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In many classes, orchestrating a thoughtful class discussion on literature feels a little like trying to keep Japanese lanterns lit during a thunderstorm. It's difficult to nurture the flame of discussion when some of our students, our "lanterns," have been drenched by their classmates' negative comments. Too many of them haven't spent the time outside of class studying to provide the fuel necessary for discussion, and as they flicker about desperately searching for something to say, ultimately allow themselves to be distracted and easily blown off course from the discussion. Many of us became teachers because we treasured the opportunity to discuss literature in mature, thoughtful ways – citing examples to support ideas, questioning each other, presenting reasonable counter-examples, and so on. Too often, though, we seem trapped leading class discussions that either fall flat or are dominated by a few vocal students. We watch the eyes of students not involved in the discussion glaze over – or worse, hear students start to whisper or heckle each other – and we cannot help but wonder if discussions are worth such frustrations.

Then we find students discussing a piece of literature (such as the first third of *To Kill A Mockingbird*) in a thoughtful, mature, manner and our discussions seem worthwhile:

> **Student A:** Well, the boys are okay. They waste time doing stupid things like sneaking up on Boo Radley's porch
>
> **Student B:** I think they are just having fun. When they do that, I think there's nothing wrong with it.
>
> **Student C:** I agree that they are having fun, but at what cost does their fun come

at? You can't go around and hurting people and peoples' feelings for fun. I think they are sorry, but it was childish.

This conversation actually happened – even though no student ever spoke a word out loud. These students participated in this discussion using an online discussion board. In essence, the students discussed the novel by posting "notes" to each other on this electronic "board" and then wrote back and forth with each other.

When using an online discussion board, otherwise known as an asynchronous learning network, the teacher or class members can post a topic (or thread) that poses a question, challenge or comment for the rest of the class. In time, other class members engage in a dialogue about these posts. The valuable dialogue stored on the forum may then be accessed by the teacher and students at any time in the future. Online discussion forums are different from chat rooms or "instant messenger" forums in that they allow students the convenience of posting their ideas at different times during the day. There is no need for the entire class to be online at once; students may discuss ideas at any time, with or without supervision.

Online discussion boards have a tremendous potential to foster productive learning as well as establish a classroom community. One notable advantage of using online discussion boards involves discovery. It is possible that online discussion boards may foster "higher-order thinking skills" that encourage discovery through critical thinking, questioning and analysis (Ferdig and Roehler np). With online discussion boards, students have time to think about what others have said before responding themselves – instead of feeling rushed to say something (or anything) before the discussion moves on or class time runs out. For this reason, online discussion boards have also been known to cultivate a higher quality discussion, encouraging "more thoughtful exchanges" (Mikulecky 4). Additionally, online discussion boards also allow more students to be engaged in learning at the same time; within an entire class, ten discussions can be occurring at once! Finally, since discussion boards permit students the

time to "think out structured and more in-depth responses," they may help timid students to share their ideas more freely (Ferdig and Roehler np).

Online discussion boards can work both at the high school level as well as at the college level. The exchange at the start of this article happened in a class of thirty urban students in the Midwest. In this class made up of mostly sophomores (with a few juniors repeating the class), the students were evenly split between males and females, and Caucasians and African-Americans, and a fifth of the class qualified for special education services. At the start of *To Kill A Mockingbird,* these students had difficulty connecting with events that were located in the South and set during their great-grandparents' times. They didn't hesitate to express their frustration with the novel and were reluctant to put any effort into thinking about what seemed to be a "boring" book. Yet, when asked to share their thoughts in writing and in the relative safety of the online discussion board, they became willing to speculate a little about the novel:

FROM: CJ Gilbert ° (09/29/04 11:35 AM) °
SUBJECT: What puzzles do you want solved in TKM?
....Harper Lee keeps giving us little hints of various mysteries... like the tree, the blanket on Scout, the laughing, etc. Scout doesn't understand what is going on... but Jem does. Can you figure it out? Post questions (or possible answers to others questions) here about the story line.

