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Discussion and Deconstruction: Finding What Works
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Abstract

This qualitative action research study shares the experiences of students and their teacher when blogging and small group discussions are implemented as ways to analyze literature. The 27 research participants are part of a 10th grade Honors English class in a suburban school of approximately 1600 students in an affluent district situated in Eastern Pennsylvania. The purposes of this study are to ascertain what effects blogging had on in-class discussion, as well as students' ability to analyze literature and also to learn what strategies and structures best facilitated high level, student-centered discussions.

This study is not meant to compare the effects of online asynchronous discussion with in-class discussions but rather to determine what kinds of discussion strategies best facilitate high levels of participation in analytical literary discussions. Data are gathered using surveys, observations, student work, participation checklists, and discussion tracking sheets. This study suggests that students benefit from time to prepare for in-class discussions and that individual participation increases when students are made aware of their own individual participation levels. In addition, findings also indicate that effective student-centered discussions are more likely to occur when the teacher acts as a facilitator and provides scaffolding for participation and opportunities for preparation. It is also apparent that students deepen their initial understanding and response to literature by discussing their responses with others and through examining textual

evidence, making connections, stating themes, and recording insights about the text and characters through cooperative learning.

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Building this thesis has been a difficult journey for me. From curricular upheavals, to the unexpected passing of mother, to the devastating loss of my relationship, there has been some major obstacle to overcome along every step of the way. Finishing my thesis and obtaining my Master's degree marks the culmination of 4 years worth of spending innumerable amounts of hours reading, completing assignments, attending classes, and dreaming about the day when I would write the last word of this document. Although this last year and half has truly been the most challenging and difficult time of my life, it has been so rewarding nonetheless. The ancient Greeks believed that from tragedy and great destruction came birth and rejuvenation, a phoenix rising from the ashes of a terrible conflagration. I don't claim to be a phoenix, but I do feel such a sense of revitalization and rebirth after completing this process, and of course, a sense of accomplishment. This journey helped bring me back to life.

I could genuinely say that I could not have continued on or completed this journey without the love and support of so many wonderful and talented people. First and foremost, I would like to thank my students, both past and present. It is because of them that I will always remember that teachers learn far more from their students than their students will ever learn from them. They are unique individuals who are full of great potential. Without them, my accomplishments

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Researcher Stance

This may not be my entire story, but it is an important chapter in the story of my teaching career. This is the story of who I am as a teacher, how I arrived at my research question, and the obstacles that stood in my way. As I reflect on my research study, I realize that it alludes to who I really am because all of my variables point to qualities of my own personality. First of all, I am someone who likes to analyze...not only literature in the academic sense, but nearly every element of my life. Despite the stress this sometimes causes me, I know that higher order thinking is good for me and good for my students, even if they struggle. It is a difficult thing to teach someone how to analyze. There is no formula, no step-by-step directions, and no easy answers. Students who thrive on the black and white may find themselves overwhelmed by the gray. As an English teacher who wants to push my students up the levels of Bloom's Cognitive Taxonomy, I needed to figure out HOW to teach students to think critically.

I'm a very social person. I like to be around people, and I like to engage in conversation, so I've always seen discussion in my classroom as a both a critical and natural part of the learning process. When students resist, I explain why discussion is so important to an English classroom; I point to my standards poster and explain just how many of those state standards address discussion. I smile; I encourage. I remind students how much more interesting class is when I talk less and they talk more. Despite my best efforts, I still worry about those

classes, and I still sometimes feel like a failure. I envision my classroom utopia where students are actively engaging in high-level discussion, while I get such satisfaction out of merely floating around the room and listening to my students who are progressing so well. Juxtaposed with the disappointing reality, I began to feel like such a classroom was unattainable. And then, I become inspired again, seeking out the best practices and new strategies that will hopefully make a difference. Since it is such a large part of my instructional methodology, I decided that I had to focus on improving in-class discussion.

In my classroom utopia, amidst the rich discussions, students also incorporate use of the best technology out there. While in their self-led discussion circles, students use their iPads, Kindles, laptops to question, explore, create, and discover. The physical walls of the classroom, which all too often limit knowledge disappear and students have the world at their fingertips. I have seen the benefits of technology in the classroom and how it engenders greater student engagement and achievement. It gives life to the constructivist approach to teaching, allowing students to construct their own knowledge and understanding.

The Obstacles that Stood in My Way

I remember the day I realized I would have to postpone my study for a year. It was a bittersweet feeling. On one hand, I had been very worried about how the new College Board SpringBoard English program we would have to implement would fit with my study, so I felt relieved that I would not have to do

both at the same time. On the other hand, I was angry! I had worked so hard for the past three years, and my study was approved and ready to go. I had no control over this decision, and I had never taken a break when it came to my education. I wrestled with the idea of postponing it for a few days before I finally decided it was the right thing to do. Thus, my school year last year was spent piloting the SpringBoard program.

As the school year drew to a close, and I began to think again about my study, I encountered the biggest obstacle of my life. My mother passed away unexpectedly during the last week of school. Needless to say, that summer was like nothing I had ever experienced before. For the first time, I truly understood what it was like to be surrounded by people, and still feel all alone. My friends and family were amazing, and I don't think I will ever be able to fully express how grateful I am to have them. But my mom was still gone, and I began to really think about how I would continue to move on in life. Who would I call for reassurance? Who would I talk to when I was feeling as though I wasn't a good teacher? Who would be there to support and encourage me? When I asked myself these questions, I would remind myself that I had plenty of people to talk to about these things, but it didn't fill the void. No one would be able to respond to me or know me as well as my mom. She would always tell me that "when the going gets tough, the tough get going." This cliché still motivates me.

So I picked myself up and decided to go on with my study, a little more beaten up than before but ready and willing to accomplish something truly worthwhile for myself and my students. My mom will continue to be my source of strength when times get tough, and I become overwhelmed. Therefore, I dedicate this study...every triumph, every tear, every tribulation...to my mother, who taught me about how important having faith is.

Literature Review

Introduction

As the world becomes more and more dependent on technology, the development of 21st century skills becomes an imperative for students. The International Society for Technology Education's standards for digital-age learning adopted in 2007 require students to master several higher order thinking skills, as well as digital citizenship. These standards include demonstrating creativity and innovation, communicating and collaborating, problem-solving, and using technology effectively and productively (Nets, *ISTE*, 2011). With standardized testing mandates continuing to encroach on the time to educate students, it is essential that we still find ways to allow students to utilize technology to help them develop higher-order thinking skills and foster discussion. In particular, the use of blogging is something that can be introduced into an English classroom in order to promote class discussions and give students practice with analyzing literature (Jewell, 2005; Ruzich and Canan, 2010; Wang & Hsua, 2008; West, 2008; Witte, 2007).

The goal of every good teacher is to get students to think for themselves. Moving toward a classroom of student-centered discussions and away from one that is teacher-centered is pivotal in promoting the skills students need to become independent thinkers and learners. Teachers want students to develop the abilities

to thoughtfully discuss literature, to learn how to challenge others' interpretations, to accept the challenges of others, and to collaborate in the social construction of meaning (VanDeWeghe, 2007). In order to accomplish this, teachers must understand the purpose of discussion and how to facilitate the kinds of discussions that push students to think about and respond to literature on a high cognitive level.

The Purpose of Classroom Discussion

Discussion within a classroom serves a multitude of purposes because it is a unique form of classroom talk that requires a back-and-forth exchange among the teacher and the students. During in-class discussions, these exchanges, which happen at high cognitive level, occur almost instantly. Therefore, discussion is a way to develop the higher-order thinking skills that are needed to interpret, analyze, and manipulate information (Larson, 1997). The National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (2006) found that in order for discussion to occur at a high cognitive level, teachers must use authentic and open-ended questions rather than questions for which he or she has pre-specified answers. The traditional Initiate-Respond-Evaluate (IRE) pattern is limiting and does not promote higher-level discussions, because, in most cases, the IRE strategy simply tests the students' knowledge by asking a question to which the teacher already knows the answer. In order to encourage students to continue to explore and reformulate their thinking rather than conclude the

interaction, The National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (2006) found that teachers need to increase their use of what they call the "pressing strategy." The pressing strategy involves asking follow-up questions, requiring students to back up their interpretations with textual support, and asking them to elaborate more on their responses. Engaging in meaningful discussion that will result in the development of these higher-level skills first requires that the teacher and students develop the skills that will allow effective discussions to happen. Larson (1997) explored social studies teachers' concepts of discussion and found that the teachers encouraged students to reflect on the discussions they had to find meaning in their interactions. Through this additional reflection, teachers helped students strengthen their analytical skills. Open-ended, thought-provoking questions require students to organize available information and craft answers that they must support with accurate details.

Quality discussions have the possibility to foster skills and knowledge that transcend the classroom walls and occur during other academic experiences. John Dewey (1938) believed that

Everything depends upon the *quality* the experience which is had. The quality of any experience has two aspects. There is an immediate aspect of agreeableness or disagreeableness, and there is its influence upon later experiences...Hence the central problem of an education based upon experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences. (pp. 27-8).

In order for discussion to truly be an educative experience as Dewey (1938) defines it, Larson (1997) believes that there must be an atmosphere that is conducive to participation from all students, which might require the teacher to limit the participation of those who are dominating the discussion to put non-participants in a position to verbalize their thoughts. In addition, if students are to engage in discussion that allows for the development of opinions, then students must “set aside feelings of hostility or affection towards a member of a group in order to pay proper attention to the merits or demerits of what he or she is actually saying” (Larson, 1997, p. 4).

Another characteristic of discussion that can lead to an educative experience is to make sure that students are taught discussion skills. Teaching students to listen, clearly state ideas, back up ideas with evidence, help group members through obstacles, and critique ideas and not individuals are skills that can lead to meaningful discussions (Larson, 1997). Larson (1997) states that “by teaching students how to discuss, the benefits for using discussion in the classroom can be extended to all areas of students’ lives” (p. 4). Thus, discussion becomes a truly educative experience in itself.

Discussion and the Meaning of Literature

Another key 21st century skill that students need is the ability to think critically about a text and construct their own meaning from it. The role of the teacher should no longer involve lecturing about a text and telling students what it

means so that they simply memorize the teacher's interpretation. Instead, teachers must use discussion to facilitate students' own interpretations of texts. According to Langer (1991), the reader response theory asserts that meaning resides within the reader, who actively constructs the meaning. Their personal knowledge, beliefs, and histories will affect their responses and interpretations and therefore create the potential for a variety of correct interpretations. These initial interpretations can then possibly change as students interact with the text and with each other through discussion. As their interpretations change, students open themselves up to new possibilities for understanding a text. Langer says, "New understandings do not lead to endpoints, but instead reveal further areas for examination. In this way, an ongoing exploration of horizons of possibilities lies at the heart of a literary reading" (p. 7). Discussion is a productive instructional approach that can facilitate the meaning-making process of the reader response theory. Langer has studied discussion-based classrooms and her findings indicate that some of the most productive literary reasoning students did happen during discussions involving an exploration of new possibilities.

One of the class discussions she observed during her study took place in an 11th grade English classroom. The students were reading *The Great Gatsby* and keeping literature journals where they were encouraged to jot down questions as they read. Prior to this discussion, the students had read through chapter three of the novel, and this discussion time was spent discussing questions they had

raised. The teacher began the lesson by focusing on the concerns they had about what they had read so far. Rather than looking for a right answer, the teacher encouraged her students to explore possibilities instead. The teacher attempted to move the discussion along and invite more students to participate by asking thought-provoking questions. The discussion lasts for twenty minutes and they explored five topics, and as they transitioned, students developed possible interpretations by building upon their initial interpretations, what others said, and their own rethinking. Eighty percent of the time was spent exploring possibilities, while the other twenty percent was devoted to seeking more specific information about the text. In terms of how ways in which students related to the text, 54 percent of the time they were trying to gain enough information to form an understanding of characters and events. Forty-three percent of the time they were extending understanding by building upon what they already knew. The *Gatsby* discussion demonstrates how discussion can be used to move their thinking along and get students to consider and accept multiple viewpoints.

Social Constructivism

Allus (1997) defines social constructivism as the process by which teachers and students establish social practices as they construct curriculum as text. Curriculum events, then, are the products of interactions between the teacher and students and not predetermined structures. Allus (1997), Langer (1991), and Wang and Hsua (2008) all found that knowledge can be generated through social

discourse and gradual advances in levels of knowledge occur because of this interaction, meaning that students are able to increase what they know about a topic by discussing it. Dewey (1938) believed in a similar notion and stated that activities should “lend themselves to social organization, an organization in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute something, and in which the activities in which all participate are the chief carrier of control” (p. 56). If the activities are designed to allow students to engage in social constructivism, then the activities shift the control from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered one, because all students will be able to participate and contribute to the construction of knowledge and learning.

Since blogs can be used as a foundation for in-class discussion, the students decide what to discuss and laying the groundwork for discussion based on their blogs (Andresen, 2009; Wang and Hsua, 2008). Hence, they become co-constructors of the curriculum and the practice of pairing blogging with in-class discussions becomes the driving force behind the learning, not the teacher (Andresen, 2009; Wang and Hsua, 2008).

Greater Participation and Communication through Blogging

One of the most important ways blogging adds value to discussion is that it increases participation and communication among students. Since some students are reluctant to participate during in-class discussions for fear of being wrong or because a few others students are dominating the discussion, blogging

provides a way for these students to participate in the discussion and gives every student a voice (Jewell, 2005; Larson, 1997; Redekopp & Bourbonniere, 2009; Yu, 2009). For those students who need reassurance before contributing during an in-class discussion, blogging gives them the time and space they need to provide a meaningful contribution (Andresen, 2009; Wang and Hsua, 2008; Yu, 2009).

Blogging creates an environment where there are fewer restraints placed on discussion than there are during in-class discussions. In addition to allowing more student voices to be heard, Wang and Hsua (2008) found that

blogging enabled [students] to share knowledge and experiences as well as express their feelings and thoughts outside classroom discussion. From the in-depth stories or postings contributed by their classmates, they became aware of their peers' opinions and were able to confront perspectives on reading and diversity issues better than in a face-to-face environment. (p. 83).

The blog provided more opportunities for students to expand on in-class discussions and interact with each other on other topics and issues.

Blogging as a 21st Century Skill

Although there has been little research done to explore the academic benefits of blogging, it is thought that using this communication tool allows for a more student-centered approach to discussion and learning (Ramaswami, 2008; Wang & Hsua, 2008; West, 2008). Since most students' social lives are already engrossed in the use of technology, it is natural fit for the classroom.

However, the emphasis must be placed on using it for educational purposes, so students can realize how technology can affect them as students. Bachenheimer's study revealed that students who used blogs as part of their English class felt better about writing overall, and in particular, commented that blogging helped them "organize their thoughts, develop their ideas, synthesize their research, and benefit from their classmates' constructive comments" (Bachenheimer, as cited in Ramaswami 2008). The students were able to see how using technology could have academic benefits.

By incorporating what students are already doing outside the classroom into the curriculum, teachers can add new value to technological tools like blogs. Witte (2008) states that "by combining writing with online technology, teachers can provide opportunities for students to develop their digital fluency while also strengthening their traditional literacy skills" (p. 92). The combination of blogging and literature has the potential to develop several key skills simultaneously. Use of technology, discussion, collaboration, writing, and responding to literature are all higher-order skills that are addressed when teachers connect blogging with literature in their classroom (Ruzich & Canan, 2010; Wang & Hsua, 2008; Witte, 2007).

