

Reader Response Meets New Literacies: Empowering Readers in Online Learning Communities

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The collaborative online learning communities featured in this study provided students equitable opportunities to share their thoughts and voice their opinions about literature.

“Cool! We’re using the laptops!!” As a steady stream of fifth graders trickle into the classroom after a competitive game of recess dodge ball, excitement fills Mrs. Stitt’s classroom. “Yes! Today, we get to chat online!” The students are excited to see me (a former teacher and current researcher in this building) and the large mobile computer carts that I’ve brought from the school’s media center. Using an LCD projector, large screen, and classroom computer, Mrs. Stitt demonstrates how to access the online message board, read the posted prompt, and reply by posting a personal and insightful response to the readings.
(From author’s field notes.)

The students in Mrs. Stitt’s fifth-grade classroom participated in a semester-long case study during which I explored numerous aspects of the new literacies and technology integration within the context of a reading workshop (Larson, 2007). In this class, rather than engaging in traditional reading and responding, students read e-books on laptop computers and responded to the readings in electronic response journals. Encouraged by the students’ strong engagement with the computer-based reading materials and electronic journals, Mrs. Stitt further decided to move her traditional literature circles online.

Reader Response Meets the New Literacies

Louise Rosenblatt’s (1938/1995, 1978) transactional theory of reader response provided the theoretical

underpinnings for this classroom-based study of fifth-grade students’ responses to literature using an asynchronous, online message board. Central to this theory is the interaction of the reader and the text as each reader breathes life into the text through personal meaning making and prior experiences. Hancock (2008b) recently suggested that in today’s classrooms, various forms of instructional technologies offer a “new vision and dimension for reader response research,” (p. 108) as students encounter digital literacies in addition to the more traditional literacies of pencils, paper, and print texts. The International Reading Association (2002) also recognized that literacy instruction is influenced by change in profound ways with the arrival of the “new literacies.” Leu (2002) stated that “literacy has always been a social phenomenon, but the new literacies contain even more of a social component than traditional literacies” (p. 314) and that computers invite new forms of social interaction.

With increasing access to the Internet, online discussions are becoming more common as a means to encourage communication and learner engagement (Hamilton & Cherniavsky, 2006). Supported by the National Educational Technology Standards for Students: The Next Generation (International Society for Technology in Education [ISTE], 2007), teachers should provide opportunities for students to “communicate information and ideas effectively...using a variety of media and formats” (n.p.). Results of early studies support that online literature discussions have great potential for fostering literacy skills, strengthening communication, and building a sense of community (Carico, Logan, & Labbo, 2004; Grisham & Wolsey, 2006; Wolsey, 2004).

Meeting the needs and resources of almost any contexts and users, electronic communications are

available in various forms including e-mail exchanges, asynchronous message board discussions, and the use of blogs, wikis, and social networking sites. This article describes how Mrs. Stitt's fifth-grade students created close-knit learning communities and broadened their repertoire of literature response strategies by engaging in asynchronous message board discussions about award-winning literature.

The Teacher, the Students, and the Literature Selection

Mrs. Stitt has 20 years of professional experience with the past 5 years as a fifth-grade teacher at the research school. Her resume includes numerous awards and recognitions for her distinguished teaching capabilities. Although she is an avid proponent of technology, Mrs. Stitt does not consider herself a technology expert. She further acknowledges that with the increasing pressures to perform on standardized tests, less time is available for “creative” technology usage, as more computer time is allotted for preparation and administration of high-stakes assessments. Prior to this study, Mrs. Stitt was personally familiar with the functions and features of an online message board, but had never introduced this means of communication to her students.

The school chosen as the site of this study is located in the midwestern United States in a K–12 district serving approximately 5,200 students in grades K–6. The building houses one computer lab with 30 desktop computers and two mobile carts with a total of 28 laptop computers. All computers are networked with high-speed Internet capabilities. At the time of this study, Mrs. Stitt's fifth-grade class consisted of 26 students, 15 boys and 11 girls. Although all 26 students engaged in online literature discussions, data collection and analysis centered around two groups of 5 students. Mrs. Stitt identified the 10 participants based on criteria of being communicative (in writing or verbally) and willing to work hard. In addition, efforts were made to identify students representing diverse backgrounds, multiple reading levels, and ranging technology skills. All children's names are pseudonyms.

