Digital Discussions in Reading

Brittany Kennedy

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Abstract

This article explores the use of digital discussions to increase engagement during the reading of novels. This eight-week study followed the process of 16 students using digital discussions in a 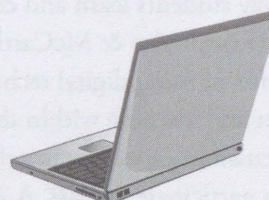fifth-grade classroom. Each week, students were given an open-ended prompt from the class novel to respond to, and they would also reply to each other. The researcher discovered that students' word count and depth of responses increased over the duration of the study. This practice gave students an opportunity to discuss reading with others while using technology to increase their engagement in reading.

When a literature question is posted on the computer, all you can hear are the clicks of the keyboard, see eyes focused on the screens, and watch as students contemplate the next sentence they will type. In the last few years, teachers have been handed forms of digital technology to use in their classroom. I have taught fifth grade for the last six years and was recently given a class set of Chromebooks to use. I wondered how I was going use this technology effectively in my classroom.

After reading articles written in *Michigan Reading Journal*, I wanted to write a piece that would apply to many teachers who are given technology to use in their classroom and give them an idea of how to best utilize its potential. Whether it be set up as one-to-one technology or a class set of devices to share, teachers are now required to know how to appropriately use these technologies in their classrooms to foster learning across the different content areas. We have to know how technology will best fit into our classroom, with our students, and with our content in order to engage our students.

Engagement in Reading

Engaged reading is a critical goal that all teachers need to set for their students (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2009). Gambrell (2011) mentioned a study for the Program for International Student Assessment where students in over 64 countries were studied to see if reading interest had a direct effect on their reading comprehension. In this study, students interested in reading perform significantly better than their counterparts who did not show interest in reading.

Engaged Readers

Student engagement relates closely to the interactions between students and teachers. When students exhibit engagement in a text, they are then likely to initiate conversations and questions with those around them. To promote engagement, the classroom needs to be interactive and one where students can discuss and receive frequent, constructive feedback for their efforts (Harper, 2009).

Discussion of Literature

The literature conversations teachers begin with their students shape the way students view themselves as readers. Teachers regularly ask their students what they notice as they read text together. Shortly after, students begin to do this on their own without prompting from the teacher (Johnston, Ivey, & Faulkner, 2011). Students can construct an understanding and are willing to think critically together about situations when they are given the opportunity and appropriate structures from the teacher (Grisham & Wolsey, 2006).

Peer Discussion of Literature

Peer discussion is central to student learning (Brown, 2006). As students receive feedback from each other,

peer discussion allows them to reject an idea they had or form a new idea (Ketch, 2005). Students are then apt to think more critically and deeply about the conversation and ideas they discussed with peers. They are more willing to share their ideas if they know others are actively listening to and acknowledging them (Fewell, 2015).

Digital Technology Benefits

Our world has entered into a new digital era that alters the way students learn and communicate with each other (Rizopoulos & McCarthy, 2009). There are many benefits of using digital technologies to increase engagement and learning within the reading classroom. Digital discussions especially benefit students who tend not to participate in class. A 2009 study found a high level of social learning among students engaged in online literature discussions; moreover, this engagement allowed for extra thinking time for students (Rizopoulos & McCarthy, 2009). This extra time allowed the teachers to give each student in the class a voice when using online discussions and may increase the quality and quantity of their responses and their contribution to their peers' responses (English, 2007; Rizopoulos & McCarthy, 2009).

Another benefit of using digital discussions is that teachers have access to all students' responses, and they can refer to them at a later date (Fisher & Frey, 2015). Digital tools can support the teacher in checking for student understanding because they allow teachers to be efficient and assess student knowledge at that moment in time (Fisher & Frey, 2015). In sum, computer-based discussions offer new insights into student learning while stressing the importance of how discussions can lead to a better understanding of the text (Gambrell, 2004).

Digital Discussions

One way teachers are incorporating technology into their curriculum is by having the students participate in digital, also called threaded, discussions. Grisham and Wolsey (2006) describe threaded discussions as an online community where students feel a responsibility to respond to their peers, as a place where student voice is valued, and a chance for all group members to contribute. To begin a threaded discussion group, the

teacher selects a topic or question that relates to the content presented in class. Students then have time to think and respond to the question or topic. Once the student posts a response, he or she is able to view other classmates' answers. Students can then see the different viewpoints their classmates hold, comment back, and contribute to creating an extended dialogue about the topic. This creates an ongoing discussion thread that can be used instead of a face-to-face conversation (Rizopoulos & McCarthy, 2009).

Application

Now that digital technologies are being implemented full force into schools, teachers can take their curriculum and student interest in technology and combine them to enrich our content for kids. As I started to speak with teachers about the new one-to-one technology in our district, the consensus was that it would only take away from the engagement of learning because of the distraction of technology. I wanted to see if technology did the exact opposite.

