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Collaboration Beyond the Classroom Walls: Deepening Learning for Students, Preservice Teachers, Teachers, and Professors

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Abstract

Geographically distant classrooms can be a ripe learning space for teacher educators who want to show preservice teachers the power of technology in the English classroom. A classroom teacher described how she used a social networking platform to allow for collaboration with a preservice teacher in the hopes of making student literary analysis more authentic for her high school seniors. The preservice teacher, as a member in the social network, learned to hone her discussion-leading and questioning skills. Teacher educators in partnerships such as this are able to better bridge theory to practice.

Professional development schools near universities and other teacher preparation institutions have long experienced mutually beneficial partnerships when college students gain experience in educational internships and student teaching experiences. Classroom teachers serving as cooperating teachers and mentors often gain a helping hand, contemporary perspectives, and the opportunity to offer collegial wisdom on best practices in teaching. Teacher educators strive to support this partnership in sharing theoretical bases that support best practice in lesson and unit planning, instructional delivery, classroom management, and assessment of student performance.

When the teacher educators, preservice teachers, and teacher mentors do not have the benefit of proximity, technology can become the bridge that allows them to collaborate and learn. The implications of this mutually beneficial relationship between the classroom teacher, the preservice teacher, and the teacher educator are important for educational professionals. Students in classrooms of these professionals are rewarded with authentic audiences, varied perspectives, and a glimpse into the opportunities afforded when English teachers use technology to connect outside of the classroom.

Context: Social Software and Developing Student Discourse

Some students take until their junior year of college to “move beyond theories of texts as autonomous to richer, more complex rhetorical theories of discourse” (Haas, 1994, p. 79). That is, college students can (and often do) spend 2 years growing into the reading and writing that will serve them best in college. This paper describes an action research project in the preparatory school English classroom of first author Susanne Nobles. Nobles surmised that the technology in her classroom could be an avenue toward connections that would allow her students to engage more readily in the complex, rhetorical theories missing from most other first- and second-year college students.

Web 2.0 tools can be used to expose more students to a community that guides them through the shift to college discourse. This created community, characterized by an explicit challenge to increase the level of sophisticated discourse, was born in Nobles’ classroom when she contacted English educator and second author, Katie Dredger, through mutual Twitter contacts in the field of English education. Because of technology-rich classrooms, geographical distance between these two educators became irrelevant in this online community, and students and the preservice teacher mutually benefitted from the sharing of weighty ideas.

Today’s students and many classroom teachers are harnessing the power of Web 2.0 technologies (Hicks, 2009; Kist, 2005) to allow students a view through a window into other places, offering authenticity of instruction. Rozema (2008) found that electronic discussions in the literature classroom “create classroom community and foster freedom of expression.” They also allow students to experiment with ideas, develop ideas in an informal, collaborative environment, and foster close reading skills in that they can “develop textual analysis in collaborations” (p. 47).

Social software enables communities of academic enterprise between high school students and preservice teachers who can form a bridge from high school to college. In college themselves, preservice teachers are more credible to high school seniors. Having newly experienced the shift from high school to college, they are also likely to recognize the increased sophistication of academic discourse.

In this discourse community, the high school students can move into academic enterprise with the guidance of preservice teachers, who are also learning from the collaboration, as they hone their teacher identities as separate from their student selves. One thing teacher educators focus on is the rejection of bells-and-whistles technology use in favor of meaningful ways to allow students to collaborate effectively as 21st-century teachers and learners (Kajder, 2010). Preservice teachers wonder whether the classrooms they enter will have the technology tools available to them and whether practicing teachers use them. This project supports university theory within the practices of a real classroom.

Preservice teachers have long been a powerful resource for students and cooperating teachers in university communities, but this symbiotic partnership does not have to be

relegated to the geographically lucky. The implications of this partnership are explored within this project. Although students have long been placed with local professional development schools or with university clinical faculty members serving as cooperating teachers, connections using Web 2.0 collaborative tools can be beneficial to more remote schools.