Because the fifth-grade social studies curriculum focuses on U.S. history, Mrs. Stitt selected historical fiction as the desired genre for the online discussions. Hancock (2008a) suggested that “quality

historical fiction breathes life into history and the curriculum and connects across time with personal feelings and experiences” (p. 173) and, consequently, often elicits notable aesthetic and efferent responses in children. After discussing the available, and rather limited, selection of historical fiction e-books, it was decided to enhance a unit on the American Civil Rights Movement, which Mrs. Stitt introduced in conjunction with Martin Luther King Jr. Day and Black History month. The e-book version of two award-winning books by author Christopher Paul Curtis were purchased and downloaded:

- *Bud, Not Buddy* (1999) won both the Newbery Medal and Coretta Scott King Award in 2000. This highly acclaimed novel follows a determined African American boy during his fervent struggles to find a home during the Great Depression.
- *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* (1996) received a 1996 Newbery Honor and a 1997 Coretta Scott King Award. The story captures the adventures of 10-year-old Kenny Watson and his family as they set out on a trip from Flint, Michigan, to Birmingham, Alabama, toward one of the darkest moments in America's history.

Taking student choice and prior reading experiences into consideration, 5 of the 10 participants read *Bud, Not Buddy*, while the remaining 5 read *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*.

Research Methodology and Data Collection

A qualitative methodology was chosen as it provided an expressive, narrative description within a natural setting (Creswell, 1998) to learn more about how fifth graders socially construct learning while interacting with and responding to literature when using an online message board. In technology-rich literacy classrooms, the researcher's role as an active learner is becoming especially prevalent. Often, the researcher's own technical literacy, or knowledge, constrains or broadens what the researcher can observe and is in a position to explain and theorize (Steinkuehler, Black, & Clinton, 2005). Miller and Olson (1998) emphasized that the reality of today's literacy classroom often requires more participation than originally planned since the researcher often

unintentionally assumes the role of technical advisor and computer teacher. I found this to be particularly true in this study; I was undeniably an active participant observer and engaged in daily electronic reading workshops, provided technical support, and taught minilessons to address concepts or issues that emerged throughout the semester.

Throughout the study, I took extensive field notes and used a digital voice recorder to depict the sounds of the classroom as well as individual interviews with students and their teacher. Numerous documents and artifacts, including students' electronic journals and online message board transcripts, were collected and analyzed.

e-Reading and e-Responding

The two groups spent 15 sessions reading *Bud, Not Buddy* or *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. While reading, the fifth graders shared personal thoughts and feelings about the literature and the e-book reading experience in an electronic response journal. After reading, the students logged on to the online message board to discuss and respond to the literature. Since the e-books, e-journals, and online message boards were accessed through the students' laptops, the transition between reading and responding was smooth and efficient.

Student interviews revealed that none of the 10 participants had previously engaged in electronic message board discussions, although all students reported prior knowledge of communicating online via e-mail or in chat rooms. Recognizing that the majority of the participants frequently "chat" online with their friends after school, Mrs. Stitt emphasized that this was a school-related activity in which students were expected to stay on topic and use appropriate language. Using a projector, screen, and laptop computer, I demonstrated the log-in procedures and explained how to reply to my initial prompt. Relevant vocabulary (*thread, prompt, post*) was also introduced and explained. During a typical session, students read and responded in their e-journals for approximately 30 minutes, followed by 15–20 minutes on the message board. In addition, students often accessed the message board at other times during the school day.

My initial message board prompt included several sub questions, to which each student was asked

to respond before reading and replying to group members' responses.

Congratulations on your first day of reading [title of book]! Please click "Reply" and explain:

What do you think about the book so far?

What do you think will happen to [main character]?

Does this story remind you of any other book that you have read?

The students spent two sessions reading and responding to my initial prompt and subsequent posts from their peers. Two days into the online discussions, Madison wrote in her electronic journal:

I love using the message board. Having online conversations is really fun!!! It kind of reminds me of an online book club. To make it better I would like to know how to make a Prompt.

