
The WEB Project, 2000

Online Learning Communities

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GOAL ONE: ONLINE DISCUSSION OF STUDENT WORK

Goal 1: Promote in-person and online discussions of student work among students, teachers, administrators, and community members that centers on the Vermont Framework, especially in the areas of arts, language, literature, history, and social sciences.

The WEB Project utilizes three types of conversation:

- In person discussions;
- Online dialogue on The WEB Exchange, particularly in the teachers' and mentors' forums, and among students in the online book discussions (*Taking A Stand*); and
- Design conversations on The WEB Exchange regarding students' work of art, music, and history projects.

These types will be discussed in turn.

In Person Discussions

In person discussions about student work occurred in periodic face-to-face meetings between participating teachers and The WEB Project staff, and in the classroom itself. The Vermont Interactive Television system offered a substitute for in-person meetings. Project-level discussion regarding assessment of multimedia products and the hallmarks of good online conversations took place at a meeting in Montpelier in November 1999 and at the Basin Harbor retreat in May 2000. Additional conversations took place at the AACE/SITE meeting in San Diego in February 2000 among the project co-directors, the coordinator of the Vermont Center for the Book, and teachers from the schools that participated in *Taking A Stand* during spring 2000.

In-class discussions often preceded online dialogue for participating students. These discussions helped to clarify guidelines for participation, enhance communication skills, and encourage reflection on the literary texts before students began to post their comments online.

Online Dialogue Among Teachers and Mentors

The WEB Project facilitates online dialogue among teachers and mentors, and among students and teachers, mentors, and other experts gathered from participating initiatives and the community at large. Teachers felt the discussion forum provided by The WEB Project was helpful for sharing ideas about issues and problems that arose in their classrooms, successful strategies for online dialogue and design conversations, and providing support and encouragement for one another. Respondents to the online survey posted the following observations:

We have learned that work must be critiqued in a timely way, and that students should request, respond and reply, completing the circle of dialogue. This seems obvious now, but we all learned this together, and the process works so well

Concerning the issue of censorship in visual arts submissions: Teacher and mentor negative (or strong) reactions to student submissions that contain graphic violence imagery or potentially self-destructive imagery have stimulated discussions about how to approach the submissions. Several times the submissions discussed have prompted a variety of approaches or opinions. The consensus, reached after online exchanges, has been to approach the student for further explanation of intent in an attempt to lead to a better understanding of the submission before conclusions are drawn outside of the intended context.

Through in-person and online conversations, teachers learned how to model the behavior they sought from their students. A teacher posted the following comment on the online survey:

An issue is brought forth and another responds thus provoking a variety of responses. We are then reminded of our goals and protocol if needs be, and we work this in the direction of a consensus.

The coordinator of the Vermont Center for the Book kept a separate mailing list of teachers who participated in *Taking A Stand*. Issues that arose as the student conversations progressed were discussed openly between the coordinator and all of the participating teachers. In these private online discussions, the coordinator often made suggestions or provoked further reflection on the part of the teachers. Exhibit III-2 presents some excerpts from the coordinator's e-mail messages to the teachers.

These and many other suggestions were discussed online by the participating teachers. As a group, they decided which suggestions to consider and which strategies to implement in order to further refine the discussions of subsequent texts.

Student Online Dialogue

For the *Taking A Stand* activities, online dialogues occurred between students on The WEB Exchange in the discussions of assigned literary texts. There was also a forum where students freely discussed issues of interest to them, thereby offering students a risk-free environment in which to practice their online discourse. Teachers who participated in *Taking A Stand* offered the following comments on the online survey:

Students discussing, for example, why the parents in Tangerine behaved as they did to their son, made their points, quoting from the text and citing places other should read. Others then responded and counter-cited. The point was not to agree, but rather to be clear in why and how they disagreed. I thought that this sort of activity was a very useful process for the students to go through.

Exhibit III-2 SELECTED POSTINGS FROM VERMONT CENTER FOR THE BOOK TO PARTICIPATING TEACHERS

Throughout spring 2000, the coordinator of the Vermont Center for the Book promoted reflection and the use of some new strategies among the participating teachers. This is an excerpt of one threaded discussion.

How about the kids take a few minutes over the next couple of days and talk about what's working and what's not working with the process itself, and post something on their threads?

And somebody get somebody to ask EMS what evil is, anyway, then, EMS, keep that discussion going for a while before letting people come back to the book – clarify the term.

What about closure? I'd been expecting to hear more from others before now – any more insights from the kids?

We never really resolved the "who gets to post where" dilemma expressed last time. It was very helpful to learn that there were two Walden groups, which explained some of

the confusion.

The question remains, however, as to whether people should post only on one thread, or be allowed to respond to different threads at different times.

