

Online Book Discussion: Taking a Stand  
Synthesis Reflection by Holly Kruse and Regina Quinn  
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**Introduction:**

In schools throughout Vermont, educators are faced with the enormous challenge of helping all students move well beyond basic reading skills, towards deeper understanding, critical analysis and interpretation.

*Can online book discussion enhance young readers' ability to comprehend literature more fully and respond to it more thoughtfully?*

Building on the research and lessons learned through online art exchanges among students, teachers and professional artist mentors, The Vermont Center for the Book and The Web Project sponsored Taking a Stand, an online book discussion series

among middle school students from six Vermont schools. Participants read and discussed, in class and online, three novels dealing with young people who intentionally or inadvertently take a stand on an issue.

**Structure of the Experience:**

Typically, students spent class time during the two weeks prior to their time online reading and participating in small-group, Great Books-style discussions, forming and responding to interpretive questions and referring to passages in the text to explain or underscore thoughts, back up opinions, or frame questions. They also sought to relate the issues involved in the books to their own lives. In some cases, they needed to build background knowledge to understand the significance of the book's context. At the end of that preparatory period, they worked with other students in small groups to select an idea or question to post, based on their in-class discussions and writing.

Due to the large number of students participating in this project (over one hundred across the 6 schools), the Taking a Stand discussion area was divided into three forums so that each school could distribute students among those three

*Through this series, we hoped to find evidence of student learning related to three standards from the Vermont Framework: **Reading Comprehension, Informed Decision-Making, and Response to Literature.***

groups. Based on their own experiences and on research and observations by Falks (1996), Sherry, Billig and Tavalin (1999), Taking a Stand project designers believed that this format might foster the development and coherence of these virtual learning communities by creating smaller, more intimate groupings.

A majority of participants in online WEB Project initiatives have consistently reported (RMC surveys, 1998, 1999) that receiving responses is the greatest incentive for engaging in online dialogue. To assure that dialogue would happen in a timely manner, project designers decided to limit the online discussion window to one week. As the project got underway, it became readily apparent that discussions were just getting going by the end of the week, so Taking a Stand teachers decided to lengthen the window for the remaining books. Although a two-week window was more conducive to having conversational cycles develop, the volume of responses continued to be unwieldy, so for the third book, schools paired off (at the suggestion of a number of students at different schools).

*As we review our own experiences and compare them with others' we find that patterns to the flow across a single book discussion and across a series of discussions emerge.*

### **Evolution of an Online Book Discussion Series:**

The flow of the initial online experiences of novice computer-users may best be described as sporadic and jerky. At the outset, there may not yet exist what researchers have called “a clear payoff -- some compelling need for the student to deal with the discomfort of learning new means of communication.”

When teachers and students are new to the experience, the log-on glitches, low basic computer skill-level, and computer access problems experienced in many schools often result in irritation, loss of interest, and loss of momentum. RMC evaluators (1998) have concluded that, among other factors, equitable access, ease of

use, and functionality are essential if the online experience is to be effective. We have found this to be particularly true at the outset when students are not yet convinced of the inherent value of the experience.

As a prelude to the book discussions, students at the six schools participated in personal introduction threads. This was initially very awkward for them as they sought a way to present themselves out into space to unknown others. We concur with Wilson and colleagues' (Shelley, Billig and Tavalin, 1999) identification of the importance of "finding a voice and having something to say" and found that this was particularly challenging before students had fully conceptualized the experience of online discussion. Some had used e-mail, some had done chats and generally imagined that communication would be more immediate; few, if any, had experienced asynchronous, threaded discussions. Once students received responses or read other postings, however, interest and eagerness soared.