Several students voiced similar sentiments. Recognizing that the fifth graders wanted to assume leadership roles within their own learning communities and, as a result, surpass the traditional teacher-driven discourse in the classroom, Mrs. Stitt and I adjusted our plans. Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, and Cammack (2004) explained that "teachers become more important, though their role changes, within new literacy classrooms" (p. 1599) as today's teacher is no longer the single source of knowledge and roles of students and teachers may even be reversed. Skilled teachers take advantage of this by constructing learning contexts in which students can freely exchange ideas and participate in social learning opportunities (Leu et al., 2004). Subsequently, Mrs. Stitt conducted a minilesson on what constitutes a "good" prompt, explaining that effective discussion prompts should be open-ended, spark interest, and often begin with *why, tell me about, or explain*. Students were taught how to post a prompt (or start a new "thread") on the message board. A handout with instructions for writing a prompt was also distributed (see Figure 1). For the duration of the study, the students initiated the literature conversations by creating and posting their own prompts with very little teacher interference.

Findings

To assess the progress and analyze the findings of the online literature discussions, I used two helpful message board tools: First, the statistical summary provided information regarding the frequency

Figure 1
Instructional Handout for Prompt Writing

Name: _____ Group # _____

1. Think about the part that you read today in your book.
What did you like?
What questions do you have?
What did this chapter make you feel or think about?
What would you have done if you were in a similar situation?
2. Write two quality prompts (new threads) that can be used to start a good discussion in your group. Your prompts should relate to the book.
3. You will post your BEST prompt on the Message Board. Your prompt must be approved by Mrs. Stitt BEFORE you post.

Prompt 1: _____

Prompt 2: _____

Check your work:

- My prompt relates to the book.
- My prompts are open-ended and cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no."
- My prompts make my group members think about what they have read.

and length of students' contributions. Second, the message board generated printable transcripts of the online discussions that allowed me to review each student-constructed prompt and subsequent discussion.

Table 1 presents a statistical summary of students' involvement with the online message board through the frequency of their posts (including new threads and replies to others) and the length of their messages.

During this study, Mrs. Stitt reviewed the statistical report on a weekly basis and used the data to

guide and motivate individual students to write longer responses, initiate new threads, and reply more frequently to others. After only a week of message board conversations, the statistical summary alerted Mrs. Stitt to the fact that Katie, an outgoing and talkative student, appeared to post considerably more messages than her peers. According to Mrs. Stitt, this behavior was reflective of Katie's "social personality" and her need to be involved in classroom conversations. Although frequent, it was also clear that Katie's posts were very short (averaging only 14 words per post during the first week of discussions). In an

Table 1
Statistical Summary of Online Literature Discussions

Students	Book	New threads (prompts)	Replies written	Posts written	Words written	Words/post
Adam	B	4	33	37	843	23
Alisha	B	5	40	45	828	18
Elaina	B	8	39	47	1421	30
Leah	B	4	30	34	587	17
Sing	B	3	25	28	887	32
Charlie	W	3	15	18	646	36
Katie	W	9	96	105	3052	29
Madison	W	6	48	54	2186	40
Mick	W	7	41	48	1512	32
Molly	W	6	51	57	1124	20
Total		55	418	473	13086	N/A
Average		5.5	42	47	1309	28

B = *Bud, Not Buddy*, W = *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*

interview, Katie revealed that she often chats with online friends on her home computer, during which discussions are brief but numerous. After the teacher shared the report with Katie, Katie lengthened her posts through the remainder of the study, bringing her average up to 29 words per post.

On the other hand, Charlie, an above-average reader with strong verbal communication skills, rarely posted messages. Mrs. Stitt found this surprising, as Charlie frequently contributed to class discussions and enjoyed sharing his opinion with others. In an interview, Charlie revealed that he likes to talk more than he likes to write. “I get frustrated because I don’t know how to type very fast.” After sharing his frustrations, Charlie was given extra time to word process his responses. At the end of the semester, Charlie had made 18 posts with an average of 36 words per post.

It is important that teachers and researchers recognize both the value and limitations of statistical summaries of online communications. As illustrated by Katie and Charlie, the statistical report did not tell a complete story but served as a gateway to further investigation. To gain a deeper understanding into the students’ comprehension and opinions of the book,

communication skills, and online behaviors, Mrs. Stitt and I turned to the message board transcripts.