Blogging and Student-Centered Discussion

Student-centered learning occurs when students are able to pursue their own answers and direct their own learning (Davis & McGrail, 2009). A teacher

may act as facilitator, but he or she is not in total control of the knowledge and understanding being formed. If questions and prompts for blogging are broad and open-ended, the students can decide what to write about, which will enrich the discussion and invite more participation, because then the discussions, whether in-class or online, are student-directed (Davis and McGrail, 2009). The role of the teacher must change in order to facilitate this for the students. According to Andresen (2009), the teacher needs to step back and relinquish some of the control to the students and their exploration of a text. If the teacher is always in control, students tend to rely on the teacher to answer questions and provide clarifications on discrepancies. As a result, students may not construct their own understanding nor do they get a chance to develop their own critical thinking skills. Instead, the teacher should intervene only to keep discussions on track or to motivate students. He or she should spend his or her time preparing materials and discussion prompts (Andresen, 2009).

Blogging is one method of discussion that makes it very easy for the teacher to give up control and put the responsibility of discussion on the students, since each student must post a response and comment on others. If the teacher is only providing scaffolding through prompts and instructions but not posting a response, then he or she is taken out of the equation, and students will need to rely on their own insights and the insights of their classmates to form ideas about a text (Andresen, 2009; Wang and Hsua, 2008).

Blogging and In-Class Discussions

Blogging prior to in-class discussions gives students a chance to think about the topic or question, generate ideas and additional questions, write a response, and read the responses of others. Thus, they will come to class better prepared for the discussion than they would have if they had not blogged prior to it (Andresen, 2009 Wang and Hsua, 2008; Wang and Wang, 2007). Andresen (2009) and Wang & Wang (2007) agreed that effective in-class discussions require that the participants be well prepared, and online discussions can provide that. For example, in an online discussion environment, participants have time available to look up information as they are crafting their responses (Andresen, 2009).

It is important to give students opportunities for both online and in-class discussions. Andresen (2009), Wang and Wang (2007), and Yu (2009) discovered that despite the fact that online discussions might be more engaging, some students felt that it was a less meaningful, less authentic form of communication. They also saw in-class discussions as more authentic because participants could talk to each other in real time, see facial expressions, and clarify matters immediately. However, Yu (2009) also found that in other considerations, online discussions were more comfortable, less aggressive, and offered equal opportunities for students to voice opinions. Both kinds of discussion come with benefits and drawbacks. Therefore it is important to give

students the opportunity to engage in both kinds in order to maximize the benefits of both (Wang and Wang, 2007; Yu, 2009).

Knowledge Construction and Understanding through Discussion

As students engage in social constructivism through discussion, they also construct more knowledge and a deeper level of understanding about text or topic. By thinking deeper and talking through their own ideas and interpretations, as well as hearing and discussing the interpretations of others, students enhance their own understanding of a text (Allus, 1997; Langer, 1991; Larson, 1997). This is one of the reasons why discussion is such a valuable learning tool in the classroom. In particular, when students discuss what they did not understand about a text, they open the door to a wide range of exploration and the possibility that they will move their understanding of a text farther along when they continue to read it with these questions in mind. In referring to discussing literature, Langer (1991) says, “When class discussion is treated as exploration, students learn that as in real life, you get to know the characters and their behaviors best if you explore and imagine their intentions, actions, and feelings from multiple perspectives” (p. 19). Through interacting with others, students learn that literature can be looked at through different lenses, which lead to different interpretations.

Discussion and the Learning Process

Because of its versatility and wide variety of different methods, discussion has been proven to be a critical part of the learning process (Allus, 1998; Larson, 1997; Murphy et al., 2009; Skinner, 2007). It is a skill that students can apply to experiences both in the classroom and the real world. If students will engage in discussions outside of the classroom, then the possibility of students building knowledge, exploring multiple perspectives, or thinking in-depth about issues also extends outside of the classroom (Larson). Teachers can help students make this real world connection to discussion by using blogs because they help to facilitate the move from in the classroom to the outside world.

Several studies suggest that discussion leads to improvements in lower-level thinking such as comprehension, providing supporting details, and literal-level responses to a text (Allus, 1998; Murphy et al., 2009; Skinner, 2007; Sorensen & Baylen, 2004; Yu, 2009). While these are certainly beneficial to the learning process, especially for struggling students, enhancing higher-level cognitive ability is the goal for teachers, and this is also possible (Andresen, 2009, Larson, 1997; Wilen, 2004). Larson (1997) and Andresen (2009) both found that higher levels of thinking were facilitated by discussions as long as the discussions were task oriented and designed to address higher-level questions.

Best Practices

Simply putting students into groups or giving them access to a blog is not enough to create the kind of discussion that will enhance their thinking or understanding (Murphy et al., 2009; Sturgeon, 2008; Wang & Wang, 2007). Before letting students take control of their own discussions, teachers must plan out the process and establish procedures and guidelines. Because discussion involves communication and collaboration between individuals, the students need to agree on and abide by norms that tell them how to interact in a respectful and productive manner. Because blogging takes away the face-to-face interaction, sometimes students will say things that they normally would not if they were facing someone; this can be both a positive and negative. On one hand, it provides a low-pressure environment where they feel more open to express their ideas. On the other hand, some students might decide to say things that are hurtful or disrespectful because they think they are hiding behind the blog. For this reason, blogging etiquette should be discussed and students must understand that same school rules apply on the blog as they would in the classroom (Sorensen and Baylen, 2004; Sturgeon, 2008). Sturgeon (2008) suggests having them sign a code of conduct that addresses things like bullying, slander, and foul language prior to starting the blog.

Since students are going to be posting information on the Internet, a blogging site that allows teachers to control the level of privacy should be used.

Teachers should investigate several options to find one that is user friendly and allows privacy and anonymity to be maintained (Davis and McGrail, 2009).

Adolescents tend to disclose a great deal of personal information online, so students should be encouraged not to reveal personal information on their blogs. They should create user names that do not specifically reveal who they are. For example, a student should not use his or her full name when posting to the blog.

Because blogging is asynchronous, attention must be paid to the timing of the posts. A study conducted by Jeong and Frazier (2008) found that the timing of blog posts affected the level of critical discussion. Messages posted near the end of the week provided less time for students to critically examine and reply to ideas presented others' posts than messages posted earlier in the week. Implications of this study include establishing deadlines for initial posts and then replies, conducting discussions over a long period of time, and reminding students to pay equal attention to posts displayed at the bottom of the blog.

Another best practice involves teaching students how to engage in meaningful discussions. Larson (1997) found that teachers believed they needed to teach their students how to discuss, and they stressed the skills and dispositions needed for this kind of classroom talk. Teachers provided opportunities for practice sessions where they planned discussions so that students could practice having verbal interactions with each other, and they also modeled appropriate behavior during discussions for students. Teaching students how to engage in

literary discussions increases the likelihood that their discussions will be productive enough to explore new understandings (Langer, 1991; Larson 1997).

Conclusion

Jewell (2005) points out that most students do not learn in isolation. Learning instead occurs in an environment where “ideas can be exchanged and then changed, where hypotheses are presented, confronted, and confirmed” (p. 83). Discussion can provide such an environment for students. Giving students adequate time to prepare for discussions is a key strategy for promoting discussions that are lively, rich, and student-centered (Andresen, 2009; Wang and Wang, 2007). This can certainly be facilitated through the use of blogs and other online discussion tool, and by utilizing these, teachers are also giving students a chance to strengthen important 21st century skills like communication, collaboration, and problem-solving ((Ruzich & Canan, 2010; Wang & Hsua, 2008; Witte, 2007). Wilen states that “as an instructional method, discussion is a natural, powerful, and effective approach to engage students in critical thinking, decision making, and problem solving, all of which are deemed essential prerequisites to responsible and competent citizenship” (p. 38). Teachers therefore have a responsibility to find ways to facilitate authentic discussions that allow students to think on higher levels and construct new knowledge and understandings, and they must keep in mind that such discussions require scaffolding and preparation.

Research Design and Methodology

My study is conducted at a suburban high school located in the Lehigh Valley of Eastern Pennsylvania. The high school has approximately 1600 students encompassing grades 9 through 12. The 27 students who participate in the study are a part of an 10th grade Honors English class, and two of them are identified as gifted. All of the rest are regular education students. All in-class observations and surveys take place in my classroom. A Wikispaces site (Appendix H) is created in order for students to access discussion prompts, find links to their blogs, and access other information about discussion. Edublogs is also used for the students to blog responses to the discussion prompts. Although I do not require students to participate in online discussions, I still feel that requiring students to blog is a better idea than having them simply complete handwritten responses to the literature for reasons that stem from the benefits of integrating technology into the classroom. First, I believe that the novelty and newness of using a blog entices students to participate and complete the assignments. Secondly, since technology is at our fingertips, students are able to blog while they are on the Internet at home or at school or on their smart phones. This aspect is also a benefit to myself as the teacher, because I am able to access their blogs anywhere from my own smart phone.

A popular saying that adorns many motivational posters hanging in classrooms today states that “anything worth doing is worth doing right.” My

teacher action research study is definitely the most worthwhile thing that I have done in my career thus far. I have put a great deal of time, effort, and emotion into exploring an area of teaching and learning about which I feel very strongly.

Therefore, this study is definitely worth doing right, so I am using recommended practices from expert teacher researchers in order to make sure that my findings are trustworthy. Andrew P. Johnson (2008) reminds us that the “ultimate goal of action research is to use your findings to make effective changes or choices. To this end, the collection and analysis of data must be accurate and credible” (p. 100). Trustworthiness and credibility are the two goals that I have in mind from the time I start to design my study until the revisions I make just prior to beginning it, and I remain open to unexpected findings and am willing to change my data collection in order to ensure both of these vital components of research within my classroom. It is not that I believe that what I did is the only way to improve classroom discussion or improve students’ ability to respond analytically to literature, but I do believe that my methods are credible and my findings are accurate.

Ethical Guidelines

My study is designed in conjunction with my work in MEDU 700: Curriculum Development and Action Research. In addition to learning more about the theory of action research, I decide on a research question and then research my variables in order to learn about what other studies have concluded. I

use this information to help me design a study of my own. I put together an action research proposal and had it approved by the Moravian College Human Subjects Internal Review Board. Prior to implementing the study in my classroom, I draft an informed consent letter in which I disclosed information about my study, and I plan to have it signed by my principal, my students, and their parents (Appendices A and B). As a result, they are made fully aware of what I am attempting to do, and students and their parents have a choice about whether or not students serve as research participants. They also have the option to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Because my study involved blogging and the use of a wiki, I make sure that only the students' first names appear online and keep the wiki private so that only the students and I are able to view it and change the content.

I reflect on my findings continuously throughout the process and alter the intervention plan, data collection strategies, or the study timeline as needed. I use the data to determine what is working and what is not. The data is also used to inform my decision on how to make changes, and once a change is implemented, I collect additional data in order to determine its effectiveness. (Hendricks, 2006). For example, my data show that students need additional scaffolding in order to have more balanced participation during group discussions, so I implement new strategies and come up with new data collection tools in which to determine how these strategies influenced participation.

Trustworthiness

Because this study involves students and seeks to inform instructional practices in order to increase their discussion and analysis skills, there are several criteria that it needs to meet for validity. It is high in democratic validity because the students are functioning as co-researchers, and I elicit participant feedback from them by administering student surveys and asking them to evaluate the emerging themes that I share with them. I also discuss my themes with colleagues to determine whether or not they agree. Because my question is research-based and will inform my teaching practice in order to solve the problem of increasing in-class participation in discussions and students' ability to analyze literature, it also has a high degree of outcome validity. Similarly, I attempt to achieve a high degree of catalytic validity in that my study has changed my practice. Since my study lasts ten weeks, I engage in persistent and prolonged data gathering and triangulate my data to include a variety of artifacts, observational data, and inquiry data. As I conduct my observations, I attempt to create thick descriptions of the setting, participants, intervention, and research methods (Hendricks, 2006; Johnson, 2008).

As I gather my data, I also utilize the constant comparative method by determining what was most important as I look through it and create categories. As I find commonalities and connections between them, I begin to generate theme statements that interpret my findings. By keeping a field log, creating a research

timeline, and gathering my data in an organized way, I am able to create an audit trail that will allow stakeholders or anyone else viewing my study to see if the results and my interpretations are accurate (Hendricks, 2006).

Researcher Bias

Although the word “bias” often carries with it a negative connotation, bias in teacher action research can simply mean that you believe your intervention will be successful (Hendricks, 2006). However, it is essential to confront potential biases and reflect on them at the beginning and end of the study. Because I am an outgoing person who enjoys engaging in discussions, I assume that all students will also enjoy them if they had the opportunity to raise their comfort levels by preparing and practicing for them. While this may hold true for some students, it might not for others, and this does not necessarily mean that they will not be able to improve their analytical skills. While research does show that discussion is a critical part of the learning process (Allus, 1998; Murphy et al., 2009; Skinner, 2007; Sorensen & Baylen, 2004), it is not the only instructional method to improve students’ critical thinking abilities. Because of this, I need to analyze and compare their in-class contributions and their blog entries to give students both ways in which to demonstrate their ability to analyze literature.

Data Collection Tools

My data collection tools include double entry journals, student surveys, student participation checklist, a discussion analysis tracking sheet, blog

participation checklist, and student blog posts. The data is entered into and then reflected upon in my field log. It is through this field log that I reflect on my findings and determine if changes need to be made to my intervention or data collection plans.

When recording my data, I keep my reflections separate from my observations by using a double entry journal (Hendricks, 2006). I write down observations of things that I see and hear during in-class discussions on the left-hand side, and after class is over, I write reflections across from these observations on the right hand side.

I administer surveys at both the beginning and end of my study in order to elicit more feedback from the students about their thoughts on class discussions, their own abilities and comfort levels as discussion participants, their feelings about using technology as a tool for preparing for discussions and responding to literature, and what they think about the strategies implemented during the study. I also am looking to see if any of their opinions or knowledge about discussion have changed from the pre to the post survey.

This was something that I put into place after my study began because I saw a need for more scaffolding of individual participation in the small group discussions. I create a table and asked one student in each group to track each group member's participation by writing their names in the table and placing tally marks next to the name of each person who contributes something substantial to

the discussion. This includes an insightful comment, probing question, restatement of a difficult concept or idea, or an attempt at meaning making or analysis of the text. I put several tables on one sheet of paper so that the students could label and date each table and compare their individual participation rates during several different discussions.

I also create and implement this tool along with the student participation checklist. I want to make the students aware of the progress and depth of their discussions, so I ask one student in each group to fill out a sheet that asks him or her to list topics in the order that they are discussed and two to three insights the group gains about each topic. It is a more concrete way of tracking their discussions, and it also gives me more data on each group since I no longer have to rely on just my own observations to hear what each group was discussing.

In order to keep track of who is completing blog posts, I create a grid with the students' names and each time they are assigned to blog about a discussion prompt, I read through the blogs and put a checkmark next to each student who completed the assignment. This is very helpful in determining which students are habitually skipping blogging assignments and which students are completing them diligently. I sense that there will be a correlation in my data between students who are prepared for the discussions through blogging and higher levels of participation.

I print out and read through all of the student blog posts for each discussion prompt. I then reflect on them in my field log by identifying and analyzing any trends, strengths, weaknesses, or other interesting findings. These reflections generate a lot of questions about their ability to respond analytically to literature and deconstruct discussion prompts.