I wanted to teach my students to utilize their Google account provided for them by our district. The main application I wanted my students to be able to use was Google Classroom. My plan for the year was to use its feature that allows students to respond to each other's reading reactions and comments online as another way to bring technology into the classroom.

The information I wanted to find out from my students was if they had ever communicated with another person through a digital-based conversation. I gained consent from my principal and parents to use the student answers as data. Through a pre-assessment survey, I asked general questions to gauge their level of interest in reading and if they thought talking about reading is important. See Figure 3 for a copy of the survey I used to gather data.

Figure 3

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Engagement in Reading Survey
* Required

1. I am a... *

Mark only one oval.

◯ Male

◯ Female

2. I enjoy reading at school. *

Mark only one oval.

◯ I do not enjoy reading at school.

◯ I rarely enjoy reading at school.

◯ I sometimes enjoy reading at school.

◯ I love to read at school.

3. What do you do when you don't know what a book is about? Mark all that apply. *

Check all that apply.

☐ I will ask a friend if they have read it.

☐ I will look it up on a device.

☐ I will read the back.

☐ I will ask my teacher what the book is about.

☐ I will ask a sibling if they have read it.

☐ I will read it anyway without trying to find out what it is about.

4. I think it is important to talk about books with other people. *

Mark only one oval.

◯ Strongly Disagree

◯ Disagree

◯ Agree

◯ Strongly Agree

5. I talk to friends about books I read. *

Mark only one oval.

◯ I never talk to my friends about books I've read.

◯ I rarely talk to my friends about books I've read.

◯ I sometimes talk to my friends about books I've read.

◯ I always talk to my friends about books I've read.

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6. **I talk to my family about books I read. ***

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ I never talk to my family about books I've read.
- ◯ I rarely talk to my family about books I've read.
- ◯ I sometimes talk to my family about books I've read.
- ◯ I always talk to my family about books I've read.

7. **When my teacher asks me about what I read... ***

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ I can never think of the answer.
- ◯ I can rarely think of the answer.
- ◯ I can sometimes think of the answer.
- ◯ I can always think of the answer.

8. **When my teachers asks the class a question about reading... ***

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ I never raise my hand.
- ◯ I rarely raise my hand.
- ◯ I sometimes raise my hand.
- ◯ I usually raise my hand.

9. **When I have to talk with classmates about what I read... ***

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ I never share what I think.
- ◯ I rarely share what I think.
- ◯ I sometimes share what I think.
- ◯ I always share what I think.

10. **I have the following forms of technology at home. Check all that apply. ***

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Handheld devices (iPad, tablet, phone)
- ☐ Laptop/computer
- ☐ Gaming console
- ☐ iPod/MP3

11. I use the internet to chat with friends. *
Mark only one oval.

- ⬭ I never use the internet to chat with friends.
- ⬭ I rarely use the internet to chat with friends.
- ⬭ I sometimes use the internet to chat with friends.
- ⬭ I always use the internet to chat with friends.

12. I use the internet to chat with friends about reading. *
Mark only one oval.

- ⬭ I never use the internet to chat with friends about books.
- ⬭ I rarely use the internet to chat with friends about books.
- ⬭ I sometimes use the internet to chat with friends about books.
- ⬭ I always use the internet to chat with friends about books.

Table 1
Google Classroom Tips for teachers

Google Classroom Tips
1. The students will need a Gmail account to use Google Classroom. If you are using another learning management system, the students will need an email address of some sort.
2. Once the students are signed into the device your school has, teach them how to bookmark Google Classroom so it is easy for them to find each time they log on.
3. Create a class for the subject or section you are teaching. Then have the students apply the access code to become a part of the class.
4. Decide the settings you want for your classroom. Settings can be set to: Only teacher can post or comment, students can only comment, or students can post and comment. You can change the setting to fit your need depending on what you are asking the students to do.

5. When you are ready to post a question for your class, choose the option "Create Question" in order to use a threaded discussion for your students. Once they answer the question and submit, then they will be able to see other student responses. This forces the students to have to think independently first before being able to see their classmates' thinking.
 	
Things to consider when posting questions:
  • Use open-ended questions, not yes or no questions
  • Use questions that include reading strategies
  • Use questions that ask students to choose a side and defend that side
  • Use a question that asks students about their feelings towards a story

6. If you teach middle or high school classes, you can create the same literacy question and share with each section you teach.

