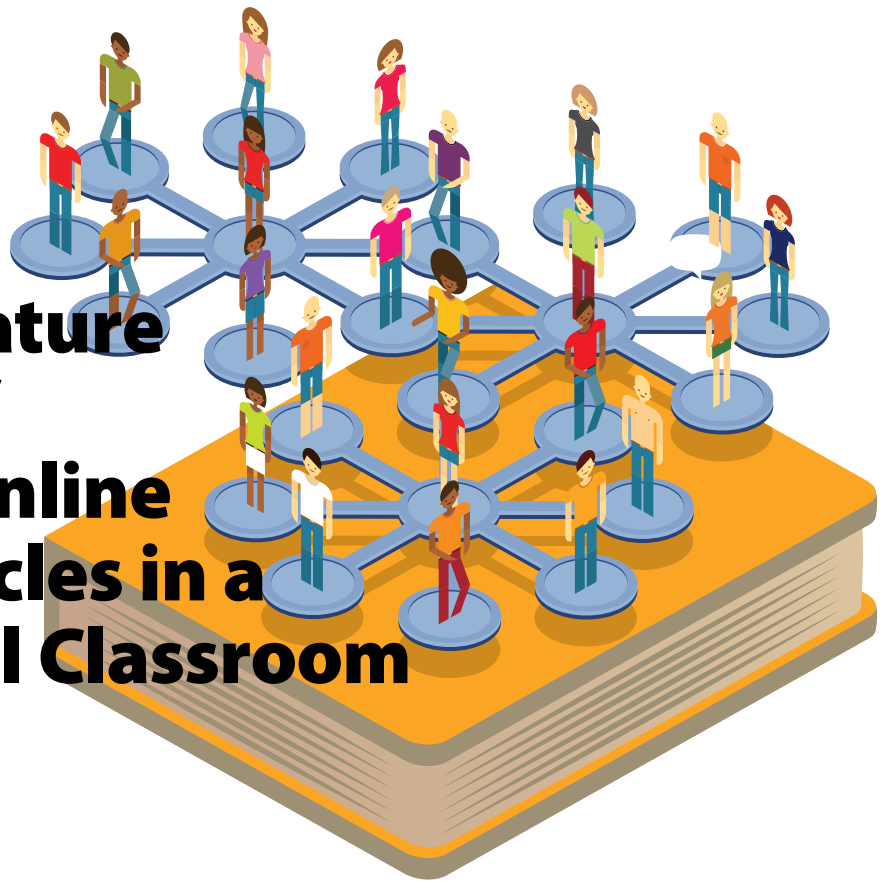# "Online Literature Circles Rock!" Organizing Online Literature Circles in a Middle School Classroom

Deanna Day & Sally Kroon

Doing literature circles helps you look at a book in a different way. Last year I didn't care for reading, and I didn't pay attention to the characters, setting, or even bother to finish the books. Reading was boring. The online literature circles motivated me to read all of the books. I even would go home and get back onto Think Quest and start talking about the books some more. Online literature circles rock! (Kaitlin)

Online discussions are stoopendos! Our literature discussion was much more in depth [than face-to-face] and there was less pressure to talk. It was fun and easy. (Brendan)

These reflections were written by sixth graders after our first online literature circle discussions. The world is quickly changing with social networking sites (e.g., MySpace, Facebook) and Web 2.0 tools such as blogs and wikis. We wondered as teachers how we could use some of these technological resources in our classroom to help middle school students create, think, learn, communicate, and gain meaning in life. We wanted to know how we could enhance our language arts curriculum with technology and prepare our students for a technological world.

Prensky (2001) calls students who have been using computers from infancy "digital natives." From a pre-survey, we learned that our sixth graders were very adept at using cell phones, digital cameras, iPods, and computers. They knew how to "surf" the Internet, play computer games, participate in MySpace, download songs, send e-mails, chat via instant message, and text friends. As "digital immigrants," we wanted to create a literacy environment in which we valued our digital natives' ways of knowing.