Working across distances takes some specialized skills, including flexibility and willingness to learn new applications, but these are skills that need to be fostered in all teachers. With Internet access and social software, classroom teachers can serve as informal mentors in 21st-century literacy English pedagogy while preservice teachers, in turn, mentor high school students. This three-way community is a powerful learning space for classroom students, mentor teachers, preservice teachers, and teacher educators. Preservice teachers are at an intersection between seeing themselves as students and as teachers. They can be a bridge between the classroom teacher and the students in many ways. They are closer to their high school years, so they remember their perspective as high school students, and yet their college classroom experiences are important too.

Social networking communities help preservice teachers form their 21st-century teaching identities by giving them an example of technology use in the real classroom. They have more perspectives on the varied nature of the English language arts classroom. This practical use of social networking is especially helpful to student teachers working in rural schools, some of which have limited access to technology. These student teachers are able to see the possibilities of the technology in use and advocate for its thoughtful implementation.

Social networking with students can remind preservice teachers of the capabilities of some of their students as well. Preservice teachers are often anxious about not knowing all the answers to their students' questions. Pairing preservice teachers with college-bound students gives them experience and a frame of reference for how to establish a comfortable place without being positioned as the only expert in the classroom. Social networking also can give preservice teachers another mentor, the classroom teacher, in their professional development network.

Planning the Community

The social software we used is Ning (www.ning.com), specifically a free educational Ning Mini sponsored by Pearson (available only in the United States). Three aspects are important to define before embarking on a Ning, or other social networking, community: text, technology, and the collaborating members of the group.

The Text. The text used in this action research project was William Shakespeare's *Othello*. A study of any engaging and challenging text works for this type of collaboration. Nobles chose the text based on her experience teaching with it. Ultimately, a text should be chosen that will keep the teacher, the preservice teacher, and the students excited for an intensive study.

The Technology. Ning allowed students to scroll through threaded discussions, a feature crucial for the reading development to be fostered in high school students. Because students can dissect textual aspects from different viewpoints and have a written record, these discussions are great tools to guide students toward academic discourse.

The writing collaboration available through Ning's blogs and forums in one user-friendly interface is another advantage. The blogs allow students to post their writing to receive feedback from all members, and the forums allow students to post their research and explore what others have found. Both the blog and forum within the Ning allow students to achieve the level of writing professors across disciplines look for. It facilitates writing tasks that require "complexity of thought" (Brockman, Taylor, Kreth, & Crawford, 2011, p. 76), that view research as a "variety of skills associated with managing sources" (p. 78), and that combine these strategies "with the right mindset toward writing, especially writing growth" (p. 79).

The social collaboration on Ning deepens writing instruction through the complexity that comes from interaction with many viewpoints, the chance to share and integrate research findings, and the constant inducement to write to engage readers. Ultimately, in our project, the Ning became an online community that high school students and a preservice teacher created together—a community that became both a teacher preparation tool for the preservice teacher and an academic discourse classroom for the high school students.

The Collaborating Members. The third piece is to make the connection between the high school students and at least one preservice teacher. The easiest way is for a high school teacher and a supervisor of preservice teachers to meet to establish their partnership. However, not all high schools and colleges have local partners available. Dredger and Nobles found each other through mutual contacts on Twitter and have never met face to face. Potential partners may also be found on school and university websites. The biographies of teachers and education professors can pinpoint those who are teaching in relevant areas as well as ones who seem more involved with technology. Ultimately, a high school class needs only one preservice teacher—as long as the preservice teacher has the hours to give (estimated as 20-25 hours in a semester). Because this project can be tied easily into teacher preparation coursework, the time is not an issue once the partnership between the university and secondary classroom has been established.

Two guidelines for preservice teachers will maximize learning for the whole online community.

1. They need to have closely read the chosen text in order for this collaboration to be successful.
2. The preservice teachers' role in the Ning is as gentle guide to new ideas not merely a "good job" voice. While positive feedback is a must for the high school students to grow, the Ning is less about making the high school students feel confident in their current skills and more about moving them out of their comfort zones into new ideas and thought processes. This type of feedback also benefits the preservice teachers because they get real-life experience offering constructive criticism to students.