At the outset of online discussion there tends to be a high level of anticipation, and excitement about the opportunity to interact with students at other sites and to get others' ideas. Students also demonstrate a high level of investment in "their question." So much so, that there is a danger of succumbing to a virtual bombardment of questions. Students may get overwhelmed by everything

**An early flurry of responses without comments on other respondents' postings, and without reply from the original questioner:**

**Subject:** What would you do in this situation

*What would you do, If you were in Ms. Narwins situation? What do you think about it? How would you feel? Please reply quickly!*

**Reply:**

**Subject:** Ms Narwin

*If I was Ms Narwin I would feel bad because she didn't want him to get suspended; she just wanted him to stop humming the national anthem because he was causing a disturbance to the class.*

**Reply:**

**Subject:** Miss Narwin

*I think that if Miss Narwin had just let it pass, Philip would have stoped humming and the whole thing could have been avoided*

**Reply:**

**Subject:** Miss Narwin

*Hi. I don't think Miss Narwin should have taken him out of the class. But on the other hand, I think Philip should have been so rude. So I am on both sides. See Yah. Write Back*

**Reply:**

**Subject:** This is a Mt.Abe exam response

*I would feel nervous and bad about the image that had been painted of me. i would most likely retire from my job, and get away from the whole mess.*

coming at them and frustrated that their postings have not received responses. During the first book discussion of the Taking a Stand series, and occasionally during subsequent ones, it was pretty much a one question - one response, or one question and a series of unconnected, brief responses, situation. Few dialogues really got going, and then suddenly the week was over! Although it was apparent that students were trying to respond in meaningful ways to others' questions, the cycle of interaction (request - respond - reply), a benchmark of basic conversation (RMC survey results, 1998), rarely developed.

As students reflected on their experiences after the first discussion, they recognized the importance of thoughtful responses and sustained dialogue.

*As students gained experience, they moved towards higher quality interactions. Initially, most discussions consisted of questions posed with, perhaps, some minimal response. By the third book, discussions, generally were more sustained; the flow felt smoother.*

Informed by their early experiences, many students approached the second book with greater focus and understanding. We believe that these qualitative improvements were also promoted by the students' feelings of indignation and outrage about the injustices experienced by many of the characters (the book dealt with

young South Africans taking a stand against apartheid). This helped fuel passion for participating in the discussion as students were personally moved and had a stronger desire to write about the issues raised. A less overwhelming volume of responses, generally greater focus and more sustained dialogue resulted.

For the third book, breaking into partnerships made things even more manageable, although it left sites more vulnerable to the peculiarities of a single partner school's computer and internet access quirks, class trips, and scheduling conflicts. As students participated in their third discussion, we noted a

*In several threads, I could see that they were beginning to understand the difference between trying to do a good job answering someone's question and building a conversation online.*

reduction in incomplete cycles online and an increase in students' tendency to

**Response to a series of questions and responses about the third book in the discussion series:**

*This is in response to the previous three replies. We agree with you in that the reason that the story ended the way it did is because good doesn't always end up victorious. There is something that we do disagree with, however, and it is in the second reply. The previous two books that we read did not end in good prevailing. In *Nothing But the Truth*, Philip ended up breaking down and Mrs. Narwin was practically forced to leave; neither of these things were good. In *Beyond Safe Boundaries* Willem died and Apartheid was still law and Evie had to leave the country; none of these things were good, either. As themes go, the themes for these books seem to be that good doesn't usually prevail, at least in most of the small battles.*

critically respond to other postings, an observations that we feel bodes well for conducting successful series of discussion.

As students become proficient users of the technology and ease into greater comfort with this form of communication, we believe they will help realize the WEB Project's fourth goal -- for students to experience "an increase in interaction using technology and ... a corresponding increase in student performance."

As students gained experience that went beyond either simply asking a question or answering one, they were ready to critique series of responses, build on others' ideas, analyze similarities and

differences among the series of books and discuss broader literary themes.

*Flow across a single book:*

Although there are overarching factors affecting the flow of a discussion that are related to students' level of experience, we observed some patterns during discussions of each of the three books:

- in class, good level of involvement in early discussions.
- first few days of discussion: sprinkling of activity. This seems like a "make or break" time. If students find another student's posting interesting, or if they

receive what they consider as a thoughtful or relevant response, there is motivation to continue.

