The Pull of Participation: Multilogues in Online Literature Discussions

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Note: In this article are audio clips featuring two of the middle school participants. Chris and Charlie, now high school students but still living in the area, agreed to read and react to the article. You can hear their remarks by clicking on "Audio" after the related segments, beginning with the section entitled, "Finally! The Real MOO!"

Converging in Virtual Space

On two Thursday afternoons each semester, a group of between 15 and 20 eighth-grade students at Blacksburg Middle School (BMS) stays after school with teacher Donna Logan. For the first hour or so, they do homework, or read the novel they are supposed to have completed by 4:00 this afternoon, or laugh and talk with each other and with Ms. Logan as she tries to get ready for the evening. They eat pizza she has ordered and drink sugary sodas. They are noisy and often silly, even the ones whose classroom presence was quiet, studious, and, in some cases, barely noticeable. At 3:45 they throw their cups and pizza plates away, grab their novels, and hustle with Ms. Logan to the computer lab on the first floor. There they will each log on to "A Room with a MOO," a virtual room in a virtual house, where they will await the arrival of their Virginia Tech (VT) pals, who at this point are finishing up a day of work or student teaching or attending classes. While the middle schoolers wait, they will investigate the other rooms in the "house"—the kitchen, salon, library, or den, perhaps—and see who else is there or who has managed to pass through before they arrived.

By 4:00 the university students will have dropped children off at sitters, checked on pets, snatched novels and notes, and converged on their own campus, making their way excitedly to the computer lab where I await them, a bit anxious and quite excited myself. Class begins and we log on. As soon as the hook-up is successful, the students discover that most of the eighth-graders have already taken possession of the cyber-premises, and they, too, begin to move from room to room. For the next 10-15 minutes they search for that one eighth-grader with whom they have been paired since the beginning of the semester, and, once finding her or him, catch up on the latest news until it is time to begin. Sometimes the search is in vain, and they are met with the disappointing news that Mariah is sick, or Jared couldn't find a ride home, or Sudi couldn't miss one more soccer practice.

When Donna and I know that almost everyone has logged on, we pass the word that it is time to begin. The students check their charts to determine the room in which they are to meet for Round One, locate the room'first on a map we provide, then on the site itself'and wait there until the host signals that it's time to begin the chat. The labs, echoing noisily 10 minutes earlier, become still except for the clicking of computer keys; and for the next hour and a half, with the exception of a five-minute break, the students sit transfixed, hunched over keyboards, communicating with their pals and peers.

They are "MOOing," a term derived from the word "MOO," or "multi-user object oriented environments" (Haynes & Holmevik, 1998). In this environment, students move from room to room

(wherever their group has been directed) in the virtual house that was created by our technical assistant solely for our use. (Other groups on or off campus cannot have access to it without a password, making the site a protected environment.) There they discuss multicultural literature with other students who have read the same work. So, for example, while one group is in the study discussing *Parrot in the Oven*, another group is in the library discussing *April and the Dragon Lady*. (See Appendix A: Novels and Short Stories Discussed in the MOOs.) And though we have named only one room in our MOO the "dining room," in each room we hope to foster the essence of Atwell's (1998) "dining room table talk," where guests' discussions about books are a provocative mix of chatter, analysis, question, and opinion.

Broadening the Community, Increasing the Possibilities

In many literature classrooms, large numbers of students, social pressures of adolescence, and the perceived need to direct students toward an efferent, that is, information gathering stance (Rosenblatt, 1978) sometimes prevent "real talk" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), that is, the kind of dialogue that draws out responses, stimulates thought, and challenges attitudes and beliefs through expression, careful listening, and response. It was in this new kind of educational community that we hoped to find the spaces for such dialogue to encourage voice, thought, exchange of ideas, and a stretching of the imagination.

> The confluence of language and literacy theories, pedagogical practice, and technology have resulted in what might be called electronic discourse communities; ones founded on contemporary social views of language, literacy and education; ones bulwarked by the new network technologies that become both simpler to use and offer greater access within and across networks; and ones that already are reaching out beyond classrooms and school buildings and into a site where virtual communities exist in cyberspace. (Butler, 1998. p. 558)

Our purpose was not to replace face to face (FTF) interactions but to see how, through this one medium, the learning community of both groups of students might be broadened, thus offering greater access as Butler discusses, access to a larger number of ideas, perspectives, concerns, and increased opportunities for dialogic experiences for students. We believed that connecting these two groups, students whose interest in each other was perhaps motivated differently, but matched in enthusiasm, would set the stage for vibrant conversations in which the students would gain new understandings of their own lives and of the lives of others.