Student-Constructed Prompts

As mentioned previously, the students desired to take ownership of their group discussions and generated a total of 55 new threads (see Table 1). The message board transcripts were printed and analyzed inductively to determine patterns and commonalities in the 55 student-generated prompts that started new threads on the online message board. The following section includes a discussion of different types of prompts constructed by students. Examples from the online message boards, written in the authentic voices of children (including occasional errors in spelling and conventions), will be used to illustrate trends and patterns. As a springboard for initial coding, I turned to Hancock’s (2008a) four types of teacher-constructed literature response prompts including experiential, aesthetic, cognitive, and interpretive prompts. Through meticulous examination of the threads, an additional category, clarification prompts, was added, resulting in five identified categories: (1) experiential prompts, (2) aesthetic prompts 3) cognitive

prompts, (4) interpretive prompts, and (5) clarification prompts.

Experiential Prompts. As explained by Hancock (2008a), experiential prompts focus on what the reader brings to the reading experience through prior personal experiences and prior knowledge. Posted on the online message board, these threads tended to begin, “Have you ever...” prompting the reader to relate an event to his or her own life. Referring to the unfolding plot, the students reading *Bud, Not Buddy* created experiential threads in an attempt to learn more about their peers.

Adam: (new thread) Bud was very brave to go on a 24 hour all day all night walk. Have you ever gone on a long run or walk and felt like collapsing? Where? How long?

Adam’s prompt sparked a meaningful conversation among his group members, who all could relate to being tired to the point of “collapsing.”

Elaina: (reply to Adam) Bud is very brave and I agree with you. I think I have been on a long run and I was sooo tired by the end...I’m not sure how long it was I was only 8 or 9.

Sing: (reply to Adam) I did except I wasn’t walking I was playing instead. I was so tired I just collapsed into the first thing, with a cushion, I saw, which was a couch.

Analysis of the message board transcripts revealed that the experiential threads elicited an average of eight replies per thread as students related the book to their prior knowledge. During interviews, several students shared that they enjoyed replying to experiential prompts as they could talk about themselves and their own experiences.

Aesthetic prompts. The aesthetic threads tended to bring out heartfelt, and sometimes heated, discussions among the group members. According to Hancock (2008a), aesthetic prompts promote emotional interactions with the text while eliciting feelings, empathy, and character identification. After reading about the Alabama church bombing in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, emotions were running wild on the online discussion board. Several

students initiated new threads expressing their own feelings while seeking comfort from their peers.

Madison: (new thread) I am in shock about Joey. I’m biting my nails and I just want 2 stop reading in case she dies, but I have 2 read more! This really happened in history... How do u feel about this? Describe. Joey is so sweet and I couldn’t imagine the book without her. Plz [please] don’t let her die.

Starting a separate thread, Katie eloquently explained how the book makes her feel, asking for input from her friends.

Katie: (new thread) I think this book is like a roller coaster...some parts are fun...so what I’m trying to say is a roller coaster goes up...like the book you go up in the good parts...you go down and the book gets boring...do you agree with me? Why or why not?

Like the experiential prompts, each aesthetic prompt elicited eight replies on the average. However, a close review of the transcript revealed that the replies within the aesthetic thread were often longer in length as students became emotionally involved in the plot and their group members’ contributions to the message board.

Cognitive Prompts. These threads encouraged group members to make predictions, solve problems, and make inferences regarding the plot and characters (Hancock, 2008a). After Adam learned that Bud left his foster family and consequently sought food at a mission, Adam made a prediction and encouraged his friends to consider the situation:

Adam: (new thread) I think Bud will get tired of eating the same breakfast and supper at the same place. So he will go back to the Amos and steal some food, Do u agree?

Frequently posted by both groups, cognitive threads often began, “What do you think...?” or “What would you do...?” Table 2 indicates that 23 of the 55 student-constructed prompts were considered cognitive. Although cognitive prompts elicited 7 replies on the average, 6 of the 23 cognitive response threads received no replies at all. Students shared in interviews that they often ignored the cognitive prompts as

Table 2
Types of Student-Constructed Prompts

Group	Experiential	Aesthetic	Cognitive	Interpretive	Clarification	Total
B	6	1	11	5	1	24 (44%)
W	1	7	12	6	5	31 (56%)
Total	7 (13%)	8 (14%)	23 (42%)	11 (20%)	6 (11%)	55

Note. B = *Bud, Not Buddy*, W = *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*

they seemed “boring” or reminiscent of “worksheet questions.”