I surveyed 16 students, including nine boys and seven girls of varying reading abilities. Based on the data collected, all students agreed they had interest in reading at school and that talking about reading is important. However, 43% stated they rarely talk to their family about the books they are reading, and 50% stated they sometimes talk to friends about reading. The most overwhelming data received was that 68% of students only sometimes raise their hand when they know the answer. This was eye-opening to me in that I need to get more student participation in class, especially if more than half my class knows the answer but chooses not to share. That is when Google Classroom became

Figure 1

Figure 2

Brian   Sep 9, 2015
Ms.Kennedy I am reading a book called The Girl Who Owned A City. it is a very exciting book about a plauge that kills all adults and the kids must survive by themselves.

Becky   Sep 9, 2015
„ Secret Garden " Frances Hodgson Burnett . This is a book about a girl from India.

Steven   Sep 9, 2015
I am reading the book Kidnapped by: Gordan Korman this book is about a little girl that was kidnapped and her brother comes with her its a very good book

an educational tool. Refer to Table 1 for information on how to get Google Classroom up and running in your classroom.

Getting Started

I began having my students write about their silent reading books, as seen in Figure 1. They were to answer basic questions about what they were reading, who the main character was, and what the problem was in their story. When looking on Google Classroom, I noticed I was getting very minimal and simple answers. Figure 2 shows my teacher post and responses from Brian, Becky, and Steven. All student answers are unedited, but pseudonyms are used for their names.

As you can see, the students simply stated a few sentences that gave me little insight into the main parts of their stories. Their answers did not exactly answer my question. I believe these basic responses occurred because I started with a broad question that gave them a wide range of response. Another thing to note is Becky is an English Language Learner. She went to Google Translate to type in her answer and had it translated to English. Then copied her response into Google Classroom to be part of our online discussion even though she is not fluent in English. See Table 3 for more ideas for diverse learners.

Improving Responses

Over the next two weeks, we kept practicing and discussed what makes a quality response. The kids suggested fully answering each and every question in the post from the teacher and explaining their thinking clearly. As time went on, I started to incorporate more content-based questions using reading strategies we had discussed in class. See Table 2 for ideas using different reading strategies with your questions.

We also brainstormed ideas about how to reply to one another. With prompting, students decided they could respond by explaining why they liked someone's response, by sharing something they learned, or by asking the person a question, among other ideas (See Table 3). Finally, with practice, student responses began to improve.
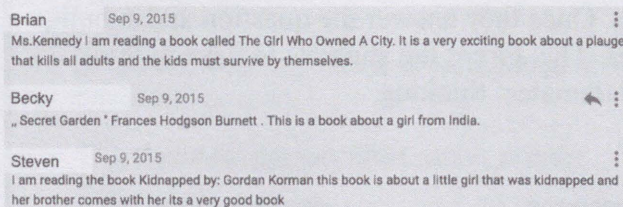
Table 2
Reading Strategies for Google Classroom

Predictions	Predict what is going to happen in the book based off the cover image, what is going to happen in the next chapter, or how characters are going to react to different situations/characters.
Connections	Make a connection to yourself, to another book/movie, or to something else similar that has happened in the world.
Questioning	Ask a question about the text- this could be about the character, the plot or about something you don't understand in the book.
Inferring	Read between the lines to state something you realized given the clues in the book. This could be about the characters, the time period of the story or any other instance that jumps out in the book.
Character Traits	Choose different characters and list traits they demonstrate using text evidence from the story.
Theme	Use the story to figure out the theme/s in the book. Use story evidence to show proof of that theme.

Table 3
Ideas for Diverse Learners

- Students can discuss with a peer first and then write their response.
- Students can write a response with a peer.
- English Language Learners can write their answer in Google Translate and then copy the English version into Google Classroom.
- Students can use sentence starters for their response.
- Special Needs students/or students who feel more comfortable speaking can speak into the Voice Typing option in a Google Doc and paste their answer into Google Classroom.

Responding to a Novel Study

In October, we began reading the novel *Number the Stars* (1989) by Lois Lowry. Two to three times a week for eight weeks, I posted questions pertaining to the chapters we read. Some of the questions asked students to make predictions, describe character traits, and even analyze character decisions in the stories.

After reading a few chapters, I posted the questions, *"What do you think freedom means? In the book, Number the Stars, what are some freedoms the Johansens and other families in Denmark lost during WWII? Explain how you might have felt having these freedoms taken away from you."* Anna responded to this question with her feelings about the story, and Elizabeth and Sarah replied, as seen in Figure 4. The students shifted to complimenting Anna's response and pulled out part of her response to include in their own reply. While Elizabeth's was not

as strong of a reply as Sarah's, Elizabeth still realized something she otherwise would not have had it not been for reading Anna's response. Sarah was able to take information from Anna's response and relate the character's feelings to her own.