Modeling the closure process for the participating teachers, he then summarized his reflections:

After seeing all of the postings on the Walden thread, I mulled and mulled, to see if I could think of a way to move this along further. Here's what I suggested to [the Walden teacher]:

- *That she have the kids look over the postings (they had already printed them out), and try to figure out what main points others had made;*
- *That the kids write a paragraph in which they summarize these main points, with a topic sentence and all the rest;*
- *That they then ask, "So what does this suggest that we might do with the direction this discussion has taken so far?" What question do these responses suggest that we ask?*
- *That they then post whatever it is that they decide, on the same thread;*
- *But also (and this is very important) that they write up what they went through to get to this point, including the discussion that led to the paragraph, the paragraph itself, the things the paragraph led them to discuss, and the final whatever-it-is – obviously we're trying to expose the part of the iceberg that you've all said has been submerged while only the tip has shown up online after your in-class discussions.*
- *Make sense? Think of how it might apply to your kids' work once the other threads get going. Let's get some metacognitive stuff out here.*

During online book discussions, many students held one belief when they developed their online question. Through the challenges and evidence presented by others and through the in-class processing of those challenges, many students modified their original beliefs and demonstrated a deeper understanding of the text.

Last year, many schools participated in the online book discussions, with concomitant problems of message overload, delayed postings, large discrepancies in prior written communication skills, and the like. This year, participating teachers from three schools met before initiating the online discussions to negotiate guidelines for their students for both in-class and online activities. They reported improvements in student achievement due to these modifications.

Edmunds Middle School

Edmunds Middle School students participated in *Taking A Stand* for the past two years. In the 1998-99 academic year, the language arts class was an enrichment class for talented and gifted students. In contrast, this year's seventh – eighth grade language arts class was purposefully comprised primarily of English language learners and remedial English students.

Walden School

A diverse group of sixth grade students participated in *Taking A Stand*. According to the teacher, there was no problem in conducting online dialogue between her sixth graders and the eighth graders from the two other participating schools because of the age difference. However, problems arose concerning matching groups of students across schools with similar online conversational skills.

Cabot School

All of the eighth grade language arts students participated in *Taking A Stand*. The teacher reported that she encountered some attitude problems with this class that were not apparent in the previous year's class. Part of this was due to frustrations with the first round of online conversations, due to a lack of response to the threads they created and managed – a problem similar to that encountered by Edmunds students.

Challenges Encountered in Student Online Dialogue

Teachers whose students participated in *Taking A Stand* identified three challenges:

- **Time Commitment:** The three schools that participated in *Taking A Stand* this year all had good access and a scheduled time to compose and post messages. After the first round of online dialogue, the students learned how to sustain deep, reflective, online dialogue. However, there were still some complaints from students regarding lack of timely responses from students at their partner schools.
- **Message Overload:** This was addressed through guidelines negotiated among members of the Vermont Center for the Book and the participating teachers.
- **Lack of Administrative Support:** This continues to pose a barrier to continuation of the online dialogue. At Cabot, the principal expressed verbal support and buy-in for the project. However, teachers did not feel that he championed the activities that were supported by The WEB Project. At Edmunds, the teacher indicated that the students' scores on literacy tests rose substantially, but that she felt isolated and was not supported by the school administration. In contrast, at Walden, the teacher's contributions were recognized by the school administration.

The three teachers whose classes participated in *Taking A Stand* engaged in collaborative action research and reflection after the first round of online dialogue. They shared ideas and strategies to refine the process for the second round. In an in-person discussion prior to their first panel at the AACE/SITE meeting, they identified five factors that facilitated the second round of student book discussions:

The process went beyond addressing common standards (an important factor, but not sufficient by itself) to embracing a common understanding of reflective dialogue shared by students, teachers, and facilitators.

The online discussions broke the boundaries of the classroom. Schools were connected, and students expected their peers in the three distributed locations to participate. Fifth – sixth graders conversed with seventh – eighth graders. In traditional classrooms, fifth – sixth graders are not considered peers by seventh – eighth graders, but online, no student really cared what grade the other participating students were in. This feeling of anonymity “leveled the playing field” among all the students in the distributed learning environment.

Students sustained the conversation. There were no more simple questions with simple responses. Students moved to a flowing dialogue as evidenced from comparison of the previous year's discussions to the current ones.

Participation deepened and broadened learning. Conversations addressed students' perceptions and preconceived notions rather than asking “what did the book say?” or “what would you do if you were the main character?”

The project infused technology into language arts instruction. There were more perspectives among the distributed learning community than were available in a single classroom. Moreover, the online discussion was thoroughly integrated into the in-class discussions.

