that most questions from Taking a Stand fit into the "test question" category, rather than resulting from genuine inquiry. Thus, essential to model for teachers and students what genuine inquiry looks like. Initially, this may take the shape of learned forms of interaction so that students are taught directly how to hold meaningful inquiry.

3. *Assess individual and group performance both in-progress and with a final product.* In-progress measures include opportunities to learn (monitored by Vermont Center for the Book) and substantive dialog. Specifics of this system are currently under development.

References

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