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Wiki Literature Circles: Creating Digital Learning Communities

Mixing literature circles with Web 2.0 technology taps into students’ digital literacy skills and their desire for peer interaction. Specific assignments, assessments, and suggestions are discussed.

It is man’s social nature which distinguishes him from the brute creation. If it is his privilege to be independent, it is equally his duty to be inter-dependent.

—Mahatma Gandhi

ike it or not, our students are Facebook addicts. They care that their 14-year-old cousin in Oklahoma had Cheerios for breakfast. They care that their basketball camp roommate whom they haven’t spoken to in the last three years locked herself out of her house this morning. They care that their boyfriend from elementary school in Georgia also thinks so much depends on the little red wagon. Do our kids care enough to pick up the phone and chat with them on a regular basis? No. But, they do care enough to creep on a Facebook page to get a pulse on someone’s life. (Besides, their cousin probably wouldn’t tell them about her breakfast even if they did call.) Teenagers love being social, and Web 2.0 technologies have provided our students with new avenues to mingle.

Although many teachers may view Web 2.0 technologies (Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, blogs, wikis, Nings) as a distraction from homework and a potential danger zone in the classroom, it would be negligent for us to ignore the ramifications of our students’ “Facebook mentality” on the learning that takes place under our care. Teens have changed, but the canon and curriculum in many secondary English classrooms haven’t. If we want to engage them, we need to meet them where they are. We need to create bridges between the school’s traditional curriculum and the students’ avatars that dominate their weekends. This article discusses how I have tried to build community and relevance in my sophomore English classes by using a wiki to facilitate digital literature circles.

Connecting with Digital Natives

I’ve noticed that fewer students linger in the smell of a new novel or get excited about a freshly cracked book spine. Nowadays they are content to text the person sitting next to them and get excited when someone brings a new Kindle to class. My students are digital natives, fluent in the language of technology, computers, Internet, and video games (Prensky 1). Thanks to emailing, blogging, video editing, etc., teens are composing words and images in their spare time because they want to, not because they have to (Yancey 298). According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 57% of online teens (about 12 million youth) report that they have created content for the Internet by blogging, building or updating webpages, remixing existing content, or sharing original artwork, photos, stories, and videos (Lenhart and Madden). They are also using Web 2.0 for social and informational purposes alike. In an extensive study of more than 800 American youth, the MacArthur research team found that young people use online networks to extend friendships and interests, and that they engage in peer-based learning and self-directed learning online (Ito et al.). The Internet has the
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potential to intrinsically motivate teenagers to read and write out of a genuine interest for a topic or activity (Also, see Ryan and Deci 72), not because a teacher has assigned them to.

Marc Prensky contends that digital natives learn differently from schoolchildren of the past and will be best served if they are taught in their native language. He asserts that “teachers have to learn to communicate in the language and style of their students. This doesn’t mean changing the meaning of what is important, or of good thinking skills” (4, italics in original). For example, thanks to their computer fluency, students are used to instant gratification when they have questions; they can process information at an extremely fast pace; and they prefer game-based learning with frequent rewards. Today’s teens also prefer graphics before text rather than the converse, and they thrive while multitasking and performing parallel tasks (Prensky 2).

Perhaps most notably, teenagers like to feel plugged into a network (Prensky 2). Although our notions of community have broadened since our first introductions to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, love and social belonging are just as central to our students as they were to previous generations. It’s no wonder that Web 2.0’s collaborative, co-creative nature and social networking capabilities are so attractive to teens. Pierre Levy asserts that the Internet now requires us to view each other as knowledge sources because digital forums “promote the construction of intelligent communities in which our social and cognitive potential can be mutually developed and enhanced” (17). The digital arena has not only added another dimension to belonging to classroom communities, it has also heightened the individual’s role in the group to that of knowledge contributor.

English teachers have been using literature circles for many years now as a means of building community as well as knowledge in the English classroom. Traditionally, literature circles are small groups in which students meet to read and discuss books of their choosing (Daniels). Be it caused by the energy-draining Cleveland winters, the usual teenage apathy, teens’ choice of books, or their preference for all things digital, for years I received consistently mediocre results using a traditional literature circle format with my sophomores. I knew in theory that literature circles should work, but something wasn’t connecting for my students. Literature circles have long offered students the sense of connectedness, empowerment, and interaction teens desire, but the traditional model I was using neglected the multitasking, instant-gratification cravings of 21st-century learners. This is when I discovered the wiki.

