

Re-conceptualizing Literature Responses through “Space”

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Abstract

Though the technological tools may change, the human desire for conversation never goes away.

Spaces in today's technological age continue to shift, change, and reshape themselves in response to new ways to communicate. Middle school students featured in this article utilized a threaded discussion board to build a reader-response community in which they responded to each other in writing about literature they were reading. Student conversations, though traditionally transpiring in a face-to-face context, are now being carried out in new spaces afforded by adaptable technologies. Students in this classroom fostered student-led discussions as they wrote questions and dialogued in this alternative, technology-based space. Through those conversations, students developed their own literature discussion community to share their personal experiences and individual responses to the reading. This technological application altered traditional ways in which they had interacted with print and provided new opportunities to share stories, build community, and respond to literature.

Keywords: online book discussion, Thirdspace, online community

Introduction

“I like that I get to talk about the book and we can start our own question. I like that because Mr. Trumbull doesn’t give us all the questions. We get to start our own discussions, discussion about the book, just as long as it is on topic and I like that he trusts us to write about it.”

Olivia, Student Interview

This article details one way in which a small group of fifth grade students shared their literature responses with each other through a web-based threaded discussion. Daniels (2006) invited teachers to consider “the next big thing in student-led discussion, written conversation” (p. 14). In this call, Daniels challenges teachers to consider the power of students writing to each other, back and forth, through notes or letters in which they are engaged in literature-based conversations. However, what this call does not specifically take into account is the way technology, through a new “space,” can motivate students to develop their responses. Students in this classroom engaged in student-led discussion as they wrote questions and dialogued in an alternative, technology-based space.

Technology applications that enhance communications, such as the Facebook, texts, blogs, wikis, emails, and threaded discussions can also enhance motivation and provide opportunities for students to engage each other in these written conversations about their reading (Larson, 2011; Thomas, 2014). However, the possibility for technology to enrich such written conversations has yet to be fully explored. Beach and Anson (2004) state, “in writing and responding to each other, students are creating social relationships through their writing” (p. 252). The social relationships that develop in the on-line, threaded discussion environment hold a great deal of promise in supporting and scaffolding students’

understandings of the readings and in nurturing writing communities across time and space.

This article will explore the reciprocity of this specific reading and writing activity, developed through the students' response process, as well as potential applications for teachers to encourage and augment the literature response opportunities in their classrooms.

Reconceptualizing Space

The understanding of space is shifting from the belief that space is “empty, available, and waiting to be filled up” (Sheehy & Leander, 2004, p. 1) to the re-conceptualization of space that is not situated and is flexible (Albers, Pace, & Odo, 2016; Lefebvre, 1991; Sheehy & Leander, 2004; Soja, 1996). Sheehy and Leander (2004) write that “space is not static . . . it is dynamically relational” (p. 1). This statement illustrates that the spaces in which we live and work fluctuate, change, and adapt. They are not inert and concrete. Spaces develop and vary according to the content and context of the situation and are the “product and process of socially dynamic relations” (Sheehy & Leander, 2004, p. 1). Examining space from this perspective illustrates it not as the outcome of social interaction, but as instrumental in shaping the social practices that form it.

Soja (1996) strives for an understanding of how the social engagements of people shape these new dynamic spaces. Sheehy (2004) writes that “spatial practice (or social practice) involves production and reproduction of relationships between people, people and things, and people and practice” (p. 95). This space, created and shaped through social relationships and social processes, is often referred to as a Thirdspace (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1996). As Moje et al., (2004) explain, “Some scholars refer to this in-between, or hybrid, space as third space, explicitly emphasizing the role of the physical, as well as socialized, space in which people interact” (p. 42). The concept of Thirdspace in this work is viewed as a

socially constructed space that results from the process and product of the participants learning together.

Soja (2004) holds that space is made and remade through the people, thoughts, materials and other particulars that are present at an instance in time. As Moje et al. (2004) state, “we call this integration of knowledges and discourses drawn from different spaces the construction of ‘third space’ . . . different or alternative space of knowledge and discourses” (p. 41). As individuals talk, interact, and work together new spaces are formed, and these discourses are “socially constructed knowledges of some aspect of reality” (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 24).