· **FROM:** **** ° (09/29/04 12:11 PM) °
SUBJECT: reply
i think i know about the blanket on scout may be boo man is nice after all and did not want to see scout freeze to death

· **FROM:** **** ° (09/29/04 12:20 PM)
SUBJECT:
i dont think yaht the radley family is as bad as everyone thinks they might be nice people.

· **FROM:** **** ° (09/29/04 12:31 PM) °
SUBJECT: hi

their probably trying to tirk him make him think that he was going to do that.

· **FROM:** **** ° (09/29/04 12:33 PM) °
SUBJECT: boo
I think that Boo Radley knows that they are trying to sneak up on the porch or whatever so he is in return trying to scare them so that they might actually stop.

Suddenly, a class of reluctant learners were all hurriedly typing away at the keyboard: eager to see what their classmates had to say, willing to ask questions of each other, and even able to admit that the book isn't (entirely) as bad as they first thought. For some students, discussing topics online is actually a more familiar and comfortable mode of communication. Online discussion boards are a valuable tool for the very reason that they are a digital way to communicate with our digitally literate students. Few classroom tools allow the instructor such an effective, culturally relevant way to communicate.

Another activity that worked particularly well involved a college-level discussion on "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Focusing on psychoanalytic theory, students were asked to consider the story's main character. They bravely shared a variety of ideas, critiqued each other's viewpoints, and provided key evidence from the text. Responding to the request to create a "case study," several students conversed:

FROM: *** ° **SUBJECT:**
... If I were to align any condition to he it would have to be some sort of obsesive compulsive dissorder. The way that she lets the imperfections of the house bother her are evidence of this.
FROM: *** ° **SUBJECT:**
She doesn't let all the imperfections bother her though — she mentions all of them but states that the only thing that bothers her is the wallpaper.
"Then the floor is scratched and gouged and splintered, the plaster itself is dug out here

and there, and this great heavy bed which is all we found in the room, looks as if it had been through wars. But I don't mind it a bit — only the paper" (Gilman, 143).
I would be more apt to say that she seems to be the only person in touch with what is happening to her — perhaps simply that she feels stifled by her own life?

This selection illustrates a common issue in many classrooms. Often a student will lack proof or make a questionable point, and it often goes unchallenged. This places the instructor in a difficult situation: let the comment "blow over" or correct these assumptions? Conducting a face-to-face discussion, an instructor might be more apt to let the assumption slide, simply grateful for students who discuss ideas freely. Here, however, one student gently tweaked the other's ideas. She drew on the ideas of imperfections, then took the time to submit a direct quote that clarified the other student's point of view. The students' willingness to seek and submit convincing evidence showcase other ways that discussion forums can foster a productive environment for discussion.

The benefits of using online discussion boards have persuaded us to use them often. As with any instructional method, though, online discussion boards must be taught deliberately, repeatedly. Teachers should expect the first one or two times online to be mainly about learning the technology; they should plan to post topics for discussion that are "easy" to discuss and that encourage frequent responding back-and-forth to help students to become comfortable with the online discussion format. Initially, entire classes should go to a lab together to carry out their discussions. This will enable the teacher to model productive online behavior and troubleshoot technology issues. At the earlier stages of online discussion (as with classroom discussion), teachers may wish to give students credit (or no-credit) simply for participating. Just as with face-to-face discussion, teachers should expect some students to start out vague and other students to take the discussion off on a tangent.

As students become more familiar with the technology, teachers should raise their expectations. For example, the exchange at the start of the article was "cleaned-up" as far as the grammar and spelling to prevent readers from (immediately) guessing that it was an online discussion. All of the other exchanges listed are preserved as the students wrote them: errors, misconceptions, insights and all. In most discussions, the emphasis should be on *thinking* about the literature, so students should not feel inhibited by the grammar-police; however, sometimes we might ask students to present a more polished presentation to the class. For example, in an Advanced Sophomore English class, students each read a portion of Plutarch and had to draft, revise, and present a paragraph discussing the influence of Plutarch on Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Before they started writing, they reviewed the scoring rubric which required that they support their position with specific details from both Plutarch and Shakespeare and that the paragraph be (mostly) free from grammatical errors. Additionally, their comments on each others' posts had to actually add to or pose legitimate questions to the posts that came before rather than merely agreeing or disagreeing with them.

