

Fantasy Island Meets the Real World: Using Online Discussion Forums in Collaborative Learning

Students from two high schools collaborate on an authentic activity designed to enhance their readings of Lord of the Flies. Online discussions and face-to-face meetings help the students describe fictional utopian societies.

Forty-one ninth-grade students and their two teachers climbed back onto the two school buses to return to their own towns after a windy spring day at Mahoney State Park. Among us were copies of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, maps and brochures for student-designed utopian societies, plastic spears and flower leis, some new friendships, and swirls of thoughts about how much and how deeply we had learned from each other.

Back in the classroom the next day, my students basked in pride and amazement that we had been able to pull off the monumental endeavor known as the Tribal Paradise Project. I asked students to log onto the online forums that had been central to our work and to reflect on their use of the forums themselves. Ashley wrote,

I really liked talking on the forum. Everyone was very active and people were a lot more interested in other's opinions. There are only a couple negative things about the forum. People can be misunderstood because when you read someone else's opinion, you don't get to hear their tone of voice to judge whether they are angry or just stating something. I prefer talking on the forum. I'm a lot more interested in being able to look at what other people say and respond on my own time.

Ashley's comments reflect her awareness of both the advantages and complexities of writing online—encountered daily by adults while we do the real-world collaborative work of coordinating with colleagues, managing projects, and negotiating different agendas through the convenience of online communication. For the last two years in my

classroom, students had been using online forums to discuss literature and to share writing. I learned about the forums from my Nebraska Writing Project friend and colleague, Jeff Grinvalds, who had invited me to participate in a wonderfully productive online collaboration between our two schools. Jeff showed me how online discussion forums could be used to vastly expand the amount of writing feedback students could share to create much more accessible class discussions. Our students enjoyed the cross-school interaction, but Jeff and I both wanted to use the forums in a way that would move students toward the kind of computer multiliteracies that Stuart Selber describes in *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*. Selber promotes the teaching of different kinds of computer literacy that include functional, critical, and rhetorical literacy—the ability to use, question, and produce technology. Jeff and I knew that students were already using the online discussion forums quite well, but we wanted to see if we could up the rhetorical ante by asking students to create and manage discussion threads for their own purposes.

Overview of the Project

The Tribal Paradise Project we designed divided our 41 ninth-grade students into six groups, each comprised of students from both schools. The groups were each responsible for using the online forums to create a utopian society and develop promotional materials to recruit other students to join their Tribal Paradise. All the students would then get together during a field trip to a local state park and present their ideas at the Tribal Council. At the end

of the day the students would vote on which Tribal Paradise they most wanted to join.

This project was a bold attempt to bring together the real-world skills of collaboration and online writing into one major, cross-school project. Adapted from the famous “Flimibuff” assignment cited by Ray Saitz on his teacher website (<http://www.rayser.ca>), we hoped students would think about the complex issues raised in *Lord of the Flies* by working together in online cross-school groups to create utopian societies that their fellow students might want to join. This project helped me understand how cross-school interdisciplinary projects can help push students to strengthen both their collaboration and online communication skills. More importantly, the project helped me see how such work might deepen teachers’ understanding of how the teaching of these skills could be enhanced through projects that insist on such skills’ interdependency and that promote the elusive critical-thinking skill of synthesis.

Key to the Tribal Paradise Project’s success was that students were asked to do the following:

- Work online with students from another school to develop projects jointly as a tribe
- Take on the “Threadmeister” responsibility for starting, moderating, and summarizing an online discussion thread focused on a particular tribal concern
- Present their projects at the Tribal Council where all students would vote on which tribal paradise they would most like to join

The Tribal Paradise Project also succeeded because of the support of fellow teacher-researchers in the Nebraska Writing Project, the forum technology and training funded by a grant from the National Writing Project, and the energetic, open-minded students who were willing to take a leap of faith and follow their teachers into the challenge of the unknown.

Welcome to Fantasy Island

On opening day of the project, I tried to heighten student interest with a little drama. I wore my best/worst Hawaiian shirt, invited our principal to come watch, and handed out the bright-green project introduction sheets. In the middle of the page, under

a big palm tree and sunset scene, the handout read the following:

As we’ve seen in *Lord of the Flies*, creating a new society can be a challenge. Ralph, Jack, Piggy, Simon, and the others have made some mistakes, and now their perfect island paradise is falling apart. But your tribe can learn from their mistakes and create a society that will work! In this project, your tribe will design an island paradise community and then try to recruit members of other tribes to join you.