National Council of Teachers of English (2005) asserts that teachers can enhance or transform the meaning of work for students by integrating multiple modes of communication and expression. Anstey and Bull (2006) define a multiliterate person as one who is flexible, strategic, and understands and uses literacy practices with a range of texts and technologies. Borsheim, Merritt, and Reed (2008) encourage teachers to give students opportunities to access, evaluate, search, sort, gather, and read information from a variety of sources and invite students to collaborate to produce texts for a variety of audiences and purposes. Our desire was to integrate multiple modes of communication and

---

This article reflects the following *This We Believe* **characteristics:** Meaningful Learning — Multiple Learning Approaches — Organizational Structures

integrate literacy with technology to help students in their journey toward multiliteracy.

Online literature circles

In the last 20 years, many middle grades teachers have organized face-to-face literature circles in their classrooms (Daniels, 2002; Hill, Noe, & King, 2003; Johnson & Freedman, 2005). Online literature circles are very similar to face-to-face ones, except students talk about the books they have read in small virtual groups using online programs such as Moodle, Blackboard, Angel, or Nicenet. Literature circles are based on Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory, which contends

understanding a text more deeply and responding to books in different ways, when they are involved in literature circles. Latendresse (2004) asserts that literature circles work well with middle grades students, because young adolescents enjoy participating in small, collaborative groups and having the freedom to interpret texts in light of their experiences.

In this article, we share our journey of organizing online literature circles in a sixth grade reading and language arts classroom. Sally teaches in a large middle school located in the Pacific Northwest. During the 2007–2008 school year, she taught two groups of sixth graders (25 students in the morning and 26 students in

Figure 1 Time line of literature circle journey

September	Read aloud. *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom* (Sachar, 1987).
October	Face to face. All read: *The Color of My Words* (Joseph, 2000). Small group literature.
November	Online. Theme: Fitting in and accepting others. Books used: *Stargirl* (Spinelli, 2000), *Schooled* (Korman, 2007), *Loser* (Spinelli, 2002), *Flipped* (Van Draaney, 2001), *Crash* (Spinelli, 1996), *Ask Me No Questions* (Budhos, 2006), *If a Tree Falls at Lunch Period* (Choldenko, 2007), *The Skin I'm In* (Flake, 1998), *Rules* (Lord, 2006), *Yolanda's Genius* (Fenner, 1995).
January	Face to face. Theme: Newbery Medal winners .
February	Face to face. All read: *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993).
March	Online. Theme: Overcoming challenges. Books used: *Kira Kira* (Kadohata, 2004), *Esperanza Rising* (Ryan, 2000), *Hoot* (Hiaasen, 2002), *Pictures of Hollis Woods* (Giff, 2002), *Walk Two Moons* (Creech, 1994), *Just Another Day in My Insanely Real Life* (Dee, 2006), *So B. It* (Weeks, 2004), *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999), *Tangerine* (Bloor, 1997), and *Becoming Naomi Leon* (Ryan, 2004).
April	State testing
May/June	Online. Theme: Verse novels. Books used: *Home of the Brave* (Applegate, 2007), *Jimi and Me* (Adoff, 2005), *Out of the Dust* (Hesse, 1997), *Witness* (Hesse, 2001), *Hugging the Rock* (Brown, 2006), *Song of the Sparrow* (Sandell, 2007), *Reaching for the Sun* (Zimmer, 2007), *Locomotion* (Woodson, 2003), and *Heartbeat* (Creech, 2004).

that students bring their life experiences and knowledge to a text, then through collaborative discussions take on an active and new way of thinking about the text so that a new meaning is created. Short (1997) found that literature circles promote a love for literature and positive attitudes toward reading. She also claimed that children become critical readers and thinkers,

the afternoon). Together, we planned and organized three rounds of online literature circles along with three face-to-face literature circles (see Figure 1 for our time line). We observed both groups of students as they discussed books; we documented these observations through field notes, analyzed the online discussions; and we surveyed and interviewed students.