FROM: ** ° SUBJECT:** HEY LOOK AT THIS. HEY I'M TALKING TO YOU
When Shakespeare wrote the play he did not specify that Cassius was married or even to whom he was married to. But in factuality, he has married to Junia, the sister of Marcus Brutus. This is one way that people say Cassius and Brutus were connected .....
Plutarch even wrote that Cassius's hatred for tyrants came from his childhood. But Shakespeare said that Cassius's hated Caesar because he has afraid of the power he would get. Plus, Plutarch says that Cassius hated Caesar as a man, not as a tyrant or a man who wanted the throne.
FROM: ** ° SUBJECT:** That's interesting
That's really weird. That would explain a little more about Brutus too. However, I can see why Shakespeare left it out. It would have looked bad if he said that Cassius was

married to Brutus's sister. It would just make another unpure reason included in there and Shakespeare wanted his reasons to be completely pure.

FROM: ** ° SUBJECT: KEWL!**
I think it is very interesting that they were kind of realted. It makes you look a little differently at the reason why Brutus sided with him.

Online discussions can also act as a primer for face-to-face class discussion. By working on making the online discussions more thoughtful and more text-based, it's easier to ask students to transfer that level of thinking to face-to-face discussion in the classroom. In addition, using online discussion boards provides a way for students to become more reflective about their participation in the discussion. For example, they can print out a record of what they wrote and evaluate themselves (and each other) on their use of supporting evidence or thoughtful questioning.

When we consider the numerous benefits of using online discussion boards to teach literature, we can't help but be excited about further possibilities. Students can post questions to characters and "role-play" their responses. Posting questions to the author of a book is another possibility (and if the author is alive, he or she could be invited to join the discussion). Students can even post original poems and receive feedback in their peers' posts. Online discussion boards are also a great way for students to discuss their responses to various class activities, such as Webquests, field trips, films, or guest speakers.

Obviously, online discussion boards cannot completely supplant face-to-face discussions. The computer does not require active listening or polite body language, and while students must write tactfully online, they also need to learn how to debate aloud without sounding hostile or demeaning. Online discussions also cannot force all students to be thoughtful: we could have easily included exchanges where students commented only on the most obvious (and shallow) aspects of the literature or places where discussions went off on a tangent. Of course, face-to-

face discussions suffer some of the same problems and do not (as easily) allow students to go back and discover where their participation went awry. Online discussions should be used as another tool in the teacher's toolbox – powerful but not a panacea.

Keeping our students' discussion lanterns ablaze is certainly a challenge, but online discussion boards are an interesting way to foster productive dialogue. By using the tools of technology, we can indeed strive for class discussions that encourage mature, thoughtful dialogue, bringing out the very best in our students.

Notes for Teachers
Additional resources for online discussion are
available at http://homepages.wmich.edu/~g3rumohr
and www.cjgilbert.net/teacher.htm. Also, we invite
any teacher interested in trying online discussion
boards to join our forum at Nicenet.org. Create a
username and then enter the class key: SZZ5422D52.

For language arts instructors interested in adding
online discussion boards to their toolbox, it might be
helpful to browse a few possible online forums. One
useful forum is www.nicenet.org. Completely free of
cost, Nicenet is simple and straightforward – and
some of our most computer-phobic colleagues have
testified to how easy it truly is. Its most valuable
feature is that its webpages load quickly, even with an
outdated modem. Another benefit of using Nicenet is
the absence of advertisements. In addition, only class
members with a "key" can join in the discussion,
keeping students safe from online dangers. Threads
post instantly, allowing for rapid discussion on more
than one topic. There are other, free forums at
epals.com and yahoo.com (you can create a "group").
Blackboard is another resource that offers online
discussion, but it is not free of cost. By far, Nicenet is
the best free resource we have utilized.

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