Teachers also agreed upon a set of successful strategies that they used to promote better online dialogue:

- Students practiced conversation in class, using The WEB Project’s and the Vermont Center for the Book’s guidelines, before posting messages online.
- Participating teachers clarified the Vermont standards in their own minds and communicated them to their students. Students knew what they were expected to do.
- Each conversation ended with reflection and closure. Students reformulated and summarized what they understood, rather than having conversations come to an abrupt end as they did the previous year.
- The online conversations promoted participation among quiet students who did not usually converse in class. When these students had sufficient time to reflect and compose an online response, the messages were often better than those composed by avid in-class conversationalists.
- The guidelines or “rules” for participation went far beyond ordinary netiquette guidelines for online postings to listservs. The following guidelines were developed by the Vermont Center for the Book (1998):

*Make sure that the items you post are clear; write so others can understand;
But don’t spend forever drafting and redrafting. Make it friendly and informal.
Be concise.
Ask thought-provoking questions, make people think.
Make your questions open-ended.
If you want a response to something you’ve said, make that clear.
When you respond to a question or a comment, mention that you’re doing so.*

- An online teacher forum was running in the background while the student online conversations progressed in a separate forum. This gave the participating teachers a chance to observe, reflect, and share impressions about the student conversations as they occurred. At no time did these two forums mix. Teachers let their students moderate their own conversations without interference from adults, although at times a few students expressed the wish that adults might participate as well.
- The collaborative action research among the participating teachers might be construed as “collaborative metacognition”, because they addressed identifying problems, suggesting strategies, and all the complex mental processes that normally take place in individual metacognition.

Design Conversations

One of the Vermont standards stresses “communication with purpose, via media”. Students are learning how to make deliberate decisions regarding their artistic and musical compositions, and to communicate these decisions clearly to the teacher and their fellow students, with intent and purpose. Development of these communication skills, in turn, positively affects their language arts and social studies performance.

Design conversations were found primarily on the MIDI and ARTT threaded discussions. Their purpose was to help students improve and refine their artwork, musical compositions, and history projects by judiciously filtering and using feedback from teachers, experts, mentors, and peers. In contrast with dialogue that attempts to negotiate meaning, design conversations were closely related to the goal of designing, developing, or refining a product.

Exhibit III-3 presents the number of student design conversation threads on each of the shared projects forums at the end of the 1999-2000 academic year. The software limits the number of displayed threads to a total of 300, so earlier threads are dropped as new threads are added. For example, in June, the earliest displayed thread was dated November 1999, whereas in April, the earliest displayed thread was dated August 1999. This may result in an undercount in some areas.

**Exhibit III-3
ACTIVE THREADS ON THE WEB PROJECT'S SHARED PROJECTS
CONFERENCE**

Number of Threads		Name of Shared Project Forum
April	June	
49	48	ARTT – Traditional Painting and Drawing
31	31	ARTT – Three Dimensional Work
38	44	ARTT – Digital and Graphic Arts
1	2	ARTT – Photography
39	30	Vermont MIDI Project: K-5
69	73	Vermont MIDI Project: 6-8
49	57	Vermont MIDI Project: 9-12
7	9	Website Design
4	3	Examples from Shared Projects (for public dissemination)

A Representative Design Conversation

Design conversations, such as “The Fox’s Tale” and “Strolling”, presented in the Vermont MIDI Project section under “Initiatives”, and “Composite Face”, presented below, illustrate deep understandings and the ability to articulate artistic intent. They also give the reader insight into the sensitivity and depth of critique by mentors as mentors and students mutually explore, formulate, select, and evaluate strategies for improving student’s creative work. Reading the threaded discussions on the Shared Projects conference gives the reader a sense of the richness, openness, and depth that can be found in productive online design conversations.

Exhibit III-4 presents a vignette from one of the ARTT forums. It captures the online conversation between a high school student and several mentors between November and February. This particular thread was purposefully selected from the many dozens of ARTT threads for three reasons:

- It traces the process by which a student develops a comfort level with online conversations over time;
- It illustrates the way in which mentors are using the guidelines for online critique developed by The WEB Project; and
- It shows how teachers and mentors have learned from their own conversations on censorship in the previous year’s “Cop Killer” episode. They now deal more gracefully with material that may be considered inappropriate in nature, such as explicit song lyrics.

Exhibit III-4

EXAMPLE OF ONLINE CONVERSATION: "COMPOSITE FACE"

A high school student began the conversation in November by posting "Composite Face", a digital art work in progress. Note that she had worked with her idea long enough to be able to request specific feedback. She used an "emoticon" (a smiley face), which is a technique often used in listservs to substitute for the facial expressions and body language that are present in face-to-face conversations but lacking in online conversations.

My idea originated with a magazine ad and it caught my attention, so I took pictures of a number of friends and started to arrange facial features. I experimented with lighting effects that made a unity to the different skin tones. Over several days I arranged the layers until I liked the composition. The mood in this picture is happy yet mysterious. This picture may be good for a magazine ad or even a CD cover. I haven't decided what to do with it yet.

Here is a question – do you like the picture on its own, or should I make a magazine ad out of it, or should I make a twisted CD cover with it? Let me know what you think...Enjoy-☺

Over the course of the conversation, four artist-mentors and her digital art teacher responded to the student, following a format that tends to be repeated by many of The WEB Project mentors:

- first, offer a supportive comment that encourages student responsibility and intentional learning;
- next, offer specific and detailed comments that are based on helping the author reach his/her intent and that extend the conversation, and finally;
- close the message on a note of encouragement.

These are aspects of online discourse that were described in Tavalin's (1998) *A guide to Online Critique* and Sherry, Billig, & Tavalin's (2000) *Good Online Conversation* paper and which were shared with the participating teachers and mentors.

