Virtual Literature Circles

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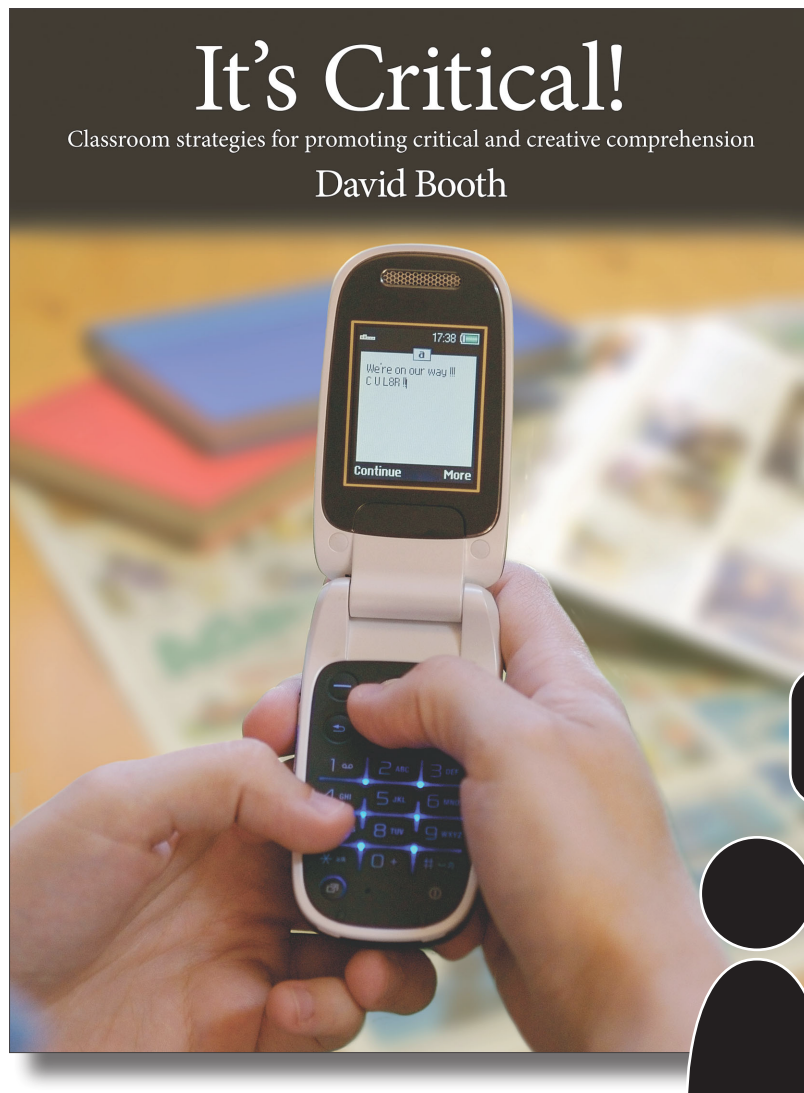
It's Critical!

Classroom strategies for promoting critical and creative comprehension

David Booth

Sharing
&
Response

Virtual Literature Circles

BY BEVERLY STRACHAN

The last few chapters when Tamara constantly helped Miss Barclay while they drove to Seattle and Vancouver reminds me of Grandpa who recently passed away. When my family and I went to go visit him in his nursing home a couple of times a year in Ottawa, he slept frequently so we could only see him for short periods of time, and sometimes he was in a grumpy mood and he did not want to see any company (just like Miss Barclay in Chapter 15). He had a disease called Alzheimer's (a brain disorder) and the effects on him were: he lost almost ALL of his memory, he sometimes had trouble speaking, he was in a wheelchair, and he basically acted like a kid. My family and I always had to haul him around to wherever he wanted to go, just like Tamara is starting to do in a different way more and more and not as severe. I recall how hard it was sometimes, and I think Tamara has, and will have to help Miss Barclay more and more. She probably is getting used to it, but I know it is hard on her, but it is worth the deal she is getting for it.