This collaborative network became a community of three made up of the preservice teacher, the cooperating teaching mentor, and the teacher educator that supported our learning about teaching in the English classroom as we worked to find and develop best practice in academic community building among a community of students. While Nobles and Dredger have collaborated with different groups of secondary students and preservice teachers over 4 years, this paper describes one semester wherein only one preservice teacher served as a mentor to a whole class of high school seniors. Each of our perspectives, described individually in the following sections, shows our multifaceted and, at times, unexpected learning.

Nobles: The High School Teacher

I teach at a college-preparatory independent school in a mid-sized Eastern city. In each of my AP English literature classes I have about 15 students, all of whom are, by the mission of the school, college-bound. As a result, I am particularly keen to help my students be as successful as possible in their transition to college. This Ning collaboration was the one part of the year that achieved this goal, because I placed my students in an online college-level community and let them see how they could learn and thrive.

The Ning was ready to go on the first day of the unit. During class, students joined the Ning. Once they joined (which only takes a few minutes), students entered their first Ning discussions so I could be sure they could all navigate the Ning. I posted a few speeches from the play, and they discussed these in groups and posted their notes for the rest of the class. We also discussed our expectations for the types of reflection and responses in the Ning. I allowed mine to be informal, but formal guidelines can work too. While the students read and worked with Act I, they wrote blog posts showing their comprehension of the reading and their manipulation of Shakespeare's language. Reading and commenting on these blogs are informal ways for the preservice teacher to reenter the writing and thinking community of high school with her new identity as a teacher.

The main focus of the collaboration between my students and the preservice teacher was character studies. These were Ning forums titled by each of the character's names with the directions:

Together, you will record quotes you have about [character's name] then react to those, ultimately creating a full picture of your character by thinking on your own and learning from others' thoughts. In the end, this character forum must trace [character's name] from his/her entry into the play until his/her final scene, so work together to compile this study. You must post five new quotes (with correct citations) and 10 reactions.

My students choose the character they wished to follow, and the preservice teacher interacted in as many forums as she could.

In these character forums the preservice teacher collaborated in ways that engaged the students in academic discourse. Students reacted to their peers' ideas and to the questions and prompts written by the preservice teacher. The preservice teacher used her feedback to push my students to new levels of thought, and my students responded. On a few days, I gave my students class time to write back to the preservice teacher directly. This correspondence told me that each of my students was engaging at this level while also opening a discussion about how they felt about what the preservice teacher was asking of them. This time for reflection was key to solidifying students' growth. The following exchange took place between my 2011 seniors and Gerheart.

- Student 1: "So speaking as I think, alas, I die" (V.ii.252). This line is so great as Emilia's dying words. She is finally free from having to please her husband or anyone else and gets to say her true thoughts.
- Student 2: I LOVE this line. This is up there with the best of the best last words. She finally spoke her mind to her husband, and was able to die with no regrets.
- Student 1: I like that, no regrets, maybe that means she finally accomplished whatever her superobjective is. Maybe her superobjective is just

to be a good person and she has finally seen everyone's true colors and knows where her loyalties lie and what the right thing to do is.

Gerheart Well, maybe not NO regrets. I'm sure she DEFINITELY regrets stealing that handkerchief at this point. But I see what you mean. She's made everyone aware of her husband's true colors, so she can die knowing that she's atoned for her hankie theft.

While Gerheart validated the students' contributions, she also pushed them to consider shades of gray. By complicating the students' thoughts, Gerheart pushed them out of their intellectual comfort zone.

What was most powerful to me was that my students saw the value of this community. One of my students wrote,

I LOVE the Ning! It's been really helpful because I've been able to see other's thoughts I really like that we can just throw an idea on [the character forum] and then let others add on to it or find evidence to support it. It's a great way for us all to be able to work together without [it] getting confusing.