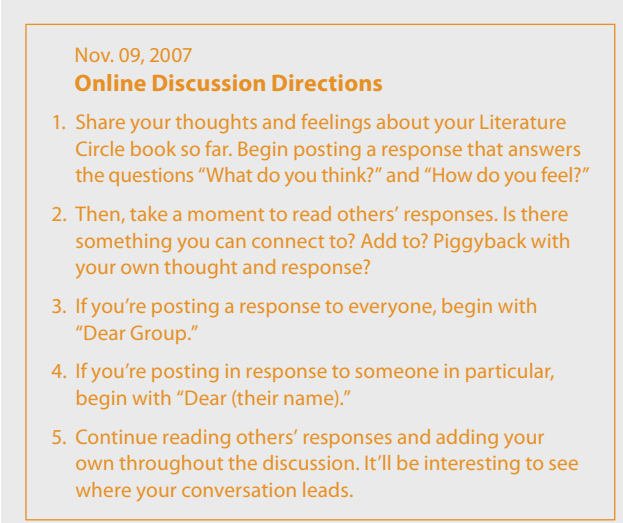# Laying the foundation for online literature circles

Small-group collaboration is not innate—it has to be learned (Daniels, 2002). We also believe discussing books does not come naturally for middle grades students. Some need to be taught how to think about a book and then how to discuss it. On the first day of school, Sally began reading aloud and discussing *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom* (Sachar, 1987). After the first chapter, she asked, "What do you think, and how do you feel about this book?" Students' perspectives were honored and invited as she read a chapter each day and demonstrated a strategy to help students begin thinking, talking, and collaborating together. One day she gave sticky notes to every student and asked them to write personal connections as she read. On subsequent days students wrote questions, personal reactions ("I like" statements), favorite quotes, or literary elements they noticed. Students were invited to share these sticky notes in small-group literature circles of four to five students. In addition, sixth graders brainstormed what working in a collaborative small group looked like—being a contributing member, being an active listener, and respecting differences. Before the book was finished, Sally asked for volunteers to participate in a fishbowl literature circle to model what an effective discussion looked like. The audience (the rest of the class) watched the small group participate in the discussion, in which they shared sticky notes and demonstrated how to talk about the book. The listeners took notes on what they noticed and afterward debriefed in a whole-class discussion about their observations.

Next, all of the sixth graders read *The Color of My Words* (Joseph, 2000) and participated in a couple of small-group, face-to-face literature circles following the norms for participation modeled during the fishbowl literature circle. At the same time, Sally taught some instructional mini-lessons on computer netiquette, web safety, and cyberbullying and how talking about books online is a little different from doing it face to face (see Figure 2).

Sally completed some "behind the scenes" activities, anticipating that students would be ready for the forthcoming online literature circles. She created passwords for every student, assigned students to different message boards, and set up a Think Quest site. We chose Think Quest (www.thinkquest.org) for our virtual small-group literature discussions because it is designed for school settings and has colorful pages and icons we thought would be attractive to 11- and 12-year-olds. This threaded discussion site required every student to obtain signed consent from a legal guardian. Before our discussions started, we gave students time to experiment and play with Think Quest in the school computer lab. They each chose a colorful icon to represent themselves and created their own web page, where they wrote a few sentences to describe themselves, created polls, and uploaded some student work.

Figure 2 Online discussion directions posted for students

> Nov. 09, 2007
> **Online Discussion Directions**
>
> 1. Share your thoughts and feelings about your Literature Circle book so far. Begin posting a response that answers the questions "What do you think?" and "How do you feel?"
>
> 2. Then, take a moment to read others' responses. Is there something you can connect to? Add to? Piggyback with your own thought and response?
>
> 3. If you're posting a response to everyone, begin with "Dear Group."
>
> 4. If you're posting in response to someone in particular, begin with "Dear (their name)."
>
> 5. Continue reading others' responses and adding your own throughout the discussion. It'll be interesting to see where your conversation leads.

Implementing online literature circles

We conducted three online literature circle rounds in November, March, and June. At the beginning of each online round, Sally introduced the theme, such as "fitting in and accepting others" or "overcoming challenges," and the 12 book titles that went along with the theme. We chose themes to which most middle school students could relate, and we wanted students to read novels featuring characters who had struggled and triumphed in difficult situations. For the final round of online literature circles, we intertwined a unit on poetry with verse novels for the online discussions.

Our online discussion rounds began with brief book talks about the 12 novels we selected. We then gave students time to browse through the books by reading the back covers and a page in the middle. They used a secret ballot to write down three titles they wanted to

read, then Sally organized the students into small groups of four or five students, trying to honor each student's first choice of books. The next day we passed out the books along with a calendar for students to calculate how many pages they needed to read each day to complete the books in time for our online discussions. Students had approximately one week to read the first half of their novels and another week to read the remainder. Each day, students read their books for approximately 15 minutes during Silent Sustained Reading (SSR) and took their books home to read as homework.