Grade 8 student
Posted at 6:16 p.m., March 30, 2008

What a powerful text-to-self connection this student has made in this response to a passage she has read from a Red Maple Award–winning novel, *Skinnybones and the Wrinkle Queen* by Glen Huser. The book is about Tamara, a 15-year-old who has made her way through the foster-care system, and Miss Barclay, a wealthy, cranky, and frail former schoolteacher. As part of a school community project, Tamara is volunteering at a local seniors' home where she meets Miss Barclay. Both Tamara and Miss Barclay have a goal and recognize that they must rely on each other in order to meet their respective goals. These two very different individuals embark on a road trip. Will they be able to make the journey and meet their goals? A reason to keep reading!

The student is sharing her response with a small group of peers who belong to an online literature circle. In this instance, students are engaging with different award-winning novels to build interactive online communities in support of deepening each other's understanding. Here, I share how a team of teachers at a Toronto public school integrated technology with literature circles, offering another venue in which students could converse about the texts they were reading.

The teachers developed a wiki site that included information about the authors, links to various websites related to the book, multi-media reflections that celebrated their learning, and most important, an online discussion forum that allowed students to reflect on and make connections to the novels they were reading. The initiative came about after teacher candidate Rickesh Kotecha shared his action research question with his associate teacher, Alison Hall; their librarian, Gianna Dassios, who was already thinking about creating such an online environment; and their principal, Helen Fisher.

This teachers' initiative recognizes the importance of providing opportunities for students to have meaningful conversations about the texts they read. Teaching reading is a complex process — we are constantly learning about and questioning our practice. We make decisions about how we can help students understand what they are reading and take that understanding to a deeper level. As we learn, we share.

We have moved well beyond merely asking students to read parts of a novel and independently respond to a series of factual recall questions. We recognize the power of having students discuss what they have read in small, peer-led discussion groups much as we may experience in book clubs.

The work of Harvey Daniels has provided us with insight into how to engage students in meaningful conversations about the texts they read. Daniels has shared strategies and presented the structure of "literature circles." Research confirms the validity and relevance of using literature circles in the classroom. These circles are often known under different titles, such as book clubs, cooperative book discussions, and literature discussion groups.

Before technology was integrated with literature circles, the students in this Grade 7/8 classroom had often met in literature circle groups within the classroom. The teacher had provided opportunities for students to make text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections as they responded to texts they were reading. She created opportunities for students to build on their previous knowledge of reading strategies, such as inferring, visualizing, predicting, questioning, and

synthesizing as discussed and modelled in class. Below is an online example of a student making connections.

Connecting: The first section of Skinnybones and the Wrinkle Queen reminded me of an episode of 'That's so Raven'. In the episode, Raven Baxter had to help an elderly lady at a retirement home with things she needed, and Raven had to spend time with her to get tickets to a show she wanted to go to. The elderly lady Raven had to look after was stubborn, not friendly, and did not want a helper at first. In the book I quote "she can be a bit difficult at times, and she may not be too friendly right to start with." Pg. 20. Both retired women acted the same. And in both the episode and the book, both elderly women ended up appreciating the help, and the company of their selected partners, with time. To add to the connection, Raven helped her partner let her dreams come back to life, and in Skinnybones and the Wrinkle Queen, on the back cover it says that they go on a road trip to try and fulfill their own dreams, and I infer that they will develop a deep and strong relationship together.

> Grade 8 student
> Posted at 7:34 a.m, March 16, 2008

After analyzing various free wiki spaces online, the teachers decided to register at www.wikispaces.com. One reason this site was chosen was because educators are provided with many special services. The site's physical setup is not too technologically challenging as there are easily accessible and detailed procedures for setup and follow-up assistance. Furthermore, specific sites can be made public or private; those that are public can be viewed for ideas and formats for personal sites. The team created a wiki space called "Chine Drive Red Maple" which, for this project, was made accessible to only invited members: the Grade 7/8 students, the teacher candidate, the associate teacher, the resource librarian, the principal, the faculty adviser from OISE (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education), and most important, the authors of the selected novels.