We talked about books, movies, and TV shows that have used the concept of utopia—*Survivor*, *The Island*, *Brave New World*, *Lost*—and about the simultaneous allure and challenge of designing such a world. To help simplify and divide the project’s physical work, Jeff and I had decided that my students in Arlington, Nebraska, would be responsible for making brochures and Jeff’s students in Ashland, Nebraska, would be responsible for making maps. This division of labor also allowed us to customize some of our non-forum classroom time and to assess student work more fairly. The project handout described a total of three Tribal Paradise recruitment materials:

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A. The Map or Model

This should be colorful, detailed, and neat, covering the required topics. Someone looking at it should be able to understand what everything represents and should perceive the “vision” of the community through its design. Required topics: housing, farming/industry, transportation, entertainment, and community facilities. This product will be created by the map-makers of Ashland-Greenwood but will require discussion input from both schools.

B. The Brochure

This should also be colorful, detailed, and neat, covering the required topics. It should be persuasive, inviting, and engaging. Someone reading it should be able to see how well you’ve thought through your plans and how committed you are to your dream. Required topics: the type of people

you are looking for, the roles and responsibilities of tribal members, rules/laws/constitution, consequences for breaking the law, major selling points and slogan. This product will be created by the brochure-makers of Arlington but will require input from both schools.

C. The Presentation

Tribe members from each school will have a chance to meet and share their products, then finalize the details of their presentation. You might incorporate music, acting, dance, demonstrations, testimonials, or even food and drink (with permission). The presentation should last at least five minutes but cannot be longer than ten minutes. This will be planned and delivered by both teams jointly at the Tribal Council.

Jeff and I made it clear that tribe members from each school would have to work together, using the online forums to decide on the general concept and design of their tribal paradise. We also made sure that students understood that in four

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weeks they would meet their fellow tribe members in person and work together with them to create a presentation for the other tribes. We hoped that we could harness the competitive spirit by designing a Tribal Council with an actual vote so that one tribe would be the “winner”; we also hoped that the real-world pressure of other students reading their brochures, studying their maps, and listening to their

presentation would create an authentic audience for their projects.

After the project overview, the students broke into their assigned tribal groups, formed to balance genders, schools, learning styles, interaction styles, and multiple intelligences. We named the groups after real Pacific islands: Malakulu, Bora Bora, Manihiki, Tongatapu, Aranuka, and Olosega. The students then became familiar with the assessment criteria by looking at samples of utopian societies designed by former students and discussing how the older projects might be judged based on the rubric. Finally, they moved on to the forums.