Interpretive Prompts. Interpretive response prompts call for a higher level of reasoning as they encourage readers to contemplate personal consideration of morals or values, meaning or message, and judgment of plot and characters (Hancock, 2008a). The interpretive threads posted on the online discussion board often made reference to specific, significant events in the text. Sing’s post explains his view on a hitting incident in *Bud, Not Buddy*:

Sing: (new thread) Do you think Mrs. Sleet has the right to hit Lefty Lewis...I think Mrs. Sleet has the right because Lefty Lewis is her dad. But then I think she doesn’t because Lefty Lewis is older than Mrs. Sleet.

Clearly, the students pondered over the situation as they tried to justify whether or not Mrs. Sleet acted appropriately.

Adam: (reply to Sing) I agree with you on the part that Lefty is older than Mrs. Sleet. So she shouldn’t be able to hit him.

Elaina: (reply to Sing) I don’t think she has the right to hit Lefty Lewis because he’s her dad and he is older but then again Lefty does joke around a lot. But I’m not allowed to hit my dad.

Readers of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* faced issues of segregation and racism throughout the book. After the church bombing, Mick contemplates what has happened while looking for the opinion of his peers.

Mick: (new thread) What do you think about the bomb? Does it have to do with racism? I mean the Watsons are black...

The interpretive prompts invited rich replies in which students expressed personal ideas and viewpoints. Although the interpretive prompts only elicited a mean of 6 replies, the example below illustrates how one interpretive prompt sparked a heated discussion and a total of 25 replies among the readers of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*:

Katie: (new thread) Do you think Kenny’s parents have problems in their marriage because there mom didn’t even care about the new radio. All she did was roll her eyes and complain about how much money he was wasting! I mean at one part she’s ignoring him now they are touching wrong spot! Like when Daniel (three dad) touched there moms breast! Disgusting!!!!

Molly: (reply to Katie) Your right they do have issues especially that one part when Daniel was reaching over...

Madison: (reply to Molly) No, all parents have little fights, and come on was this message necessary? Ewww! I could have done without this. So what maybe Momma was having a bad day. It wasn’t necessary to bring up what Daniel did in the car... Give it a break.

Clarification Prompts. Clearly indicating confusion or lack of understanding, these threads were posted as the reader sought an answer, or clarification, to a specific question relating to the text. Sparking replies from multiple perspectives, the clarification prompts

encouraged the group members to collaboratively make sense of the unfolding plot.

Molly: (new thread) Why didn't By stay with grand-ma and how did they just appear back in Flint?

Mick: (new thread) Confusing ending! Why didn't they leave Byron? I think the "wool pooh" stuff just made the book really confusing...

Of the 55 student-created threads, 6 consisted of clarification prompts. With a mean of only three replies, these prompts did not initiate a considerable amount of responses. Examination of the transcripts suggested that once questions were addressed or clarified, students lost interest in these threads and did not return to them again.

Table 2 presents the types of student-constructed prompts that made up the 55 new threads posted on the online message board. There are several noteworthy differences between the two groups: The readers of *Bud, Not Buddy* posted six experiential prompts compared with only one produced by readers of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. One reason for this may be the fifth graders' ability to easily relate to Bud, the likable and lively main character in *Bud, Not Buddy*. As students put themselves in Bud's shoes, they also brought personal experiences and prior knowledge to the reading experience and, consequently, to their literature discussions.

On the other hand, the group reading *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* produced more aesthetic prompts (see Table 2). It is probably safe to assert that the book's themes of segregation, discrimination, and the possibility of losing a sibling triggered emotional responses within the group. Interestingly, this group also posted the most clarification prompts. As the students tried to make sense of the story's complex events and context, they clearly relied on each other for clarification. Teachers of reading know that books with depth, emotion, strong characters, and intriguing plot lend themselves particularly well to a reading workshop approach. Furthermore, teachers should carefully match literature and students' personal interests (Serafini, 2001). In this study, the same appeared to be true as students read electronic texts and participated in online literature conversations as the two books sparked differences in student-created prompts and subsequent literature discussions.

"Rules" and Expectations: TALK ABOUT THE BOOK!!!