Four weeks into our novel I asked, *"What do you think Mrs. Johansen meant when she said that 'it may all have been for nothing' when she spotted the package? Why do you think Mrs. Johansen didn't tell Annemarie what she was really carrying to Uncle Henrik on the boat? What do you think will happen next?"* At this point of the novel, the students were far enough into the school year and had learned many ways to analyze characters. Therefore, I felt this would be a great time to ask them to evaluate the mom's decision in the story, while then predicting what will happen next due to her decision. See Figure 5 to see Carl's and Jenny's responses. As I looked through

Figure 4
Student responses to the story

Anna   Nov 20, 2015

Freedom means that you have the choice to do want you want not someone telling you that you have to do it. Some freedoms that were taken other things are, no vacation, no coal, no certain food, and you have to be in your house by curfew. I would be mad, I mean why take away all those stuff away. I think that the soldiers would want that stuff and they would be mad too. I would hate having no freedom.

3 replies ✕

Elizabeth   Nov 20, 2015

I think that this is a very good response i wish i would've thought about that when i was typing.

Sarah   Nov 20, 2015

I forgot all of those other things that they lost i should have thought of that. i think that is a very good answer for what you think freedom is. I would also be mad if they took all those things away from me. i also think the the soldiers would be mad if we took all those privileges away from them

Figure 5
Student responses to each other about character decisions

Carl   Dec 8, 2015

I think Mrs. Johansen meant that if the packet wasn't delivered, all the setting up and all the mess they went through to make Aunt Birte's funeral would have meant nothing to their plan and possibly ruin everything by "it may have all been for nothing". I think Mrs. Johansen didn't tell Annemarie what was in the packet because it might tense up Annemarie, and if she came across a German soldier, she wouldn't know what to say. I think Annemarie will be stopped by a German soldier. After she deals with him, she will be too late and will have to swim to the boat to deliver the packet in time.

1 reply ✕

Jenny   Dec 8, 2015

I think so to about the package being too late but I didn't think she would swim to the boat. I also thought if Mrs. Johansen would tell annmarie about the packet she might not want to deliver the packet because it might be bad. I also think she would be stopped by a german solder too read my answer but great job.

Table 4
Ideas for Responding to Others

Agree or disagree, but politely state why especially if disagreeing	I agree with you because…	I like what you said, however….
Ask questions regarding something they mentioned in their post.	What did you think when…	How did you feel when…
Make a connection to something they posted.	I also had this happen to me when…	I remember hearing about something like this in…
Comment back on something they mentioned in their post that you didn't realize.	I didn't realize that…	I didn't know that…

Table 4
Word count totals over an eight-week period for select students

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8
Molly	61	98	105	101	93	98	169	123
Amber	64	81	58	54	45	54	129	125
Nicholas	53	57	73	62	130	80	94	101
Chris	61	63	100	88	89	62	135	100
Josh	86	66	74	77	45	79	91	86

their responses, Carl and Jenny pulled out more details from the text and inferred how the main character might have reacted in the story if she had known what was in the package. I was happy to see their responses to the questions, and their replies to each other were now showing more of their own new thoughts.

Increasing Reading Engagement

I kept wondering whether responding online to a question and responding to each other was increasing the engagement the students had in reading. Looking back at the students' responses and replies, both increased in quality and length over the course of the twelve-week period focusing on eight data points. I surveyed the students again using the same survey I sent out in the beginning of the year to see if their ideas about technology and reading had changed from twelve weeks earlier.

I also gathered data specifically from five students in my classroom, three boys and two girls. I discovered that overall their word count rose from the time we started using Google Classroom for online discussions. Table 4 shows the word count over the eight-week period for each of the five students chosen. The word count increased by almost 40 words for the group from beginning to end of the eight data points pulled. This could be attributed to that fact that we moved from short stories to a novel over the eight weeks of data collection. Even though this is not necessarily supported by theoretical research yet, I interpreted it as an observational indicator of engagement when I saw the word count rising and the quality of their responses improving.

As I looked for an increase in engagement during those twelve weeks, I noticed it is hard to measure engagement when students are reading and typing on a computer. You do not see the emotion the students' have while responding because you cannot hear the tone or inflection in their voices. One thing that I did notice that could be a sign of engagement is the amount of time they spent on their responses, which increasingly rose as we discussed questions from a novel instead of short stories or their silent reading book.

Finally, when looking over the survey and assessing its worth in the end, I found that the survey did not gather the information that I was looking for in terms of engagement with online discussions. I would change the survey to ask more direct questions about talking through online discussions more than just general technology and reading questions.

Conclusion

Technology is growing in our society both inside and outside of schools. If we allow our students to use the technologies our schools provide, we can take them to a whole new level of learning and interaction through digital discussions. In the end, using technology did not take away from the learning environment in my classroom. Instead, it allowed all my students to actively participate in a safe online learning environment. Taking the time to implement digital discussions in the classroom proved beneficial for students, enhanced their reading experiences, and increased their engagement in learning.

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