This student saw the benefit of having others' ideas to consider. She ended up feeling this exchange was *less* confusing, showing a real growth of mind because she found that having *more* ideas is actually clearer than merely focusing on her own thoughts. She ultimately clarified her understandings through these exchanges.

All of this character collaboration built to my students' final research paper, the paper where I hoped to see college-level written discourse emerge from the college-level reading discussions. Their assignment was to join the academic conversation by writing journal articles exploring the characters they followed. The goal of the journal article was to determine, explain, and ultimately prove the character's superobjective. I expected my students to establish their own frameworks for understanding their characters. I asked them to do this in the manner of a true research scholar: by integrating all of their Ning conversations as well as outside research consisting of academic articles written by Shakespearean scholars into a college-level analysis with the support of their online mentors.

The students posted their drafts on their Ning blogs with two or more specific questions for the preservice teacher. The preservice teacher focused her feedback on whether the writer had achieved a strong college-level academic voice, giving her experience with critiquing student work. The preservice teacher also graded and commented on the final papers. We teachers, often isolated in our classrooms, rarely get to norm our assessing with others. When I saw how Gerheart had assessed my students' papers, I felt deeper confidence in my own grading, knowing that the strengths and weaknesses I saw in my students' writing were there for others to see as well. I, the experienced teacher, gained as much from this project as Gerheart did.

In their unit reflections my students saw that sharing ideas made their own ideas stronger. One wrote,

I really liked the fact that just because of what the Ning is and how it works we were sort of forced to see other people's thoughts on things....For example, through the character groups I got to really see the opinions of others, and their

support for them, of such a complex character as Iago. I think it really helped me to develop my own opinions much stronger.

Another student wrote,

[Gerheart] would...ask questions to us individually and sort of challenge us...which forced me to think more about whatever it was that she asked....I was challenged by the questions and thoughts that she wants us to think about.

I also noticed a confident voice in my students' writing I had not seen before:

Othello fends off invaders from allies, Desdemona fends off her father's disapproval of her union with the general; Othello wears armor to protect himself physically, Desdemona wears an ability to speak her mind to protect herself from being walked on; Othello has the full attention of his followers (minus one unusually cunning Iago), Desdemona commands the attention of the Duke's court."

Emilia's flowing syntax, full of thought, quickly deteriorates into curt statements as she seemingly arbitrarily turns to Iago in her judgment. This shift reflects the haste with which her decision is made.

These strong, confident writers were ready to join the academic discourse. They had good ideas, and more importantly, they had confidence in expressing these ideas.

I informally tracked my students as they entered college to see if they see this collaborative project prepared them for college. Rachel, a college sophomore, reflected as follows:

The level of professionalism expected out of us definitely prepared me for college writing....We were expected to be confident in our writing abilities, to thoroughly develop our ideas, to organize our papers in unique ways. When you write college papers, I've found, you have to exhibit clear confidence in your writing....The process we went through of learning about academic articles before writing those character studies also prepared me a bit for this year, as articles from academic journals are basically the standard held up for us by our professors.

Gerheart: The Teacher in Training

As a preservice teacher studying English education at a large state university, I was given the opportunity to complete an independent study to augment learning within a required course, Teaching Adolescent Readers. As a project option, I worked with Nobles' classroom as her students studied *Othello* on a Ning. My story shows how the collaborative nature of the Ning helped to shape my identity as a teacher as distinct from my student identity. A Ning in the classroom brings the outside in. With 225 miles between us, I could never have the full discussions I had with this classroom in any other way. The Ning created two communities for me, one with a teaching mentor and one with students in the classroom. The Ning as a learning space taught me to allow the student discovery process to unfold and gave me insight into constructive assessment.

