

Online Discussion Boards Promote Reflective Thinking

Connie Lindsey

As foreign as they may seem to many teachers, chat rooms, Instant Messaging, My Space, and blogs are tools that many of our students comfortably use daily to publish their writing and communicate with friends.

Having learned to type on a manual typewriter and to research using the card catalog and printed *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*, I understand many teachers' reluctance to embrace technology as a tool to teach literacy. But we owe it to our students to take an honest look at the world in which they live, as well as what skills colleges will expect them to have mastered as incoming freshman rather than remaining in our comfort zone and sticking with what has worked for us for years. I was personally made aware of the disconnect between the high school English classroom and the university freshman comp classroom several years ago when my son and several of his classmates, whom I had as AP students the year before, took two dual credit English classes their senior year at our local university. Assignments and handouts were posted on Blackboard Learning System or Nicenet, not written on chalk boards or run off and handed out in class. Papers were turned in via email or uploaded online. Having grown up with computers, these new methods presented no problems for my son or his friends. Using Nicenet as a means of academic discourse, however, was a different story.

One evening my son Keith explained to me that the instructor was requiring them to begin their discussion of an assigned essay from the reader on Nicenet before coming to class. I looked in horror over my son's shoulder as he was reading his fellow classmates' posts. Students who had turned in literate, well supported analyses of essays to me the year before were posting messages that read more like Instant Messages than academic discourse. Standard punctuation and capitalization were absent, and NetSpeak was sprinkled throughout their posts. Upon making a judgmental statement to the effect of "What are they thinking? They are in college now," my son retorted, "Give them a break, Mom. We've never done this before. It's not like anyone ever taught us how." Ouch. Realizing the truth of his statement and feeling guilty for leaving this gap in their preparation, I resolved to find a way to include online discussion in my AP junior English curriculum.

When I brought up the subject in class the next day, my students became animated, asking when we could start. Our first forum was a folder the district technology director created for us on the employees' discussion board that few teachers, including me, knew existed. After explaining the difference between chat rooms and academic discussions, I asked students to post their opinion on the issue they planned to research that semester and reply to two classmates' posts. The assignment quickly took on a life of its own, and I was reminded that technology integration is not for the faint-hearted. Numerous students eagerly set to work searching for avatars to upload. Upon receiving clarification that avatars are icons that can appear next to one's name, I initiated a discussion about what is appropriate on the World Wide Web is not necessarily appropriate in a college English class.

As I read through the morning's posts during lunch that day, I discovered that one student had flamed the person who replied to his post with a remark resembling "in your face...who cares what you think!?" Making a note to talk to this student, I noticed that a new folder had appeared on the district discussion board. Curious to see who else was using the board, I opened the folder to discover that three of my students had started their own chat folder right there on our district Web site. These events motivated me to contact my Web hosting provider that evening to find out how to install a private discussion board on my independent Web site that I maintain for my students, a decision I have never regretted.

Several days later I introduced my students to our new discussion board and called their attention to the folder titled "Read before Posting" that contained the following message:

An educational discussion forum requires a more professional tone than chat rooms or Instant Messaging. Remember to spell words out correctly and give thought to your wording and sentence structure. When responding to a post, make sure you address the ideas presented in the original post with respect. Never make personal comments or deride the person in any way. Respectful disagreement can create an exciting exchange of ideas, but personal comments will anger and/or embarrass people. Enjoy using this forum to express your opinions and to find out what others think!

The real rewards in this new venture, however, were unanticipated, going far beyond teaching discussion forum etiquette. What unfolded that semester as we worked together to understand what honest discussion and respect for dissenting opinions look like made the anxious moments and hard work well worthwhile. Discussions begun in class were extended onto the forum, and discussions begun on the forum

spilled over into class discussion. As time went by and students reread posts and added new replies, that elusive ingredient reflective thinking began to appear.

Creating an environment that actively encouraged my students to think deeply, critically and reflectively had always seem to elude me. Although people need time to process and reflect in order to synthesize what they are learning with what they already know and believe, too many times students come to a class discussion with their opinions already formed, so that the discussion of an issue quickly becomes a debate, with little consideration given to others' perspectives or ideas. What my students and I discovered that semester is that asynchronous discussion boards can create that reflective environment that students need. When students must read and process a peer's written opinion, they are focusing on that idea, not thinking ahead to what they will say next in a group. When reflection is coupled with research, the outcome can be powerful.

In the research unit that my junior English students do in the spring each year, they must center their research on an issue about being an American. Although one of the stipulations at the beginning of the unit is that students keep an open mind as they strive to answer the questions they have generated, many focus their research on affirming what they already know and believe.

Mark, a high-achieving student, chose the issue of how race matters in American as the focus for his research. What was not clear at first is that he chose his research focus in order to vent his anger and frustration concerning his perceived unfairness of affirmative action regarding college admissions. Having high goals for himself, but limited funds, Mark had already consulted resources in the counselors' office, looking for possible scholarships and grants to help him pay for college. What he found were long lists of opportunities for people of color, but very little listed for middle class white males. His feelings surfaced in his initial post in early February to the discussion thread "How does race matter in America?" "It matters a lot when it comes to college," he wrote. "The least likely person to get accepted into college is the average white male." In response to Emily's reply that she wondered whether schools did actually treat people of different races differently, Mark revealed his lack of knowledge and naiveté regarding the issue by replying,

"There are specifically black institutions and black scholarships handed out but if whites had scholarships just for whites or a school for whites then it would automatically

become racist. Even if there is discrimination, if people just worked harder, they wouldn't have to worry about getting into college, no matter what their race is."

