

When Teachers Read: How the Writing Project Made Me a Lifelong Learner

by Liz Harrington

"We have thousands of demands on our time, but we need to pause and remember that the choices we make in our own learning lives have the potential to lead our children into much more in-depth learning and understanding" (Keene, 2008, p.194). Since becoming a Fellow of the Writing Project at the University of California, Irvine (UCIWP), I have been privileged to be part of a learning community known as Writing Project II (WPII), in which Fellows of UCIWP meet regularly to share best classroom practices, and to discuss professional literature and research. This group has allowed me to extend and deepen the transformative experience of the project's Summer Institute by continuing my professional growth through action research, inquiry projects, and professional book clubs. This year in WPII our focus is on twenty-first-century literacies, the new forms of literacy that my students are already embracing, but about which I feel woefully ignorant. Looking for guidance, I chose *Literature and the Web: Reading and Responding with New Technologies* by Robert Rozema and Allen Webb (2008) as my professional book-club reading, a choice that ultimately yielded the "in-depth learning and understanding" described above by Ellin Oliver Keene.

Rozema and Webb detail many opportunities for students to create content online rather than simply reading it, in the arena known as Web 2.0. I was immediately interested in the idea of a threaded discussion, an online discussion in which "...participants post messages over an extended period of time and others respond..." (Rozema and Webb 32). Although similar to blogs, threaded discussions differ from the former in their organization. An important distinction is that entries in a blog are arranged chronologically, whereas in a threaded discussion the responses are grouped by topic, or thread. Because it resembles the Socratic seminar, a technique I had learned in UCIWP, threaded discussion seemed to be a reasonable first step for a beginner like me. I would be dipping my toe into the Web 2.0 pool while wearing the life preserver of a familiar strategy.

My seventh graders had just begun reading Lawrence Yep's novel *Dragonwings*, when our schedule was interrupted by a week of state testing. The class would not meet for a week, but I wanted to maintain their interest in the novel, while creating an opportunity for out-of-class interaction. I was also curious to see whether my students would be able to sustain a rigorous discussion of the text without my intervention.

Guided by Rozema and Webb, I created a class in Nicenet, a free educational site operated by a nonprofit organization (www.nicenet.org). After clicking on *Create a Class*, and providing some basic information, I was given a unique password or *key*, allowing me to restrict access to the discussion. In less than five minutes, I set up a class account on Nicenet, and posted a topic to begin our *Dragonwings* discussion. Set in San Francisco's Chinatown at the beginning of the twentieth century. Yep's novel tells the story of Moonshadow, a young boy who is sent from China

to join his father, Windrider, whom he has never met. Yep's characters illustrate a variety of relationships and groupings that invite an inquiry into the concept of family. Thus I created a guiding question to form the lens through which we would view the novel:

There are several different groups in the novel that could be considered as "families." Which groups are they, and how does each of them compare to your ideas of what family means?

When I explained the concept of a threaded discussion to my students, telling them that they would be participating in an online discussion of the text, writing responses both to the initial question, and to each other, they were immediately enthusiastic. Students were expected to contribute to the discussion at least once weekly, but were free to post additional responses if they wished. As well as responding to the initial topic, or to other students' responses, students could also create their own topics. In a four-week period, there were 125 responses from a class of 36 students. Several students posted multiple responses, sometimes on the same day. Many who were reluctant to participate in class posted thoughtful and articulate contributions and also responded perceptively to the ideas of others, leading to several lively exchanges. As we continued in class with more traditional "face-to-face" discussion of the novel, students frequently alluded to the online discussion to support or enlarge upon what was being said, so that it became an additional resource in the classroom.

The first response was posted at 4:30 p.m. on the first day that the discussion was open, and by 9:30 p.m. half a dozen students had weighed in, either by responding to the first student's comments, or by posting their own responses to begin new threads. The following is a brief sample of the dialogue on that first day:

Joshua: "He twisted my arm. I let out a yell. I kicked him hard in the knee and he let go of me with a grunt. I began to run up the hill. My hat flew off. I kept on running. I heard his boots come closer as he followed me. Suddenly I felt a pain in the back of my head. He had grabbed my queue. I stopped short as he jerked at the queue, and fell on my back. He tore the money bag away from me, but he did not even look at it. 'Pain?' he said strangely. 'Pain? You don't know what it is!' And he began to kick me with his heavy boots" (78). Wow, Black Dog is a horrible relative. Definitely not my idea of a relative. From my point of view, my relatives are always nice. How mean, why did he do this? Black Dog is so evilly evil!