To prepare for the online discussions, we asked students to use sticky notes to mark pages that were interesting and explain why they marked them. Specifically, students made connections, asked questions, found golden lines, and noted anything they wanted to share in their small groups. During the online discussions, students used these sticky notes to help them talk about the books they read. For our third online round, we gave each student a journal to record their thoughts and feelings about the verse novels. We asked students to find poetic lines or phrases, write them in their journals, and share their interpretations. Before our online discussions, students reviewed their sticky notes or journal entries and put a star next to the questions or comments they thought were good conversation starters to begin the virtual small groups. We reminded students to choose questions, phrases, or thoughts that would add to the discussions.

Sally reserved the school computer lab for all of our online discussions. Typically, the discussions lasted one hour, but students requested more time for the second and third online rounds. At the conclusion of each round, students self-assessed their preparedness and involvement in the discussion by answering questions on Sally's Think Quest web page. Questions included "How did your online discussion go?" and "What did you observe about the discussion?" and "How would you change the discussions?" We welcomed student suggestions and used them as a way to rethink and organize the online discussions. The organization of the three rounds evolved and changed throughout the school year. For example, with the first two rounds, students discussed their novels twice—once in the middle of their books and a second time at the conclusion of their books when everyone had finished reading. After analyzing the transcripts, we decided to have students discuss

Figure 3 Examples of extension projects: quilt square, character sketch, and multimodal

the books only once for the third round, after they had completely finished the novels.

With face-to-face literature circles, students usually produce paper extension projects to demonstrate their understanding of the books. We decided to have students complete digital extension projects for the online rounds. For instance, the students created multimodal theme collages and digital quilt squares using PowerPoint

circles, they eagerly read their books and marked pages with sticky notes. The idea of discussing books virtually was exciting and different. After the first round of literature circles, 43 students of the 51 commented in their self-reflections that the literature circles were "fun." Their comments included, "I can't believe we get to do this in school" and "I love working on computers. Technology is much more fun."

> **"The online literature discussions caused a ripple effect in the classroom as students heard about many different novels and wanted to read more than just the one they each chose."**

for the first and second rounds (see Figure 3). For the final online round, students used TuxPaint to sketch and write a poem to describe a character from their verse novels. Students had to think about color, symbols, tone, images, photographs, music, video, movement, and powerful quotes and words to describe their books. Some students used digital voice recorders to document their book talks or found music to accompany their electronic creations. All students uploaded their extension projects to their Think Quest web pages and included written explanations. Class members viewed and read these projects and responded on message boards as a way to bring closure to each online literature circle round.

Evaluating online literature circles

We gathered a rich set of data from the three online rounds, which included a total of 36 literature circles. Data included 298 student self-reflections and 8 interviews with students. Three major categories emerged from our analysis: (1) students were excited and engaged, (2) students experienced technology trials and triumphs, and (3) reflective teaching was essential. Each of these categories is discussed with examples of student comments.

Students were excited and engaged

When we introduced the sixth graders to the idea of implementing online literature circles to talk about books, cheers erupted in the classroom. Practically every student in Sally's reading and language arts class was enthusiastic about the idea of using technology. As students prepared for the first round of online literature

We found that the excitement about using technology transferred to literacy and the books the students were reading. When students observed Sally gathering piles of books on the front table in the classroom, they asked, "What books are we going to read?" and "Are we going to use Think Quest again?" We thought this enthusiasm might diminish after each round of online literature circles, but the students' excitement about reading and discussing books online continued throughout the school year. One sixth grader wrote, "Teenagers love Think Quest because it is so much like instant messaging. More people participate in Internet conversations than in face-to-face conversations."

The online literature discussions caused a ripple effect in the classroom as students heard about many different novels and wanted to read more than just the one they each chose from the possible 12 novels for each theme. Hearing about other books and reading conversations about the other novels motivated some sixth graders to seek out other titles and read more books. Students explained, "I'm trying to read all of the literature circle choices" or "The online literature circles motivated me to read all of the books."