Wiki: A Forum for Collaborative Authorship

While some Web 2.0 technologies are quickly becoming mainstreamed in U.S. classrooms, wikis are still working to get their foot in the door. Defined most simply, a wiki is a “user-editable website” (Lundin 435). More formally, wikis are a digital forum for collaborative authorship in which any member granted access can add or change content and are typically organized by topic, which makes them more dynamic and easier for readers to browse (Boulos, Maramba, and Wheeler). Sarah Guth states that wikis best represent how “the greater the user base, the greater the potential for real knowledge” (61). Wikipedia is the best known example of a wiki.

Love and social belonging are just as central to our students as they were to previous generations. It’s no wonder that Web 2.0’s collaborative, co-creative nature and social networking capabilities are so attractive to teens.
The first day in their new community is an important one. Being the digital natives that they are, I have found that my students need little more than a five-minute tutorial to learn their way around a wiki. (My first time I allotted an entire block to teach the technology and found myself scrambling to fill the block after they figured the wiki out in just five minutes!) One of my students commented, “I was worried about the fact that it was going to be a big hassle to post on the wiki every night. However, as time passed on it became clear to me that the assignment would be a piece of cake!” I use Wikispaces.com in my classroom, but PBWorks.com is another good wiki option. During their initial meeting, each DLC is responsible for planning out their reading schedule and posting it to their wiki. I also ask that group members assign themselves a “Daily Duty” to complete along with their reading and to post their “Duty” to the wiki each night for homework. Much like a traditional literature circle, the “Daily Duty” can vary from classroom to classroom, but in the past I have used those listed in Figure 1.

I opted to use my wiki to facilitate a digital literature circle community.

**Digital Learning Communities**

During their second semester of English 10, my sophomores participate in our Coming of Age unit, where we study *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a class and then after a detailed introduction complete with my personal commentary, I ask students to choose one of the following more contemporary “coming of age” texts to read: J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, Jeannette Walls’s *The Glass Castle*, Sue Monk Kidd’s *The Secret Life of Bees*, or Lisa See’s *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. After students select a book and share their choices with me privately so as not to influence other classmates, I arrange them into groups of four or five according to their reading preferences. This group becomes known as their Digital Learning Community, or DLC for short.

In the classroom, wikis can be used as a source for obtaining information and knowledge as well as a platform for virtual collaboration. Wikis actively involve learners in their own construction of knowledge (Boulos, Maramba, and Wheeler). When working on a wiki, students are writing for an audience beyond their teacher and reading critically with an eye for revision. The virtual community plays an important role in quality control as members will self-monitor for accuracy and quality of the information posted to the wiki (Guth 62). Peter Duffy and Axel Bruns suggest using wikis to:

- develop research projects and document ongoing student progress;
- build a collaborative class annotated bibliography on assigned readings;
- provide students with access to all instructor handouts;
- map concepts, brainstorm, and link relevant online resources;
- facilitate presentations, instead of PowerPoint or other traditional methods; and
- collaborate on group projects and documents rather than emailing the documents back and forth between group members.

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**FIGURE 1. Digital Learning Community Daily Role and Responsibilities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Daily Role</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discussion Leader</td>
<td>facilitating and reporting on the group’s in-class discussion of the reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary Builder</td>
<td>identifying and defining unknown or problematic words in the reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbol/Motif Tracker</td>
<td>finding examples of a symbol(s) in context and analyzing the significance (I provide the list of symbols/motifs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme Tracker</td>
<td>finding excerpts from the text that contribute to the development of an overarching theme in the text (I provide the themes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character Tracker</td>
<td>identifying passages in the text that support and trace either the static or dynamic nature of the protagonist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extender</td>
<td>drawing a connection between the book and something from our world; this could be a song, video, photo, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first day in their new community is an important one. Being the digital natives that they are, I have found that my students need little more than a five-minute tutorial to learn their way around a wiki. (My first time I allotted an entire block to teach the technology and found myself scrambling to fill the block after they figured the wiki out in just five minutes!) One of my students commented, “I was worried about the fact that it was going to be a big hassle to post on the wiki every night. However, as time passed on it became clear to me that the assignment would be a piece of cake!” I use Wikispaces.com in my classroom, but PBWorks.com is another good wiki option. During their initial meeting, each DLC is responsible for planning out their reading schedule and posting it to their wiki. I also ask that group members assign themselves a “Daily Duty” to complete along with their reading and to post their “Duty” to the wiki each night for homework. Much like a traditional literature circle, the “Daily Duty” can vary from classroom to classroom, but in the past I have used those listed in Figure 1.
Each “Daily Duty” has its own page on the wiki, and every day, each student is responsible for posting examples, quotes from the text, and their personal analysis to the wiki.