Phung: Yeah, I think so, too. Black Dog was a violent and cruel relative. He doesn't act like a relative to Moon Shadow. "He grabbed me by the arm and his voice grew wild. 'Don't give me your simpering, mealy-mouthed answers. We repaid our debts a dozen times over.'" I think the people in the Company were very

worried about Moon Shadow when he passed out. I think the Company acted like a family toward Moon Shadow. Black Dog was Uncle's son, and yet, he cursed his own son for hurting Moon Shadow.

Ceres: Yea Black Dog is related to them yet he doesn't think of their feelings, for example when he goes out and doesn't return for a long time. And he doesn't appreciate their help even though they [father and most of the company] offer it and give him lots of chances. "'Don't want. . . don't need. . .' Black Dog mumbled....'Remember,' Father said. 'He was a good man once...'" (72).

The discussion that began thus, eventually ran to thirty-four pages and continued through the last day of school. Clearly, students were engaged by the concept of the threaded discussion, and were willing to put time and effort into it outside the classroom, but I was concerned that, left to their own devices, they might not engage in the higher-level thinking skills that I was accustomed to drawing out of them in class. This proved a needless worry. From the beginning, I was impressed that the students' contributions to the discussion were consistently thoughtful, analytical, and perceptive. Xin Yi, an English Language Learner who rarely spoke in class, responded to the dialogue quoted above with an impassioned and perceptive defense of the character Black Dog:

Black Dog did not choose to come to America in the first place. Back in China he lived a glamorous life of luxury, but now in US, he had been roughen up by how the demons mistreated him to become the man he is now. Black Dog hates his father because he brought him to hell. His dad tore him away from the easy life of all he ever wanted. I'm just saying, if I was in Black Dog's shoes, I would feel the rage Black Dog feels.

Reading the responses each evening, I realized that my students were independently employing the skills I had been scaffolding in the classroom all year. They questioned the author and each other. They supported their opinions with evidence from the text, and even cited page numbers. They made connections to their own lives, and to the world around them. They considered the views of others and were respectful when disagreeing. Most importantly the threaded discussion pulled in those quiet students, like Ceres and Xin Yi, giving them a forum in which they felt comfortable enough to participate equally with their more vocal classmates, and an opportunity to have their voices heard and validated.

As previously mentioned, threaded discussion bears a strong resemblance to Socratic seminar. In both cases, the teacher acts as facilitator by posing an opening question, and then stepping back to allow the discussion to flow from student to student. However, I have found that, even in the most engaging Socratic seminars, there are students who are too shy or insecure to speak up in front of their classmates. By contrast, everyone participated in this threaded discussion and each response was acknowledged by other participants. Many students, I surmise, benefited from the opportunity to consider their responses and to put them in writing, rather than being expected to speak "off-the-cuff." Thus, the threaded discussion provided differentiation that allowed all

students to be successful on their own terms.

These seventh graders also demonstrated a willingness to raise, and wrestle with, difficult concepts. What does it mean to be a family? Should a person still be considered part of a family if he consistently bullies, mistreats, and disrespects other members of the family? Are there limits to family relationships? In doing so, they brought to bear all that they had learned about critical thinking and strategic reading. As the discussion progressed, Vincent wrote:

Even though the Company isn't built with true family members they all treat each other so much like a family they should probably be considered as a family. They are always there to help out, unlike Black Dog. Although he is related to Uncle he certainly dislikes his father. Another example of family is the special bond between Moon Shadow, his father, and their land owner. All tried to help out one another, even in times where it was risky. This, to me, is what a real family is.