- somewhere just past the midway point of a two-week cycle, interest and activity peaked, as there were a variety of conversations happening and students chose ones to respond to.
- often, as discussions just got going, the flow was not as smooth as it might otherwise have been, due to factors such as trips, residencies, illnesses and general scheduling. The flow was then very dependent on the quality and quantity of responses; if there was too much lag time or if responses didn't feel thorough or apropos, students felt frustrated and began to lose interest.
- in some cases participating schools posted and disappeared, leaving students at the other school only able to respond to each other.
- As the window closed, some discussions had come to a natural conclusion, while others abruptly ended. It would not have been impossible to continue, but schedules did not seem to coincide and students were then on to the next book. One student compared the ending to falling off a cliff.

**Classroom Practices that promote quality online discussion:**

There are a number of classroom practices that appear to be helpful in promoting higher-quality online discussion:

- conducting quality in-class discussion, but

*We had begun using printouts of online responses partway through the discussion of the first book, and we continued this so that students would read them through without the urgency to respond immediately and off the cuff. They read what others wrote eagerly and responded earnestly.*

not to such an exhaustive level that students are left with only a few issues unresolved.

- allowing time to explore postings.
- printing out discussion threads so that individuals can read them, write comments, discuss them with their group members and formulate a response.

- include the online discussion, not as an add-on, but rather as the core of in class learning: The RMC Survey data for 1998 and 1999 indicate a large majority of teachers “sometimes” incorporate the “topics raised online into classroom discussion and vice versa.” We believe that successful online dialogue and student learning will be enhanced when “sometimes” becomes “usually.” (This was not a choice for respondents. We suggest that it be added to future surveys.)

- post related artwork online: if teachers work with an art specialist, students may create interpretive works and generate meaningful dialogue related to their works in progress.

**Regarding the two-week window:** *Students had more time to reflect on the book, others’ responses, and their own replies. It felt less rushed than it had with the first discussion.*

### Quality of the discussion

In reviewing Lorraine Sherry’s research article, survey results, Web Project participants’ experience papers, and the online discussions themselves, a number of factors emerge, we found, which affect the quality of online discussions and the opportunity they hold to help students meet related standards. Many of these factors overlap; all are interrelated.

- *Schedule/time factor*

Lack of time is considered the greatest barrier to online dialogue by respondents to the RMC online survey. Schools may have different vacation and in-service calendars. Special events or residencies, field trips, and snow days further

complicate coordination between schools. Some teachers struggled with the

*“However we chose to approach the ‘Taking a Stand’ project, my sense is that we all viewed it as an ‘extra’ thing to be done during the school year. This may be important to examine further as we evaluate the experience.”*

*Jane Lavigne*

constraints of class periods, competing curricular needs, and little planning time to try out new ideas and methods or focus on disciplines in which they were not experts. A number of schools viewed the online discussion project as an extra to be added rather than incorporated into their curriculum. In Walden, the Taking a Stand discussion series formed the core for eighth grade literacy; however, scheduling and time were still issues as discussion group members usually were not together during other periods of the day.

- *Access to the Internet using current technology*

Access to the Internet is seen as the second greatest barrier to online dialogue, according to RMC evaluators (1999). Flexible access to recent-generation computers with an Internet connection is considered essential for online discussion. For a variety of reasons, many schools did not have sufficient access to Internet computers for the duration of this project for students to easily post their responses or check the flow of their discussion threads online. Each site experienced idiosyncratic challenges related to access. For example, at one school, some of the older computers connected to the Internet necessitated the use an early version of Netscape which does not show a “reply” button; on these computers students may read but not post messages.

- *Common understandings*

To ensure the best opportunity for success, we believe it benefits everyone for all participants to have shared vision and goals for the project and an agreed upon plan for handling issues that arise.