Negotiating Paradise

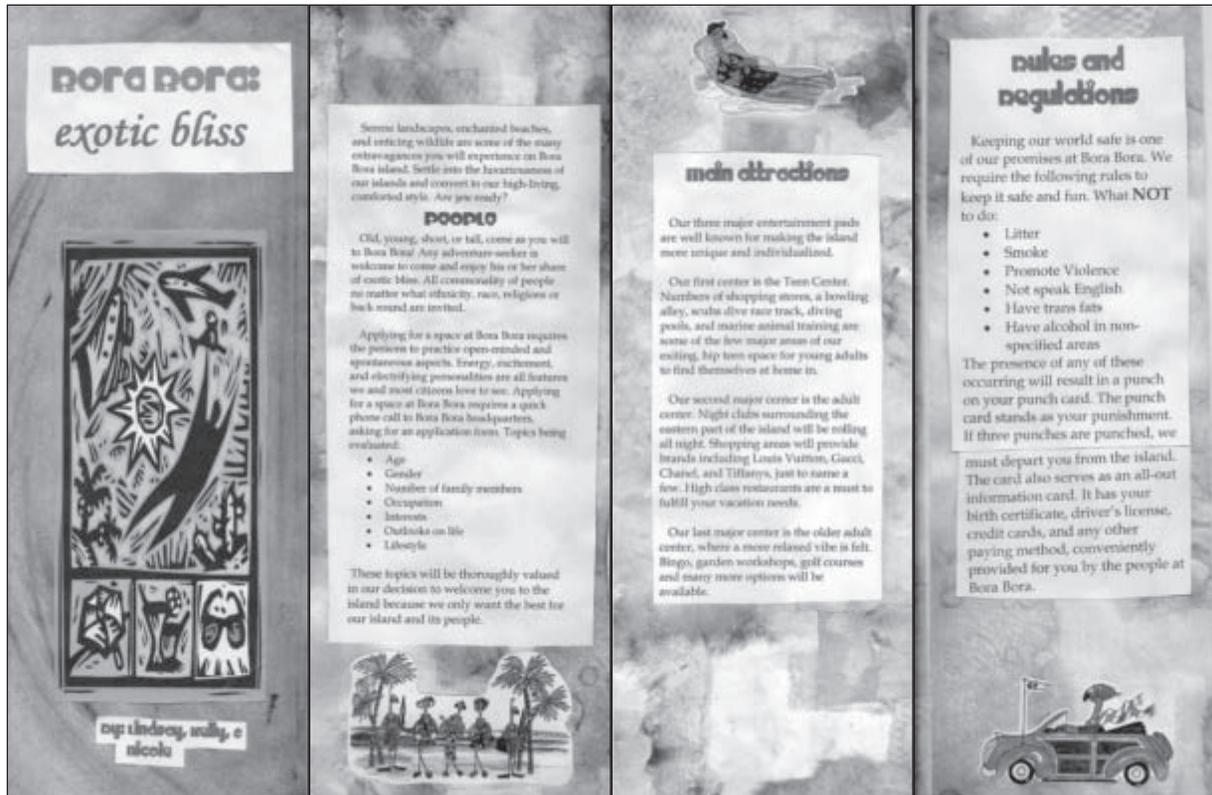
Excited but nervous about this challenging new work, students went online and began general discussions about their plans for creating a perfect society, coupled with discussions about what was happening in *Lord of the Flies*. Students were able to discuss their tribal paradise plans in class and online for two weeks. Although there was lively posting from home and during study halls, Jeff and I tried to provide as much in-class Web access as possible, since some students did not have home Internet access or were stymied by slow dial-up connections that are still somewhat common in the rural Nebraska areas where we teach.

On forum-focused days, students generally began the class by logging on and reading the new posts in their tribe, comparing their observations and opinions with their in-class tribe members, then responding or starting new discussion threads. Jeff and I—each in our own classroom—circulated among the groups, carefully read all of the tribes’ online discussions, and spent a great deal of time emailing back and forth to compare notes. Sometimes we gently nudged groups to discuss threads that demanded attention or explained gaps in response time when students complained that the other school hadn’t responded. Students often sat side by side at tables so that they could point to items on their screens, but some preferred to sprawl out on the floor or to sit with their screens back to back.

Slowly, consensus began emerging within tribes about what forms paradise would take on



Students present information about the utopian society they created.



Selected pages from one of the students' Tribal Paradise brochures.

their islands. Some groups emphasized a “family friendly” environment, while others focused on creating societies devoted to ideals of serenity, luxury, simplicity, or community. It was interesting to watch how online dialogues happened alongside and in response to classroom dialogues. A few groups were initially slow in their cross-school interactions, having to work harder to elicit responses from each other. But some groups seemed to fall into easy conversation interspersed with friendly comments about sports rivalries or local issues. At least one cross-school romance sprung up, which became a subject of great interest, but there were also quite a few friendships formed.

During the last week of the Tribal Paradise discussion and planning, the project entered a frustrating phase that led Jeff and me to rethink how we were using the forums. The various discussion threads were starting to overlap and multiply chaotically, and students seemed overwhelmed with the number of decisions they had to make. We needed a way to move forward with the actual maps and bro-

chures so that the tribes could present them at Tribal Council. Just as Selber had urged, we wanted to “[s]caffold instruction that leverages well-known contexts and gradually releases certain responsibilities to technologically competent students” (186). To move toward this rhetorical computer literacy and to help the tribes manage the flow of information, we asked groups to designate a “Threadmeister” for each required topic. The Threadmeister’s job was to

- Start and maintain a discussion thread devoted to that topic
- Read and respond to all posts to encourage further discussion
- Identify patterns of thought that might lead to consensus
- Identify conflicts and work toward resolving them
- Write and post a “Threadmeister Report” summarizing what issues had been discussed and what he or she felt that the group had decided regarding the topic

Designating Threadmeisters served as a necessary management tool, since tribe members at both schools needed to know the basic facts about the island so that they could create the maps and brochures. In writing the brochure section on “rules,” for example, the person responsible for that section only needed to read the Threadmeister’s Report to be in agreement with what had been decided over the last two weeks of discussion. All tribe members understood that the various Threadmeister Reports would contain the final word on tribal decisions regarding laws, consequences, housing options, etc. and that they needed to post responses before the deadline.