Here is the response from one of the artist-mentors that demonstrates how the artist-mentor used both probes and supportive comments to extend the conversation:

Good to see your work online. I ask myself: could this be Harry Potter in person? This face certainly carries an ambiguity and at the same time shows a mischief-maker. Which is it?...[student], what do you want to do with this picture? Does it have to be an ad or a CD? How about the beginning of a character study using male and female faces. Make it a guessing game for graduation parties: how many of your friends can see themselves in the picture? I sure would like to know what this face is looking at. Do you know? At this point, having spent a while with your composite face, I'm ready to give it a name. Do you have one also? I am interested in the female counterpart. Would you work on one?...Keep your challenges up, [student], and enjoy working on your images.

On the same day, the student posted a second work: a collage of her friends and teachers that were taken with the school's digital camera and then reworked in Photoshop, saying:

...This piece took me a total of about four hours to get it the way I liked it. I was thinking about making it into a yearbook page... Do you think that there are too many pictures on this page?...Enjoy-☺

One of the mentors responded to the author's second piece with a more detailed response, interspersing probes that dealt with color, composition, sense of motion, relative size, and other aspects of the work. The student continued the cycle of request-respond-reply:

Thanks for your comments, and I really appreciate your consistency in your replying to our class's work . We enjoy reading what you think as well. Also, I am pretty much done with these pieces and I am starting on other work, but I will post soon and hope that you will feel free to comment on our work. Thank you, [student].

The artist-mentor further extended the conversation:

Was just looking for your next artistic surprise and found your nice comments. Thanks to you and all, and I really enjoy watching your creative "juices" flow – even got myself a music magazine, "SPIN", to look at the images of CDs, read about bands, and reports, and people from around the world...

Between December and February, the student continued these conversations with her mentors, posting her CD cover, "Rotton (sic) Milk" and her Web page, which she used for her final project. Here are some excerpts from these conversations. Note the increasing comfort level of the student with the online interactions and the graceful way in which the mentors handled the issues of profanity and censorship:

Student: These are maybe the best two pieces of work that I have done all year. I am truly happy with them...The name of the CD isn't all that pleasant, but I was feeling good about it for some reason, I for once felt creative. I found that now my viewers can see me when they are judging my work...so that's me holding the bubble in my hand...I also found it helpful to actually listen to my teacher's advice, it's funny how that works!!! I had a few different versions of this piece [Rotton Milk]. I decided that the black background on the cover of the CD cover looked best. I originally had a white background . Do you think I truly made the best decision...?

Mentor: It makes me feel really good how positive you speak about your work and your ability to listen to teacher's advice on times. Creativity and acknowledging various concepts (presented by others) is quite a fine balancing act... Yes, I like your title. And the black background. What other color combination have you tried for your picture? ...[several suggestions]... Ja, looking at the artist is quite a joy . Do you have the image printed out and are looking at it? I hang my artwork in the oddest places so that I have to look at it without any warning (and certain parts will make themselves clear, that they need a change). Have fun, [student].

Student: This is my new Web page. Actually it is two pages. The main page is a gallery of my computer graphics projects for this past semester. The family page is a photo gallery of my family members and pet. I spent a long time figuring out the ins and outs of Claris Homepage. I spent a good while trying to get background images to fit and not hide the text. I think that the Web page that I made last year doesn't even compare to this year's. I had a lot of fun and help making this...Do you think that I should have some framework in the page itself, like a grid? Any ideas about the backgrounds would help. Any other suggestions that leap to mind will be appreciated. Thanks for visiting my pages.

Mentor: Yes, your Web pages have really come alive – great combination and images from your family. We really get to know you well. Congratulations on learning Claris Homepage. The good thing is the more you work with it, the easier it becomes to customize your pages...[several suggestions]...In some places I had a hard time reading your text against the background. If you bold the text, that will really help...good job, I'll check on it again to see how your site progresses.

Mentor: It's great to see what you've done with all the neat images you've created...The background you chose for your Web page is a perfect foil for all of your masterworks except "My Town". That one gets too washed out and I think you'll need to put a border around it (black or bright blue?) so that we can really appreciate the subtlety of the piece. Well, actually the logo doesn't show up too well either. Can you just make it larger?...I've really been enjoying seeing all of your more recent images. You are really growing in expertise. Your hard work is paying off.

Mentor: Yes, it's great to see you come back online once more with your work. I'm also very glad that [another mentor] is giving you the technical advice I couldn't give (because I haven't yet put a Web page together) and is able to save you time when improving your page. And I agree with [a third mentor] to make the text a little bolder...[several suggestions]... Your writings and your introduction to the page have given us a colorful window into your family and life with friends and school activities. Thank you for providing this opportunity for us. I really enjoyed reading your text and looking at your images now gathered together in one place.

In February, the student uploaded a final work to the forum and received responses from her teacher and two mentors.