Toward this end, the focus that literature would evoke discussions about difference was kept. We believed that the use of multicultural and human rights novels, short stories, poems, and essays, would not only provide the students content but would broaden the learning community even further to include voices from literature of the underrepresented and marginalized. As we considered our goals, our main question evolved into this: Could we make online literature discussions about multicultural books an effective means of pursuing ideas about difference, inviting maximum participation, and leading participants to a greater awareness and understanding of the issues and their attitudes toward diversity, and the ultimate promotion of tolerance? This article focuses on the MOOs of one semester and shows what was discovered in response to our question.

The Process

Each year we follow a fairly simple pattern. At the beginning of the semester, Donna recruits enough middle school students to match the number of students in my class. On the first night of class my students list information about themselves: hometown, major, hobbies and "favorites": foods, bands, books, authors, TV shows, movies, colors, and so forth. Donna's students read the information sheets and choose three people with whom they would enjoy working. Donna and I then meet to pair up the students and ensure that each middle schooler is paired with one of those three people. We meet with our respective groups once a week: Donna meets the middle schoolers on a rotating schedule; I meet mine on our designated class night with a portion of the class devoted to web pal issues.

During the semester featured in this article'Spring 1999'the pairs read and discussed multicultural short stories from an anthology written for teenagers entitled *Join In*, as well as related poetry, essays, and a novel on multiculturalism. Electronic formats were used that were believed would create a learning community in which each would learn from many people but have special access to one. First, e-mail was the tool the pairs would use to get to know each other and to begin a practice of discussing literature together. Second, an electronic bulletin board called NetForum (1995) was the medium that gave individuals from both classes an opportunity to interact asynchronously with the entire group around topics related to poems and the essays. Finally, the MOO was used as an electronic literature circle to bring together web pal pairs who read the same multicultural novel. Two MOOs were planned for that semester, the first one approximately one month into the semester on short stories from *Join In* and the second a month later on a novel.

Discussion of Multicultural Short Stories: The "Fake" MOO

The first MOO was set up for February 25 and featured a discussion of short stories from *Join In*. We felt lucky that afternoon: all four eighth-grade English teachers were available to act as hosts in the electronic rooms. In addition, one of the eighth-grade science teachers'a frequent volunteer'agreed to host, and, to fill the last room, a former student of mine who had MOOed the previous semester came to assist. By 3:50, the hosts, along with the middle schoolers, were at their posts, waiting to begin. However, between the first and second semester, unbeknownst to Donna, the technology coordinator for the county put up firewalls, which did not permit the BMS students to make electronic contact with the VT network; thus, Donna discovered she could not log on to the MOO site. Since the hosts and students were prepared, and since the school is close to the VT campus, we piled into cars and went to the school for an unexpected face-to-face encounter, what the students would thereafter refer to as the "fake" MOO. Instead of meeting in virtual rooms, the groups moved to each host's classroom to discuss the stories they read.

Though somewhat disappointed, largely because most of them had not MOOed before, the university students were still delighted to meet the pals face to face. Their relief was evident in log entries, written later that evening, in which it was clear that many'even some secondary education majors—had feared that they would not know how to interact and respond to an adolescent. In fact, the most striking feature of their logs'written after class that night'was the recurring notation of their great surprise. They had not expected the eighth-graders to be as "intelligent," "deep," and "interesting in their differences of opinions." A few students reported their pals as reluctant to talk, understandably so, they thought, due to the unexpected surprise of meeting in person and having to discuss literature face to face with college students. More, however, were impressed with the pals' willingness to engage and to interact easily with both older students and with what my students judged to be "mature" and "intense" subject

matter in the stories, for example, hatred, rape, and racism. For most, this was the beginning of what would be a growing realization that they might not, after all, mind working with this age group.

Although Donna and I were relieved that we could implement a hastily conceived "Plan B," we were subdued by our own growing realization that even in the "most wired town in America" (Diamond, 1996), we would be frustrated, not always by the tools of technology, but by the unique context in a school system (Cuban, 1999) and by a temperamental infrastructure. We knew all too well that if this happened when working with a more distant site, which is indeed a future goal, Plan B would have been useless, and we would have been extremely disappointed and frustrated with the waste in preparation time and of opportunity. Since that time, we have been vigilant (obsessed) with checking and re-checking before each MOO to make sure the connections work.

Preparing for the Second MOO: Discussing Multicultural Young Adult Novels

To prepare for the second MOO, the middle school pals were to choose a book from a group of several possible choices, inform their university pals of their choice and set up a reading schedule. Through e-mail, they were to discuss the book they were reading in the weeks before the MOO. Then one week before the MOO, Donna and I asked the students to prepare for the discussion in the following ways: (a) by marking with sticky notes interesting passages or passages illustrative of life in a different culture; (b) by considering how the structure of the book helped or hindered the reading process; (c) by focusing on the positive and negative experiences the characters had as a result of being part of two different cultures; and (d) by relating some of the previously mentioned experiences to their own lives or to someone they knew.