Similar to traditional literature circles, the message board elicited lively, conversational responses to the books. Throughout the study, general expectations were shared regarding quality and quantity of prompts (open-ended; should spark discussion) and replies (elaborate; include examples from the text if possible). Although students were not given specific guidelines regarding the length or content of their prompts and replies, they clearly established their own expectations for appropriate conduct and contents on the message board. Heath (1982) explained that each individual group develops its own "rules for socially interacting and sharing knowledge in literacy events" (p. 50). For example, interviews and written reflections revealed that students valued replies from classmates.

I loved writing new threads and reading what people responded to me.

I think the kids shouldn't ignore other kids messages...

It was fun making new threads because people reply to you.

On the message board, students frequently thanked each other for replying to their prompts. They offered praise and compliments to peers who posted interesting ideas or alternative viewpoints.

Thanx 4 answering my questions.

Rock on Charlie way 2 be mature.

Never thought of it that way...very nice

Keeping the expectations high, students asked for clarification of vague or ambiguous prompts or replies.

Leah: (new thread) Have you ever been in a situation like bud when you are locked up in a dark and scary place? Explain.

Elaina (reply to Leah) No, I don't think I've ever been in a place as scary as Bud's.

Leah: (reply to Elaina) but if you *were* bud how would you feel?

Similarly, Katie is clearly disappointed with only a short reply from Molly:

Molly: (reply to Katie) i agree with you

Katie: (reply to Molly) thanks, but do you have *any opinion* on what will happen next in the book?

On rare occasions, discussions strayed from the book. As exemplified in the following excerpts, the students self-monitored their conversations without intervention from adults.

Molly: (reply to Katie) Lets stop calling each other names and get back to the book.

Katie: (reply to Molly) I know, but we can go off the subject a little I mean that is what this project is about to enjoy and have fun!!!

Mick: (reply to Katie) Katie, TALK ABOUT THE BOOK!!!

“Appropriate” Online Language: OH PLEASE!!!

Analysis of the discussion transcripts further revealed that students’ responses were conversational and interactive. Their written expressions were rather informal and playful and often reflected synchronous chat room language. Despite the initial request to use “appropriate” language, Mrs. Stitt and I determined that students’ creative use of emoticons (☺, ☹), abbreviations (“U R so right!”), acronyms (“OMG” for oh my gosh), capitalization and punctuation marks (“OH PLEASE!!!”), and number/letter substitutions (“If only we all could do that 2 r brothers...”) ultimately enhanced their conversations by adding voice and expression. We both reasoned that students participating in face-to-face literature discussions often use rather informal oral language, supported by hand gestures, body language, and facial expressions. The same communicative “tools” should be available when communicating online.

Researchers agree that strategic use of symbols, icons, and placement of text and images help communicate the message in an electronic literacy environment (Grisham & Wolsey, 2006; Leu et al., 2004). Norton-Meier (2004) proposed that members of the world of online discussions should experiment with language and learn how to use icons and images to communicate with one another. She further advocated for the right to play with and break the rules of language while participating in online chats. Bromley (2006) cautioned, however, that as this type of informal writing finds its way into students’ school

assignments, teachers will need to rethink standards for writing within the classroom in relationship to information and communication technologies. Mrs. Stitt and I both reconsidered our initial positions as we recognized that the students were ahead of our learning curve in their use of language and new literacies.

Closing Thoughts and Implications for the Classroom

In the traditional literacy classroom, literature discussions often involve a teacher leading the class in conversation about a particular story with only occasional student involvement. Carico et al. (2004) viewed the traditional literacy classroom as a place in which knowledge is mostly transmitted, not conducted. Grisham and Wolsey (2006) advocated that asynchronous discussions support socially constructed learning since all participants have an opportunity to be heard without being interrupted. “Asynchronous communications are interactive, like discussions, but thoughtful, like written discourse” (p. 652). This sentiment appeared to be true in this study.