Student: Limp Bizkit is a band that I am interested in. I found some of the background art on one of the band's web pages and used it as a background. Then I found lyrics to my favorite song and pasted it to the background in the font that I wanted it in, and decided that it looked cool. So I added the band's name and lowered the opacity level because I thought that the red was a little bright, if ya know what I mean...there were a few profane words in this section of lyrics, so I had to censor those few words by blurring them...I apologize to the band!...How do you think the darkness of the lyrics fit in with the overall effect? Would the background lyrics be better faded out? Does the picture flow? Does the background and the foreground work and is it eye-catching? Could this be used for multiple purposes (i.e., flyers, posters, and/or bumper stickers?)

Teacher: The upload works and I can imagine this as a Eurostyle poster plastered in repetition (side by side) tiled in the many places in New York City where they say "post no bills" but people do anyway. It is its own form, kinda like graffiti. I can imagine it advertising a concert or a new album title. Now I wonder what their music sounds like and how the music would complement the mood of your poster...[several suggestions]...Maybe we should get out the transfer paper and iron and make a T-shirt when you get to the final version.

Mentor: Just as I clicked off last night I found your next work of art. So, I had to come back today and talk to you. Like [your teacher], I am also unfamiliar with the band – and I'm not surprised. My 27 year old daughter listens to Philip Glass, Keith Jarrett and Glenn Gould, and my 12 year old likes the Beatles. So there is quite a time gap in between – and I am willing to learn. Now to the image...[several suggestions]... Your thought about the bumper sticker is size-wise correct: how would you put the sticker, vertical or horizontal? Now, if this piece is horizontal and Limp Bizkit reads correctly, how does the photo and the text hold up? I'd be curious and want to look at that way...Also, I like [your teacher's] idea of putting it on a T-shirt. Will you try it? His other idea of putting it on walls as a poster is good. What pattern will develop if there is one right next to the other?...Thanks for putting your work up – and – I do appreciate a black/white image (the longer I look at it, the more I'm getting excited about it) even in the depth of winter. It just carries so many possibilities. HAVE FUN!

Mentor: Just a quick note to apologize for not being touch lately, but I toured one

of my puppet shows to Puerto Rico and barely got back. It was cool to see all the work you've posted lately. I am impressed with the quality of your digital art. I am also pleased to see [the other mentors'] feedback. I am particularly interested in the poster "Limp Bizkit". It also wants me want to listen to their music. As for profanities...I'll tell you a story. Spain was under a very conservative dictatorship for many years. The name of the dictator was Franco. For the longest time, you could not film many things, because they would be censored. This guy, Luis Bunuel, excellent theater director, filmed "Viridiana", and the censors forced him to change an explicit ending. After dealing with his frustration and changing his work, he found out that the artistic quality of his ending was increased by the challenge he faced. That is to say, the second ending was more artistic than the first, according to his view. In some cases, artists can find extremely creative ways of dealing with censorship. Viridiana's ending was so suggestive that it really opened up more room for our imagination than the explicit ending that Bunuel had filmed before...Can't wait to see more of your work...Love [Mentor].

Participation in Online Conversations

On the online survey, 70% of the respondents reported that they incorporated online discussion topics into their classroom discussions. From these reports, it was evident that the discussions were not limited to teachers and students alone. Parents (11%) were sometimes involved; local craftsmen and designers (7%) were sometimes or often involved; local artists and musicians (34%) were sometimes, often, or always involved; and local employers (7%) were sometimes involved.

Respondents reported that there were differences in participation in online dialogue between the following groups of students: boys/girls (23%), high/low SES (40%), home computer Y/N (42%), ESL/nonESL (21%), and shy/vocal in class (44%). Since the participating schools have low diversity, the ESL category did not always apply. Regarding students who were shy versus vocal in class, one respondent replied "major difference: encourages participation".

Barriers and Facilitators To Progress

In the online survey, participants were asked to what extent six factors presented barriers to online conversations. Fully two-thirds of the respondents listed "lack of time" as an important barrier. Lack of time, access, and technical support are three barriers to educational technology innovations that have been consistently cited in the literature as important. Lack of administrative support was not perceived as strong a barrier as one might expect, based on research from other educational technology projects. Exhibit III-5 presents the distribution of responses.

Exhibit III-5
BARRIERS TO ONLINE DIALOGUE
N = 42

Barrier	None	Slight	Moderate	Important
Lack of time	7%	5%	21%	67%
Influence of other students	52%	33%	10%	2%
Apprehension about written communication abilities	40%	38%	14%	7%
Access to the Internet	29%	12%	21%	38%
Availability of technical support	21%	21%	14%	43%
Availability of administrative support	45%	19%	19%	17%

One respondent to the online survey presented a detailed picture of how these barriers work together to make participation in The WEB Project activities difficult. These comments are presented in Exhibit III-6.

Exhibit III-6
INTERACTION OF FACTORS THAT IMPEDE ONLINE CONVERSATIONS

Lack of time to engage in the online dialogue is frequently cited as a major barrier for using the online exchange in the classroom. The curricular structure in classrooms is not currently constructed to incorporate the activity.