Finally! The "Real" MOO!

As they had prior to the "fake" MOO, 37 students gathered at 4:00 with six hosts—this time one eighth-grade English teacher, one eighth-grade science teacher, two county gifted resource teachers, the county's K-12 language arts coordinator, and me—and logged on. This time, after getting special dispensation from the county technology supervisor to penetrate the firewall, the connection worked! After the pals located each other and spent their 10-minute roaming time, they moved toward their designated rooms and began the evening's discussions; first, on a poem, "At the Electronic Frontier," that illustrated the ubiquitous nature of technology, and second, on their chosen novels (Appendix A).

What we subsequently discovered upon reading the transcripts of the discussions, as well as other data related to the MOOs (process logs, e-mails, MOO analyses, interview transcripts, and, later, reflection papers), was intense engagement with issues in the novels and participation patterns that encouraged, informed, and challenged us.

Literature Truly is Exploration: Topics Discovered in the MOO

Rosenblatt (1983) wrote about literature as a medium for exploration and the reading experience as a vital, creative act (1978). Following Rosenblatt, Pradl (1996) wrote about the social nature of the

reading experience, that in the transaction with text and with others, new meanings are produced, resulting in the discovery of new ideas and new ways of reading. In each room we saw these theories played out; the participants created meaning together as they considered one another's responses and questions regarding the novels.

In the kitchen, 13 topics were covered related to *The Joy Luck Club*, a now familiar novel about four young Chinese-American women coming to terms with their mothers and with their own identities. The host began with one question'"Anybody have a burning thought to get us started?"'and from there the students took over the conversation. All the participants, with the exception of the host, who was never heard from again, began to share their ideas and questions about the story. Figure 1 shows both the issues and their distribution over a period of time. First, there is a flurry of conversation as everyone shares their responses to the books. Then the group gradually settles into one or two related and substantial themes, which it continues until moving into a different topic. A similar pattern was observed in the other rooms as well.
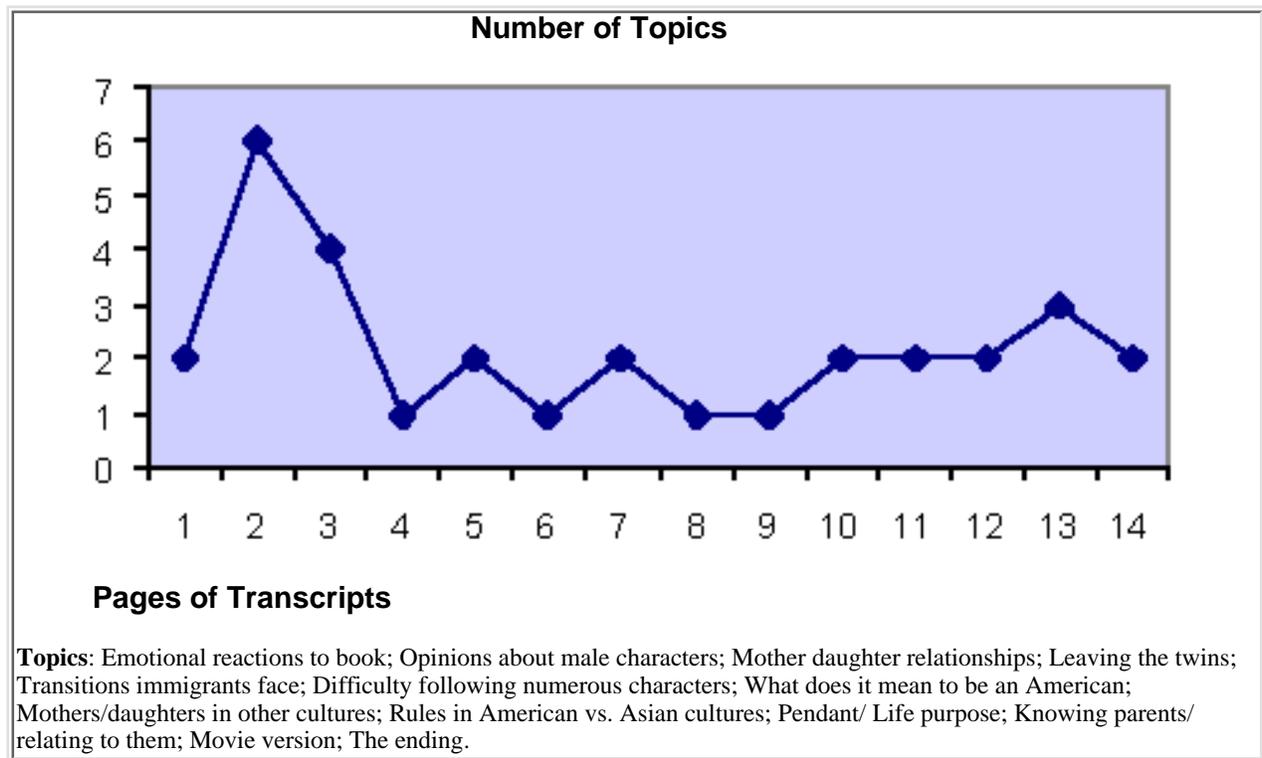