On several occasions in the Taking A Stand project, a few of the schools used the discussion forums in ways that seemed to run counter to our goal of collaborative learning among students from different schools through online discussion. A hoard of questions were posted in one of the forums to fulfill an exam requirement in one case and in another, students from one school responded to a prompt given by their teacher in a way that seemed to fulfill a classroom assignment. As neither posting was accompanied by an explanation from the schools involved, they caught other teachers off-guard and sent a confusing message to our students as to what we were trying to achieve.

*“The important thing is that there is some clarity regarding the goals of the electronic discussion because other instructional designs are related to these goals.”*

*N. Chism (1998)*

In one schools' experience papers, the issue of heterogeneous versus homogeneous groups was brought up. In another, a teacher states “I chose to involve my ‘enrichment’ class...who had elected to take this class because they enjoyed reading and wanted to be part of a book discussion group.”

B. Means et al:

The core of educational reform consists of authentic challenging tasks, with nine associated elements: multidisciplinary curriculum; collaborative learning; heterogeneous groupings; interactive modes of instruction; student exploration; teacher as facilitator; performance-based assessment; extended blocks of time; and all students practice advanced skills. (1993)

Teachers at another school noted that students with weaker skills seemed to make the greatest gains and reap the richest benefits. Sherry, Billig and Tavalin (1999) write:

On the other hand, Berge (1997) notes that written communication tends to be more reflective than spoken interaction and is particularly well suited to thoughtful or hesitant conversationalists.

We believe it is essential that teachers keep these points in mind as they decide which students to involve discussion.

- *Teacher training or knowledge*

*It appears that students whose teachers practice these techniques approach online discussion differently...*

Several teachers in the Taking A Stand discussion referred to Great Books training or used “Seed Discussions” and “Questioning the Author” (QtA) methods in their classrooms. Many of these techniques for critical reading and collaborative discussions complement one another. It appears that students whose teachers practice these techniques approach online discussion differently from those whose teachers maintain more direct control (such as framing discussion in terms of a teacher-generated question and a series of individual student responses, or in terms of question-generation linked to test grades, with little student ownership or concern for maintaining a conversation related to that question.)

- *Teacher/Mentor commitment to project*

In collaborative projects, especially paired ones, if a school drops out, it leaves the other hanging. It is a frustrating experience that should not happen. School “absenteeism” has occurred in both the Taking A Stand and Civic Discourse projects. The History Day group experienced a similar problem with a significant number of their mentors. Brent Truchon of Edmunds Middle School: “Of the twenty-five mentors that volunteered to be part of this activity, five did not respond at all. Another responded once...”

- *Student motivation and investment*

RMC survey results (1999) show that “giving and getting feedback was the most important incentive for students, teachers, and community members to continue participating in the online discussions.” Other reported incentives to participate were “increased student motivation and fascination with the creative

process...increased student self-efficacy...and that “integrating the online discussion into the curriculum was an incentive in and of itself.” It is unclear how many of these respondents were students, and how the majority of students might have responded to this section.

Jane Lavigne at Edmunds Middle School notes that students “like the immediacy of face-to-face discussions, and were frustrated when they didn’t receive instant responses online. They kept asking for real time chat or a Taking A Stand chat room.” Her students also “have suggested that teachers post questions or create threads from which students can choose.”

According to Regina Quinn at Walden School, “if the book didn’t ‘grab’ kids, it was difficult to sustain interest in keeping discussions going.”

Students at Cabot School eagerly checked for replies to their responses and were discouraged when conversations seemed to move in fits and starts. They were also worn down with the volume of questions coming at them frequently devoid of commentary or context.

In reading through parts of the Civic Discourse threads, we found that adults were much more present in topic discussions than in Taking A Stand, which may have had an inhibiting effect on student discussion. An alternative would be to have students take more of a facilitator/moderator role in the online discussions on a rotating basis. This would provide opportunities for students to understand and affect the overall dynamics of online discussion of literature, for instance, and interact at different levels. If everyone took turns, perhaps more would become consistently involved in the conversations.