In essence this Thirdspace can become a site for socially negotiated understandings of the group to be co-constructed out of the multiple and complex discourses of all those involved. Together, the participants of any conversation come together to create a new “space” or Thirdspace that builds individual understandings to form a shared meaning. As Lefebvre (1991) writes, “Every discourse says something about a space (places or sets of places); and every discourse is emitted from a space” (p. 132). The creation of a Thirdspace can emerge from any social process or production such as a face-to-face interaction or in an on-line environment.

Through a technologically enhanced environment such as an on-line threaded discussion, the possibility exists for the nurturing of conversations that are more reflective in nature. Students in an asynchronous environment may have more time to reflect and deepen their thoughts and responses than an on-the-spot moment in class. They can step back and reflect on the reading, their own response, and the responses of others, then come back to the multimedia application and/or conversation to record their thoughts. Students utilize the

technology of a threaded discussion to write the responses to their reading and to share these written responses with each other. By writing and responding together, students can support and scaffold each other's understandings and thus socially construct their understandings (Almasi, 1996; Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993; Coffey, 2011; Gavelek & Raphael, 1996; Mazzoni & Gambrell, 1996; Thomas, 2014).

Though many studies have been conducted to examine the multiple ways that students respond to text in group environments, limited research currently exists that explores the technological ways available for students to write their responses to their readings and thus build a writing community through a Thirdspace. Bowers-Campbell (2011) conducted a study examining graduate students and their responses in a virtual children's literature circle. She found that groups actively engaged in socially constructed understandings and 2) that students clearly demonstrated their engagement in the reading process. Albers, Pace, and Odo (2016) have also examined adult online literature discussion experiences that they describe as "communities of practice" (p. 226). They illustrate that knowledge can be shared and effectively built through online social interactions. They also identified that discussions were often "social and fluid" (p. 242). Thomas (2014) explored online literature discussions between middle school students and pre-service teachers. She found that online literature conversations can motivate all participants as well as deepen comprehension.

These studies begin to explore the opportunities that exist for online conversations in a negotiated Thirdspace. However, little research has been done to examine the ways in which middle school students engage and learn with each other in an on-line context. The possibility for technology to enhance these written conversations has yet to be fully explored.

Methodology

Design

The research described in this study went beyond the traditional, “brick and mortar” classroom into a new Thirdspace environment. Participants in this research utilized a traditional face-to-face discussion context, as well as an on-line threaded discussion in which they wrote their responses to the common text that they were reading. In order to examine these elements of the classroom, this study employed a qualitative research design from a constructivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Context

This study incorporated daily involvement for three hours over a six-week time period in the fifth grade classroom as the students and teacher engaged in a unit of study. The teacher was intentionally selected for this study due to his extensive use of technology, his authentic uses of literature and nurturing of the reader response process, and for his utilization of an on-line threaded discussion board. The researcher engaged in the role of participant-observer as students were observed throughout their daily Language Arts time periods.

This article shares the data and findings from observing a subset of seven students reading the text *Stargirl* over a six-week book unit as designed by the teacher. *Stargirl* focuses upon common high school themes: individuality, acceptance from peers, and conforming for the sake of belonging. Stargirl is the “new kid” at Mica Area High School and makes a memorable entrance. She wears strange outfits, has a rat for a pet, performs anonymous random acts of kindness for people she doesn’t know, and sings “Happy Birthday” to students in the cafeteria accompanied by her ukulele. In the beginning, Stargirl is shunned, but through a variety of events she is eventually accepted, and many in the high school follow her and

adapt her style. Leo and Stargirl fall in love, and Leo is overjoyed at her acceptance among their peers.

However, when Stargirl chooses to cheer for an opposing basketball team at the high school tournament (wanting happiness for everyone) the students turn hostile against her. Leo is unable to leave the security of belonging to the group and tries to convince Stargirl to change who she is to “fit in” within the dominant high school culture. Though Stargirl tries for a short time, she is unable to deny who she is at heart for the sake of uniformity. After a climactic scene at the school’s dance, Stargirl disappears forever and leaves Leo sadly contemplating his own choices.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study were collected using interviews, observations, field notes and document analysis. The 10 group discussion meetings were videotaped and transcribed by the researcher. Time spent by the students working on the computers, writing and posting their responses, were also videotaped and transcribed by the researcher. The teacher was interviewed six times over the 6 weeks. Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed by the researcher. Conversations were held informally as different relevant events occurred over the six-week time period that the researcher wanted to investigate more closely. Each of these conversations was also audio-taped and transcribed. At the end of the six-week study, each student was interviewed to gather additional insights into his or her thoughts and feelings regarding the on-line and group discussion environments as well as his or her perceptions regarding the teacher’s role in the different environments. Extensive field notes were recorded throughout each day of observation.