Number of Topics

Pages of Transcripts

Topics: Emotional reactions to book; Opinions about male characters; Mother daughter relationships; Leaving the twins; Transitions immigrants face; Difficulty following numerous characters; What does it mean to be an American; Mothers/daughters in other cultures; Rules in American vs. Asian cultures; Pendant/ Life purpose; Knowing parents/ relating to them; Movie version; The ending.

Figure 1. Topics in the *Joy Luck Club* discussion

In the den, students gathered to discuss *April and the Dragon Lady*, a novel with a story line similar to *The Joy Luck Club*. It features a Chinese-American girl who struggles to understand her place in American society, the implications of her heritage, and her grandmother, a "dragon lady" who rules the household in the absence of a mother with seeming blindness to her granddaughter's modern situation and needs. Students focused on the characters, primarily Grandma and April, and the interactions between them that would, to the students at least, reveal Grandma's entrenched racist and sexist attitudes. Two questions raised in this room speak to central issues in a discussion of difference: "Can we judge Grandma when she's from another culture?" and "How can Grandma change?"

And so it went in the other rooms, with students discussing the above themes and others as well: the conflict caused in *Dangerous Skies* when the ideal world of the young protagonist is shattered by racism; the difficulties and pleasures of growing up as an optimist in *Parrot in the Oven*; the imaginary world of *The Ear, the Eye, and the Arm*; and the difficult decisions of the characters in *The Bean Trees*.

Overall, each group discussed characters at length, including their relationships to each other and to society, relationships often complicated by the bicultural nature of the homes. There were few entries related to lower-level questions and responses; most were close examinations of the themes, characters, symbols, and issues of the stories, as well as analyses of language, plot, and structure. What is also clear, and what we found most promising, is that the students shared with each other out of their particular knowledge bases which, in many cases, illuminated both plot and setting for others in the rooms. (**Audio 1**)

Participation Patterns: Supporting Maximum Participation

Hey, diddle diddle,
Answer this riddle:
What in the world is a MOO?
It's a place we can talk
Without taking a walk,
And where everyone can share his or her view. (Regina, VT student)

Regina's light-hearted assessment from her reflection paper does indeed describe what it was to be part of a MOO environment and suggests consonance with Butler's (1998) research that the MOO provides spaces for fuller participation by more people. "It's a place we can talk," wrote Regina, and in Appendix B, it is clear that a great deal of talking took place; in fact, there was 100% participation. (For an explanation of the analysis, see Appendix C.) Analyzed quantitatively, the data allowed comparison of participation entries of BMS and VT students, as well as the hosts, to see if there were patterns of domination by any one person or by any particular group represented.

There are several notable statistics. First, the sheer volume of contributions made in a 35- minute period (e.g., 451 entries for the *April and the Dragon Lady* discussion) suggests the students were highly engaged, and our qualitative analysis showed us that they were engaged in the topics we hoped they would discuss, as noted in the previous section. (For an in-depth discussion of the issues discussed in this MOO, see Carico, 2001.) The lowest participation percentage, 4%, was from a student who had to leave early.

Second, though the VT students did consistently rate higher in the number of entries overall, the percentages were close in most cases, suggesting that the middle schoolers were usually able to keep up with the university students and felt free to contribute in this setting and with this group. And considering the number of BMS absences—seven—the already slight gap between the two groups closes further. For instance, in the *Dangerous Skies* discussion, by some happenstance, Chris was the only middle schooler present, so comparing BMS percentages to VT percentages does not tell the entire story. The number of Chris's entries—54—exceeded that of all but one of the VT students, his pal Julie, who made 59. (**Audio 2**)

Third, the hosts' percentages are in every case the lowest of the three groups represented, suggesting that the students were able to conduct the conversations toward fruitful ends with little direction from the host. Considering that each room had a host in some authority position and whose job it was to guide the conversation by suggesting topics, we were pleased that the hosts did not dominate, nor did they have to take over the conversation because it was veering off a productive course. (**Audio 3)**

(See Table 1 for summary information on the group.)