Early into my collaboration on the Ning, I made a serious faux pas. *Othello* has always been a favorite of mine, and because there is so much subtlety and intricacy in this

particular play, I hoped I would make a difference in the students' perceptions of the story by offering a unique point of view. Having dissected this play so many times, I got carried away with my own enthusiasm and, unconsciously, I pointed out subtleties and understated foreshadowing so blatantly that students felt I was giving plot away. In one post I said,

I'm finding it intriguing that you're all describing Emilia as so weak and timid a character. While she certainly seems to shut down around her husband, I think she's generally an outspoken sort of woman when she's not trapped in his presence. I know there hasn't been much of an opportunity to see her apart from him (at this point in the play), but I'm looking forward to seeing how your opinions change once you see her away from Iago's influence.

This was one of my first posts to the Emilia forum. To students just discovering her, I gave away far too much information.

I had to stop thinking of myself as an *Othello* expert and redefine my role as encourager. In fact, I felt I was a much more effective part of this community when I focused my contributions on asking questions I thought might lead them to look at the text in new ways. I had to remind myself that I was present in the forums to push their thinking, not to direct their perceptions. I realized a delicacy is required when you are teaching a text you have read and loved, and it is important to allow members each to discover the story at their own pace and in their own way. This was a valuable lesson for me to learn as a novice teacher.

I was surprised how easy it was to fit into my new role. I realized that even though I have read and studied this text before, I still have so much to learn about it. In our Ning community, we all brought different lenses to our reading of the text. I was thrilled and inspired by how much I learned from reading their thoughts and insights and how they led me to reconsider some of my own conceptions.

One of the things that fascinated me about this experience was how much I learned about each student based solely on how they responded to what was going forward in the text. Some students were readily trusting of the characters, while others were initially wary. Some students saw bravery in Desdemona, while others could only find weakness. The Ning helped the students (and me) walk in each others' shoes, and that benefit to this community was unexpected and wonderful. I had worried initially that it would be difficult to build strong relationships with students I would never meet in person. These students whom I had never seen or spoken to were as real and distinct to me as those I student-taught every day. I was a part of their community. Who would have thought that level of rapport could happen online?

I think my most valuable lesson came from my own mistakes. I learned to see myself as a learner and not just a teacher. When exploring a text as rich as *Othello*, teachers have to think about not only what we want students to see, but also what they can show us and each other. In a Ning community, teachers are learners and learners are teachers. I learned just how perceptive and insightful students could be, especially if I backed off and let them explore.

Another great lesson I have taken away from this experience dealt with assessment. As a new teacher, I was definitely worried about my assessment skills. When Susanne and I first discussed my role in the Ning, she asked me to complete my collaboration by giving students feedback on their drafts, then assessing the completed papers. Responding to

the rough drafts was fascinating and uncomplicated. It was the first time I had given detailed criticism to students, but it was truly a pleasure to see how far they had come in their understanding. It was sometimes hard for me to articulate what needed to be fixed, but I reminded myself to look at these as a fellow writer in our community. What feedback would be helpful to me if I were in their situation? With that question in mind, it was easy to make suggestions where I thought improvement was needed and to compliment the areas where they had excelled.

When it came to assessing the final papers, my confidence faltered. I was nervous about my grading skills. Nobles had provided me with a rubric that helped to guide my thinking, but I was still anxious about my own inexperience as a grader. However, when Nobles let me know how our assessments turned out to be very close, the value of the teacher-teacher aspect of our community became clear. To know I was grading so similarly to an experienced teacher whose judgment I value and trust was incredibly gratifying. I've always thought of rubrics as primarily a list of guidelines to help students, but this opened my eyes to the value of this tool for teachers. Having the rubric in front of me kept my grading consistent, and discussing assessment with her deepened my understanding of and confidence with grading.

Dredger: The Teacher Educator

I am a teacher educator in a small teacher preparation program within a large research university in the middle eastern United States. After 13 years in secondary public education, I entered the teacher preparation arena and found the value of Twitter and social networking for professional development purposes. When first approached by Nobles, I saw an opportunity for outreach, as I work at a land-grant university that prides itself on service within our state. The power of New Literacies gave me the opportunity to explore such a partnership. The mutually beneficial relationship that was created fit well with New Literacies as defined in accordance with Knobel and Lankshear (2007).