Documents, such as the on-line responses of the students, their reading packets, and final project requirements, were collected and digitized for analysis. Data were analyzed in which significant patterns, common elements, and specific events were identified and overarching themes developed. A recursive process was utilized in which the data collected, the research questions, and the review of the literature were all incorporated to process the data.

Findings

Findings from this study indicate that the on-line context provided a new opportunity for students to “own” the conversation rather than the traditional authority of the teacher guiding a face-to-face conversation. Introduce the findings that are stated in the subheads in a sentence or two.

Building a Community in Thirdspace

As the students read *Stargirl*, they responded to the text in the on-line threaded discussion environment, as well as the in the face-to-face meeting context to discuss the book. When the students met in the face-to-face context of the room, the teacher asked the questions and the students responded to his questions. Data analysis of the *Stargirl* group’s face-to-face sessions found that the teacher asked over 96% of the questions. Although the students in this environment responded to the students’ questions, the teacher held the ownership of asking the questions and directing the conversation. As we know, students who are familiar with school culture may respond in ways that they know meet the expectations for the rules and regulations that form the procedures of the school culture (Almasi, 1995; Bloome & Green, 1992; Bloome, Puro, & Theodorou, 1989). Though the teacher began the conversations by asking the students what they wanted to discuss, the conversation quickly fell into a pattern in

which the teacher initiated and led the conversation with teacher-generated questions to which the students responded. This finding supports the work of Alvermann, Dillon, and O'Brien (1987) in which they found that when teachers exert too much leadership, the students relinquish their responsibility for taking an active role and expect the teacher to lead the discussion.

In contrast, the on-line threaded discussion environment allowed the students to seize ownership of the discussion, forming their own writing community (Bowers-Campbell, 2011). They composed and posted the questions, responding to each other throughout the study. In this space, the students wrote questions and posted written responses to those questions throughout the six weeks. Additionally, the on-line context gave an opportunity for the students to make individual, personal connections to the text and ask each other to make personal connections to the text. Finally, these personal connections provided a springboard for the students to engage in conversation with synthesis driven questions that applied to deeper aspects of their own lives.

Sharing Stories

Many of the questions that the students wrote in the beginning of the six weeks related indirectly to the text and asked for personal information from one another. Through these questions and responses, the students wrote responses to the text but also developed their own writing community by sharing personal stories. For example, in the following transcript (see Table 1) Grace asks the students to describe a time in which they felt left out and how they felt about it. This question had an indirect relationship to the books as Stargirl and Leo are left out and ignored by the others as a consequence for not conforming to the dominant high school culture.

Table 1: Students share feelings about being left out.

Grace	Have you ever felt left out of something? Tell me about it, what did you feel like (sad, mad...)
Iris	Yes I have felt left out before but not all the time. I felt sad when my friends leave me out.
Mikela	Yes, I have been left out. In second grade one of my friends asked me to play after soccer, but I had to go home and ask my mom. When my mom said yes I called that person, and that they were already playing with someone else, and they didn't think we got along well so we couldn't play. That made me feel so left out. But that day I met another friend that was the good part. But I will never forget that day, but mostly for the bad reason that made me feel so bad. The End
Lea	I have felt left out many times. One time one of my friends came over to play, but some of her other friends showed up, and she wanted to play with them instead of me

Three of her group members responded to this question, detailing a time in which they had been left out and how they felt about it. Mikela provided a specific story from second grade in which she was left out and how bad it made her feel. The other two group members wrote of a time that they had been left out, sharing their experiences in this on-line environment. These responses to the student written question provided a Thirdspace, outside the classroom walls, in which the students could build a community and share their personal experiences through their writing.

On a different occasion, one of the students posted a question to the community members asking if anyone had ever thought that they had vanished and the details of the situation. (see Table 2) The student in her post, answers her own question writing, “I know I haven’t. But if that has happened to you, I would like to here [sic] it!” Olivia’s question also had an indirect connection to the text as Stargirl vanishes towards the end of the text and no one knows where she has gone. In her post, Olivia engages the writing community with her question, answers the question for them from her experience, and encourages them to respond by writing, “I would like to here [sic] it.”

Table 2: Students discuss “vanishing.”