- *Timing of online discussions*

One factor that had an overall impact on the flow of the online literature discussions was that students were most interested in discussing parts of the book

they had most recently read. Some students were somewhat reluctant to go back over early parts of the book they had read, discussed, and written about in class a week or two before. For some it seemed like rehashing ideas they had pretty well resolved through their class discussions, so they were less likely to pick up on such a thread online.

Regina Quinn: “...after reading and discussing books in class students felt less urgency to wrestle with ideas and pose questions online...A negative aspect of the online discussion was that it occurred after much in-depth, in-class discussion, so for many students their conflicts and questions had been resolved by the time they went online.”

Jane Lavigne on the other hand, “..found that if I gave my kids enough time and guidance through in-class discussions, they would make their way online to the bigger ideas.” She does explain that hers was an enrichment class: “...we could focus all of our energies on the books and the discussions; we didn’t have other curricula that we needed to cover. This, however, contributed to a frustration that we encountered. Some very good ‘starts’ went nowhere, or ended abruptly.”

“I found that if I gave my kids enough time and guidance through in-class discussions, they would make their way online to the bigger ideas.”

- *Time and flexibility for the project to evolve*

Teachers involved in Taking A Stand agree that students need time and opportunity to develop their communication skills, break the question/answer cycle, move beyond the superficialities and reflect especially with this more anonymous online audience. The project needs time to evolve. This would have to be balanced with discussion “make or break” times students’ need for immediacy and change, the danger of running a book into the ground, unacceptable response time lags, and the general schedule/time factor. Instead of having a project such as

this be viewed as an “extra,” it could incorporate a good portion of one’s curriculum, move into different sorts of literature-related forums for certain times during the year, or even semi-hibernate for periods.

- The response/feedback factor

In the Taking A Stand project, student responses varied in depth and pertinence. Promising conversations came to sudden ends. Jane Lavigne: “Some very good ‘starts’ went nowhere, or ended abruptly...Sometimes discussions stopped because the discussion time ended; other times it was because of lack of access to computers, snow days, field trips, school vacations, etc.” Regina Quinn notes this about the flow of responses: “Sometimes it was so overwhelming, it was hard for students to find a place to respond; sometimes there was no response, or conversations that didn’t really get off the ground.” Printouts seemed to help with access issues as well as to leave time for reflection. Holly Kruse notes that it removed a sense of “urgency to respond immediately and off the cuff” for her students.

There needs to be a give-and-take in numbers of responses and length of time between postings of responses. Students used to chat rooms may be expecting much more immediate response, and it takes time to get the rhythm of a reflective online dialogue. If too much time goes by, there is the concern that nobody is out there, which lowers students’ investment in the project, yet too many responses are overwhelming. Frequent responses may cause the conversation to remain superficial, yet if responses are too long and polished, other students may not want to wade in. These are all givens; with guidance our students will adjust to the rhythms and hopefully make the best of the potential.

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- *Project closure*

How do we begin the project? How do we end it? Representative students and teachers in Civil Discourse met at Cabot School with folks from the Web Project to carve out forums and develop a web site for the project. Student involvement in the planning process seems a key factor in their investment. It also gives a sense of immediacy and the face-to-face interactions many of them are requesting. Project closure is equally important; otherwise things seem to peter out and no one is sure what was supposed to happen. Again, a face-to-face meeting or celebration to share cherries and pits seems worthwhile for assessing and improving the program. In *Taking A Stand*, Nick Boke has made a great effort to meet with groups of students from the different schools and will meet with teachers in May. It might be a nice idea another time to expand this so that kids meet kids.

### **Student Learning:**

*“Did online discussions increase student learning, or did the in-class discussions improve the quality of online discourse? My students tell me it was the latter.”*

*Jane Lavigne*

Citing specific learning gains is related to online book discussion is challenging, due to the many variables and factors that exist. There are, however some indicators that we believe suggest gains.

Many students at our small Vermont schools attend school together from the time they are in preschool through at least eighth grade and may develop strong conceptions about each other’s strengths, weaknesses and relative status. Some teachers report that many of the students who tend not to participate as much in class, or who are not seen as highly capable in their peers’ eyes, were more willing to participate and initiate conversations online, confirming Stone’s (1996) finding that this medium is “attractive to intuitive thinkers, particularly introverted persons.”