My Story

What If...? -9/16/11

As I wait patiently for my students to finish answering the beginning survey I have designed, which officially marks the beginning of my study, I am very anxious to see what they would say. I am very worried about the potential for them to hit me with a harsh reality that would doom my study before it even begins. What if they say they all want the teacher to control the discussion? What if they say they are all already very comfortable with classroom discussions and see no need for improvements? What if they don't like the idea of using a blog or a wiki as a way to prepare for class discussions? These are all questions that I can't stop from sneaking into my mind as I wait. I try to put on a brave front and answer every one of those questions in my mind with the same answer...my study will make some sort of a difference, and I will find interesting things on which to collect data.

Then I have another, more optimistic thought. What if my study turns into something unexpected and unplanned but wonderful? After all, we've been hearing about others who had come before us and how their studies turn into something greater and more telling than what they've originally planned, albeit different. It is at that moment I let go of my preconceived notions and biases and become more open-minded and accepting of the unexpected.

Table 1 –Beginning Survey Results

Question	Results	Student Comments
Do you prefer discussions that are controlled by the teacher or by the class? Why?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8 said the teacher • 8 said the class • 2 said both • 2 said it depends on the topic • 2 said it doesn't matter • 1 said controlled by the class by having the teacher facilitate 	<p>“It doesn't matter to me as long as we are all able to participate. Usually it comes down to not wanting to participate.”</p> <p>“I like discussions when a teacher gives a prompt, but the lets the class take it wherever they wish, without input. I find that students are much more open to discussing when a teacher isn't adding to the commentary.”</p>
Do you like to participate in class discussions? Why or why not?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14 said yes • 5 said no • 4 said it depends 	<p>“I do because I like to hear myself talk.”</p> <p>“Not really because it leaves my opinion out there for judgment.”</p> <p>“Yes I enjoy participating because sometimes I have something important to say and I want the whole class to hear.”</p>
What do you think is the biggest obstacle to having a meaningful and successful class discussion?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9 said a lack of class participation • 6 said students being too afraid or shy • 5 said understanding the question or topic 	<p>“I think that sometimes people are just scared to say what they think, in fear of criticism or being told they are wrong. Also if they don't know much about the topic, they won't have much to</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 said people getting off topic • 1 said a good question 	offer.”
Question	Results	Student Comments
If you had a way to prepare for class discussions prior to coming to class, do you think this would increase your participation in discussions? Why or why not?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 said yes • 8 said no • 3 said it depends • 9 said it would give them more time to come up with answers 	“I think it might, but it would depend on how much I care about the topic. I won’t research it unless I’m interested.”
On a scale of 1-4, with 1 being very uncomfortable and 4 being very comfortable, how comfortable are you with participating in class discussions?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average was 2.64 	
Would you be interested in learning more about using a blog or wiki as part of class?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 17 said yes • 4 said no • 1 said yes and no 	<p>“No because computers and I don’t get along well.”</p> <p>“Yes and no, I would like doing it but just ever now and then, not like an everyday thing.”</p> <p>“Yes because there would be more ways to have discussions.”</p>
Would you like to use technology as a learning tool on a regular basis?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18 said yes • 3 said no • 2 said it depends 	“Depends. I hate Power Point (boring). What kind of technology are we talking about?”

As I read through the data, I realize that I am in a good place to begin this study. Nothing really shocks me as I analyze the results of this survey; It is what I

expected for the most part. There appears to be an even-split between preferring student-controlled and teacher-controlled discussions, and no one appears to be totally averse to the idea of student-controlled discussions, so this makes me think that my study has the potential to change some of their opinions about teacher-controlled discussions being the only way to have an effective discussion. In addition, the majority of them seem to recognize the benefits of preparing in some way prior to in-class discussions, since only eight of them state that they see absolutely no benefit in it. Perhaps this means that the blogs will be a hit! This is further supported by the fact that 17 of them say they would be interested in using a blog or a wiki for class.

Maybe participation, which I assume will be my biggest battle, won't be such a difficult challenge, because 14 students say they like to participate in discussions, and nine of them already recognize a lack of participation to be the biggest hindrance to a successful discussion.

TWISTing and Talking -9/23/11

“What will you do if it doesn't work?” This is the question that is asked of me by one of my students as I am excitedly trying to conduct my very first observation. As I make my way around my classroom, trying to capture every insightful utterance and meaningful gesture from each group of students who are working on creating TWIST charts, I think about how this first observation might impact

my study. TWIST is a strategy from our new SpringBoard curriculum that helps students analyze a poem for the purposes of writing about it. The acronym stands for tone, word choice, imagery, style, and theme. Students are to identify these elements in a poem and cite lines as textual support. As my students work with their groups to deconstruct their poems and reconstruct meaning using TWIST, I am anxious to see how they will work in groups, since small group discussions will be a large part of my study. As I get to the last group, Stephanie notices that I am writing things down and is curious. She already knows I am doing an action research study, as I have already handed out consent forms and explained what I am going to be doing. She asks some good questions.

Stephanie asks, “What do you hope to get out of this...Like, what will the outcome be?”

“I’m not sure about all of the outcomes,” I reply honestly. “But overall I am hoping to help you guys improve your ability to discuss literature at the analytical level more independently so you don’t always need a teacher to lead you in discussions.”

Then comes the question that really stuck in my mind...

“What will you do if it doesn’t work?” she asks.

Always up for a challenge, I felt a little rush of adrenaline as I prepare to show her and the rest of her group that I, of course, have a contingency plan.

“Well, that’s where the observations come in. I will be able to tell from

my data what's working and what's not, and then I can change things and implement new strategies based on what you guys show me." I say with a smile.

She and the rest of her group seem satisfied with that answer to her question, and it is a question that I am glad they ask. I want my students to be interested in my study and what I am learning. I want them to question me and keep me on my toes. It makes me believe that they are thinking about something beyond themselves and their own work as students. They are curious about what I am doing, and it makes me believe that I can serve as a role model for them as I demonstrate to them that I am still very much a student myself and am committed to learning as much as I possibly can.

As I think back to that first observation, I realize how pleased I am with what I see. Not just because of Stephanie's questions but also because how well the students appear to be working together and remaining on-task. I think about how critical this dynamic is to my study, since we do several small group discussions. Although I don't really get the hang of how to truly best "capture" relevant data until I have a few more observations under my belt, I feel that this initial observation, prior to implementing the strategies I have planned for my study, go extremely well and is a confidence booster.

Good Themes, Lobster Bisque, and Screeching Desks -9/26/11

The set up and formation of the class wiki and group blogs is a process that it seems through which I am only plodding. Between trying to find time when the Instructional Technology Specialist is available to come up and help facilitate and also finding a good time in the curriculum in which to pair up a good piece of literature with a blog post and subsequent discussion, it feels as though my research study is off to a very slow start. It is like trying to find the best time to jump into a session of double-dutch jump rope. Even though this class discussion is not yet paired with a blog, I still want to take the opportunity to observe another small group discussion. I feel it is important to seize another opportunity to give students a chance to practice self-directed discussions with their group members. I ask them to discuss the short story they had read for homework called “The Cabuliwallah” and determine the theme. Being able to extract themes from works of literature and then support them with explanations and examples from the text is a key skill that we try to develop during 10th grade English, so the more practice they get at it, the better.

After giving them instructions, students begin to form circles of desks with their group members. The screeching of the desk legs as they are turned and maneuvered on the linoleum floor drowns out most other sounds, so I am only

able to start observing after all of the groups are situated. As I stand at the front of the room with my clipboard, I look out at all six groups. I notice that three out of six of them are beginning to take notes, even though I don't tell them to do so. "This is a good sign," I think to myself. These groups also end up electing one person to write down a list of their potential themes, which I decide to collect. After the observation is over, I realize that these three groups seem stronger and more productive than the two groups that don't bother to write anything down. I figure that I could have helped to keep them on task or given them more to talk about. This initial notion proves to be the impetus for the creation and implementation of a discussion tracking sheet that I implement later on in my study as a way to provide more scaffolding.

Themes Determined by Three Group

JJAR: "Relationships with everyday people are constantly made and broken, but there is a special bond with your family and there always will be."

Cardnl: "Feelings can change over time due to experiences and maturing, which, in turn, can alter relationships."

English Group Two: "As time apart continues, relationships are tested and some friends are reluctantly forgotten."

Although they state it differently, these three groups basically have the same idea about diminishing relationships, which is correct. I am happy to see that these groups extract an accurate theme out of the story and state in a way that isn't too

cliché or overly simple. “The Cabuliwallah” isn’t a very difficult story to comprehend, so I do expect my Honors students to be able to take that next step and accurately analyze it. Nevertheless, my experience thus far teaches me that students often struggle with conceptualizing theme, even for simple stories.

The group that name themselves Lobster Bisque catches my attention rather quickly, so I move closer to them to capture more of what they are doing and saying. Christy and Tina are leading the group and doing most of the talking.

“Let’s put all of our ideas together,” suggests Tina.

“Good idea!” I interject. It was an excited utterance, but I was hoping to remain more like a spectator than a player in the game during these observations. This group seems to function fairly successfully. Although Christy and Tina are more extroverted and emerge as the leaders, they aren’t alienating the other three members, two of whom tend to be more introverted. I move on to another group, eager to capture more snapshots of what was going on but also feeling overwhelmed and wondering if I am missing anything important. I move on to another group to catch more of the action!

The group, JJAR, was working in the corner of the room. As soon as I approached, Jimmy spotted me.

“Is our theme good?” he asked. He showed me the paper he’d been taking notes on and points to their most recent attempt.

“Let’s see,” I reply. I begin to read aloud from the paper. ““Relationships with everyday people are constantly made and broken, but there is a special bond with family that will always be there.” That’s not bad. But think about how you are using the word everyday. I don’t think it really belongs there.”

“Yeah I don’t really mean, like, everyday people, I just mean people that you might encounter on a daily basis.” Jimmy stated. “Should we just take it out?”

“I think that would make more sense.” I said.

Jimmy and Annie tend to be the ones doing the questioning in this group. I can tell that they really tried hard and want to make sure that they arrived at a correct theme. There is a period of time during observations immediately following this one that they continue to ask me questions once I approach their group. They seem to need me to validate their thinking and interpretations of the literature, and this is certainly a normal thing for students to require, especially for Honor students. However, I learn after this observation to try and help when needed but not become too overly involved. If my goal is to get them to be more independent thinkers and discussers of literature, then I have to cut the proverbial apron strings, and the sooner the better.

A Conversation With My Helping Hand

As luck would have it, Jimmy is in my study hall session at the end of the day, and this gave us a chance to talk a little bit about how the group discussions are going. Jimmy is always eager to participate and comes to class everyday with

a positive attitude, and this is something I very much appreciate. I feel comfortable talking with him about things that occur in class and am willing to listen to any suggestions he may have.

“So how did your group’s discussion go today?” I ask.

“I think it went pretty good,” he replies while nodding his head.

Then I ask, “Did you and Annie do most of the talking?”

“Well...yeah kinda,” Jimmy answers with a smile, “Jarret was writing everything down, but he didn’t talk too much.”

“Hrmm...well that’s not good.” I say with a thoughtful look on my face.

“I think some kids just don’t want to participate just because...like they aren’t unsure or scared...they just don’t want to talk. That’s why during class, I try to be your helping hand by raising *my* hand and talking when nobody else is. I try to keep things going.” Jimmy says.

I smile at Jimmy for his constant efforts and for caring enough to help me out. It’s true...Jimmy participates so frequently and many of his classmates so rarely during whole class discussions. How do I get them to speak out more during discussions? I thought the focus on discussion practices and the formation of small groups paired with the blogging would do the trick, but it hasn’t. Jimmy has just confirmed the same pattern I have been seeing during my observations, which is that two students are dominating the discussions, one or two more chime in occasionally and are participating a moderate amount of times, and one

(sometimes two), aren't saying much of anything and doing all of the listening. I need some students to pipe up and others to pipe down!

The First Prompt -10/12/11

Prompt: Identify the aspects of culture that are found in each of the two poems you analyzed with your group today. How do each of these poems make a larger statement about culture? How do they illustrate the link between culture and voice?

For their first prompt, I decide to give them a multi-layer question that required level one (comprehension), level two (interpretation), and level three (universal/big picture) responses. Since the students have already been instructed on the different levels of questions and worked with them during their group projects for the novel, *Things Fall Apart*, I think I will use this opportunity to review the levels of questions with them again and gather information on how well they are able to distinguish between them and to correctly answer them. In addition, I want to provide a model for them on what a good discussion question looks like and how they should move through the different levels in order to make connections between the questions and think on an analytical level. Culture and voice are the two key concepts in the unit we are currently working on, and they are addressed in somewhat of an abstract manner, so I think this gives the students practice at finding the connections between culture and voice and also to see how they are connected to literature. The prompt, then, intends to turn the abstract into something concrete for their understanding. Since this is our first blog post after

setting up the blogs and the class wiki, I use it as a “test run” in order to smooth out any technological kinks or glitches.

After reading over the blog posts and keeping track of who completes one, I observe that five students did not complete a post. Perhaps this is due to technological difficulties, which we can correct. The blog is the perfect place for every student to express his or her own voice and to think about and respond to things he or she has read, so it is important that all students participate. I believe if nothing else, that the blogging will emphasize the importance of thinking about and responding to what you read, instead of just reading something, closing the book, and not thinking about it until class. Requiring the students to answer analytical questions on things we are reading requires them to think about the text and craft a meaningful response, which I hope will lead to better understanding and the ability to offer more insightful comments during in-class discussions. Instead of reading something at surface level, I provide the scaffolding they might need in order to dig deeper into the text.

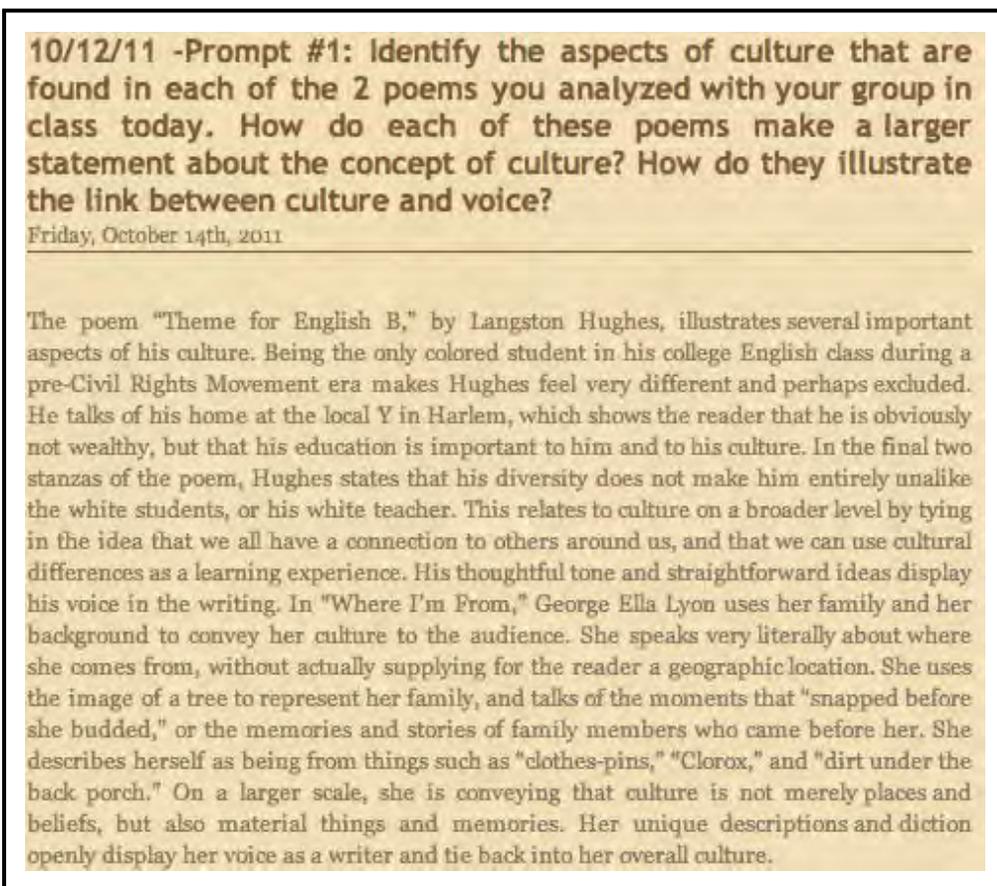
I observe that 13 out of the 21 posts don't fully answer all three questions that the discussion prompt is asking for, especially the last question, which is a level three question. Although this is an issue, I am not really surprised, because I know from past experiences and from speaking with colleagues in all subject areas that students sometimes have an issue fully addressing or answering larger questions or questions that are multi-layered. Sometimes they go off topic, and

other times they just don't ever pull it together or make those big connections.