Although several students agreed with Vincent, Vivian turned the discussion in a different direction:

I disagree with what you have said. Although I agree that Black Dog has deemed himself to not be a member of the family, I believe so for different reasons. Does doing drugs no longer make you a part of your family? In fact, if you did drugs, your family should help you get away from taking drugs, not reject you. Are you also suggesting that by being lazy, he is no longer part of the family? I believe a family is made by the way they treat each other. I believe Black Dog is not a part of the family because of the way he treats everybody. He shows a lot of disrespect, and therefore, he is no longer a member of the family.

This led to a long, and sometimes heated, argument following the thread of family responsibilities, and focusing on the character of Black Dog in particular. In disagreeing with Vincent's reasoning, while agreeing with his main point, Vivian shows that she is learning to be a critical thinker and is connecting her reading to the larger problems of society.

As well as engaging in healthy disagreements about the novel, students also voiced their appreciation of others' thinking. This is not something that often occurs explicitly in classroom discussions, but I was pleased to see it surface here, because I attributed it to the considerable amount of time my students had spent responding to each other's writing in writing groups. The Writing Project introduced me to the power of peer response, and in the threaded discussion I found that students were independently, and quite naturally, using the peer response strategies they had learned in class.

Aaron, very quiet in class, but always a deep thinker, eventually rounded off the sometimes tortuous argument about Black Dog in a thoughtful and analytical "mini-essay," part of which is quoted here:

Family is a bond or relationship that involves constant support, compassion, and most of all, love ... Uncle Brightstar and Black Dog show a lack of compassion, support, and even love. Does not Uncle Brightstar say to spit in his son's face? And does not Black Dog show hatred for his father? The two characters cannot

live with each other as a family, and neither help others as a family. Therefore are they truly a family? This is for you to decide. But your standards determine your strength and stability as one. I personally believe blood relatives may be called "family," yet a true one is based on a true heart.

Jason responded:

Wow. You pretty much said what all of us have been talking about for the past week except you condensed all of our arguments into one statement ... Good job Aaron.

Jason has learned how to affirm the writing of a peer by focusing on the writing rather than the writer.

Carol Booth Olson, director of the UCI Writing Project, reminds us in *The Reading/Writing Connection* that the teacher's job is to equip students with the "cognitive toolbox" needed to comprehend difficult text, and then to lead them to a point where they are able to employ those tools effectively on their own. "If we want students to perceive literature as something that can be richly rewarding, both intellectually and emotionally, and not merely a chore imposed by the teacher, we must find ways to promote and value the students' own process of meaning construction" (Olson, 137). Threaded discussion, I believe, is an additional tool that allows students to construct meaning both independently and in collaboration with peers.

In *Literature and the Web: Reading and Responding with New Technologies*, Allen Webb notes: "The capacity to formulate thinking in writing; the added time to respond; and reviewing the whole discussion

before (and after) making their own contribution; the fact that none of the students are 'called on' but all are responsible to contribute – these circumstances of electronic discussion add richness beyond what is possible in the classroom" (30). The discovery of the tool that thus enriched my classroom stemmed directly from my choice to maintain the connection to a learning community, WPPI, that also enriches my own intellectual life.

Besides, as several of my students noted in regard to the threaded discussion, "It's cool!"

Works Cited

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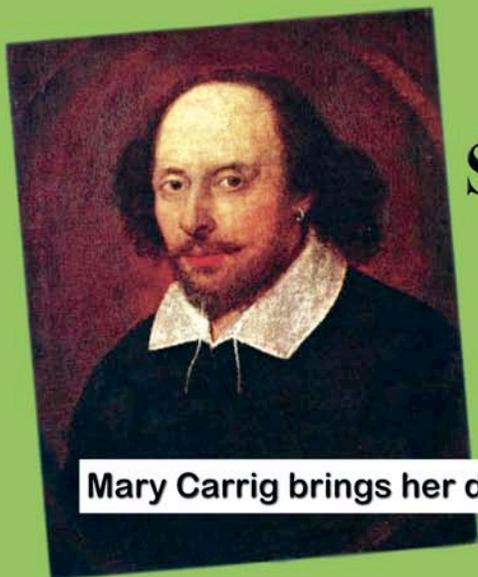
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About the Author:

Liz Harrington teaches seventh- and eighth-grade Language Arts at Jefferson Middle School in San Gabriel. She has been a Fellow of the UCI Writing Project since 2001.



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