New Literacies are “literacy practices that privilege participation over publishing, distributed expertise over centralized expertise...sharing over ownership, experimentation over normalization, innovation and evolution over stability and fixity” (p. 21). This informal collaboration corroborated this definition in that the students were encouraged to participate in meaning-making. Gerheart, the preservice teacher, found that she was not the expert in the room. I, the university English educator, saw a place for experimentation. Nobles, the classroom teacher mentor honored innovation and evolution.

Listening to the voices of mentor teachers and preservice teachers is an effective way to hone the craft of teacher education. Pairing reflective teachers like Nobles with eager preservice teachers like Gerheart does not have to happen only in the student teaching experience in traditional places near the university. Collaborating this way allowed for one preservice teacher to see that current theory grounded in New Literacies is happening in classrooms where practicing teachers honor student voices in an effort to better prepare students for the academic writing demands of college classrooms. Best practice happens in schools that use Web 2.0 technologies to offer vigorous curricula that is steeped in student creation, collaboration, and varied audiences that not only preservice teachers can provide (Hicks, 2009; Kajder, 2010). Teachers can pair students with local authors, community members, and students in other schools. The untapped resources of authentic audiences are only part of the possibilities.

Teacher educators wonder why theoretical best practices are not transferred to the classrooms of their former students. In my experience, students are more likely to strive

to balance theoretical best practice with traditional practice when they have a strong and present professional learning network, despite sometimes working in school systems with limited access to technology. Access to email is the minimum technology needed for such partnerships. Using the power of these electronic partnerships, preservice teachers can join wired classroom communities that will give them a real life example of the possibilities for their future practice.

Implications

Traditional literacies are not being replaced by these technologies (Alsup, 2010) but teachers are seeing that connections enhance the authenticity of reading and writing tasks. Hicks (2009) discussed the ways that digital writing offers the collaborative power of multiple audiences and additionally a record of increased writing sophistication in that electronic tools leave a record of growth. Like wikis, blogs, and collaborative word processors such as Google Docs, Nings track revision history but amplify the social aspect of constructivist philosophy. Perhaps the most powerful aspect of this project is the collaborative inquiry that is the hallmark of teacher action research, especially in the field of rapidly changing technologies (Adcock & Bolick, 2011; Bourgeois & Hunt, 2011).

Burke (2008) created the English Companion Ning (englishcompanion.ning.com) as a professional development network that is now over 32,000 members strong. Over 2,000 members are a part of the discussion group Teaching with Technology, and 68 discussions have been about using Nings in the classroom. The heart of the project's initial impetus was an authentic teacher question. How could Web 2.0 technology launch students into higher-order thinking and writing in order to better prepare them for college discourse?

Teacher education that models connection between current technological tools, effective pedagogy, and student learning is amplifying the teacher preparation experiences in powerful ways (DeGennaro, 2010; Smagorinsky, 2008). In order to amplify this discussion as to the impact of the reach of this research, it is important to note that the classroom educator saw the power in collaboration beyond traditional geographical confines. It is not enough that students are digitally connected to classmates they see everyday in the classroom anyway. It may not even be enough that they are connected to other classrooms if those other students are simply mirrors to their socioeconomic level, age, stage, and dispositions, as is the case in some linked classrooms. Digital technologies in the English classroom can be windows first and then connections into others' conversations. "Education has failed to involve students in scholarly projects, projects that allow students to act as though they were colleagues in an academic enterprise" (Bartholomae, 1985, p. 144). This collaboration of scholarship benefits the students in the immediate nature of feedback, the varied voices offered, and in the authenticity of task, better preparing them for academic life after high school.

Considering that Nings make communities possible across countless miles, the possibilities seem endless. People in different countries, time zones, and parts of the world can come together to collaborate and share their original points of view. A level of accessibility is present when teaching with this technological tool that makes this type of collaboration almost effortless. It blends the line between teacher and student roles. Our Ning community allowed us all to keep learning.

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