This is certainly a higher- level skill that we need to work on.

Below is an example from Missy, one of the higher-achieving students, and it serves as an example of a thorough post that demonstrates both analysis and her ability to address each part of the question.

Figure 1 –Missy's Blog Post



She begins her response by stating the specific subject she is addressing, which is something that I teach students to do when crafting thesis statements about works of literature. She correctly identifies one author's perspective as the only

“colored” student in his class and understands that he feels “different and perhaps exclude” because of this. She also makes a connection between education and culture, and continues to make connections to both the author’s culture and culture in general throughout her post. In addition, she also discusses voice by citing examples for tone, diction, and unique descriptions. She makes sure that she answers the entire question by discussing both poems, not just one of them. While she sees education as key cultural element in “Theme for English B,” she determines family and heritage to be the important cultural element in “Where I’m From.” These are both accurate interpretations.

Whole-Class Interview -10/14/11

I decide to point out to the students the issue of deconstructing the prompt and ask them about the strategies or approaches they use to answer these kinds of questions. After explaining the issue and showing them the prompt again, I ask them if they either broke down this prompt and answer each question separately, or if they see the entire prompt as one whole question and craft a holistic answer. I have to ask and rephrase this several times before all of the students understand the distinction. Twenty-two of them say that they answer each questions separately and four of them say that they try to answer it holistically. This becomes a head-scratching moment for me, because if so many of them claim to answer each question in a multi-layer prompt, then why do so many of them fail to answer the entire question in their blog posts? I realize that perhaps it isn’t

their failure to deconstruct the prompt, but rather their failure to truly understand what the question is asking, since it is a difficult question to answer. Once I come to this realization, I revisit the blog posts and notice how many of the posts attempt to define or identify the voice being used in the poems but don't then offer any universal explanations for the link between culture and voice. They are having difficulty making the jump from the level two (interpretational) question to the level three (universal meaning) question. I need to figure out what will help push them to the next level.

Say Cheese...Please! -10/30/11

Prompt: In "Street of the Canon," give 3 reasons Pepe Gonzalez might have had for leaving the cheese at the party. What do these reasons indicate about his character traits?

My goal for this prompt is to help students realize that there are several plausible explanations for the protagonist's motives for bringing the cheese to the party. Ultimately, I want to set them up to discuss symbolism in their small groups the next day. I think this prompt is the most direct and explicit. Although it is a level two question, it is probably the easiest prompt that I have asked them to respond to thus far. There is not much deconstructing that needed to happen to answer this prompt, so I expect their answers to be fairly straightforward and accurate.

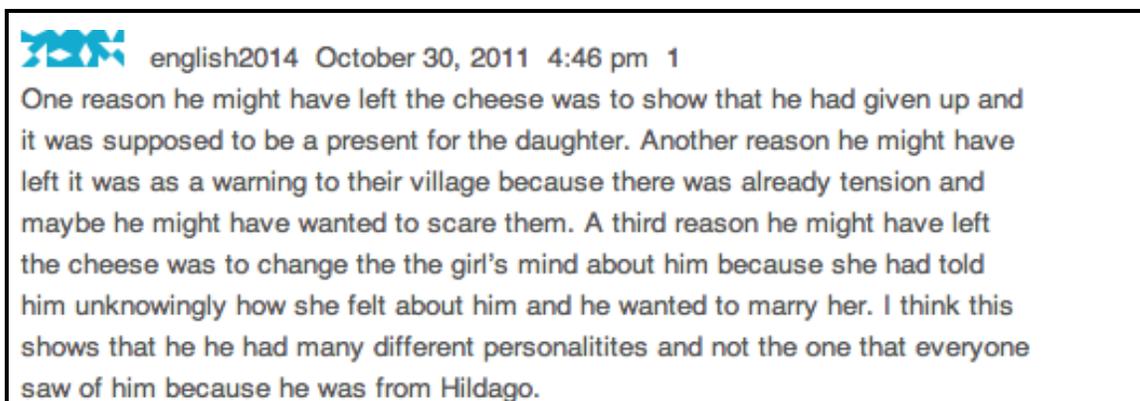
I am very disappointed to find that only 16 out of 26 students posted to their blogs. This is certainly an issue, because they are not completing their

assignment, and they are not responding to what they were supposed to have read. There could be several reasons for why some students did not post: they didn't read; they read but didn't want to blog about it or they forgot; they have technical issues. Still, I am shocked that so many didn't post. I thought that the novelty of the blogs and the fact that it is done on the computer would be conducive to high levels of participation.

As for the students who did post, I don't find many issues with their answers. Only two students don't fully answer the question because they don't state what character traits are revealed, and only one student has a response that really isn't supported by the text. She states something about the story that does not happen. The majority of students who blog about the story are successful at making several correct inferences about the cheese and indicate corresponding character traits. 21 students have very organized responses in that they gave reasons for leaving the cheese, and then state what character trait it indicates, and then moved on to the next reason. They repeated this pattern until they address three reasons and corresponding character traits for each. I believe this is due to the direct nature of the prompt; I ask for a specific number of reasons, and then ask them to connect character traits to these reasons. Although this prompt asks for two answers, the answers are directly connected, so there really is no need for them to deconstruct a multi-layer prompt or make those connections between the answers as they blog.

Nate's post is rather short and lacks specific detail. Stylistically, it is rather simple ("One reason..., Another reason..., A third reason..."). His first reason for why Pepe left the cheese is inaccurate since he doesn't have a daughter, so he may have misread the story. His responses is also incomplete because he only writes about a vague notion of character traits at the end of the post, never identifying any specific traits or pairing them up with his reasons.

Figure 2 –Nate's Post (Doesn't fully answer the question)



Marie's post is much more developed than Nate's and demonstrates an effective way at setting up a response to this question. She provides accurate reasons for Pepe leaving the cheese behind and then pairs specific character traits with them. In essence, she is accurately supporting her analysis of this character and is able to write a solid response.

Figure 3 –Marie’s Post (Fully answers the question)

October 30, 2011 at 7:01 pm - Filed under [Uncategorized](#)

When I think about Pepe Gonzalz leaving the chesse at the party, I think he wanted to show the nice side of him and his people. As a kinda truce, he left the best thing that his village could offer them. He wanted the people to see that there are some nice Hidalgos and that not all of them are as spiteful as the people of San Jaun Inglesias thinks they are. He is also showing that the Hidalgo people can be civilized and attend a party without creating a scene. Pepe left the cheese without saying who it was from because he did not just want himself credited for the nice act, but his whole village. Pepe’s tries to accomplish a first step of peace between the 2 villages, but does not actually succeed. These acts show that Pepe’s character is not as bad as the people of the San Juan Inglesias village make him out to people. His character traits are harmless and only working towards the commen goal both villages should be reaching for, peace. Some might say he was sneaky and sly for coming, leaving the cheese, dancing with Sarita and then leaving, but it was all out of kindness. His traits are not one of someone trying to pick a fight, but of someone trying to bring peace.

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Discussing the Cheese -10/31/11

For the small group in-class discussion following their blogging about “The Street of the Canon,” I tell the students to discuss the symbolism of the cheese and its connection to stereotyping or prejudice in the story. As I make my way around the room from group to group, it become apparent that many of the groups see the cheese as a peace offering, most likely because the story tells them that the two villages are in conflict, so once they also read about how the cheese is the finest of its kind around, they probably draw the conclusion that it’s

a peace offering. There seems to be a consistent interpretation among the groups about the meaning of the cheese. Here are some highlights by group:

Cardinal

"The cheese symbolizes peace," Kevin states.

"Yeah, and it also could be a warning maybe," suggests Nate.

Kevin gets to the point about the cheese right away, but rather than just accept this as the answer, Nate extends the discussion by offering a different interpretation of the symbolism of the cheese. The small group discussions give the students the chance to express their own ideas and hear the ideas of others, which may cause them to discuss the differences.

Awesome Group

"I think by brining the cheese he was offering peace," Tess concludes.

Another student is on the right track about the potential symbolism of the cheese. It is good to see different students drawing the same accurate conclusions.

Lobster Bisque

"I don't know. Someone else talk," Christy says.

"He left it as a Peace offering so the 2 villages would come together," Tina adds.

Although she may not have phrased it correctly, Christy's invitation for the others to participate is something that I wish I saw happening more in the groups. Although participation is better this time, there are still some groups with students who are making habit of not saying much.

JJAR

"We finalized our discussion. We thing there are 2 meanings for the cheese"

Jimmy points out (while looking at me).

"It has to do with stereotypes because he's from Hidalgo so they thought he was bad even though they've never met him before," Anna states.

Robin replies with "Yeah, so it shows that he can be peaceful."

Jimmy stating that their discussion is finalized makes me think that this group has some sense of structure and purpose for discussions. The ability to know when the discussion is over is hopefully contingent upon their ability to recognize that they have addressed the prompt and engaged in a thorough analysis of literature with equal individual participation.

English Group Two

Stephanie says, (while looking at me) "Our discussion was very enlightening. Our idea is the cheese means peace and he slips away so they can realize they all have things in common"

"We also thought that it was like a tease that the people of Hidalgo are still around," Katie included.

"Did you discuss the second part of the question?" I asked.

"We did a little," Faith replied.

My reminder to also address the second part of the question that connects the symbolism to stereotyping made me think about how sometimes students don't always address the entire question. This is something I saw in their blog posts. Perhaps during their discussions, they got sidetracked when they thought about the multiple meanings of the symbol and went in another direction.

Team Success

"If he wanted to stay at the party, why did he bring it [the cheese]?" says Adam.

"I think he was trying to be nice." Marie replies

"Then they stereotyped him as evil because he's from that town."

Teddy adds.

This group is able to build on each other's interpretations to come to an insightful conclusion about the character. I am happy that I got to see this

exchange, as it demonstrates the potential for students to deepen their understanding of a text by discussing it with each other.

This turns out to be our best in-class discussion as far as content goes. When I asked the students how they think it went, they feel that it is a productive and informational discussion, as well. My hunch is that the students who post before class do most of the talking, and this is something I need to confirm. This can either be because they are the stronger students and/or because they were prepared for the discussion by blogging about the story first.

However, I am worried about levels of individual participation, because I don't want the discussions to become uneven. I realize that I see a pattern occurring during the last few discussions...each group is comprised of four to five students, and one to two of them do most of the talking, while another chimes in occasionally and one doesn't say much at all. This is a definite concern for me, because I want more students to be comfortable with participating in discussion. I start to think about what else I can do to encourage more individual participation, but I am drawing a blank. Panic starts to set in. What now?

We Can Do Better! -11/1/11

Prompt: How does Dee's sense of heritage differ from her mother and Maggie's? What is ironic about Dee's accusation that her mother and Maggie do not understand their own heritage?

Like the last prompt on "Street of the Canon," this prompt for the short story, "Everyday Use," is asking students to respond to two questions about the

main character. Although this one is not asking them to brainstorm ideas for symbolism, many of the students offer specific evidence from the text that contains symbolic elements. Three students even quote lines directly from the text within their posts. I do not tell them to support their assertions with textual evidence, but most of the posts use specific examples to help answer the questions. I am pleased that they do this, because I have been emphasizing the need to support their analysis with textual evidence. This is standard practice when discussing or writing about literature or creating an argument about any topic. I think this prompt is harder than the one I ask about “Street of the Canon,” but their responses are fairly insightful.

Figure 4-Quotes from Student Blog Posts

"She [Dee] is dumb, and i really wish i could give her a talk about manners and respect" –Joanne

"Dee was less respectful of their culture and didn't care about what the quilts meant to her mother and her family. She even changed her name to 'Wangero' showing she didn't want to be connected to her Aunt 'Dee.'" –Marie

"Dee's sense of heritage for her is simply having something form the past and framing it to be admired, but in contrast Maggie's and her mother's sense of heritage is much more practical than that." –Henry

"Dee's sense of culture is ironic because she left behind her family and culture for a new life with her boyfriend and now she wants to return and cherish her culture" –Robin

"Also, Dee could be considered a snotty, unappreciative brat, with the way she dresses, and how she acts so differently than Maggie and looks down upon her family" –Kevin

They seem to have a fairly strong reader reaction to the character of Dee, which indicates to me that they made a connection with the text and were able to truly get a sense of who this character really is. They definitely point out her

shortcomings, and since she is not meant to be a likeable character, they do provide accurate descriptions of her.

Eighteen out of 26 students post to their blogs, which is an increase of two from last time but still a much lower number than anticipated. I wish I saw more consistency in their participation in the blogging. I'm coming to realize that participation is an issue both online and in-class. I think this is because analyzing and then subsequently discussing literature is a challenge and requires students to read, think, and then craft a response to the text. I am definitely going to have to address the participation issue, and after reading another colleague's study on Socratic Circles (Doklan, 20110), I get the idea to consider the blog posts their entrance tickets into the small group discussions, so if they do not blog, then they will not be a part of the small group discussions and instead will need to handwrite their response in class before joining their group.

A Closer Look at Participation -11/3/11

Since I've been so worried about the uneven balance of participation within the groups, I decide...do or die...that I would try to observe participation in each group for three to five minutes and keep a record of individual participation levels. In needing to gather more data about the dynamics of each group's discussions and interactions, I know that I have to see it with my own eyes. However, I am afraid that perhaps hovering over each group will skew the data in some way. After all, they are very much aware that I am observing them,

and, as honors level students, want to perform well for me. And what if this is counterproductive? One of the goals of my study is to teach them to be able to have student-centered discussions without the teacher's control. How can I find out what they are doing when I am not looking...if I am not looking? I am thirsty for more data nonetheless, so I decide to go ahead with my observation plan for the discussion of "Everyday Use." I observe each group, keep tally marks for individual participation and also record a few interactions between the students.

For this particular short story, which can be challenging because a lot of students misinterpret the story and its outcome, I give the class three analytical questions to discuss:

Figure 5 –Discussion Questions for Analysis of "Everyday Use"

1. What is the significance of the title, "Everyday Use" in relation to the central conflict of the story?
- 2. What is the overall theme conveyed in "Everyday Use"?**
3. How does the symbolism of the quilt help to convey that theme?