Olivia	Have people ever thought that you have vanished? Did they ever think that you were gone or just disappeared? Or did you just go away for a while and or friends did not know that you were gone? So they thought that you were gone and they would never see you again! I know I haven’t. But if that has ever happened to you I would like to here [sic] it!
Grace	Well I'm not so sure if people thought I was gone forever, but in second grade I was gone for a week and had Laryngitis (that's not how you spell it - lare.en.gite.ist) and when I came in for Valentine's Day, which I would have missed, I started to cry because I missed my classmates so much. : ~ (
Iris	One day in fourth grade I was absent for a week because I had strep throat. My mom was out too. All I can tell you is you don’t want to have STREP THROTE [sic]!!!! When I came back I was so happy to be back. My friends were happy to see me to!

Two of the students' responses are articulated in the above transcript in which they share with the other members of the community their personal experiences when someone thought they had "vanished." These stories provided a common ground for the writing community, building a foundation for sharing experiences, stories, and thoughts.

Writing and Responding to Common Reading

As discussed previously the teacher's intent for the students' use of the threaded discussion board was to write and respond to each other regarding their reading of *Stargirl*. For the first two weeks of the book unit, the students wrote questions that indirectly related to the text such as those described in the previous sections. Beginning in the third week of the study, the students began using their writing community to discuss direct aspects of the text together.

For example, in the following transcript, (see Table 3) Iris engages her community writing the question, "Have you ever liked someone like Stargirl and Leo? If you have, have you been afraid to tell them or someone else?"

Table 3: Students discuss connections to feelings.

Iris	Have you ever liked someone like Stargirl and Leo? If you have, have you been afraid to tell them or someone else?
Iris	Well maybe a little but not to like the whole class. Because somehow it gets out and you get humiliated by everybody.
Olivia	Yes I have had a crush like that before, I just never told him that I liked him. I mean I do not even know if he liked me. But one thing that I do is I tell my friends that I like him. The guy I like I would talk to and eat with but my friends

	would be there too. But I would not act all weird around them I would just be myself.
Helen	Yes. But I have asked him and people think it's funny and laugh at me, and I just want to go back in time and not ask, but I can't. So I just beg my mom to stay home, but the people don't make fun of me, well they do, but I don't feel embarrassed, but I feel like one person in one world.
Lea	Yes, I have liked someone. It was a silly crush because the person already liked someone else.

Five of the six girls responded to this question with personal experiences of whether they had liked someone as Stargirl and Leo had. In four of the responses, the girls share individual experiences of having a crush on someone and how that affected them. Helen, who was observed to be shy and reluctant to share openly in the face-to-face classroom environment, described a personal event in which she was laughed at and “wanted to go back in time.” Olivia playfully describes her experience with liking someone, but not being able to articulate that interest.

In a different written thread, (see Table 4) the students responded to a question posted by Mikela who asked, “Why do you think that Stargirl left? Tell why?” In the book, Stargirl is confronted by a high school girl who is angry at Stargirl for not fitting into the high school culture and for being popular despite her unique personality. After this conflict between the two girls climaxes, Stargirl vanishes, and the story ends without resolving Stargirl's disappearance.

Table 4: Students discuss book's open ending.

Iris	I think that Stargirl left because Leo and all the other kids like Hilary Kimball and all the other kids at Mica High always made fun of Stargirl. For odd reasons like what she wore and other weird reasons. I think she just had enough of every one at Mica High (that) just pushed her to her limit.
Lea	I think she left because she was a Starperson. Archie said that Stargirl was wisely named Stargirl. I think that she really was a star and that she lived in the sky. I think it was time for her to go home.
Tyler	I think she left because she found she couldn't fit in with anyone. I think if just one person (Leo) had accepted her for who she was, she would have stayed. She wouldn't have cared what anyone else thought. She would have put up with it all, if Leo had been nicer to her. Bad Leo! (I'm still mad at him and it's been a year since I read the book!)
Grace	I think that Stargirl left because she felt that she wasn't needed anymore, like what she said to Leo was... "When Peter gets this in a few years, he will really appreciate it. It is probably one of my favorite things to do, make people happy." ...not in those words exactly but that's what she meant. So I sort of think that when she came to Mica Area High School she had a reason to cheer everyone up, just like Peter. That reason was maybe she thought that the school students were too gloomy and they need to be cheered up. Then at the Ocotillo Ball, she had completed her "mission". When *everyone* [sic] joined in on the Bunny Hop, that was her signal.