The Threadmeister activity created a strong sense of student ownership and shared responsibility. It was also one of the most significant demonstrations of authentic student motivation I saw during my two years of work with online forums. As often happens in professional interactions, students were working with people they could not see or hear, but who, like them, had thoughts about how to translate discussion topics into actual words and images and how those choices would be received by the others. Working on the Tribal Paradise Project, students had a vested interest in trying to make sure that everyone’s opinion was heard and

that everyone was being understood, since effective work on the maps, brochures, and presentation depended on clarity and inclusiveness. For the first time, it felt that our work with the forums was creating a learning environment that promoted Selber’s concept of multiliteracies as well as a more authentic learning experience with the rhetorical triangle of audience, purpose,

and context. Rather than writing to their instructors for the purpose of earning a grade, these students were composing complex texts for a real audience of peers, with the real purpose of persuading the other tribe members to join them, within the real context of the impending Tribal Council.

This authenticity was not always easy to manage, since some of the interactions were *authentically* difficult. Some complained about fellow tribe mem-

bers’ lack of response or inability to explain why they liked or didn’t like certain ideas. Their frustrations frequently reminded me of project planning endeavors I’d tried to coordinate online with other teachers: the lack of response, the vague language, the misunderstandings resulting from misinterpretations. Occasionally, tribe members strongly disagreed, providing for some of the project’s most interesting “teachable moments.” The most famous of these became known as the National Worm Day Incident.

One student, frustrated with her tribe’s lack of discussion regarding national holidays, sarcastically posted a comment that suggested a “National Worm Day.” Although she claimed she did not mean to be snide, the comment led to serious strain in group interactions, all the way to the Tribal Council presentation. The positive side to this difficult snag was that, as stories of National Worm Day spread, the students began to pay closer attention to what tone they were conveying online and how it might be interpreted. As I circulated among the groups, I heard students remind each other that they would be seeing fellow tribe members in person soon and that it would be best to remain civil. During our discussions about this learning, students voiced an awareness of how carefully they needed to phrase their postings and how their words might be misinterpreted without the benefit of intonation, facial expression, or body language. They also recognized the temptation to say things online that they would never say to someone’s face.

The Tribe Has Spoken

Finally, the big Tribal Council day arrived. Students travelled by bus to meet in the arts and crafts lodge of Mahoney State Park. We began by exchanging small gifts so that tribe-mates could find each other, discussed the plan for the day, and then rallied the whole group for a Jeopardy-style *Lord of the Flies* trivia game. Each tribe then met to share the recruitment materials they’d crafted and finalize plans for their presentations. Students smiled and chatted amiably throughout the planning time and lunch, slowing reconciling their online perceptions of each other with reality. During the presentations, tribe after tribe proudly displayed their elaborate maps and brochures, spoke eloquently about their found-

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ing philosophies, handed out samples of “local produce,” and even fielded questions from the audience. Students took notes during the presentations and cast their votes at the end. The day wrapped up with some written reflection, a lively discussion about the project, and then the highly anticipated awards.

Even with the drama of National Worm Day, Tribal Council was exhilarating, imbued with a communal feeling of shared risk and hesitant hope as our two schools gathered in the state park’s rustic craft lodge. For teachers and students alike, there seemed to be a great sense of accomplishment: an awareness that we had all stepped across a threshold into a new realm of possibilities for technology in the classroom. Jeff and I, as well as many of our more reflective students, had at times wondered how such a complex and challenging project could ever work out. And yet it did. Most remarkably, much of the creative work happened *collaboratively, between students at different schools, negotiating their work online*. Each tribal paradise had something different to offer, presenting radically different notions about how utopia might be imagined and maintained. When all of the votes had been tallied, Bora Bora was chosen as the tribal paradise most students wanted to join, no doubt due in part to the island’s hip atmosphere of shark-hunting, designer label-wearing nightclub-hoppers. Bora Bora’s smart marketing sense comes through clearly in the tone of the group’s brochure:

Applying for a space at Bora Bora requires the persons to practice open-minded and spontaneous aspects. Energy, excitement, and electrifying personalities are all features we and most citizens love to see.