We also observed that the online discussions helped some students become more engaged in the classroom. Students who rarely volunteered to talk in class were actively participating in the online discussions. Students remarked, "I was much more comfortable sharing my ideas because I wasn't afraid of people laughing at me" and "You can ask questions that you would never ask out loud." We learned that students who were normally unengaged with paper extension projects were much more engaged when we invited them to complete

extension projects using technology. We found that inviting students to use PowerPoint and TuxPaint created an equal playing field for students who did not feel they were artists. One student said, "I love using PowerPoint because it doesn't limit my poor drawing abilities."

Normally, when students are absent from our classes they miss out on our discussions and experiences. We unexpectedly discovered that students wanted to participate in the online literature discussions even if they were sick. A few students contacted Sally by e-mail to find out when our online discussions were scheduled so that they could participate outside the classroom. Morgan reflected, "I was at my grandma's house and would have missed this discussion if it had just been face to face. I got online at her house and started talking with my group members and discussing the book. It was really cool."

The "fun" aspect never dwindled the entire school year. After the second and third online rounds, students made comments such as, "I think [our discussion] went really well, and it was so much fun" and "I can't wait to do this again."

Students experienced technology trials and triumphs

In a pre-survey, students noted that they had never talked about books online before but were pretty adept at typing papers and creating PowerPoint presentations. The idea of discussing books online was invigorating for the sixth graders, because "it was new and different," and they had the opportunity to use technology.

During our online discussions, the only sound we heard was the clicking of computer keys. Some students were speed typists, and others pecked slowly at the keys. The online conversations also occurred much faster than face-to-face, because multiple discussion threads around the same book were occurring at the same time. Students had to pay attention, or they could easily get lost. Students commented, "It's a little tricky trying to understand what messages connect and which ones don't" and "I was confused at first, because not everyone is on the same topic and people are jumping from subject to subject."

We found that the more students participated in the online discussions, the easier it was for them to understand the layout of the discussion threads. Some students told us, "There was never a dull moment

because the questions kept pouring in. Everyone had something to say, and we didn't have to wait turns to talk" and "If you missed something that one person said, you could look back at the discussion to figure it out." We also noticed that a few students were frustrated when they had

Online literature discussions engage and excite students in learning about books. photo by Alan Geho

to quickly produce a thought about their books and type it. "I like to talk, not to type," one student commented. Other students noted, "This experience helped us with our typing skills. I know that I have gotten better!" and "Online literature circles teach you to be faster at typing."

During the first round, we did not anticipate that some students would not know who else was in their discussion groups. In face-to-face discussions, students are in a circle looking at each other, but with online literature circles, 25 students are scattered in a computer lab. In the transcripts we read, "Who is in our group?" or "[name of student], are you in my group?" To rectify this for subsequent discussions, we provided a bookmark with space for students to write down the group members' names. This also offered correct spelling for each student's name, a complaint some students talked about in their self-reflections. For example, one student complained, "My group kept misspelling my name."

One student who was on an IEP, Kenny, had a difficult time following the discussion threads because he had to read quickly. He also wasn't computer savvy or proficient with typing. His small-group members were

encouraging and helped involve him in the discussion by asking questions such as, "Kenny, what was your reaction to the book?" or "What was your favorite part, Kenny?" In each of the three online rounds, Kenny only made a handful of comments. In his final self-reflection about the online literature circles, he wrote, "Mrs. Kroon, I did more discussing with my group." Sally explained, "Communicating online was difficult for some kids, but this was no different from their face to face conversations."

As with any online program, students had to remember to press the "refresh" button every once in a while so that their Internet connections would not freeze. Learning to read backwards was also challenging

During online book discussions, some students are better able to stay focused on the topic than they are during face-to-face discussions. photo by Alan Geho

for some students, as Think Quest posts the discussion conversations from the bottom to the top (see Figure 4 for a sample transcript).

We acknowledge that technology definitely produced trials for a few students, but there were far more triumphs. For example, after 60 minutes had passed with the first online discussion, we asked students to bring their discussions to a close. We heard grumbles and complaints, because students wanted to continue talking and felt they did not have enough time. Surprisingly, and without prodding or suggesting from us, we noticed that

one-third of the sixth graders returned to Think Quest to resume their literature discussions at home.

Students commented that discussing online was helpful. "You never interrupt anybody when you type your response," one wrote; while another commented, "We get a lot more ideas typed down than we could discuss in face-to-face." Students noticed that online discussions produced more talk. "We get off topic in face-to-face discussions. We don't get as distracted with online and never run out of anything to talk about," one offered. Another stated, "Discussing books online allows many conversations to be going on at the same time. This allows us to talk about more topics, and everyone learns more."

