

# Chapter XL

## Computer–Mediated Discussions within a Virtual Learning Community of High School and University Students

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### **ABSTRACT**

*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 author the opportunity to create a virtual learning 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, email 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 mov-

ies. 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 further 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.

Through the use of technology K-12 students communicate, collaborate, and learn within and outside of the classroom as they seek to make meaning. These students use the computer as a tool for exploring many different ways of learning about literacy and the world. In elementary school, students use technology to learn new vocabulary. For example, students can read a book and take turns recording vocabulary words from the text on a digital white board that provides visual images as they read (Labbo, Love, & Ryan, 2007). These digital words would then be used to create a Digital Language Experience in which students use digital pictures and words to reenact and write the story events (Labbo, Eakle, Montero, 2002). Likewise, in middle and high school, students use the computer as a tool for communication through computer-mediated discussions in which students engage in online discussions through blogs or discussion boards (Langhorst, 2007; Xie, DeBacker, & Ferguson, 2006). These discussions concern school subject matter topics, books they are reading, and social talk (Jetton & Soenksen, 2006). These 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).

## **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 (Leu, 2000). According to Reinking (1998), digital communication is replacing the traditional printed texts, and as a result, has changed communication and dissemination of information. Students are approaching reading and writing tasks differently. For example, students have begun to engage in digital environments during writing lessons in kindergarten. As students create representations of play, art, and writing in these digital environments, they learn quickly that print is interactive and malleable (Labbo & Kuhn, 1998).

## **INTERACTIVE LITERACY ENVIRONMENTS**

The advent of information and communication technology (ICT) has led to substantial changes in classroom organization, curricula, and pedagogical practices (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). Teachers have begun to organize their classrooms and design curricula so that their practices include more collaborative pedagogy in which teachers and students interact with the technology, and students interact with one another and students outside the confines of the classroom. Emerging evidence finds that students' engagement and motivation increased as they participated in interactive software and hardware such as the Interactive White Board (Harrison et al., 2003; Passey et al., 2003). Students also reported that they appreciated the range of resources available

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