Table 1. Summary of Participants

	Number of Students	Female	Male	African American	Asian/Afri. American	Asian American	European American	Indian American	Pacific Islander
BMS	15/21	10	5	1	0	3	10	1	0
VT	22/22*	18	4	2	1	0	18	0	1

*Due to special circumstances, one student had begun the course in the previous semester (and was assigned a pal then), and was completing the semester in the spring.

Characteristics That Make the MOO a Satisfying Learning Experience

Students from both groups expressed a number of reasons why the MOO experience was positive. The reasons fall generally into two descriptive categories: the MOO as an environment that supports freedom of expression and, in our case, the MOO as a space to talk about books with other people who like to read.

Freedom to express. Most of the middle school students indicated pleasure in being able to speak more freely than in the regular classroom, without constraints imposed either by classroom structures or by peer pressure. They valued the opportunity to speak candidly, to express whatever thoughts they had about the book and to see that others valued their thoughts as they received immediate responses. Nearly all of the VT students echoed the same thoughts, and those who did not said that they could see how someone else might think the same.

First, students enjoyed what they described as the freedom to interact without what they perceived as constraints of FTF interactions. Though the students were all recognized by first names during the discussions, students from both groups reported feeling anonymous, therefore, free to express themselves. Absent was the sensation of being what they described as "stared at" or "gawked at" by other people, a practice they said inhibits the formulation of a response or question in face-to-face classroom conversations. And, 13-year-old Charlie's admission indicates that the anonymity works both ways: "I didn't have to look anyone in the eye," he said. (**Audio 4**)

Absent was the pressure of thinking about how one looks or acts. What one says becomes the focus. For adolescents whose often new found ability to think outside themselves gives them a painful awareness of what Elkind (1988) called "the invisible audience," this anonymity is a relief. For many of the older adolescents who populated my class, the same was also true, as Julie's log represents: "This is a happy medium for those who are shy.... There weren't all these eyes on me hanging on my every word. I could say what I really wanted to say and say it with conviction in a MOO." For Julie, whose fair-skinned cheeks grew rosy when I called on her, this was indeed true: her MOO transcripts reveal a robust interlocutor, able to set forth strong statements and argue her point intelligently.

Related to the issue of anonymity was the change in power differentials. For the middle schoolers, the pressure of having to say the "right thing" in front of teachers was noticeably absent. Although many of the middle school students were in a room hosted by their classroom teachers, they reportedly sensed an unspoken permission to speak freely. Though there have been infrequent episodes of silliness in previous semesters on the part of new participants (e.g., pressing down the return key so that an entry is repeated several times in a row), this sense of freedom did not seem to include an accompanying sense of license to "flame," to harass, or to intentionally disrupt the conversations. During this particular

MOO, there was no talk that could be considered inappropriate in any of those ways. Nevertheless, the middle school students got the distinct sense that they were acting in ways that would not be acceptable in school. "In the classroom," Jerry said, "the teacher talks and asks questions." In the MOO, the teacher, he went on to say, "was not trying to be like a teacher." (**Audio 5**)

Charlie added, "I was able to bring up topics, say things." Charlie's assessment was a true one. In the *Joy Luck Club* room with two other BMS students, five VT students, and the county K-12 language arts supervisor acting as host, Charlie interacted freely, often, and on various topics: making a joke, sharing personal responses, admonishing the group to "stay on target," and offering opinions about the characters, the symbolism of the pendant, and the notion of America as a mosaic.

My students, too, noticed the way the MOO seems to enable participation on an equal basis. In fact, the university students participating in the discussion of *Dangerous Skies*, where Chris alone represented the middle schoolers, reported surprise upon learning that there was only one eighth-grader in their room. Chris's contributions did not betray his age.

One university student's notation about the obvious dissolution of typical classroom structures characterizes not just his groups' conversations but those in other rooms as well:

> I believe if I didn't know who was 'in charge' it would be hard (though not impossible) to tell, and if I didn't know the names of my own classmates, it would be hard (though not impossible) to tell who was in eighth-grade and who was in college. The reason, I think, is that everyone had the opportunity to participate on a ground where bodies, gender, and age are less readily noticed. Physicalities are still there, but they stand to one side. (Dean) (**Audio 6**)

An opportunity to talk about books. Both groups commented on the enjoyment of talking about books together in this environment. For the university students, the opportunity to discuss the novels with the adolescents and with each other was, perhaps, the most significant aspect of the Web Pal Project. They heard the responses and questions of various 13-year-olds related to the novel, witnessed their interpretations of a poem first-hand as they all tried to make sense of it together in Round One, and worked as partners with the kids and each other to create a common and enjoyable "dining room table" session for the group. For the middle schoolers, some of whom were loners and/or on the fringes of their classroom's social structures, the book discussions were an opportunity to, as Alan put it, "...talk with people who care about books."