The number of computers (mostly one to a few) in the classroom makes individual student's access limited.

The students' perceived lack of ability to articulate the issues of problems encountered and requested feedback seems to limit participation. A student who posts work online sometimes feels "put on the spot". Their lack of verbal tools can further the perception. This can intimidate students into not participating online.

Arts classrooms are often not included in schools' plans for Internet access. Unless an arts teacher takes the initiative to connect the classroom to the Internet, there is little opportunity for students in the arts to take advantage of the resources available on the Internet, especially the online exchange with artist/mentors.

Technical support - when something goes wrong with computers in the classroom, the teachers often stop using the tool. The lack of participation is sometimes the only indicator that there is a technical problem in the classroom. Technical coordinators at schools often are inundated with problems and have to prioritize. Sometimes the arts classrooms are moved to a lower priority due to the perception that computers are more important in other disciplines.

Teachers (and most other people) often do not have the skills to troubleshoot technical problems. In relying on tech coordinators or other outside resources, the delays in getting a faulty system up and running again can be significant. This kind of delay can also be discouraging for teachers who have to make time for the online activity anyway - especially if the problem is repeatedly encountered.

Due to the lack of priority among administrators (generally) toward arts and computer-related activities, attention is frequently given to math and language classes first. The Internet connections in arts classrooms are frequently excluded from school technology plans. In fact, any mention of the arts classrooms in technology plans is usually absent.

Facilitators

Participants were asked to what extent five factors facilitated online conversation. At least one-third of all respondents felt that all of the listed facilitators were important. Exhibit III-7 presents the distribution of responses.

Exhibit III-7 FACILITATORS OF ONLINE DIALOGUE

Facilitator	None	Slight	Moderate	Important
Influence of other teachers	15%	24%	27%	34%
Perceived value	12%	10%	20%	56%
Student sense of self-efficacy or confidence	15%	12%	27%	46%
Availability of technical support	7%	12%	17%	61%
Availability of administrative support	17%	22%	24%	34%

Participants were asked how the factors with moderate or important effects facilitated this dialogue. Here are a few representative comments:

Because this project has a perceived value, and the administration and other teachers support it, we are given time in the school day to work on these projects. Students have to be confident to allow their work to be posted.

Student and teacher comfort with technology and technological support make a huge difference. If you don't get the support you need, you are not likely to feel confident about using the site. Student knowledge is also an absolute necessity. I just wouldn't have the time to teach kids how to do the computer basics AND how to use the site.

Students have felt empowered that their comments are important. It has helped me tremendously to talk online and via e-mail with the other teachers involved in this project and with [the coordinator of the Vermont Center for the Book'. Both the school district and The WEB Project have provided technical support that was invaluable. And my administrator has been important in both a positive and negative way. Positive because she supports the work I'm doing and has freed me from school sometimes to meet with other participants. Negative because this year she cut way back on how much time she would allow me to leave my classroom for such meetings.

Strategies and Practices that Promote Quality Online Conversations

From time to time, even a well-moderated online discussion can run into problems. Respondents used a variety of strategies to keep a floundering discussion going. They were much more articulate about their strategies and techniques than they were in previous years. Some strategies mentioned in the online survey included:

- Introduce new topic, new angle, and new question. Restate what the original idea was and what our goal in discussion was.
- Try to redirect the discussion back to what does the student need to get from this discussion. Sometimes it means an e-mail privately to either the student's teacher or the mentor to help move things along.
- What would you like to hear someone say about your piece? Is that enough information to help them fix or change the piece? What instrument would change the feeling or mood of the piece? What about the tempo and volume?
- Include other students and/or classroom teachers, language arts teachers, teacher with students' confidence and trust.

- Project work on the screen with a projector, and critique the work based on observations that the students make about what they hear and see. I always try to relate it to what they know, and are working on, and then build from there.
- Students have a “Frame It” sheet to help organize thoughts and develop vocabulary and specific questions.
- Ask students to reflect and then either come up with suggestions for redirecting and stimulating the discussion, or else decide that it is time to move on.
- Create a new piece of artwork to discuss.
- Teacher intervention to redirect discussion. Also, I print out the discussion and read through it in class and discuss how we might, as a group, come up with a refocusing - or even different - question. Sometimes you need to branch out and go in a different direction. Sometimes a question has been discussed enough; and
- If you are referring to an online discussion or exchange between student and mentor, I use these techniques to try to elicit more response:
 - (1) recently, I sign my first name at the end of the comment - I think this helps;
 - (2) I request or encourage response directly, i.e., I always ask questions, I often request the student re-submit later;
 - (3) I try to write in a friendly manner so the student will feel OK about responding;
 - (4) when I write about technique (use of materials, tools, etc.) and achieving goals, I refer to problems that I have had myself or that I am currently having, with the hope that the student won't feel that a professional artist has achieved is too much to strive for; and
 - (5) I try to use humor as much as possible in my comments.