Serene landscapes, enchanted beaches, and enticing wildlife are some of the many extravagances you will experience on Bora Bora island. Settle into the luxuriousness of our islands and convert to our high-living, comforted style.

Are you ready?

Conclusion

As this project and many others have shown, collaborative learning and online discussion forums can be used effectively to help students develop real-world skills and engage in authentic learning. But this project also demonstrates how combining these two

teaching practices can yield dramatic results. When students are able to take charge of discussion topics as stakeholders in the outcome of their online discussion, they become motivated to pose questions, resolve conflicts, and forge consensus, entering a whole new level of interpersonal and online literacy. Directly or indirectly, a collaborative online forum project can also help students learn about the unique challenges of online communication, especially the need for clarity and the dangers of sarcasm. Bringing students together toward the end of a collaborative online project provides a wonderful opportunity for closure and celebration, but it also serves to underscore the personal effects of their online interactions, allowing students to reflect on the assumptions they make about each other and to see the benefits of thoughtful, civil discourse employed for a common goal.

About a week after the Tribal Council, I started a discussion thread on the forum, asking the students to reflect on their work using online communication. Their comments echoed many of my instincts about both the benefits and challenges of using the forums, particularly within collaborative learning environments. Lindsay interpreted her forum experience with an almost Web 2.0 revolutionary zeal:

I personally thought it was the birth of a new innovation, like going from a mop to a Swiffer. With technology, will our thoughts be through our fingers? I think it’s just another alternative that you can choose to do, although it is kind of a scary shock that we’re moving with technology. Positives of this change are that you don’t have to wait to raise your hand waiting for your turn to speak, unlike an oral discussion. Everything keeps moving quicker, and you get to get more done in less time. Plus, you get to see EVERYONE’S opinions, as opposed to in class where some people are scared to raise their hand.

For me—as a language arts educator and especially as an advocate for teaching multiliteracies—the Tribal Paradise Project was a lesson in faith: faith in students’ potential to handle complex problems, faith in myself not to melt down in the face of chaos and uncertainty, and faith in the absolutely critical

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Making a Brochure: Tribal Paradise Project

Student(s) Name: _____

CATEGORY	4	3	2	1
Attractiveness and Organization	The brochure has exceptionally attractive formatting and well-organized information. Color, fonts, and graphics are engaging and connect well with the text.	The brochure has attractive formatting and well-organized information. Color, fonts, and graphics are used but may distract from the text or may not connect very strongly with it.	The brochure has well-organized information. Color, fonts, and graphics are too few. The brochure lacks visual interest and may be text-heavy.	The brochure's formatting and organization of material are confusing to the reader. Color, fonts, and graphics are lacking or appear randomly chosen.
Neatness and Conventions	The brochure is neat and professional-looking. If there are conventions errors, you'd have to really hunt to find them.	The brochure is neat, if not professional-looking. A few errors are apparent, but they do not seriously distract the reader.	Some aspects of the brochure may look rough, but others are neat. Several errors distract the readers.	The brochure looks hastily constructed and lacks neatness. Frequent errors make reading difficult.
Coverage of Topics	All required topics are well developed. Descriptive details help the reader visualize the island. Additional topics may also be included. Writing reveals thoughtful planning.	All required topics are covered in decent detail. The writing reveals some thinking, although some ideas may lack development.	Most requirements are covered, but only vaguely. Detail is lacking on some items. Some ideas may have significant problems in terms of practicality.	Several key requirements are missing. The writing reveals hasty thinking, with little thought toward practicality.
Persuasiveness	The text is engaging and persuasive, written with the reader in mind. The brochure captures a strong sense of the community's "vision."	The writing is somewhat persuasive. The community vision is mentioned.	The writing lacks a strong sense of purpose or audience. Little enthusiasm shows through. Little sense of community vision.	The voice may be inappropriate or mechanical. The community vision may be absent or run contrary to the project guidelines and purpose.

value of teaching with technology in collaborative learning environments. Although such work is usually fraught with curricular as well as technological challenges, it can provide rich opportunities for innovative and socially responsive classrooms. The challenge for teachers, as always, will be for us to swallow our fears, hold fast to our faith in what we do, and move forward. 

Works Cited

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