I attempt to scaffold these questions in order to move students toward connecting the symbol to the theme of the story. First, I want them to consider the title and its connection to the central conflict. Next, I want them to build off

of this connection to theme. Then, I ask them to consider symbolism and how it supports the theme.

I start with Team Success first since I normally do not observe them until last.

Table 2 –Tally of Individual Participation Within Groups During Five minute intervals

Group	Tally of participation per student
Team Success	Joanna-5 Steve -5 Marie -4 Adam-2 Calvin -0
English Group Two	Stephanie -4 Michelle -4 Kate -2 Francesca -1 Henry -1
Lobster Bisque	Tina -2 Christy-2 Matt -1 Oliver -1
Awesome Group	Missy -4 Andrea -4 Tanya -2 Kevin -0
Cardnl	Chris -5 Andre -4 Laura -1 Nate -0
JJAR	Jimmy -5 Anne -4 Robin -3 Jarret -1

As I observe each group for a few minutes, I find that most of the groups fall into the pattern of one or two people dominating the discussion, while another one or two people in the group don't say much if anything at all.

In addition to levels of participation, I want to make sure I capture snapshots of the discussion that is occurring between the students.

Team Success

Joanna says that "Dee is hypocritical about her culture and is materialistic. I really wanted to punch Dee in the face.

"I don't know why she wanted the quilt so much? What questions did you guys write down? Why does she change her name?" Steve asks.

"The quilt pretty much represented her heritage. I don't understand most of it. Why are the first 2 paragraphs about their yard?" says Marie.

I'm happy I got a chance to hear more from these students. Joanna certainly had the strongest reader response to this story and really proved to be the keystone of the discussion today, as many of the others had questions. Calvin doesn't really say anything. I've noticed that he doesn't participate much in the group discussions, even though I know he is capable. This could be because Steve, Marie, and Joanna tend to dominate the conversations, so I am reminded yet again after observing this first group that there needs to be more balance in participation.

I am impressed with Steve's questions, because he is ask an insightful questions...questions that, if discussed and answered, will lead to making meaning of the story. Marie is doing a nice job of trying to answer those questions and offering some of her own, while Adam only chimes in once or twice. Like Calvin, he tends to be quiet during class. These two students are exactly the kind of students in which I hope to see a change.

English Group Two

Stephanie quotes a line from the story and then adds, "Her mother realizes she just wants their stuff.

"Right," Kate agreed, "She only came to see them so she can get something.

"What if the mother was strong enough to tell Dee off? Maybe she'd get the picture and peace out without thinking she has any right to the quilts," suggested Michelle.

I was pleased to hear Stephanie use quoted lines from the story during the discussion, because it meant that she was offering evidence to support her interpretation. Maybe next time, I should have them base their discussions around direct quotations, as this could spark more discussion.

For the first time, since I have begun gathering data, I hear Henry say something. It could be that he had during other discussions and I missed it. In fact, I didn't hear it well enough this time to even write it down, but I wished he

would offer more input and he is another strong, but quiet student. I also realized that he is the only male in this group, so perhaps with a different group arrangement, he would speak up more.

Awesome Group

Missy said, “She [Dee] pushes Maggie around. Her desire shows her personality.”

“But what does the quilt represent?” Tanya asked.

Andrea answered her by saying, “It means a lot to her mom, but Dee doesn’t understand its true importance.”

I admit to myself that this group is rather self-sufficient, and although I would probably get a lot of great insights out of them for my data collection, they tend to be the group that I don’t spend too much time observing because I am worried about what was going on in some of the other groups. Missy, Tanya, and Andrea made a strong discussion group because they offer high level responses and thought on an analytical level as they respond to and built off of one another.

But then there is Kevin, who often quietly listens but doesn’t participate. Like English Group Two, there is a quiet, male student in a group with females who are strong discussers. I have to figure out a way to pull these guys out of their shells and give them the right opportunity to build their own discussion skills, so I pause from my observations for a moment and I begin to just think. I lean against my counter and nervously tap my pen against my clipboard...what can I do

differently? The answer turns out to be exceedingly simple; I will form a new group by taking all of the quiet, non-participants out of the existing groups and making them their own group. After all, I have seen a fairly consistent pattern within each group of one to two students who don't speak up while one to two others do all of the speaking, and then one to two others chime in every now and then. If I take all of the reluctant discussers and put them together to fend for themselves, what will happen? Would they all just stare at each other in stark silence? Would one or two of them pipe up every now and again? Would a leader emerge? Would they all come out of their shells, even just a little? All of these questions popped up in my head, so I know this was something that I had to try next time.

Lobster Bisque

By the time I get to this group, the discussion had dwindled. Tina usually asks me a question as soon as she sees me approaching, but this time she doesn't, and I am hoping that it is because she is relying on her peers and their discussion for any questions which she needs answers. They do inform me that they discuss questions that each group member had about the story in order to clear up any misunderstandings and figure out what it meant. Although I am happy that want answers to specific questions, I do not want this to be the sole purpose and function of the discussion groups, for discussion is much richer when it is not

driven by questions and answers, but rather an open-ended exploration of ideas and insights.

Cardnl

“I thought that Dee was abused. I know it’s far out there, but during the house fire, Maggie was clinging to her mother and Dee was alone. And the title...I thought „Everyday Use“ meant abused slash vulnerable. Dee is trying to break away from the stereotypical African American, but she’s trying to go back to her family’s house to get tangible things to reclaim her heritage,” says Chris.

“The guy changed her perspective on her culture and that’s why she talks down to her family.” Andrew adds.

Chris’ interpretation is unique; none of the other groups mentioned anything like this. Dee is usually not seen a sympathetic character, but it is does demonstrate insightful thinking, and he does try to support his explanation with some textual evidence. He just happens to misinterpret some of the details, including what kind of character Dee really is.

Listening to Chris reminds me of how important discussing literature with other is in order to truly grasp the deeper (and correct) meaning. If only someone else in the group would have questioned his opinion or challenged it with other details from the story! A discrepancy could have certainly added fuel to the discussion and invited more participation, and hopefully, it would have resulted in a new understanding of the story.

Why Didn't I think of This Sooner? -11/16/11

Eureka! This ends up being a very important turning point in my study. As I am sitting in my home office, desperately searching through the library's online database of journal articles for small group discussion strategies, and getting no closer to a solution; I begin to think about the idea of structure, or scaffolding, that I might provide. What they need is scaffolding to balance their participation and move along the discussion. I then realize that, despite my best efforts to plan my inquiry, I really don't have a lot of specific data on individual rates of participation or as good of an understanding as I would like to have on a typical discussion that the students are having.

In a moment of sheer practicality, I realize that I should have the students think about their own participation and start tracking it themselves within their groups. That might also help to make individuals more aware of their participation or lack thereof. Ok, so this might make them more cognizant of whether or not they participate, but I think something else is needed to actually *balance* the participation. I sit back in my desk chair, tap my fingers on the armrests, and squint as I continue to wrack my brain for an idea. To me, the solution lies in something hands-on and tangible; something that might keep their interest or even their attention. But how do I set something like that up? Just then, I remember hearing that one of our Spanish teachers distributes tokens to her students at the beginning of class and each time they participate, she takes away a

token, and once they are out of tokens, they are no longer allowed to participate, leaving the others with remaining tokens to start speaking up. “This could work,” I think to myself, and my new strategy to support discussion is born! Each student receives three gemstones, and one person in the group is in charge of taking away a gemstone each time someone participates, and once he or she is out of stones, he or she cannot participate again until all others lose their stones, too. Once everyone is out of gemstones, they reset and everyone gets three back again. “It’ll be almost like *Survivor*,” I think as I giggle to myself.

In addition to the gemstone strategy, I also create a sheet for tracking participation (Appendix F) and a sheet for tracking topics discussed and insights determined about them (Appendix G). This now means that three students in each group will have specific jobs to do during their discussions, and I am hoping these new strategies initiate the right kind of change needed to fix the participation problem and foster more in-depth discussions as a result of more ideas being shared. I also decide to take one non-participator from each group and form a new group in order to get these students to speak up. I am eager to see what happens when I put them together. My belief is that *someone* will *have* to start participating, and since none of them are overly extroverted, I highly doubt that one person will take over for the entire group. Right?

Here's Hoping... -11/17/11

Prompt: In "Us and Them," how does Sedaris' family influence his perception of others and the world? Why is Halloween important to Sedaris' story?

Student Blog Posts

I am pretty impressed with this round of blog posts. Twenty-two out of 27 research participants post responses and I enjoy reading them. I find them to be insightful and accurate. All of the posts contain analytical responses. Only two students don't totally answer the second question about Halloween, and only one student is really off the mark in a part of her answer. What she writes about the main character's realizations at the end of the story is not supported by the text. "Us and Them" is an easy read, but students often don't recognize the deeper meaning or how Sedaris is using satire to comment about how media can influence family life. I am not sure if the students' thoughts are a result of their ability to see the deeper meaning and make connections on their own or if perhaps it is the questions themselves that provide a direction for their interpretation. The first question is a level three question, and the second question is a level two question, so they are higher level but rather specific.

Armed with a new bag of tricks, I begin class the next day by informing them that we are trying a few new things out today during our small group discussion of "Us and Them." This piece is a satirical essay by David Sedaris on the negative influence of media on family life, and the students seem to

understand the big ideas and are able to make sense of the story so as to isolate specific topics and analyze their significance.

New Interventions

- One student per group tracks participation.
- Gemstone strategy structures and balances participation.
- I give no guiding questions for small group discussion.
- One student per group tracks what topics are discussed and what insights are made about each.
- I create a seventh group out of the nonparticipating members of the original six groups.

Participation during Small Group Discussions

I feel a lot less pressure during my observation of the groups, knowing that a student in each group is tallying individual participation. The average participation rate is ten times per student during the 15 minute discussion. The least is four and the most is 24, so there is quite a range. Within each group, the rates of participation are very close, no more than a difference of three among the students. I think this is due to the gemstone strategy. If they are doing it correctly, it basically forces them to have even participation rates. During my observation, I am also interested in how often the students reset their stones. The most resets are eight times by Team Success. I also observe that the groups are now smaller because of the creation of a new group, which I think helps group

discussion because there are fewer people per group, so it is harder to “hide” and remain a non-participant. The discussions seem focused and no one tells me that he or she is confused or asks about details he or she read about that he or she cannot make sense of. The group that has the least amount of participation is the new group, appropriately named the Shy Guys. I am not entirely surprised by this, since this is a new group, and it is made of students who are usually non-participants, but I think this is the best group on which to test out my new interventions, because they present a challenge. The biggest lull in discussion happens because Kevin is the only one left with two stones, and everyone else has used theirs, so they could not reset until he participated two more times. Although it is difficult to watch the stalled progress, I think it points out the issue that nonparticipation can create, and I am hoping it shows Kevin that he should be participating more.

Oliver, a relatively quiet student, comes up to me at the end of class and says, “Are we being graded on how much we participate?” to which I answered “No, not directly. Why?” He then proceeds to explain that he feels that he is being left out of his group, especially by Matt, who won’t move his desk so Oliver could join the circle and who is also telling him that things he says are already stated by another group member, so he isn’t giving Oliver as many tally marks for participating as he thinks he deserves. I am sorry to hear that this is occurring, and I tell Oliver that it means there is a group dynamic problem that we

have to address. I think it is interesting that this comes out now, and I am wondering if it had been going on before. I think it was the new interventions that were put into place today that may have flushed this problem out. There is now more structure and awareness placed on individual participation, and it obviously makes Oliver concerned enough to tell me about it. He never says anything like this, and he normally keeps to himself. I have to address this group to reiterate the importance of respect and adhering to our small group norms. It is also a good idea to ask someone other than Matt to track participation next time. I will check in with Oliver after the next small group discussion to ask him how it's going.

Small Group Discussion Analysis Sheets

Since my main goal is to get them to analyze and discuss literature independently, I decide that now would be a good time to make the transition to letting the groups decide the direction of their discussion. I wanted to make sure I was aware of what each group discussed and the results of the discussion, so having a member of each group track the discussion by writing down topics and insights is very telling. Three groups discuss symbolism, specifically the symbolism of the candy, which is also frequently mentioned in the blog posts. Three groups also discuss and attempt to state the theme of the text. Symbolism and theme have been frequent concepts in the discussion prompts that I have previously given them, so I am pleased to see that some groups are modeling their

discussion after previous ones and are attempting to address these two key aspects of literary analysis. This gives me hope that they are ready to make the transition to independent discussions that are student-centered, and that I am providing them with the correct scaffolding. Overall, I am pleased with the topics that the groups choose to discuss, as they all seem to pick out significant aspects of the text that provide good sources for analytical discussion. I gather a lot of good data from the discussion analysis sheets, and it indicates to me that the students are making high-level insights about the text and characters.

Team Success

Topic: Blog question

Insights: possible low self confidence, extremely critical, parent's point of view, end of story confusing, point of view changed due to Halloween.

The Shy Guys

Topic: TV

Insights: brings the family together, replaces human contact, gives them the belief that the Tomkeys are weird, he thought TV was how you spend time.

JJAR

Topic: Halloween

Insights: Candy represents quality of person in his mind, selfishness, they put out bad candy, he wants to eat chocolate cause it is normal, turning point/self-realization

Cardnl

Topic: Narrow-mindedness

Insights: prejudice, the son being nose, hypocritical, insecurity

Awesome Group

Topic: He thinks he is superior

Insights: He eats candy just so Tomkey kids can't have it, he speaks of their lives as puny.

Lobster Bisque

Topic: Perspective of others

Insights: Tomkey family always went away on weekends, curiosity turned into despise, thinks he is superior to others, all the other families pity the Tomkey family

English Group Two

Topic: How TV Influences

Insights: TV is a social guide and a pancea of social awkwardness, used as an model of how families should act, Tomkeys acted almost more of a family because rather than focusing on the outside world they focused on emotional values than social, the narrator couldn't understand because he had never experienced that.

I find each group's topic and subsequent insights to be focused, accurate, and indicative of analytical thought, which is a very good sign! What a great data

gathering tool this turns out to be. By requiring them to track topics and insights, they must also begin to think about the productivity and the depth of the discussion itself, and once it is on paper, they can have a visual of where their discussion goes. My tenth graders' ability to accurately discuss and analyze a satirical piece is certainly an accomplishment. My worries are being alleviated, and I can't wait to continue on with my study with these new interventions in place.

Smooth Sailing -11/30/11

Prompt: In "An Indian Father's Plea," What do you think are the most powerful or important points that Robert Lake makes and why? (quote and cite). Discuss how strong his argument is and how convincing it is. Do you agree or disagree with him? Overall, what statement does this piece make about the blending of culture and education? (Be specific and insightful, not "we have to recognize each other's differences." There are several different angles!)

For this blog prompt and subsequent in-class discussion, I want the students to think about and respond to a challenging, multi-layer prompt. This is probably the most difficult discussion prompt yet, and I am curious to see how they rise to the challenge. The first two questions the prompt is asking are about identifying the author's most powerful points and discussing the effectiveness of his argument are both asking students to respond at the evaluative level, and the last part of the question is asking students to state a theme by determining the author's insight about culture and education. I eagerly await the posting of their

responses to their group blogs, checking several times that evening after school to see who has already posted.

