Chapter XXX
Creating a Virtual Literacy Community between High School and University Students

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ABSTRACT

The authors of this chapter describe a project in which a university education professor and a high school English teacher redesigned the curricula of their classrooms, so their students could participate in a literacy project that focused on computer-mediated discussions of literature. The goal of the project was to develop both the technological literacies of these students and the more traditional literacies in the form of reading and writing skills. The Book Buddy Project afforded the authors the opportunity to create a virtual literacy community in which high school and university students incorporated the traditional literacies of reading and writing within a virtual environment that facilitated communication, collaboration, and learning with text.

INTRODUCTION

Technology is an integral part of people's everyday lives as they engage in computer online chat rooms, send messages to family and friends, use their digital cell phones to conduct business and personal communication, and capture their most precious moments on digital pictures and movies. Students as early as elementary school use computer technology to create stories and draw about particular events in their lives. As students progress into middle school, they fur-

ther develop their knowledge of the computer through computer literacy classes that teach them to engage in multimedia and hypertext environments. By high school, students take elective courses that focus on more sophisticated technologies that include creating digital video streams and computer programming.

Technology enables K-12 students to communicate, collaborate, and learn with people around the world as they seek to make meaning. These students use the computer as a tool for communication through computer-mediated discussions in which students engage in online discussions concerning school subject matter topics, books they are reading, and social talk. In order to facilitate this kind of communication, teachers have had to rethink their curriculum so that students are no longer engaged with one another within the limits of the classroom setting (Jetton, 2003-2004). Students can now participate in discussions that extend the boundaries of the K-12 classroom to virtually anywhere in the world. As a result of the proliferation of technology, teachers and university professors are revising their theories about the ways in which students think and learn, and are designing new course curricula that encompass these new uses of technology (Kim & Kamil, 2004).

The purpose of this chapter is to describe a project in which a university education professor and a high school English teacher redesigned the curricula of their classrooms so their students could participate in a literacy project that focused on computer-mediated discussions of literature. The goal of the project was to develop both the technological literacies of these students and the more traditional literacies in the form of reading and writing skills.

COMPUTERS AND LITERACY LEARNING

Literacy has many meanings, even within the field of education. Literacy can refer to the processes of becoming a literate citizen that might include mathematics, language, and science. With the continued proliferation of technology, literacy has now been expanded to include the development of computer-related skills such as word processing, World Wide Web searches, computer-mediated discussion strategies, multimedia presentations, and a host of other valuable skills.

Technology has also begun to change the way in which we examine the traditional literacies of reading and writing. Technology provides unique ways in which students can learn to read, collaborate through writing online, and respond to literature with others. For example, the advent of computer-assisted instruction (CAI) has enabled students to increase their comprehension of text (Boyd, 2000; Reinking, 1998; Weller, Carpenter, & Holmes, 1998). In these studies, students were provided with aids as they read the text. These aids included guided reading, vocabulary definitions, context cues, simplified texts, and additional background information.

Other studies have found that students need high levels of guidance as they engage in computer-assisted instruction that might include prescribed suggestions as to the strategies that would be the most effective to use (Gillingham, Garner, Guthrie, & Sawyer, 1989; Reinking & Rickman, 1990). In these studies, students received focused guidance such as vocabulary assistance and prompts that instructed them to reread, use their background knowledge, and locate important information in the text.

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