Even the students who did not prefer the format admitted'usually after analyzing the transcripts'that the discussions generated in the rooms were thoughtful examinations of the issues and characters in the books. VT student Joyce was disappointed initially with what she deemed silly behavior of her classmates in their *Dangerous Skies* room; back and forth teasing about the misspelling of a word went on too long, in her opinion. However, after an in-depth analysis of the transcripts, she made the following comment:

> Overall, there was some good discussion during our MOO. The group members raised some interesting issues, ideas, and feelings. They tried to help each other understand the novel. Even though this conversation was a little too silly for my taste, I do think it was fruitful overall and worthwhile to do again.

It seemed clear from the reports of other students in the room that Joyce was accurate in describing her reaction as a matter of taste; the teasing did not distract them. Their reports concurred with Joyce's in another aspect: they believed they had raised significant issues. In discussing this difficult story about two adolescents involved innocently in a racially charged incident, the students worked with each other to understand the actions as well as the motivations of the characters, and in so doing, reflected on issues of discrimination that continue to trouble our society.

Students from both groups were surprised at the number of issues they were able to discuss, often in some depth. They expressed appreciation at the wide variety of opinions and interpretations they were able to hear and the opportunity to "put it together," as one middle schooler said. VT student J.R. described this task of "putting it together" in his own terms:

> Ideally, I think a MOO group would develop a sort of temporary mutual lens, through which they can construct a group meaning for the text through discussion. I mentioned in my process log a feeling of disembodiment when disconnecting from the MOO. I think that is partially a result of a 'collective mind' effect. Even in a limited time, with few parameters of protocol, the MOO discussion becomes a sort of socially constructive meaning-making venture.

J.R.'s vision of the MOO environment recalls Pradl's experiences, recounted in *Literature for Democracy* (1996), in which he looked back at his own process of identifying his students' desires: "Simply allowing students the privilege of owning their own literary responses was not enough to capture their full interest, for they hungered, most of them, to be part of a constructive social enterprise" (p. 15). What we saw over and over in the MOO itself, in the MOO reflections, and in the many other MOOs that we have conducted over the past three years, is the pleasure students take and the mutual benefit of being together in a "constructive social enterprise."

Characteristics That Made the MOO an Unsatisfactory Experience

Emerging from the data were clues as to ways the MOO was not satisfying as a learning experience for some students. Concerns covered physical, emotional, social, and technical dimensions.

Fear of being misunderstood. First, for some students, most clearly three middle school and two university females, the anonymity that worked to free so many of the others to speak their minds, served to distance these young women from their classmates and pals. They noted the absence of obvious signals of body language that would indicate to others how to interpret a statement, what one student called the "motives" in what they were saying. "We don't know the people, so it's hard to know how they'll take your comments." Sherri expressed relief that she had been able to meet her pal at the "fake" MOO. "You know their sense of humor," she said.

"Technostress": An unwelcome side effect. In his analysis of networked classroom discussions, Bump (1990), discussed technostress as a by-product of electronic discussion, often resulting from covering intense subject matter through an unfamiliar medium. Like Bump, we had few complaints related to technostress, but the ones we had were significant. The two most frequently cited complaints were related to eyestrain and the fact that conversation is carried out through type. To resolve the first, we took one of the students' suggestions and inserted a break in the MOO schedule between the first room and the second. However, the other concerns'inability to type quickly and accurately, primarily related to spelling'is a definite hindrance for some and not quite as easily solved. The spelling concerns are somewhat ameliorated by the fact that fast typing produces errors even among the best spellers, and a shorthand that the middle schoolers seem to use more readily than the rest of us does mask some spelling differences. Though it did not help during the actual MOO, when Donna and I prepared the transcripts for distribution on the website, we did correct glaring spelling errors, particularly in cases where we knew the students were sensitive about it. However, we knew that students were anxious about this, as evidenced by their numerous apologies for spelling and corrections online.

The nature of the MOO as a text-based discourse that takes place in real time has difficulties that go beyond typing problems. A small number of students from both schools described a feeling of stress at their difficulty in both keeping up with the conversation and contributing satisfactorily to it. Indeed, if there are large numbers of people in the room and if those people all "talk" fast, that is, type constantly,

then the flow of topics can take several paths, making them difficult to trace and respond to. Since the screen scrolls after it fills up with text, the topics seem to "disappear." Although a distraction for only some students, these few were distressed and frustrated at their inability to share opinions as often as they wanted or simply participate when they chose to. (Note: Since most of the students who mentioned these concerns were from rooms with large numbers, we have since tried to limit the number of students per room to seven, including the host.)