One respondent made the following observation:

If students feel that someone “out there” (who is knowledgeable) is interested in their work, they are more motivated to continue working and communicating. Students who are self-confident are more willing to participate; however, those who are a bit more shy gain more confidence through participation.

Impact of Online Conversations

Teachers felt that online conversations had a positive impact on student motivation, thinking and learning processes, performance in academic subject areas, and transfer of skills to other domains. Here are some representative responses to the online survey:

Students in my upper classes (fifth & sixth grades) have been less critical and more excited about their art work after receiving comments.

A much deeper understanding of issues in history is always a product of online dialogue.

Having students across the state compare and listen to each other provides camaraderie and a benchmark of skills and student capabilities. Using music language to dialogue shows a certain comprehension and communication skill that can be used in all subjects.

Getting teachers to take the time to help their kids talk with kids in other classrooms about works of literature is, I think, exactly the sort of “out of the box” thinking that the Framework and other state efforts have been encouraging. In this, teachers, become “guides on the side” and the learning that takes place is student-generated.

In focus groups, students reported that they filtered and used the feedback that they were given to improve their products. They stated that they were pleased to find that “real” artists and musicians were evaluating their work and giving them substantive feedback to improve it. The design conversation threads indicated that students were revising their work, even though the finished product was not always posted.

From interviews with participating teachers, it appears that constructive feedback was most useful for students when they needed to make decisions or solve problems that they encountered in their “work in progress” rather than at the initial brainstorming stage or the “final product” stage. Finally, an analysis of artifacts shows evidence that the online discussion was valuable for all participants in both dialogue and design conversations.

- The number of threads comprising discussions about individual student works of art and music on The WEB Exchange continued to increase. There was a sizeable increase in the number of MIDI postings and the professionalism of the compositions just prior to the National Symphony Orchestra’s visit to Montpelier, during which time they played several of the compositions that appear on The WEB Exchange.
- The online conversations in the MIDI and ARTT forums were not limited to simple pedagogical, administrative, technical, or supportive postings. Many were true conversations that followed the request-respond-reply cycle and that used a mix of probes and “extension” strategies to further the conversation.
- Teachers and mentors used the conversational guidelines developed by The WEB Project.
- Teachers and mentors dealt with sensitive issues such as censorship in a more mature and polished manner than they did last year.

Example of Dialogue from Taking A Stand

The example presented in Exhibit III-8 is taken from one of the *Taking A Stand* discussions about the text, *Beyond Safe Boundaries*. The conversation took place between January 19 and February 2, 2000. It illustrated the use of the request-respond-reply cycle. It provided a sense of the higher order thinking processes that the students went through during the conversation. These thinking processes were representative of the Vermont Standards addressed by *Taking A Stand*, namely:

- *1.3 Reading Comprehension* – students read for meaning, demonstrating both an initial understanding and personal response to what is read;
- *3.7 Informed Decision Making* – students make informed decisions; and
- *5.13 Responding to Text* – students respond to literary texts and public documents using interpretive, critical, and evaluative processes.

Another stand that was not a specific focus of *Taking A Stand*, but is nonetheless related, is:

- *6.2 Uses of Evidence and Data* – students understand the varied uses of evidence and data, and use both to make interpretations concerning public issues.

Exhibit III-8 A STUDENT THREAD ON THE TAKING A STAND FORUM

Student Posting	Reflective Remarks
<p><i>Date: January 19, 2000, 9:19 AM</i> <i>Author: Anne and Sam</i> <i>Subject: Let's Start!</i> We're Anne and Sam from Cabot. We're going to be moderating this forum. We hope you will respond to our questions and help us build a dialogue about some of the issues in <i>Beyond Safe Boundaries</i>. If you would like, please don't be afraid to introduce yourself when you respond. To start, we both love soccer and dogs and we both talk too much. Here is our question. Why did Evie decide to join the fight for freedom and risk her life to help others?</p>	<p>Students introduce themselves and begin moderating the conversation.</p> <p><i>Request: why join the resistance?</i></p> <p><i>Standards: none</i></p>
<p><i>Date: January 20, 2000, 2:53 PM</i> <i>Author: LaShawnda, Richard, Eriberto</i> <i>Subject: Evie and the Movement</i> Hey, we're seventh and eighth graders from Edmunds Middle School. Richard skateboards, Eriberto plays basketball, and so does LaShawnda. We think Evie decided to join the movement because she has friends at the university who are from many different countries and cultures. For example, Willem is a black South African and Sara and Chandra are from India. They all treat each other as equals, which is what the movement was all about.</p>	<p>Introductions</p> <p><i>Response: reason for joining: university's multicultural character changed her; peers are treated as equals.</i></p> <p><i>Standards: 1.3, 6.2</i></p>
<p><i>Date: February 2, 2000</i> <i>Author: Forrest and Tris</i> <i>Subject: We agree</i> I agree with you. I think that another incident not described in the book had something to do with Evie joining the movement. After all, it takes something serious for someone to go from not really caring about an issue, to sacrificing almost everything for it.</p>	<p>Introductions</p> <p><i>Reply to Edmunds response: inference – outside incident must have affected her.</i></p> <p><i>Standards: 5.13</i></p>
<p><i>Date: February 2, 2000</i> <i>Author: LaShawnda, Eriberto</i> <i>Subject (none)</i> We think why she joined is because of Willem's influence on her with his speech. He was someone important to his race. Willem got</p>	<p><i>Response: reason for joining = Willem's influence and courage.</i></p> <p>Uses evidence from the</p>