Having an online discussion forum enabled the students to create questions and make comments directly to the authors who were participants. The students were excited about being able to engage in conversation the authors of the texts they were reading. They felt encouraged to take part in ongoing dialogue. An example:

Mr. Huser, why did you write the book in two different points of view switching chapter by chapter? My answer: I think you did it because it provides two different points of

perspective and engages the reader more. I know it made the book more captivating, and I felt like I was in two different characters' shoes. It was amazing to see what they thought of each other. I think you, as the author created good character traits for the characters, and did not just make Tamara and Miss Barclay normal people, but unique.

> Grade 8 student
> Posted at 7:34 a.m., March 16, 2008

Of the six Red Maple Award winners that the students selected, the teacher candidate piloted online literature circles with only two groups of students. The groups that went online were reading *Skinnybones and the Wrinkle Queen* by Glen Huser and *Stolen Away* by Christopher Dinsdale. These two novels were chosen because they had been read by all members of the team, enabling everyone to be active participants and facilitators in the discussions with the students.

As you can see from the following quotations, the interactions between the students and the teacher candidate reflect a progressive discussion thread.

I also really liked these chapters because I could relate to them very well. The majority of these chapters are set while Tamara and Miss Barclay are driving across Canada. I could relate to that very well. I have traveled to Jasper, Banff and Vancouver. I liked how the author described the weather conditions. He was talking about the country side and the mountains. I felt like I was back there again. I think that was the reason I enjoyed these chapters the most. I really cannot wait to read on! I want to see what happens the rest of the trip!

> Grade 8 student
> Posted at 5:16 a.m., April 1, 2008

This is a really good reflection! I remember how much tension there was with my family when we had to go on long trips. Imagine being cramped in a car with everyone! Although it is just the two of them, you can imagine how Tamara is feeling (especially since they are of different ages). I have never driven across Canada but would like to do this one day. Keep on reading and posting!

> Teacher candidate
> Posted at 1:03 p.m., April 1, 2008

One time when I was like 8, my family and one of my dad's friend's family members decided to rent a minivan and go to Quebec. I do remember by the time we got there everyone was sick and tired of each other, and that was when I had people there who were my age. I can imagine how

Tamara is feeling. Driving for hours with a person who is like 5 times your age. I think that just listening to the opera music would have driven me crazy.

Grade 8 student
Posted at 6:54 p.m., April 1, 2008

One of the main reasons many of the students enjoyed this online format was that they could discuss and post their reflections at varying times throughout the day and night. The students in this particular community were fortunate to have access to computers at home. As teachers, we recognize the importance of equity of access. For those students who do not have computers at home, we must find alternative ways to ensure that they learn the skills to become digital citizens and be part of the learning environment we have structured. Ensuring that computer time at school is allocated to students who require access is essential. Encouraging students to become members of their local library also provides more Internet access.

Some students found that this format for sharing enabled them to channel their feelings or thoughts in a deeper, more meaningful way than they could in a face-to-face setting. For some students and adults, expressing feelings in writing can be less threatening or intimidating; however, this advantage does not negate the importance of having face-to-face conversations, a skill that students and adults of any age need to develop. A combination of both formats would be ideal to address the varying needs of many learners.

Providing an online space for students to respond to texts can be inspiring and energizing; however, the space need not be a wiki. If schools have access to First Class or other online conferencing systems, an online conference environment could be created for students to respond to text. As you read more about the students' reactions to wiki spaces, however, it may inspire you to pursue this particular environment.

Students were able to provide meaningful and detailed reflections and responses throughout the process. There was definitely a difference between what they would write on paper and talk about and what they would write in an online dialogue. They were quick to understand how to navigate their way while using the wiki, and they continuously provided feedback and suggestions.