Since most of the reading and posting takes place at home, I use our class time for discussion leaders to facilitate group dialogue about the reading, to discuss any questions or confront any difficulties with the text, and to engage in collaborative textual analysis activities. Another activity I require is for groups to make a setting page for their wiki, complete with images and culturally relevant information for the story. Students return to the book to gather evidence on the book’s setting and conduct online research to extend their knowledge of time and place. About halfway through their reading, I ask the DLCs to build a home page for their wiki that is reflective of their text. They need to incorporate images/colors/ideas that are important to their book and write a persuasive paragraph “selling” the book to a person who is wholly unfamiliar with it. Finally, the DLCs engage in a “coming of age” analysis in which they analyze events in the protagonist’s life and how they have served as a catalyst for character growth. Ultimately, each DLC presents its “coming of age” page and as a class, we look for similarities and differences among the books. Throughout the entire project, each DLC periodically reports to the class about its experiences with the book and the group. Figure 2 outlines my design for the DLC wiki assignment.

**FIGURE 2. Digital Learning Community Wiki Design**

- **Home: The Home Page:** Students are responsible for designing their home page in a manner that is consistent with their book. Considering dominant images/symbols, colors, characters, themes, etc., they should pretend they are trying to sell their book to someone who is unfamiliar with it. They should also include a brief summary of the book as well as an explanation/justification of the design. Why did you design it the way you did? What were you hoping to convey or express?
- **Page 1: Daily Assignment:** I post a copy of this assignment for their reference.
- **Page 2: Reading Schedule:** The group will create a personalized reading schedule to follow. I post a template for them to complete. In addition to the daily reading assignments, each person is assigned a specific duty to complete along with the reading.
- **Page 3: Vocabulary:** The Vocabulary Builder is responsible for finding at least three unknown words from that day’s reading and posting them to the Vocabulary page of the wiki. I create a vocabulary quiz for each group based on these posted words.
- **Page 4: Extender:** The Extender is responsible for extending their knowledge beyond the book, and posting it to the Extender page of the wiki. They have some freedom in how they make their connections between the book and the outside world. They might want to research an historical aspect of the text, or find a poem that is linked thematically, or post an image that is relevant.
- **Page 5: Themes:** I provide them with a list of themes. The Theme Tracker is responsible for identifying examples of developing themes in the reading and posting them to the Themes page of the wiki. On some nights they may encounter all of them, and on other nights they may encounter only one. It will vary.
- **Page 6: Character Development:** I assign the group a main character to track. The Character Tracker is responsible for identifying examples of the static/dynamic nature of the main character in their reading and posting them to the Character page of the wiki.
- **Page 7: Setting:** Groups work together during class to analyze the main setting of their book and create a setting page that includes: author’s description from the book, interesting facts and information surrounding the setting, etc., while considering the question: How does the setting contribute to the book?
- **Page 8: Symbol/Motif Tracker:** I give students a few symbols/motifs to track during their reading. They are responsible for identifying examples in context and explaining how each contributes to the scene on a symbolic level.
- **Page 9: Author:** Groups work together during class to research their author and create a biography page for him/her that includes: author’s background, interesting facts about the author, information surrounding the writing of your book, etc.
- **Page 10: Coming of Age Analysis:** Groups analyze how their protagonist “comes of age” and then present this to the class. After the presentations from each group, we compare and contrast protagonists from different books.
For assignments that require relinquishing control of the classroom to students, assessment can be tricky; however, the wikis I designed provide daily documentation of student engagement, participation, and depth of thought. Throughout the Digital Learning Communities project, students earn daily points for their wiki contributions as well as points for posting the in-class group analysis activities. Twice, students were assessed on the vocabulary words they had selected and posted. Each vocabulary quiz was generated from the wiki and, therefore, personalized to each group. In keeping with the ideas of student choice and responsibility, for the final paper the sophomores were allowed their choice of topic and were encouraged to return to their wiki, which now served as a study guide and resource on the text. Figure 3 describes how I counted various forms of assessments and whether those assessments were graded individually or for the entire wiki group.

**Lessons Learned**

There are a few details I learned the hard way that are worth mentioning. First, I always try to have laptops in my class or hold class in a computer lab during this project. If for some reason a student is unable to post for homework (and there are many good reasons, one of which being that a student does not have Internet access), I ask them to complete their post in hard copy and transfer it to the wiki during class time. You don’t have to have computer access every class, but it will make life easier. Second, I always ramp up the security settings on the wiki so that only members of the wiki can see the content and edit it. I also enable the feature that sends me an email every time a wiki is edited. While this results in an overwhelming number of emails, it has come in handy when the class clown posts something “funny” or a page “accidently” gets deleted. The emails make it easy to identify the perpetrator and restore the wiki with just a click. Third, I always do the preliminary wiki set-up for my students so that they simply need to fill in their group’s information. This cuts down on the amount of start-up time required and helps to ensure a certain amount of continuity among the different groups.