Although the previously mentioned concerns may seem to be a matter of personal preference, there is one sense in which they are clearly problematic, an aspect that did not emerge until the transcript analysis with the middle school students. As part of the analysis, the students highlighted each of their contributions to the discussion and then categorized them according to suggested codes based on Beach's (1993) categories: factual, connecting, imagining, and evaluative. We then asked them to write what they believed to be the value of their contributions and what they might like to change. In response, the BMS students asked us if they could add new codes: P for Personal; A for I Agree; and T for Typo. The desire for the 2nd category became apparent in middle schooler Cherie's written comment: "Well, in this MOO a lot of my contributions were "agreeing" because people went so fast that I didn't want to say the same thing twice and feel stupid, so I just agreed!" Knowing that her statement, "I agree" meant more than a affixing a rubber stamp opinion to someone else's remark, she wanted credit for her contribution. Other students from both groups confirmed that they, too, had this difficulty.

The task of noting instances of agreement on the transcripts is further complicated when considering the fact that I ask the VT students to critique their pals' contributions to the discussions. It becomes important to understand and communicate to my students that there are factors not visible on the transcripts that may have affected responses and participation patterns. From this finding we have determined that we must ask questions in response to analysis rather than simply make judgements, and we have encouraged our students to do the same.

Conclusions and Implications

As Bromley (1998) and Sclove (1998) cautioned and the data from this study suggested, there is work to be done to make the electronic MOO spaces truly democratic as well as effective in meeting the goals we had for literature study. Students did indicate changes in understanding of the elements of the novel as well as appreciation for the characters' diverse circumstances; however, both Donna and I realized that we need more in-depth analysis and follow-up discussions of the MOO content with large and small groups. Students also indicated a need for further negotiation of talk in this written format. Time needs to be taken in class or in small groups to consider the effects of differing beliefs, attitudes, and conversational styles on discussions, whether online or in person. Discussions concerning the effect of power differentials in the virtual spaces may be instructive in helping us enhance our in-class discussions.

Next, the effect of the MOO cannot be judged apart from the other components of the project, which support it. The language of the students changed as they talked about the belief structures of others and their sometimes-new ability to understand and tolerate the differences, but those changes did not take place solely because of the MOO. The new language came directly from an assignment they had done preceding the MOO, in which they examined their own cultural lenses. The MOO gave them a place to exercise their beliefs. In addition, the positive nature of the MOO that most experienced was fostered, we believe, by the e-mail letters that preceded it. Finally, the more time we spent in our individual classes on the project, helping students with letter writing, with the reading, and with strategies for response, the more satisfactory were their overall experiences.

Last, we were also to discover that our work in the MOO environment did more than illustrate the use

of a new technology to reach a common instructional goal (Labbo & Reinking, 1999), for example, effective literature discussion. It expanded our notion of what effective literature discussions can be: many participants were able, through the wonders of technology, to explore together literature and the ideas it generates in a forum that allowed and encouraged participation from every member. Therefore, though the project has required a major investment of time, each semester we see greater gains and more improvement, re-confirming the value of the project. We believe it is significant in the development of teachers who can talk about difference, who can work with students of diversity (Willis & Harris, 1997), and who can begin to understand their own biases, lenses, and predispositions. We believe it is important in the lives of the middle school students who find excitement, encouragement, and opportunities to create meaning through stories they want to discuss with, as middle schooler Alan said, "people who care about books." Finally, we have seen Belenky et al.'s notion of "real talk" come to pass in this virtual environment, talk that is full of energy, vitality, and possibility. Thus, we will continue, hoping to add more distant sites that will expand our contacts, our ideas, and our possibilities even further.

Post Script: (**Audio 7**)

Note: Donna and I are now engaged in working with a third site, in which the project is integrated into the curriculum of the eighth-grade participants. We will soon know if Charlie and Chris were right!

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Appendix A

Poem, Novels and Short Stories Discussed in the MOOs

Algarin, M. (1985). *Time's now*. Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press.

Farmer, N. (1995). *The ear, the eye, and the arm*. New York: Puffin.

Gallo, D. (Ed.). (1993). *Join in: Multiethnic short stories by outstanding writers for young adults*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell.

Kingsolver, B. (1998). *The bean trees*. New York: Harper Collins.

Martinez, V. (1996). *Parrot in the oven: Mi vida*. New York: Harper Trophy.

Namioka, L. (1994). *April and the dragon lady*. Orlando: Harcourt, Brace & Company.

Staples, S. (1996). *Dangerous skies*. New York: Harper Trophy.

Tan, A. (1989). *The joy luck club*. New York: Ivy Books.