In a normal classroom setting, the discussion would most likely have ended there. But having a Web-based discussion allows for input 24/7, and the thread grew to 25 posts by class time the next day. As the focus of the thread shifted to other aspects of how race matters, Mark would refocus the discussion back to Affirmative Action with a new post.

"I agree [that] equal opportunity is great, and it should be that way, equal," Mark wrote, "but when almost every scholarship you can try to find has racial classifications for those who apply. When you start to say only blacks, Hispanics, Japanese can receive this scholarship and leave the rest out without allowing them a chance because of their race you cut out equal opportunity."

As posts were made by others outside Mark's class, one challenged him and others "to research the amount of money allocated to students with the same socio-economic status and cross reference it with race," adding that "You might be surprised."

Because the unit stretched out from early February through April, students had time to read multiple articles on their issue, discover what was available on the Internet related to their issue, and continue to post on the discussion board. This extended time and audience outside the regular class period allowed students to work through their feelings and work on meshing new ideas they were having with what they had originally believed to be true. Most students commented in their final reflections on the unit that they had changed their original opinions due to their research and discussion with classmates. Probably no one made a bigger change, though, than Mark. The third week of April, he began a new thread on the discussion board.

"The views of Affirmative Action in my mind have changed severely. At first I thought it was to give a head start to ethnicities and to halt the further progress of the majority. Through this extensive research, I have really seen how it is a fair policy that doesn't harm many, if any at all. It really does more than just one thing. It intermingles all races, progresses low to middle class minorities, which helps out in unemployment rates and keeping us from becoming separate from each other, living apart in a nation of one. On the whole it is policy set in place for the greater good, to give opportunities to those less fortunate and thus making progress as a nation."

Not only did Mark see the issue from a new perspective, he was influential in changing others' views. A classmate wrote in his final discussion thread, "It wasn't until I had the opportunity to talk to Mark and Victoria that key points were brought to my attention. They helped me realize that Affirmative Action is there to help kids that would not get into college otherwise."

Victoria's response to Mark's April thread reveals that the discussion was not limited to English and the discussion board, but had spilled over into other classes as well.

"I am really glad to see that your mind has been opened to a new side of Affirmative Action. I cannot explain how angry I would get at you when you would argue over Affirmative Action in our history class. I just wanted to scream at you, but just kept it all in, due to the fact that I knew that I knew what I wanted to say, [but] I just did not have any evidence to back it up. But I am so glad to hear that you do see the other side of the fence, and do realize what good these programs do for the people of this country."

Sustained intellectual discussions such as these rarely occur in most schools but are desperately needed. If our young people do not learn to express dissenting opinions and find ways to reason with one another, our society may lose the ability to accept diversity and find a way to be one nation of individuals.

Having the posts remain on the Web for students to revisit their discussions and reread threads allows them to trace the development of both their own and others' ideas, at times a rewarding experience. Victoria expressed her satisfaction in seeing people's attitudes change in a post at the end of the unit.

"I am so glad that this research project has opened the eyes of so many people. I am glad the people realize how lucky we are to be able to come to school with peers who care about getting an education, a facility where we do not have to fear for our safety day in and day out."

Had our discussion been limited to one or two days in class, this growth and bonding would probably never have occurred.

These benefits alone would be reason for implementing discussion boards into classroom instruction. However, they offer other benefits as well. Asynchronous discussion boards offer students freedom of expression that face-to-face classroom discussion does not. Quiet students who will not assert themselves verbally in a group find that they can voice their opinions without having to interrupt others or have 20 pairs of eyes focused on them while they are talking. The eyes that some students fear most are their teacher's, as they see in them a judgmental gage of the "rightness" of their response. Robert Roxema found after surveying students who used a literary MOO that students enjoyed the freedom of stating their opinions without seeing the teacher's facial expressions (38). Mike was one such student. He did not voluntarily join in any class discussion all year and gave brief, quiet responses when called on. He found his voice, though, on the discussion board.

His posts revealed that occasionally still waters do indeed run deep. And as other students responded to his posts, he became a frequent user of the board, making numerous posts in the evenings.

When discussing sensitive subjects like racial discrimination, some students are not comfortable speaking out and hold back their true feelings. In a class that is dominantly white, students of color can feel especially uncomfortable. As the only minority student in a small class, Renee sat quietly looking down during the heated discussions, never voicing her perspective of Affirmative Action. She did, however, post voluntarily to the topic at the end of the unit.

“Even though life for most minorities isn’t fair, Affirmative Action is there to smooth over the injustice that has been happening for many years. I know I would never know how it feels to be a different race, but I just don’t understand how middle class whites or even upper class whites could feel discriminated against just because minorities are given affirmative action.”

In this era of accountability, state-mandated testing, and No Child Left Behind, many teachers are feeling pressured to adhere to traditional test prep methods that administrators can easily recognize in lesson plan documentation and appraisers’ walk-throughs. Some administrators become uncomfortable when they see a roomful of English students staring at laptops and ask “Shouldn’t they be doing something to prepare for the state test?”

“They are preparing,” is my answer.

Works Cited

Rozema, Robert A. “Falling into Story: Teaching Reading with the Literary MOO.” *English Journal* 93.1 (2003): 33-38.