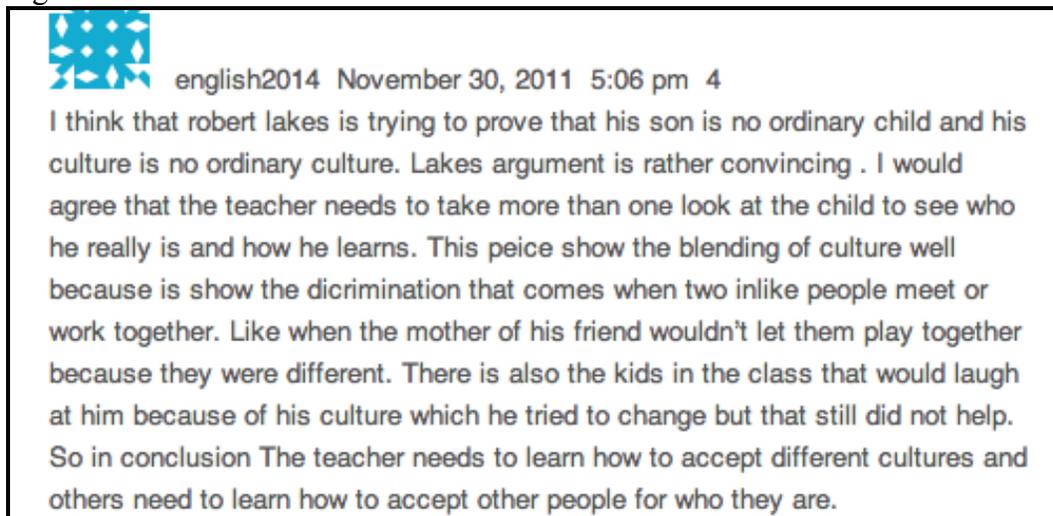
As I begin to read through the students' posts on their group blogs, I am very pleased to see that they are creating well-developed, thoughtful responses that address all of the layers of the prompt. When writing the prompt, I purposely make the questions very direct and clear, thus attempting to eliminate short, under-developed responses that don't really demonstrate any sort of higher-level thought. Basically, I try to make this prompt challenging but very black and white, and judging by the students' blog posts, I believe that it is successful. All 26 students who are research participants post to their group blogs, and I am understandably pleased. It is the first time that all of them post a blog response on time and prior to our in-class discussion. Because of this, I am expecting to see and hear some strong small group discussions going on. I am also anticipating good things to come out of the strategies that we implemented during the last discussion. Break out the gemstones; let's get analytical!

Figure 6 -Marie's Blog Post

The most powerful and important points Lake makes is that WindWolf is highly educated in what is important in his culture. He shows this point by saying, "At the age of 5, he has already been through quite an education compared with his peers in Western society" (Lake). Lake also proves WindWolf is not "slower" but has learned in different ways than the rest of his peers by saying, "So you see, all of these influences together make him somewhat shy and quiet — and perhaps 'slow' according to your standards. But if Wind-Wolf was not prepared for his first tentative foray into your world, neither were you appreciative of his culture" (Lake). He makes these points because it supports why WindWolf has trouble in public school, but tells that he was taught in different ways. Lake's argument is fairly strong and convincing because he tells of all the things WindWolf knows, even at the age of 5, but some people could say that the teacher should not have to change her teaching style for 1 student when it works for all the rest. I do not agree with Lake because even though the teacher should acknowledge cultural differences, there is not much that can be done if WindWolf is not willing to learn the way the teacher teaches. The statement this piece makes is understanding the cultural background of someone, can further help their education.

Marie wastes no time in identifying the main point of the author's argument about his son, which is the claim that his son has been educated through his own cultural experiences and shouldn't be labeled as slow by western society's educational system. She uses textual evidence to support her response as the prompt directs her. This is something that has been happening with many of the students' blog posts without me asking them to do so, and I am glad that it is. If it is already engrained in many of them to utilize textual support when analyzing and discussing a text, then that is one less battle to fight! Her post is also complete in the sense that she addresses all facets of the prompt and has determined an accurate theme.

Figure 7 -Andre's Post



Andre's post is rather sparse. Full of vague references and lacking in specific details, this response does not demonstrate the kind of well-developed, insightful responses that many of the other student posts do. It is rather short, especially compared to the rest of responses, and he uses no textual support. He is also missing an answer for the question about identifying and discussing the most powerful points of the argument, which is the first part of the prompt. Aside from saying the argument is "convincing," he does not elaborate on its effectiveness or why it is so convincing. He also finishes his response with the dreaded "in conclusion" as a transition to his last point about the theme. Compared to Marie's post, this one seems poorly written and certainly does not reach the same analytical level as hers did.

I get ready to observe the in-class discussions by digging out the individual participation tracking sheets and printing out fresh copies of the discussion

analysis sheets. The students, familiar with the routine, have already started to move into their circles by the time I ask somebody to divvy out three gemstones to each person. I inform them that there is no directive for the discussion today; they are to discuss “An Indian Father’s Plea,” and it is up to them to structure the discussion. I quickly remind them about the how to use the gemstones, and then I walk around to each group and give one person the participation tracking sheet and another person the discussion analysis sheet.

I begin to make my way around the room as the students become engrossed in their group discussions. I suddenly remember that I wanted to check in with Oliver and his group members due to the fact that after the last observation, he reports to me that he feels left out of his group. I hurry over to Lobster Bisque to see what’s going on. I notice that Oliver and his desk are not really in the circle with the rest of them, and he is essentially behind Matt.

“Hey guys, can you make room for Oliver?” I ask. He’s not quite in the circle. It looks like he’s not involved if he is sitting behind you.”

“Sure, no problem,” Christy replies.

I say, “Remember when we looked at the website on discussion techniques? It talked about how important it is to make sure that everyone is involved and feels like he or she is part of the group. Otherwise, it makes it very hard to invite equal participation. By the way, how is your individual participation going? Is everyone getting a chance?”

“Yeah we’re doing alright. I think we’ve started trying to make sure everyone participates because we’ll ask somebody who’s being quite about what they think,” Tina replies.

“Really? That’s good. I think it helps if you are aware of your levels of individual participation, too. That’s why I hope the tally sheet is helping make participation more of a priority.” I say.

“Yeah I think we notice it more,” Matt says.

“I see that you are discussing the letter but no one has their books open to the actual letter. Just curious...is there any reason why not?” I ask them.

Christy replies, “I didn’t find it necessary. We all have a lot of ideas already because of what we wrote last night for the blog prompt, and I don’t think we can really have a good conversation if we are flipping through pages.”

“Hmmm...interesting thought. Ok, carry on,” I say with a smile as I walk away. I never really think about the text being a hindrance, but that can make sense, especially if there is are students with their noses stuck in the book as they flip through the pages and check out of the discussion while looking for something to say. Perhaps if they are, in fact, prepared for the discussion, then it does eliminate the dependence on the text.

As I walk away from this group, I notice the newly formed group, the Shy Guys, and I hear Robert say to Henry, “That wasn’t about the story; that was just a comment,” and he gives him back one of his stones. I’m glad someone is

monitoring the collection of the stones and what constitutes an actual participatory comment. I have noticed that my idea about making these non-participants into their own group as a way to get them to participate in a discussion has been working. They aren't just sitting there in complete silence staring at each other. Based on the name they give themselves, I can tell that they realize why I put them together. If they understand the purpose of this newly formed group, then perhaps they are trying to do what is expected of them.

After class is over and the participation and discussion analysis sheets are turned in, I start to pour over this new data. Based on the tally marks for participation, the average rate is 13 times per student, which seems like a lot. The lowest rate of responses is six times per conversation and the highest is 33 times. In particular, the Shy Guys show improvement in that their average increases from five times per student to seven times per student. The rates are also remaining quite balanced, with the biggest difference within a group being four times. This must be due to the gemstone strategy, as they each get three stones and are not supposed to talk after they lose all three until the stones reset. I think about how these new data collection tools really are helpful, and I still feel like I have useful information on every group, even though I don't visit each group extensively or scramble to jot down notes about what I see and hear.

An Eye-Opening Ending -12/5/11

My ending survey yields some of the most important and thought-provoking data of my whole study. As I watch them from the front of the classroom, I notice that they are engrossed in filling out the survey. The entire class remains silent for close to 15 minutes as they craft answers to each open-ended question. As I walk around, I can see that many of them are writing copious amounts for some of the questions. This makes me nervous as I wonder what they are writing. Will it be what I expect, or will it be a shock? Will it confirm my findings and match up with my other data, or will I find new concerns or a negative case? I want to stop and read as students are writing, but I had to refrain from doing so. I'll just have to wait until I collect them and class is over. Then I can dig into them for answers. The pencils tap away as the students continue to answer the questions, and I try to see the looks on some of their faces, hoping to discern any kind of telltale signs.

Once they all turn in their surveys, I can't help but to ask them about some of the questions. In particular, I wanted to hear what they had to say about the gemstone strategy. "So what did you think about using the gemstones as a strategy?" I ask. Several hands shoot up into the air. I call on Joanna, who is never shy or afraid to express her opinion.

"I didn't like using them at all. They didn't really help anything. Plus, I like to participate, and there were so many times where I had something really

good to say, but I couldn't because I had to wait for other people to talk to use up their gemstones. They were kind of stifling." she answers.

Megan chimes in by saying, "I think so, too. I don't think we should've used them. I didn't need them in order to participate. My group eventually stopped using them. I had a lot more to say, and I didn't want to be restricted by having to wait for other people to talk."

"I see your point," I reply, "But remember I have to think about what is best for the class as a whole, and as a group, there are different levels of participation. Some of you guys love to participate...some of you don't mind it...and others don't want to do it at all. That question was about whether or not you felt it was an effective strategy overall, not just whether or not it worked for you as an individual. Can you maybe see the value in it for the class as a whole or for classes with fewer eager participators?" They look both look at my quizzically, and it seems that they are either unable or unwilling to see the benefits of this strategy from a perspective beyond their own. In fact, once I actually look at the surveys, I find that 13 out of 24 students completing the ending survey state that they do not like the stones, nor do they find them helpful. At first, I am rather confused and disappointed by this, but after talking with a few colleagues, I realize that it could be more about their egocentrism than about the strategy. At this age and this level, students tend to think about themselves and their own perspective as the primary context for most situations. When I ask about

the usefulness of the strategies, many of them see it in terms of how it affects them. They have a hard time considering the usefulness of the strategy for others who are unlike them or that I, as the teacher, must think about what works best for a variety of learners. Once I explain this to them, I believe that I few of them are able to understand this, but others remain unmoved. I am reminded of Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development, which "defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state" (1978, p. 86). Perhaps these students are not yet able to look beyond themselves to see the implications for the greater good or to totally understand my perspective as the teacher. I believe this is something they are capable of and may understand in the near future as they mature and their views of the world and others in it expand, but for right now, the egocentrism that goes along with being an adolescent seems to be what is causing the shortsightedness.

There are other important insights that I glean from the students' responses on the ending survey.

Table 3 –Ending Survey Results

Question	Results	Student Comments
1. Has your opinion changed about whether you prefer discussions controlled by the teacher or by the students?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18 said student controlled • 4 said teach controlled. • 2 said no but didn't elaborate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Student controlled discussions are way better than teacher controlled. Teachers tend to overpower discussions even if they don't mean to. Therefore student led ones are more productive.” • “I prefer the teacher leading discussions. Students are blood-thirsty and can be judgmental and just mean about others' opinions.”
2. How do you currently feel about participating in discussions after having experienced the activities and strategies implemented during the study? Has it changed your opinion of or comfort level with participating?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 13 said their opinion has changed, and they feel more comfortable. • 11 said their opinion hasn't changed. Out of these 11, 7 said this is because they have always felt comfortable with it. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Honestly, I like group discussions better now because you don't have the pressure of feeling that you must say something.” • “I was, am, and always will be 100% comfortable participating in class discussions.”
3. In what ways do you think your individual participation has changed or been affected by utilizing small groups for discussion?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I noticed that my participation increased substantially in my group discussions, because I didn't feel the pressure of leading the whole class discussion.”

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I feel it gave me more of a chance to participate since I didn’t have to complete with 30 other people to talk.” • “I participate a little more than I usually do in English, but it hasn’t changed much.”
<p>4. Do you think responding to questions about the texts we were reading through blogging helped you to better understand them? Why or why not?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 said yes • 10 said no • 2 said maybe a little 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Yes, because it would address a certain part or main idea of the text and that allowed me to understand it. I could also look at my peers’ responses and better understand.” • “No, because honestly I just say the same thing in different words. I enjoy discussing in more of an improv fashion.” • “Maybe a little. I never read other people’s posts, but I think after answering the blogs, I had just as much of an understanding as when I started.”
<p>5. Which of the following strategies, if any, do you believe helped to improve the discussions? How or why?</p>	<p>Gemstones: 13 said no. 11 said yes.</p> <p>Tallying individual participation: 14 said no. 10 said yes.</p> <p>Discussion Analysis Tracking Sheet: 15 said yes. 7 said no. 2 said no effect.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The stones didn’t work because it limited the amount that people could contribute, and sometimes they had something really valuable to say but couldn’t.” • “The tallying worked because if one member was behind, it made him

		<p>or her want to discuss to catch up.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The tallying made a competition for us, so everyone included their opinions more often.” • “The discussion tracking sheet made sure everyone stayed on topic.” • The discussion tracking sheet didn’t work because that person was distracted with his or her task and couldn’t participate as much.”
6. What are some things that you’ve learned about group discussions?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Everyone has something to contribute, but it’s hard to get introverts and extroverts to be balanced in a discussion.” • “Equal participation is key to a successful discussion.” • “You can feed off of each other’s answers, but you need to come prepared.”
7. What are some things you’ve learned about answering higher-level, multi-layer literature questions?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 13 said they learned how to deconstruct or unpack them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “In order to answer a higher-level question, one must deconstruct it into a simpler question.” • “They can take awhile to break apart and create a well-developed answer.”

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “That it provides deeper knowledge of the work and allows people to share their thoughts and opinions.” • “Made me realize not to be intimidated by a question if it is worded at a high level.”
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This survey really produces a lot of telling responses from the students. I am pleased to see that 18 students now feel that student-centered discussions are better than teacher-centered ones. This demonstrates a change from the beginning survey when only eight of them say they prefer student-centered discussions, and two said it depends on the topic. I do get the sense that more students are more confident about discussions and their own roles in them. I am a little disappointed that 10 of them said they don't see the blogging as a useful tool for preparing for discussions. I wonder if this is because I do not emphasize the blogs enough or fail to incorporate them more into the class discussions.

Although I am disappointed about their lack of enthusiasm over the gemstone strategy, I do see that they find some worth in the tallying and discussion analysis sheets. The idea of the tallying sheets sparking completion among them does make sense, as these are honors students, and they tend to be highly competitive in nature. Many of them also seem to understand why I start having them track their discussions, and I am glad that they utilize this tool.

In terms of what they learn about group discussions, they appear to understand the importance of equal and balanced participation, which is a relief to me because this is most definitely something I want them to realize. They must have the knowledge of this philosophy before they can ever be expected to put it into practice. As my study progresses, I do see more balanced levels of participation emerging.

It really surprises me that 13 students cite being able to deconstruct the prompt as something they learn about answering higher-level, multilayer questions. This is a very important skill to have, and I am excited that they feel they are able to develop it for themselves as a result of my study. Feeling less intimidated, as one student mentions, is also an additional bonus. If I raise some of their confidence levels through this, then I count that as an achievement. I know that increased confidence will help them to be successful in other academic areas, especially when it comes to deconstructing questions. This is something they will encounter again and again in all of their classes.