Appendix B

Summary of Student Entries

Code: The initials following each name provide ethnic and gender identification and are given in the order they appear in the table. F: Female; M: Male; EA: European American; AA: African American; AsA: AsianAmerican; IA: Indian American; PA: Pacific Islander

April and the Dragon Lady:

19 pages; Total Entries: 451

VT Students	#entries	BMS Students	#entries	Host
Alicia: EAF*	28	Hannah: EAF	44	Jim: EAM
Andrea: EAF	55	DanaF: EAF	43	
Betsey: AAF	49	Maxine: AsAF	80	
Florence: AAF	65	Jennifer: EAF	48	
Melinda: EAF	29	Absent		
Subtotals	226		215	10
Percentages	50%		48%	2%

The Bean Trees

8 pages; Total Entries: 130

VT Students	#entries	BMS Students	#entries	Host
Renata: EAF	21	Jeanette: AAF	11	Colleen: EAF
Tina: EAF	39	Cherie: EAF	30	
Subtotals	60		41	29
Percentages	46%		32%	22%

The Ear, the Eye, and the Arm

17 pages; Total Entries: 320

VT Students	#entries	BMS Students	#entries	Host
SusanD: EAF	67	MaryLou: AsAF	44	Carrie: EAF
J.R.G: EAM	66	Alan: EAM	50	
SusanS: EAF	33	James: EAM	33	
Subtotals	166		127	27
Percentages	52%		40%	8%

Dangerous Skies

12 Pages; Total Entries: 270

VT Students	#entries	BMS Students	#entries	Host
Kristin: EAF	49	Absent	Absent	Deborah: EAF
Jane: EAF	44	Absent	Absent	
JessicaR: EAF	59	Chris: EAM	54	
DebS: EAF	39	Absent	Absent	
Subtotals	191		54	25
Percentages	71%		20%	9%

Joy Luck Club

12 pages; Total Entries: 191

VT Students	#entries	BMS Students	#entries	Host
Natasha: AsAAF	38	Absent	Absent	Irene: EAF
Connie: EAF	33	Sheila:IAF	8	
Regina: EAF	60	No Web Pal	8	
Joan: PIF	20	Charlie: EAM	22	
Keith: EAM	31	Julia: AsAF	31	
Subtotals	182		61	1
Percentages	75%		25%	<.5%

Parrot in the Oven

9 pages: Total Entries: 244

VT Students	#entries	BMS Students	#entries	Host
Dean: EAM	40	Absent		Susan: EAF
David: EAM	15	Bob: EAM	128	
Maureen: EAF	31	Sherri: EAF	30	
Subtotals	86		58	35
Percentages	48%		32%	20%

Appendix C

The Transcripts

As soon as possible after the MOOs, Donna and I do light editing of the transcripts, removing typos and as many spelling errors as possible. The students access the transcripts from the website and review them, noting their own participation practices and determining what they can learn from the transcript reading that they were not able to absorb during the MOO.

For the sake of comparison, all of the transcripts are done in the same format (font, size, margins, and spacing). The edited transcripts begin at the point the conversation about books began in earnest, and each one represents approximately 35 minutes of talk. We eliminate comments referring to technical mistakes, (i.e., "whoops, I didn't mean that," or times when the students would enter blank spaces) and personal chatter unrelated to the text. In preparation for this article, because I wished to show degree of involvement in the conversation, I counted each separate comment as an entry. In the example below, although Maxine's three comments are all centered on her dislike for the grandmother, I counted them as three entries, which represents her attempts to stay in the flow of the conversation and register her opinion. This passage shows three ways she disagrees with Grandma's choices and actions: she wanted her way, she showed more respect to her grandson than to her granddaughter April, and she tried to dictate to her son whom he should marry.

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MaxineP:" I didn't like the grandmother or the brother either because
they always wanted things their way"

Betsey: "in what way Florence?" (April is referring to an earlier
comment.)

MelindaH: "Well I wanted to take the brother and give a good kick in
the rear and the grandma needed to relax and let her grand daughter
live a little."

AndreaD: "I believe that is how it is in China"

AliciaM: "I've heard about some Chinese mother-in-laws from a friends
and it was pretty accurate"

FlorenceH: "I think that the culture, Chinese American or Chinese,
was portrayed negatively because the overall negativity in the book
excluding the end when she finally got the jade bracelet.""

Betsey: "who are we to judge if we are not aware of the culture"

AndreaD: "But the Grandmother needs to change now she is in America"

MaxineP:" I think that the Grandmother was mean to treat the brother
with more respect"

AllisonB: "I wonder why the grandmother was so stuck on tradition.
And Harry was such a snob. He didn't care whether April got to do
anything she wanted. He just wanted to hang out with Judy."

Hannah: "I mean there grandmother was totally being really rude to
the daughter in the first part and I know that's sort of how she was
but it was kinda bad for a first impression:)"

JimN: "Somebody describe for me the character traits that Harry had
that were not attractive."

AliciaM: "selfishness"

MaxineP:" the grandmother was also trying to rule her son's life
about who to marry"
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