We hope that continuing online discussion will increase their participation and hence, their learning. The Complex Instruction Program research conducted by Lotan and Cohen (*Working for Equity in Heterogeneous Classrooms: Sociological Theory in Action*, 1997), has clearly shown that students make significant learning gains as their level of collaborative interaction and activity increases during cooperative group work.

Although the standards we monitored were clear, we have not arrived at a shared tool for monitoring and assessing the many facets of student performance along the way. Perhaps a pre and post interpretive reading assessment might be helpful in the future. Students might also be asked to keep a journal with classroom responses and reflections on their online contributions.

Regina Quinn: “We also noted that as students read the work of other students with whom they did not have a relationship or personal history, they were more analytical and critical about their work...they did challenge with ‘Why do you think that?’ or ‘What evidence do you have...’”

Holly Kruse: “During this time, we saw increased use of indirect references from the book and more complex reasoning applied to construct interpretations...”

Brent Truchon: “It is unclear if the quality of their work would have significantly differed[if they had not been involved in online discussions with their mentors], but the approach certainly would have. On the other hand, what does the fact that students felt that the personal interaction was the best part say about the power of face to face personal communication. Maybe on-line dialogue followed by personal communication are a perfect compliment for one another.”

There is a Response to Literature rubric used in the Vermont Writing Portfolios in eighth grade. Perhaps if we took a closer look at this with our students during the online literature discussion project, they might make good use of this collaborative time to try their wings and post work in progress of a more formal

response piece to be included in their portfolios.

### **Improving the quality of future online book discussions: Ideas to explore**

- Having teacher/facilitators participate in a non-overpowering way in the first online book discussion to model building dialogue through effective responses.

Lorraine Sherry refers to three functions of the moderator suggested by R. Mason:

"~set the agenda for the electronic conference  
~create a friendly environment for learning, and  
~focus discussion on crucial points." (1991)

These functions could be non-intrusive while at the same time provide needed scaffolding and modeling for the students. Students could then perhaps take over this role in subsequent discussions.

- Involving students in the planning stages of this project in a face-to-face gathering which might include building a web site for the project and deciding what sorts of forums might work in reaching the goals. Students have asked for the immediacy of face-to-face meetings and this might be a good way to begin.

- Posting works-in-progress online and receiving feedback. These might include student artwork relating to the discussion as well as longer student responses to literature that are taken through the writing process which might be eligible for students' writing portfolios. This could be a wonderful means by which students could conference with each other on their writing and practice using the *Vermont New Standards Rubric for Responses to Literature*. The experiences of those who have participated in the MIDI and visual arts-in-progress mentoring have shown that there are particular points in the creative process when creators are most open

to critique. Once students feel that they are close to completion, there is little interest in going back to a piece to refine it; however, earlier in the process as students are grappling with how to proceed or how to improve their work, suggestions may be welcomed and meaningfully utilized.

Students around the state are working with the recently created “holistic rubrics” for various types of writing. We believe that if students write response and post their drafts, they may have opportunities to more critically respond to each other’s work and thereby increase their ability to self-critique and improve the quality of their own

- Discussing books online while students are in the process of reading them. This would allow for more of a natural flow between the class and online discussions, but would have to be given some thought.
- Reaching agreement on the goals and expectations for the project/Training in similar discussion methods

If we begin with the same goals and understandings, we may be able to work together to achieve a smoother flow between our separate classrooms and the online forums. Students may be better able to move into a richer online discussion earlier, especially with modeling and scaffolding provided initially by teacher/facilitators and later, hopefully, by groups of students.

We feel that these online discussion projects were very successful first efforts and serve as learning experiences. As we all analyze each other’s experiences, reflections, and responses to available research, we are forming a clearer vision for how to proceed in ensuring that these programs maximize creative learning opportunities for our students. We would like to be involved in this next round.