Data Analysis

Introduction

Throughout my study, I attempted to make sense of my data to determine what I was finding out and what it all meant. Eager to make meaning of all of the surveys, observations, blog posts, and other artifacts, I tried to methodically reflect on my data and identify any patterns and big ideas emerged. Maclean and Mohr (1999) point out that “It is difficult to believe that a collection of data will eventually make some kind of sense and to trust that patterns will emerge” (p. 56). Indeed, sometimes it was difficult to immerse myself in this giant pool of information and swim through it, collecting insights as I went along. However, I did have triangulation of my data sources and more than enough information, so I knew that if I continued to look and look hard, I would find those insights that I longed for. In fact, it was my data analysis that allowed me to make an important change midway through my study and introduce several new discussion strategies, which kept with the belief that “when you use your data to figure out your next steps, you create an incremental understanding that provides structure for your research” (Maclean and Mohr, 1999, p. 57).

Participant Observations

Observing the small group discussions was a very important way in which I gathered data, and when I conducted these observations, I used a double entry journal format where I would record what I saw and heard in one column, and then after the observation was over, I would reflect on these things in order to find significance helped me to see patterns, such as the lack of balanced participation, and come up with ideas for how to address this. My double entry journals for my participations tended to be rather long, but they helped me flush out details and gather my thoughts on what was going on during the group discussions, especially because by the end, I had seven groups to observe.

Reflective Memos

I utilized reflective memos as a way to analyze the students' blog posts. (MacLean and Mohr, 1999). Initially, my plan was to print out all of the blog posts, and code them as I read through them, but this proved to be difficult and unhelpful, so I decided to take a more holistic approach. Instead of coding the blog posts, I annotated them with my ideas and questions as I read through them. Then, I sat down at my computer and wrote a reflective memo about my overall impression and any insights, concerns, or questions that had arisen. My goal for these reflective memos was more than just to make sense of the data from the blog posts; I wanted to reflect-for-action, which Killian and Todnem (1991) describe as a way of guiding future action based on past thoughts and actions.

Every prompt I gave them was another chance for them to prepare for in-class discussion and practice analyzing literature, and it was another chance for me to see what other interventions or scaffolding they might need in order to think about and discuss literature independently.

Teacher-Created Data Collection Tools

Half way through my study, my data analysis yielded a need for additional strategies to scaffold participation in and analysis of the small group discussions. I created a discussion analysis sheet (Appendix G), so that the students could track the development and direction of their discussions by recording topics and insights. I also implemented an individual participation sheet (Appendix F) where one group member would track each student's participation by using tally marks and then adding them up at the end of each discussion so that the students could each see their totals and how they compared to one another. The implementation of these things proved to be a turning point for my study. Not only did it help me gather more data on each group that I was missing while trying to observe them all, it did provided the students with more structure during their discussions and raised their awareness of both their own levels of participation and depth of their discussions.

Pre and Post Surveys

The pre and post surveys I administered gave students the chance to respond individually about their feelings concerning class discussions and utilizing technology as part of the class. My surveys consisted of mostly open ended questions (Appendices C and D), so I thought that I might get all sorts of different responses from the students. However, for most of the questions, there was not much variation, as I found several students saying the same things. I regarded my pre survey results as favorable in terms of how I thought the students would respond to the interventions during my study such as using blogging to prepare for discussions and recognizing that lack of participation was the biggest hindrances to successful class discussions.

The post survey was an extremely important piece of data because it gave me a lot of insight about how the students felt regarding the effectiveness of the strategies I used throughout the study. For example, the majority of them did not see the need for the gemstones and preferred not to use them. This went against my expectations, because I was sure the gemstones helped to balance participation. However, some students, mostly those who like to participate, felt that the stones limited them.

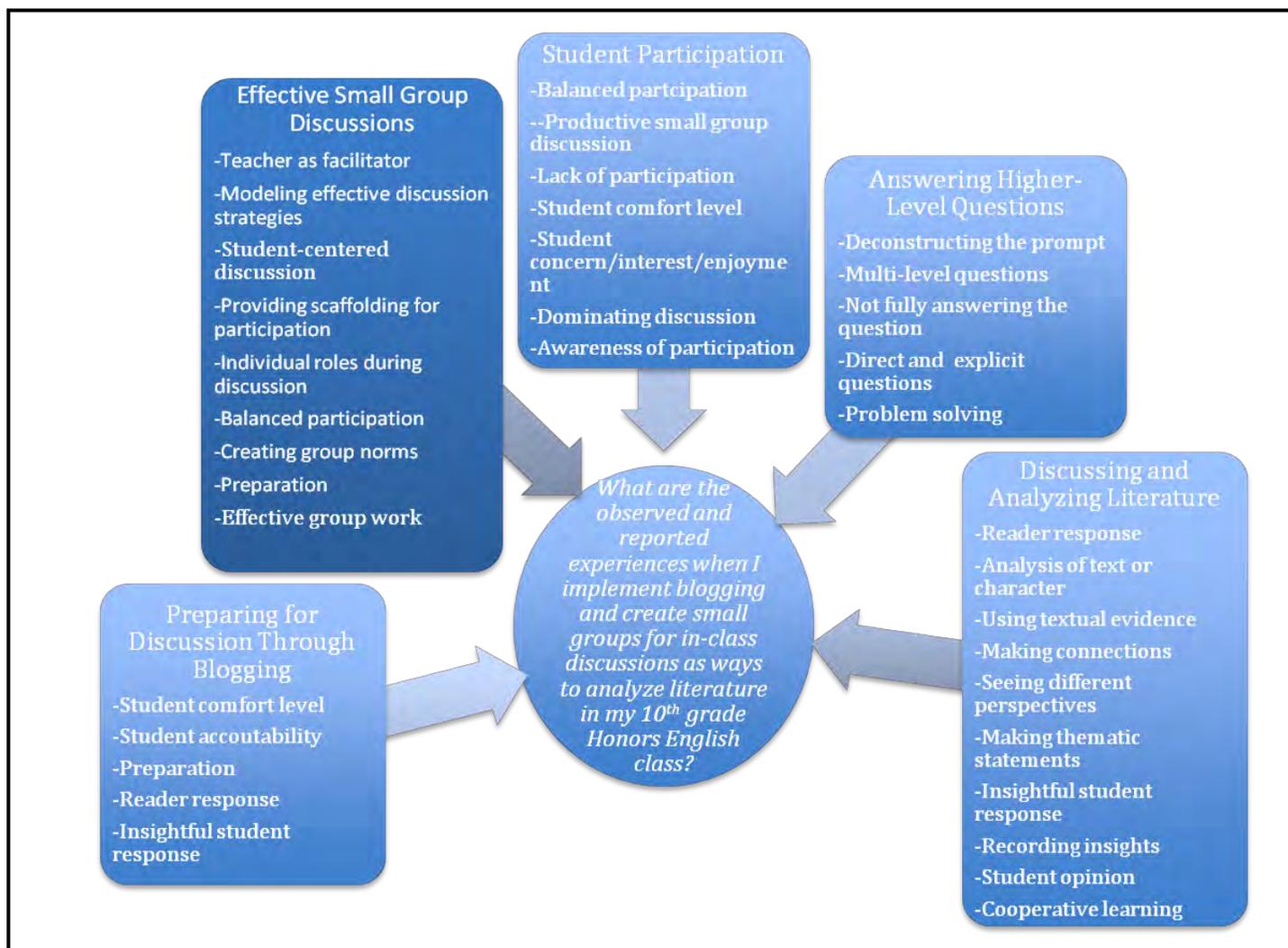
Figurative Language Analysis

About mid-way through my study, I engaged in a figurative language analysis in which I read through my data and memos to find examples of things that I or the students said that contained figurative language, and subsequently, a deeper meaning. In doing so, I was provided with snapshots of thoughts that meant more than just what was at the surface. Digging into them and analyzing what was actually being said through the use of figurative language was a way for me to get snapshots of insights into the data that I might have overlooked. It helped me to reaffirm what I was finding at this critical point in time.

Coding and Binning

As I created my field log out of my data, I began to read through my entries and determine codes and bins (Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul, 1997). While reading, I looked for reoccurring ideas and topics and annotated them with words or short phrases, and these became my codes. As I continued to code, I was able to see the beginnings of my findings and see the relationships between the codes. After I coded my entire field log, I grouped similar codes together under bins, which are big ideas that the codes fall under. These bins provided a starting point off of which I based my theme statements. The theme statements were reflective of the codes within a particular bin and constituted my findings.

Figure 8 –Graphic Organizer of Codes and Bins



Research Findings

Answering Higher-Level Questions

When higher-level questions are direct and explicit, students are better able to deconstruct the prompt and fully answer the question.

This theme became most apparent while reading their blog posts in response to the higher level, multi-layer questions I gave them (Appendix E). Some students really struggled with deconstructing the prompt and crafting an answer that addressed the entire question. Instead, when I gave prompts that list out the smaller questions specifically, students were able to address them more thoroughly and craft an answer that is better organized. Discussing deconstructing the prompt during the whole class interview early on in my study pushed them to think about what strategies they use, if any, when facing a higher level, multi-layer questions and the importance of deconstructing them. For their last blog prompt of the study, the prompt included a total of four questions that they needed to answer. The questions were stated very directly and explicitly within the prompt:

In "An Indian Father's Plea," What do you think are the most powerful or important points that Robert Lake makes and why? (quote and cite). Discuss how strong his argument is and how convincing it is. Do you agree or disagree with him? Overall, what statement does this piece make about the blending of culture and education? (Be specific and insightful, not "we have to recognize each other's differences." There are several different angles!)

This turned out to be the prompt that elicited the longest and most thorough responses. The students were able to construct answers that covered the entire prompt and made sense as a whole. Subsequently, the in-class discussion that followed is focused and generated strong levels of individual participation. The average per student was 13 times during the course of the discussion.

Student Participation

When students become aware of their own level of participation, more balanced levels of participation and productive small group discussions are likely to occur.

Despite some students' dislike of the gemstone strategy, the rule of three stones and then you're out until all others lose theirs did help to balance participation levels within the groups. This was indicated by their individual participation sheets, which also showed more even amounts of participation within the groups when the stones were used. The biggest difference in the rate of participation with the groups each of the two times the stones are used was four, meaning that no individual student varied his or her participation more than four times more or less than anyone else in his or her group. Students responded that they felt that the individual participation sheets were an asset during discussions, because they placed more focus and awareness on participating.

I believed that it was within my students' zone of proximal development to understand the usefulness of the gemstones and also to understand that some of the more extroverted students shouldn't always get the chance to say everything they wish to say during discussion. However, they needed my assistance in order

to understand these notions. Vygotsky believed that “what children can do with the assistance of others might be in some sense even more indicative of their mental development than what they can do alone” (p. 85). Not only does this support the idea of discussion as an effective cooperative learning strategy, but it also supported the notion that some of my students need to look beyond their own individual interests and let go of the notion that discussion was stifled for them personally if their levels of participation are kept down in favor of encouraging other, less extroverted students to participate. They need to begin to understand how listening to others is also an important skill during discussion. I think that I might be able to provide the needed scaffolding so that this is indeed within their zones of proximal development by having them do more individual reflecting about their own contributions to group discussions, their own strengths and weaknesses and how these might influence the discussions, and how they can help each other during discussions.

Effective Small Group Discussion

Effective student-centered discussions are most likely to occur when the teacher acts as a facilitator rather than the leader and provides scaffolding for participation and opportunities for preparation.

The “guide on the side versus the sage on the stage” theory is nothing new when it comes to instruction, but it can sometimes be difficult to accomplish. During my study, I found that providing the right scaffolding greatly increased the chances for successful student-centered discussions. Although I had them read

about and respond to information about effective discussion the individual's role within a discussion, it was not enough to actually get them to practice good discussion strategies, so teachers need to find scaffolding that works for their students in addition to making students aware the theories behind good discussions. Once I created the new group of reluctant participators, implemented the gemstone strategy, as well as the discussion analysis and individual participation sheets, the students became more successful at autonomous discussion and relied less on me. In addition, the opportunity to prepare for the discussion through blogging allowed them to come to class with ideas and opinions already formed, which they were then able to share during the discussion. If they blogged, then they had something to contribute. During observations, I often heard students refer to their blogs or ask what other students wrote about.

In addition, one of the students who was part of the Shy Guys, the group I created midway through the study out of reluctant participators, wrote on his ending survey that his opinion of class discussions had changed. Kevin wrote that "Before, I hated group discussions, because one person always controlled the discussion, and some people don't participate (like me). But after being put into a group of kids who were similar and did not participate, no one person controlled the discussion. This student seemed to benefit from my decision to create a new group rather than just let the non-participators continue to be drowned out by the

others in their original group. I tried to create a new group environment for these students that encouraged them to participate and didn't allow them to remain silent.

Discussing and Analyzing Literature

Students analyze literature by building on their own initial reader responses as they discuss their responses with others and through examining textual evidence, making connections, stating themes, and recording insights about text and characters through cooperative learning.

In my study, I wanted to identify the ways in which the students were choosing to respond to and analyze the texts we are reading. Through reading and annotated their blogs, observing their discussions, and reading their discussion analysis sheets, I found that the students are mainly using these strategies. I never told them to specifically do any of them, so these were occurring naturally, either because of previously learned skills or by chance. According to Allus (1997), Langer (1991), and Wang and Hsua (2008), social discourse could create gradual advances in levels of knowledge because students interact with each other and with the text, thus increasing what they know about it.

Vygotsky stated that "Learning is more than the acquisition of the ability to think; it is the acquisition of many specialized abilities for thinking about a variety of things" (p. 83). I saw the ways in which my students analyzed and responded to the literature as fitting into this theory. They used these specific strategies during blogging and group discussions. I hoped that this study gave

them the opportunity to not only strengthen their ability to think about literature but also to practice using the specific ways in which one responds to literature.

The ways in which students analyzed and responded to literature included:

A. Building on their own initial reader responses as they discuss their responses with others

This was the purpose of the blog posts and subsequent in-class discussions that followed them. Students responded to a text by answering a blog prompt, thus preparing them to contribute something to the group discussion that took place during class the next day. By requiring them to blog about the text, I was also requiring them to write about their own initial understanding of and reaction to the text. These initial understandings provided the basis for the group discussions that occurred after blogging. This was a type of social constructivism, as students gradually expanded their understanding of the text by discussing it with each other and therefore constructing their own knowledge (Allus, 1997; Langer, 1991, and Wang and Hsua, 2008).

B. Examining textual evidence

There was only one blog prompt in which I explicitly told them to incorporate textual evidence into their blog posts, but several students were doing this anyway in other blog posts, and I definitely saw it

occurring during discussions, as most students would have their book open and would reference lines and passages as necessary during group discussions.

Figure 9 –Kevin’s Blog Post on *Antigone*

12/12/11 -Prompt#7: In *Antigone* scene 3, Haemon says to Creon, “A city which belongs to just one man is no true city” (p. 308). How does the meaning of this line relate to the major conflict of the play? Also, compare this conversation between Creon and Haemon to Creon’s first speech in scene 1 about what makes a good ruler (p. 292) and explain what Creon is failing to realize.

The meaning of the line, “A city which belongs to just one man is no true city” relates to the major conflict (Antigone going ahead and burying her brother anyway, although Creon did not allow it) of the play because if Creon just goes ahead and doesn’t consider the ideas/proposals of anybody in the city, he is not ruling a true city, even if he goes against the views of the gods. Creon even says himself, “a man who rules the entire state and does not take the best advice there is... such a man is the very worst of men” (292). He does not realize that he is clearly becoming one of these men, and he is not a good leader, because he is not taking the advice that everyone is giving him.