<p>killed because he was so important. Because he stood up for what he believed in, Evie admired and followed him. And so did many others. Willem wasn't even afraid of the police. For example, on page 105 before he began his speech, he even introduced the cops who were watching them.</p>	<p>text justifying Willem's courage. <i>Standards:</i> 1.3, 6.2</p>
<p><i>Date: January 25, 2000, 10L07 AM</i> <i>Author: AP, Sam, and Tia</i> <i>Subject: Evie</i> Dear Edmunds, Thanks for your response and we thought your response was true, but wasn't Willem's influence stronger than the other two. Here is our response: She saw many clues that the government treated people unfair. Ex. On pg. 37 their maid got taken away because she was outside without a pass. Then on pg. 47, Popeye has to make dentures because he is black and can't be a dentist. We also think that Evie learned that the world doesn't always change for the good, like she didn't want a new mom but she got one anyway. With that in mind she went to college and decided to try and change the world for good with the influence of Willem.</p>	<p><i>Reply to Edmunds response:</i> strengthening their argument Uses inferences based on evidence from text that add to Edmunds' points. <i>Standards:</i> 5.13, 6.2</p>
<p><i>Date: February 1, 2000 10:13 AM</i> <i>Author: Aleasha</i> Hi. I am Aleasha and I love basketball and animals. Here are some questions my forum came up with. If Evie had joined a college outside the country instead of South Africa, do you think Evie would be more involved or less involved in the movement? Why? If Evie didn't have a stepmother, do you think she should have joined the movement? Also we think the biggest reasons Evie joined the movement were her love for Willem and the influences of her college friends.</p>	<p>Introduction <i>Response:</i> agreement. <i>Request:</i> raise two new questions. <i>Standards:</i> 1.3</p>
<p><i>Date: January 27, 2000 10:14 AM</i> <i>Author: Alice</i> Hi, my name is Alice. I go to Edmunds Middle School. I'm in seventh grade, on the Dream Team. I am 13 years old. I think that Evie joined the Movement because at university something clearly happened that made her more interested. On page 69 it says that Evie had been home a week for summer vacation and she was a very different person from the one who had left home almost a year before. I think she first got into the Movement because she liked Willem, but then she found out about how blacks were treated, and she formed her own opinion.</p>	<p>Introduction <i>Response:</i> inference = something happened at the university. Evie became more involved and changed as a person. <i>Standards:</i> 5.13, 6.2</p>
<p><i>Date: February 1, 2000</i> <i>Author: Sam</i> <i>Subject: Evie</i> Hi, I'm Sam and I think that Evie joined the fight for freedom because of Willem. She eventually got over her head in the fight for freedom. After Willem's death she couldn't take it any more and was convinced by her stepmother to leave South Africa because of being arrested. On pg. 152+153 she leaves without a fight, meaning she has given up or wanted to leave South Africa.</p>	<p>Introduction <i>Reply to Alice:</i> Evie became more involved because of Willem. Inference = Evie gave up and left. <i>Standards:</i> 5.13, 6.2</p>
<p><i>Date: February 2, 2000 10:59 AM</i> <i>Author: Keilidh, Levi and Brooke</i> <i>Subject: She didn't give up</i> We disagree that she had given up. Evie only left without a fight because she was being watched by the police and if she continued in the Movement she would probably have been killed by the police. Her life would have been pointless if she hadn't left because she was followed by the police all the time. Probably if she just said</p>	<p><i>Reply to Alice's reply:</i> Disagree with Alice's statement. Students recognize, but do not carry out, informed decision making.</p>

<p>something about the movement she would have been thrown in jail. She didn't really have a choice – either stay and be like a prisoner or leave and live a better life! We're wondering if you think that Evie would have continued the movement if her life wasn't in danger?</p>	<p><i>Request:</i> raise a new question. <i>Standards:</i> 5.13</p>
<p><i>Date:</i> February 1, 2000 10:29 AM <i>Author:</i> AP <i>Subject:</i> Evie Dear Alice, I agree with you that Evie first got into the movement because of Willem. I think she had her own opinion but I think Willem was more into the Movement. He had more reasons to, for example, he wasn't even allowed to live with his own father. By the time Willem died, Evie was committed to the movement. She had met people from around the world who were treated unfairly and wanted to help. After Willem died, I think Evie would have stayed but her mom saved her by helping her run away. If she had stayed, she would have been arrested.</p>	<p><i>Reply to Alice's reply:</i> Agreement New idea: Willem cannot live with his own father <i>Standards:</i> 1.3, 5.13, 6.2</p>