The girls struggled with this unresolved element in the book, wanting to know what happened to Stargirl. In response to this student's questions, the members of the book discussion group wrote lengthy responses, detailing what they thought happened to Stargirl. Grace, in her quote, utilizes the text to illustrate her argument, providing strength for her written opinion of what she thought happened to Stargirl.

Through their questions and responses, the students were able to write and share their responses to the text together as a community. By writing direct and indirect questions the students were able to share their thoughts about the text, as well as the personal experiences that helped facilitate and enhance their understandings. This process was supported through the use of a new space or "Thirdspace" (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1996) that was created outside the conventional school structure. In the traditional school "space" of the face-to-face environment, the students were accustomed to and expecting the teacher's leadership. Previous years of experience have indoctrinated the students in the procedural knowledge that teachers ask and students answer questions.

In this classroom, the Thirdspace created an opportunity for the students to ask and respond to questions about the text. This finding aligns with what Sheehy (2004) refers to as spatial practice. Spatial practice incorporates the creation of relationship "between people, people and things, and people and practice" (p. 95). The students raised written questions and responded to each other in the space that developed outside of the traditional school setting, thus creating their own writing community. Through the social production of their writing they responded to the text and to one another. This space was also influenced by the purposeful, limited involvement of the teacher who provided the opportunity for the students to foster their own community by generating questions and responses to each other. The non-

traditional classroom setting created through the socially constructed “Thirdspace” provided an unconventional school context for students to initiate conversations, responding and learning with one other in community. Space is made and remade through the people, thoughts, materials and other particulars that are present at a particular given time (Soja, 2004). The students in this experience created their own space, through the participants’ thoughts and responses, as they wrote and responded to the text and each other (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001) and through that experience developed their own writing community.

Conclusion

This article illustrates how this particular group of fifth grade girls developed an on-line writing community in which to share their responses to a common reading through a Thirdspace. Like Daniels (2006), I consider “the next big thing in student-led discussion, written conversation,” (p. 14) as a possible new avenue for students to read and respond to literature by developing a Thirdspace that facilitates student ownership of their writing community and conversations. This Thirdspace experience provided the opportunity for a writing community to flourish. Through their ownership of the space that they created in their on-line writing community, the students composed and posted questions and responded to each other, sharing their personal experiences and responses to literature through their written conversations.

This article illustrates an innovative way that technology can build writing communities in a Thirdspace. The students in this classroom shared their thoughts on-line through writing their responses to texts in conversational threads. Cazden (2001) writes that by conversing through the computer (utilizing e-mail and threaded discussion boards, for example) students provided longer, deeper answers to questions. The teacher seems almost

absent in the discussion, and the students receive more feedback from their peers than in face-to-face discussions. The students in this classroom experienced these benefits in their on-line writing community first hand. As Flood and Lapp (1997) advocate, teachers need to incorporate the communicative arts, including computer technology, into ideas about reader response. Standards from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and from the International Reading Association (IRA) document the importance of utilizing technology in the language arts. Teachers, who are looking for additional ideas on ways to incorporate technology in authentic, meaningful practices that support writing communities, could utilize the ideas presented in this article.

This qualitative study examined one subset of students and the ways in which they facilitated and advanced their individual and group understanding of a text through both a face-to-face and online experience. Future studies should could consider comparing experiences between environments utilizing on-line writing communities to more traditional style teaching environments to explore different experiences in students' experiences and understandings. Supplemental studies could also examine student feedback and personal reflections on the pedagogical implications of the experience. This article focused upon one group's experience with one text. Additional research and analysis should be conducted to explore different students' responses to different types of texts.

Students today integrate technology-based writing communities throughout their daily life as they communicate with each other through text messaging, instant messaging, and e-mail. Students easily have incorporated these technologies into their daily lives. Literacy practices, such as writing communities, are intertwined with technology usage that impacts the ways we read, learn, and communicate in today's society. We know that "new literacies"

(Lankshear & Knobel, 2006) are not about the hardware or digital devices, but rather the shifting of classroom practices (Bomer, Zoch, David, & Ok, 2010) from traditional methods to those with more contemporary relevance. In this classroom, students were impacted positively by responding to literature in a new, innovative way: on-line, student-led discussions. Computer mediated technologies, such as the on-line, threaded discussion illustrated in this article, are one example of the application of technology that can be readily utilized to enhance a reader's response to texts and encourage participants to collaborate and socially co-construct their understandings through different spaces.

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