Kevin’s blog post in response to a prompt about the Greek tragedy, *Antigone*, demonstrates how he chose to base his response around relevant quotations that he felt helped him to answer the question. He was able to find a significant quotation that illustrates the major conflict in the play, thus addressing the first part of the prompt. The second quotation he incorporated helped him to address the second part of the prompt, which asked about Creon’s functionality as a ruler.

C. Making connections

Students would do this often during group discussions, and not only would they make connections between their own insights, but they would also make connections to other group members' notions about meaning, as illustrated in this exchange that occurred between members of Team Success:

"If he wanted to stay at the party, why did he bring it [the cheese]?" says Adam.

"I think he was trying to be nice." Marie replies

"Then they stereotyped him as evil because he's from that town." Teddy adds.

D. Stating themes

Determining the theme of a text is something with which students often struggle, so I began teaching and scaffolding to this very early on in the curriculum. The blog posts and group discussions gave the students additional opportunities to explore themes within texts, and these approaches required them to do this more independently instead of waiting for me as the teacher to simply tell them the theme or make it so apparent that they do not need to do much thinking to determine it themselves. During the discussion of "The Cabuliwallah," which happened early in my study, three groups decided to record their themes by writing them down for me to check as I performed my observation.

E. Recording insights

This occurred throughout my entire study, but the discussion analysis tracking sheet that I implemented half way through it really solidified this strategy as an important part of the discussion process. By tracking their discussions and recording insights, students were able to produce something tangible as an end product of their discussion. Anyone in the group was able to have a copy of the sheet, so that he or she didn't have to rely completely on his or her memory of the discussion.

Preparing for Discussion Through Blogging

Students need time to prepare for in-class discussions by crafting their responses to literature beforehand, and when they are given this opportunity, they feel more comfortable participating during in-class discussions.

The majority of the students responded on the post survey that blogging did give them opportunities to better prepare for in-class discussions because they were able to formulate ideas, and they knew what to expect during the subsequent discussions. This resulted in a greater feeling of comfort when participating. Based on my observations, more students began to participate and others started to participate more frequently as they continued to create blog posts.

Blogging gives every student a voice (Jewell, 2005; Larson, 1997; Redekopp & Bourbonniere, 2009; Yu, 2009). Even the most reluctant participators during in-class discussion are provided with a way to express

themselves and practice discussing literature. In addition, blogging about the texts we are studying allows them to think and write about the text prior to analyzing them in class, and this better prepares them for the in-class discussion (Andresen, 2009; Wang and Hsua, 2008; Wang and Wang 2007).

The Next Steps

Overall, I feel a strong sense of accomplishment in my study. I do feel that I gain a lot of insight into how both the students and I approach the analysis and discussion of literature. In particular, I feel like I have gained the most insight into the dynamics of group discussions and it was extremely beneficial to my teaching practice to conduct this study on discussion. Reflecting on what I did and what I learned from it has caused me to make some changes as I move forward. I intend to continue using blogging and small group discussions as strategies for analyzing literature, but there are some improvements that I think will make these strategies even more beneficial.

When it comes to small group discussions, I have learned teaching students about discussion and best practices must be coupled with additional scaffolding in order to ensure productive discussions. Therefore, I will continue to use the individual participation and discussion analysis tracking sheets as hands on tools during small group discussions. The gemstone strategy, however, might require the students to be more open-minded. For this group of 10th grade Honors English students, it did not prove to be effective or helpful in most cases, but I still believe in its ability to help balance participation and encourage extroverts to speak less and introverts to speak more. I think it still has a place within the groups as strategy for balanced participation, and those students who are stronger participators and tend to dominate discussions need to be made aware of how they

might be taking over the discussion and that despite their belief that everything they have to say is important, sometimes they need to defer to others and remain quiet. The ability to listen is just as important in group discussions as speaking is.

I also now believe it is a necessity to define individual roles within the groups, and I hope to implement something like Benne and Sheats (1948) have suggested. Rather than training students to only assume group leadership roles, they have suggested paying closer attention to training students for roles that promote effective growth and development. They have determined that individual roles are fall into one of three categories: group task, group building and maintenance, or individual roles. Group task roles involved facilitating and coordinating group efforts to define a common problem and find a solution. Group building and maintenance roles involved keeping the group functional. They either alter or maintain the way the group is working. Individual roles addressed the group members' individual needs so as to not hinder completion of the group's task.

I am interested in implementing the group building and maintenance roles, which include roles like a gatekeeper who regulates the flow of communication by encouraging everyone to participate or an encourager who praises and accepts the contributions of others (Benne and Sheats, 1948). As I found when I incorporated my own strategies, giving some students individual jobs or roles did increase the productivity of the discussions and helped to balance participation, so

assigning every student a specific role within the group is something that I plan on doing as I continue to use discussion groups as part of the learning process.

Due to time and curricular restraints, I was unable to do more with the blogs during my study, but I think these could be better utilized to improve students' ability to respond to literature and to one another. Next time, I will evaluate their blog posts so that they receive a grade for them, which I think will encourage them to take blogging more seriously, as there was an initial problem during the study of students not posting responses to the prompts. In addition, I would like to generate online discussions by requiring them to read and respond to their classmates' posts. This gives them more opportunities to discuss literature and could also prepare them more for face-to-face discussions in class than just posting individual responses would.

Having to teach students to deconstruct the prompt was not something that I anticipated ahead of time, but I learned rather quickly that it was something that had to be done, so I adjusted my plan to include it. This is now something that I place more emphasis on when I am teaching, and I look for opportunities to model this and allow them to practice it. Definitely a key skill, it is something that I will begin doing before I set up the wikis and blogs and start having the post responses.

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Appendices

Appendix A-Principal Consent Form

Dear Principal,

During the 2011-2012 school year, I will be finishing my Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Moravian College. Moravian's program requires that I complete an extensive action research thesis involving a systematic research study of my own teaching practices. The focus of my research will be the effects of asynchronous online discussion on in-class discussion and students' ability to analyze a text.

The methodology of my study involves observing and evaluating student discussions, both online and in-class, and eventually having them create a wiki on a text and evaluating that, too. Students will also be completing beginning and ending surveys as part of the data collection process. My goals are to increase student participation during in-class discussions, decrease the emphasis on teacher-led discussions, and improve their ability to respond to a text by offering more analytical/interpretive responses rather than always responding at the literal/comprehensive level. I am hoping that participating in online discussions using a wiki or a blog will better prepare them for in-class discussions and give them more practice with analyzing literature. This study was designed based on my own rationale about what I see happening in the classroom as well as peer reviewed journal articles and other research studies. There are no anticipated risks in this study to any of the students. Established IEPs and instructional modifications will be adhered to throughout the study. I would like to conduct this study in one of my 10 Honors English classes. This study will begin during September/October 2011 and end during December 2011.

The lessons and assignments involved in this study will be part of instruction for all students in my class. However, participation in the study and the collection of data is entirely voluntary. Any child may withdraw from the study at any time. If the student withdraws, or the parent or guardian chooses not to have him or her be a part of the study, then no information pertaining to that student will be used in the study. All of the participants' names will be kept confidential, and all research material will be kept in a secure location. An informed consent form will also be distributed to the students to get signed by a parent or guardian.

My faculty sponsor is Dr. Joseph Shosh. He can be contacted by email at jshosh@moravian.edu. I am completing a proposal of my research study as part of MEDU 700, which is the class I am currently finishing up. I would be happy to share a copy of the proposal with you once it is complete if you would like to see

it. If you have any questions or concerns about my in-class study, please do not hesitate to contact me. If not, please sign and return the bottom portion of this letter.

Sincerely,
Janelle M. Schaeffer

I attest that I am the principal of the teacher conducting this study. I have read and understand the consent form and received a copy.

Principal's signature: _____
Date: _____

Appendix B –Parent Consent Form

Dear Parent or Guardian,

During the 2011-2012 school year, I will be finishing my Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Moravian College. Moravian's program requires that I complete an extensive action research thesis involving a systematic research study of my own teaching practices. The focus of my research will be the effects of asynchronous online discussion on in-class discussion and students' ability to analyze a text.

The methodology of my study involves observing and evaluating student discussions, both online and in-class, and eventually having them create a wiki on a text and evaluating that, too. Students will also be completing beginning and ending surveys as part of the data collection process. My goals are to increase student participation during in-class discussions, decrease the emphasis on teacher-led discussions, and improve their ability to respond to a text by offering more analytical/interpretive responses rather than always responding at the literal/comprehensive level. I am hoping that participating in online discussions using a wiki or a blog will better prepare them for in-class discussions and give them more practice with analyzing literature. This study was designed based on my own rationale about what I see happening in the classroom as well as peer reviewed journal articles and other research studies. There are no anticipated risks in this study to any of the students. Established IEPs and instructional modifications will be adhered to throughout the study. This study will begin during September/October 2011 and end during December 2011.

The lessons and assignments involved in this study will be part of instruction for all students in my class. However, participation in the study and the collection of data is entirely voluntary. Any child may withdraw from the study at any time. If the student withdraws, or you choose not to have him or her be a part of the study, then no information pertaining to that student will be used in the study. All of the participants' names will be kept confidential, and all research material will be kept in a secure location.

My faculty sponsor is Dr. Joseph Shosh. He can be contacted by email at jshosh@moravian.edu. The principal has approved my study and can be reached at (610)- 759-1730 ext. 2300.

If you have any questions or concerns about my in-class study, please do not hesitate to contact me at school (ext. 2346) or by email at jschaeffer@nazarethasd.org. If not, please sign and return the bottom portion of this letter. Please notify me by phone or email if your child is to be withdrawn from the study at any time. Thank you for your help and support of my research. I am truly excited about what I will learn from my students through this study.

Sincerely,
Miss Janelle M. Schaeffer

I attest that I am the student's legally authorized representative, and that I read and understood this consent form and received a copy.

Student's
name: _____

Legal Representative's
name: _____

Date: _____

Please check one: I give my permission for my child's data to be used in the study.
 I DO NOT give my permission for my child's data to be used in this study.

Appendix C –Beginning Survey

Research Study Beginning Survey

1. Do you prefer class discussions that are controlled by the teacher or controlled by the class? Why?
2. Do you like to participate in class discussions? Why or why not?
3. What do you think is the biggest obstacle to having a meaningful and successful class discussion?
4. If you had a way to prepare for class discussions prior to coming to class, do you think this would increase your participation in discussions? Why or why not?
5. On a scale of 1-4, with 1 being very uncomfortable and 4 being very comfortable, how comfortable are you with participating in class discussions?
6. What level of reading do you think you've mainly functioned at thus far?

7. Would you be interested in learning more about using a blog or a wiki as part of class?

8. Would you like to use technology as a learning tool on a regular basis?

Appendix D –Ending Survey

Research Study Ending Survey

1. Has your opinion changed about whether you prefer discussions that are controlled by the teacher or by the students after experiencing the activities and strategies implemented during the study?
2. How do you currently feel about participating in discussions after having experienced the activities and strategies implemented during the study? Has it changed your opinion of or comfort level with participating?
3. In what ways do you think your individual participation has been changed or affected by utilizing small groups for discussions?
4. Do you think responding to questions about the texts we were reading through blogging helped you to better understand the texts? Why or why not?

5. What effect, if any, did blogging about the texts prior to discussing them have on the small group discussions?

6. Which of the following strategies, if any, do you believe helped improve the discussions and how/why?
 - a. Gem stones-

 - b. Having someone in the group tally participation-

 - c. Having someone in the group track the discussion and record insights using the discussion analysis sheet-

7. What are some things that you have learned about group discussions?

8. What are some things that you've learned about answering higher-level, multi-layer questions about literature?

9. Did you like using the blog and/or wiki as part of our class? Why or why not?

Appendix E –List of Blog Prompts

1. Identify the aspects of culture that you found in each of the 2 poems that you analyzed with your group in class today. How do each of these poems make a larger statement about culture? How do they illustrate a like between culture and voice?
2. After reading the small group discussion guidelines website on the "Discussion Tips" page, identify 3 insights/tips that the author makes about effective discussion or small group participants that you found interesting or that you did not know before. Do you agree or disagree with these insights/tips? Also identify and explain what you think contributes to an effective discussion.
3. In "The Street of the Canon," give 3 reasons Pepe Gonzalez might have had for leaving the cheese at the party. What do these reasons indicate about his character traits?
4. How does Dee's sense of heritage differ from her mother and Maggie's? What is ironic about Dee's accusation that her mother and Maggie do not understand their own heritage?
5. In "Us and Them," how does Sedaris' family influence his perception of others and the world? Why is Halloween important to Sedaris' story?
6. In "An Indian Father's Plea," What do you think are the most powerful or important points that the Robert Lake makes and why? (quote and cite). Discuss how strong his argument is and how convincing it is. Do you agree or disagree with him? Overall, what statement does this piece make about the blending of culture and education? (Be specific and insightful, not "we have to recognize each other's differences." There are several different angles!)

Appendix F –Individual Participation Tracking Sheet

Group Name: _____

Small Group Discussion Participation

Date:	Discussion Topic
Name	Number of Times Participating (Tally Marks)

Date:	Discussion Topic
Name	Number of Times Participating (Tally Marks)

Date:	Discussion Topic
Name	Number of Times Participating (Tally Marks)

Appendix G –Discussion Analysis Tracking Sheet

Group Name: _____

Date: _____

Filled out by: _____

Small Group Discussion Analysis Sheet

Please record your group's discussion by listing the topics covered in the order that your group discussed them. Then, list 2-3 insights or interesting ideas that came out of the discussion on that topic.

Topic 1: _____

Key insights/ideas:

Topic 2: _____

Key insights/ideas:

Topic

3: _____

Key insights/ideas

Topic 4: _____

Key insights/ideas:

Topic 5: _____

Key insights/ideas:

Topic 6: _____

Key insights/ideas:

Topic 7: _____

Key insights/ideas:

Appendix H –Class Wiki

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying a Wikispaces page. The browser's address bar shows the URL 'http://english10honorsf11.wikispaces.com/'. The page title is 'english10honorsf11'. The main content area features a 'home' page with a welcome message and an important reminder about research paper note cards. A discussion prompt is also visible. The right sidebar contains a search box and several navigation links.

english10honorsf11

home Edit 10 0 53 ...

Welcome to the Block 2 English 10 Honors Wiki

IMPORTANT REMINDER: NOTE CARDS FOR RESEARCH PAPER ARE DUE ON 1/5. WE WILL BE WORKING ON THESE IN CLASS ON 1/3 AND 1/4, SO PLEASE REMEMBER TO BRING NOTE CARDS (4X6 OR LARGER) AND YOUR RESEARCHED INFORMATION TO CLASS. I HOPE YOU ALL HAD A NICE BREAK!

~A place where students collaborate and ideas are shared.

To the right, you will find links to our group blogs. Below, you will see the discussion prompt for you to blog about. Please make sure you copy and paste the discussion prompt to the top of your response before posting it to your group's blog. Remember to put your first name at the bottom of your post.

Discussion Prompts

10/12/11 -Prompt #1: Identify the aspects of culture that you found in each of the 2 poems that you analyzed with your group in class today. How do each of these poems make a larger statement about culture? How do they illustrate a like between culture and voice?

Search Wiki

Group Blogs

- Team Success
- Cardnl
- English Group
- Two
- JJAR
- Lobster Bisque
- Awesome Group

Helpful Hints

- Wiki Information
- Blog Information
- Discussion Tips

Links

- Vocabtest.com