The librarian was both a help and a strong advocate of this initiative. Interested in the program and the entire process, she constantly encouraged the team to implement new things as we created our space. For example, after the site was fully functional, the librarian researched and found a code for an online voting poll where the students could place their votes about the degree to which they enjoyed the book they were reading (on a scale from 1 to 5). The code came from another public wiki site. All she had to do was copy and paste it into a text box on our page. There were, and still are, several surprises and challenges with the process that need to be addressed for future wiki projects.

- It was essential to remind students to check the site frequently (I tried to have them check at least once a day). It was frustrating to post an important message on the general discussion board and not have it read by students until the night before.
- We decided to assess students based on the requirements of posting a minimum of one reflection and two responses to other students' reflections. We recognized that we were assessing students' work based on the participation of others. If group members didn't post their reflections, it was difficult for other students to post responses. We needed to reassess our practice.
- We recognized that some students find it challenging to learn how to write "professionally" or for an audience that is diverse and wider in scope. Spelling errors, instant messaging lingo, and casual e-mail jargon were evident in most discussion posts. Students were encouraged to use a writing program to draft their reflection, to use spell check, and to save their reflections for backup. Judging by the continuous evidence of grammatical errors and spelling mistakes in their posted work, only a few students adopted this strategy. When I implement this process next, I plan to have the students use a writing program and then I will teach them how to post their work into the wiki site. (All it takes is a simple copy and paste.)
- One huge concern with this process is the reliability of the technology. If the Internet or site goes down, what do you do? There was one instance where the site was down and students were unable to read or respond to any of the reflections. This is where the previous point plays a major role: if students had a backup file of their work, they could easily print off a copy and

implement the strategies used in the face-to-face literature circle discussions.

I expect that student involvement will increase over time as students become more familiar with the process. As they continue to receive constructive feedback about their work, they will not only be more engaged at using the technology, but will benefit both academically and socially. Because the idea is a new concept for most students, it would be worthwhile to designate students as explorers of the development of a wiki page, its functions and format, and most important, of ways it can enhance their learning. There are unbelievable tools and unique features that will complement students' creativity and ideas.

The interest and support of everyone on this team provided a risk-free learning environment for all concerned, especially the students involved. This initiative taught the students how to be professional digital citizens and what responsibilities they had as authors of authentic pieces of work that could be viewed on the World Wide Web. Combining the opportunity to experience "virtual" literature circles and face-to-face literature circles would open doors for many students and provide more opportunities for students to talk about and reach a deeper understanding of the texts being read in small peer-led discussion groups.

Overall, I REALLY enjoyed using Wiki rather than just having a plain discussion about the book. Everyone's voice could be heard instead of in a discussion when people cut people out and talked over people. The only thing that I did not like was the fact that you did not know when some-

one responded to everyone's comment. You had to open each discussion and figure out if anyone responded to a comment you had. Otherwise it was a great experience, but also I wish there was a spell check on Wiki so you did not have to cut and paste in Word.

So, to end our foray into the world of virtual literature circles, we will share one last entry, made by a student as she completes reading the novel. She still has questions and is still thinking about the events in the story . . . and that's what we want our readers to be doing — always thinking and trying to understand, trying to make meaning and deepen comprehension.

I found that the last few chapters were amazing as they were very engaging and I could not put the book down after there was a hunt for Tamara and Miss Barclay, and Miss Barclay had a brutal fall. Many of the things we predicted came true! Overall I think this book was excellent and I think the author ended the book well with a good overall conclusion of Tamara having to never miss another day of school, having to go to group therapy, and helping at the Sierra Sunset Seniors' Lodge. I think that was a good punishment for Tamara to learn a lesson about what she did was wrong. I thought she might have to kid's jail . . . but it was not that bad. Without her punishment though, I think Tamara would get back up on her feet without thinking about it and plan once again the next second. Will Tamara learn her lesson, or will she keep on doing things like that again? Will her punishment really help her, or just go to the back of her mind?

Grade 8 student
Posted on April 9, 2008