**A Flourishing Community**

In keeping with research that suggests digital natives like to feel like a part of a network (Prensky 4), the wiki not only facilitates a DLC’s study and analysis, but it also fosters a sense of community in the classroom. On the first day, my students walked into the classroom and were excited to find out their books and group members. I noted in my journal that day, “When [the students heard] that they had received their first choice book and groups, it was like they had won the lottery . . . lots of jumping and whooping.” After learning about the project, one male student exclaimed, “I love this! I feel like I’m part of a team” and many groups started acting like teams immediately. On the first day, one young lady posted to her DLC’s homepage, “We have the greatest group ever!!! Happy to be working with all of you!!!” Many groups take instantly to the idea of assigning each member his or her own individual color to post in or create a theme for their wiki by choosing profile pictures that identified students as a member of the group. I wrote in my log, “I thought it was cute that groups were creating ‘profile themes’ for their groups. One group was


Perhaps most notably, I overheard few complaints about homework. One young man commented, “I think working in a group is a good idea because it makes you read the book and do the homework since you don’t want to let down your classmates.” The transparent and communal nature of the project motivates students to carry their own weight. I also noticed that students were citing each other in their discussions and posts, and even correcting analytical and grammatical mistakes in each other's posts. I can surmise that since students assigned the work to themselves, they felt more committed to completing it and took pride in it. They were under a social contract of sorts to their group members: the groups depended on all members holding up their end of the bargain.

I have also noticed students taking on additional tasks on their own accord, and not because I asked them to do so. The first example of this was when I was stopped in the hall by a teacher and was a few minutes late for class. When I arrived, my students had already grouped their desks together and had set up the laptops for their groups. Another time, a group of three boys asked me to change the theme color of their wiki from green to red, which represented a “good day” to the main character in their book. Typically a quiet and often disengaged group in class, their request showed me that they were not just going through the motions; they were genuinely invested in the project and concerned about all parts of their wiki coalescing to create a tone consistent with the book. They were focusing on detail not because I asked them to, but because they wanted to get it right.

In the end, my students learned that the group could accomplish more than an individual. The amount of time involved in tracking characters and themes and symbols and vocabulary and making extensions to the real world would have been overwhelming for a single person. However, as a group, it was manageable. One student noted that by members taking “a turn each night” reporting on a different aspect of the book, she learned more than if she were completing these tasks by herself. Not only did the students revel in feeling like part of a team working toward a common goal, but they also grew to appreciate each other's contributions and the collective body of knowledge that arose from the project.

different Sesame Street characters; another group was Care Bears; another group was Ninjas.”

Groups also claimed personal areas in the classroom as their own. Some DLCs found a table or corner the first day and stuck with that location for the duration of the project. If the desks weren't pushed together, students would push them together without being asked. On the last day of the project when we were done posting to the wikis, one sophomore girl walked in and said, “Why aren’t we sitting in our corner with our group? Can we sit with our groups? If we can’t sit with our groups, can I at least sit in my corner?” The students did not receive any directions from me about colors, themes, profile pictures, or meeting locations. They undertook these unifying activities on their own volition and during their unscheduled work time.

Overall, the elements of community and choice incorporated into the wiki project intrinsically motivated students and generated a sense of responsibility to one another. Initially, I was nervous that students would not keep up with the reading schedules they created; however, with the exception of a few students, everyone generally kept up with their group's reading and homework assignments.
Giving an Inch

The beauty of the Digital Learning Communities project is that I realize how much students can accomplish without my micromanaging their efforts. In validating their preference for digital communication and helping them to create communities based on mutual interest, I saw intrinsically motivated readers and writers spurred on simply by their sense of duty and responsibility to each other and their genuine desire to know what happens in the next chapter. Overhearing student-led discussions about character development, genre, foreshadowing, symbols, and themes, I understood that perhaps I had been stifling my students with my hand-holding rather than trusting them to explore. It was nice to have my suspicions confirmed by one student’s final thoughts on the project: “Even people who never read assigned books would read ahead. It was nice to have a small group of peers who all gained something.” I hesitantly gave my students an inch, and I’m glad they took a mile.

Works Cited


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