As group members communicated on the message board, they carefully read and contemplated the opinions of others before submitting a thoughtful reply. By asking to construct their own prompts, the fifth graders took on simultaneous roles as facilitators of and participants in the online literature discussions. Leu et al. (2004) reminded us that in the new literacy classroom, students assume diverse responsibilities and effective learning experiences are increasingly dependant on social learning strategies. While working collaboratively in response to the literature, students established a community of inquiry in which their sundry literature prompts elicited divergent responses inspired by multiple opinions and diverse perspectives. In this study, classroom observations and online discussion transcripts clearly support that engagement in an asynchronous online literature discussion encouraged students to respond deeply to the literature, share their ideas with others, and carefully consider multiple perspectives and thoughts.

The findings of this study also suggest that students’ engagement in online literature discussions promoted socially constructed learning. On the message board, the fifth graders’ discussions were based

on their previous knowledge of face-to-face literature discussions (“talk about the book”), classroom expectations (use “appropriate” language), and informal social interactions online (☺, ☹). Collaboratively, the students skillfully cocreated hybrid means of communications that reflected prior experiences in both real and virtual environments. In-depth conversations with Mrs. Stitt further revealed an unwavering commitment to fostering a true community of learners. In her classroom, collaboration and appreciations of others’ opinions were emphasized and expected. Mrs. Stitt’s position is supported by researchers (Labbo & Kuhn, 1998; Leu et al., 2004) who believe that social learning does not come naturally to all students. Consequently, many students will need to be guided in learning about literacy from one another. As the new literacies become increasingly dependant on social learning strategies, teachers must acknowledge that socially skilled learners will likely be advantaged, while independent learners may be disadvantaged (Leu et al., 2004).

The asynchronous online message board format provided students equitable opportunities to share their thoughts and voice their opinions about the book. In a traditional literature circle, students who

are shy, struggling as readers, or linguistically diverse may hesitate to share ideas in group settings. The asynchronous message board discussions allowed for extra thinking time before formulating and posting responses. In her e-journal, Leah stated, “I like using the message board...instead of talking and getting mad when no one can hear us. [Now] we can ask each other questions and answer one at a time.”

The technology itself required students to use new literacies to communicate and socially interact with their peers. As literacy instruction continues to change, teachers should respond by offering students new opportunities and expand their learning community beyond their classroom walls into virtual learning spaces. Of course, issues such as online safety and technology access will remain on the forefront as teachers turn toward new literacies instruction. Purchasing and downloading e-books can be a difficult and frustrating process due to districts’ firewalls and blocked websites. Though well-intended, such protective barriers may also prohibit important technology access for teachers and students (Larson, 2007). Some school districts provide opportunities for online message board discussions, blogs, or student

Table 3
Resources for e-Book Reading and Online Responding

Free e-Books	<p>www.getfreeebooks.com This is a free e-books site where you can access legal, downloadable e-books for free.</p> <p>Public library websites Check out your local library website for opportunities to “check out” e-books. (Library card is often required.)</p>
e-Books for purchase	<p>www.ebooks.com This site offers a large selection of children’s and young adult e-books in multiple formats.</p> <p>www.fictionwise.com Fictionwise.com has a comprehensive collection of fiction and nonfiction books in a variety of popular e-book formats.</p>
Online literature response	<p>moodle.org Moodle is a free course management system that can be used for asynchronous message board discussions.</p> <p>www.epals.com ePals.com offers schools and districts safe e-mail solutions, blogging, and opportunities for collaborative projects.</p> <p>www.pbwiki.com Using the Peanut Butter Wiki site, students can create a wiki to discuss books online.</p>

e-mail accounts while others do not. Table 3 offers readily accessible resources for teachers who wish to implement e-book reading and online discussions in their classrooms.

Within the technology-rich environment, the student-constructed prompts elicited insightful and heartfelt responses and invited group members to think more deeply about the literature. Repeatedly, the students' interactions brimmed with respect, kindness, and support for one another's opinions and ideas. The new literacies are here to stay, and it is the responsibility of all teachers to orchestrate learning opportunities in which students can collaborate and communicate within a technology-rich environment. We recognize the varying accessibility of technology across districts and individual schools and teachers' diverse comfort levels in using and integrating technology; e-book reading and responding, however, provides accessible opportunities for teachers who wish to enhance their current literacy curriculum by focusing on new literacies instruction (Larson, 2008). In this study, the fifth graders clearly relied on each other for guidance, support, and construction of knowledge. So should educators. By helping one another, sharing ideas, and supporting future research, teachers can provide their students with the literacy futures they deserve.

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