The online discussions also helped children make sense of the books. One student told us, "In our group discussion, people brought up things that I never would have thought about." Another student shared, "If I didn't understand a part of a book, I asked the other members about it, and they explained it so that it made more sense to me. This helped me a lot." As with most middle grades classrooms, we had a few students who struggled completing and turning in work. We found that technology helped one such student finish her assignments. She reflected, "Technology is much more fun. It was fun making the extension projects on the computer because I could play around with color and images."

We heard students over and over state that discussing online was one of their favorite activities in middle school. Many of them commented that they hoped their future teachers would initiate online literature circles. One student told us, "If you want your students involved, use computers!"

Reflective teaching was essential

Both Sally and I quickly realized that for the online discussions to be successful, we needed to be thinking constantly about how to improve the discussions, and we needed to listen to the students. For example, during the first round we noticed that the middle grades students seemed to be caught up in the "entertaining aspect" of working on computers and sometimes forgot to participate in the discussions or to keep them moving. A handful of students left the literature discussions to visit their web pages, where they changed their icons or created surveys to administer to their fellow classmates. We immediately realized that we needed to have different

Evan L
Dear Bronson,
You know how Juli in her mind thinks that Bryce is just to shy to come up to her and tell her how he feels about her, while Bryce is actually trying to avoid her. Well I think that when she saw the eggs she realised that he didn't like her in a sense.
11.9.2007
Delete

Destiney S
Dear group,
what do you think was the funnyest line, I thought that when she said on page35.
When she said(They never get exhausted because they wont stay up long enough to get poop out.
I just thought that was a really funny line i dont really know why but it stood out to me.
11.9.2007
Delete

Megan K
Dear Group,
What is your favorite character out of the whole book?
I prefer Juli because she wouldn't be afraid to tell Bryce she didn't like something he gave her.
11.9.2007
Delete

Ashley P
sorry Evan,
I had an error. I meant to say Bryce can still like Julie if he is jealous, right?
11.9.2007
Delete

Megan K
Bronson,
I think Juli felt hurt because she could have been making money with those eggs, Juli thought that Bryce was her soul mate, and Bryce didn't even tell her.
11.9.2007
Delete

guidelines for the online literature circles than we had used for the face-to-face discussions. Students also shared in their reflections, "Some people wouldn't move on to talk about something else." Students were frustrated that a few of their peers got stuck talking about the same thing over and over. We also noticed in the transcripts that students often said little more than, "I agree" or "Good idea." This positive affirmation and active listening was good, but it did not add new ideas to the discussions.

Before our second online discussion, we brainstormed with both classes using the following prompts: "What is the role of a member in a literature circle?" and "How can we help keep an online discussion moving?" Students' ideas for keeping an online discussion moving included typing "I agree with you, but what did you think of…?" or "I have a question…" or "One of my sticky notes says…" We made a bookmark with these suggestions for students to take to the computer lab

for our online rounds so that they could refer to it when they needed a prompt or an idea to help them move the discussion forward.

As a way to improve the online discussions further, after the second round we photocopied the transcripts and had each student read the conversation in which he or she had participated and then analyze the discussion. Students used the same codes that researchers use to analyze literature circles: initiating discussion, active listening, asking questions, clarifying, personal reactions, personal connections, book connections, retelling, and discussing literary elements (Short, 1997). After coding the transcripts, we asked students to reflect on their discussions. We asked, "What did you notice? What went well? What didn't? What are your goals for the next literature circle?" We learned that the transcripts were visible evidence of what was happening in the discussions and that reading and analyzing them helped students think about their conversations. Some of the student reflections included, "I have to stop goofing around and ask more questions" and "I am going to try to get more people to share their sticky notes." In our final literature circle round with verse novels, we found that students were much more aware of what they were saying and the filler or active listening comments stopped.

criteria for the project? What is missing? How could the piece be better? Does the writing flow? Is there excellent effort? We also suggested some sentence starters to help students phrase their comments clearly: "I particularly liked…, Did you think about…, You might want to try…, You could try…, This reminds me of…" We found that this mini-lesson helped improve students' comments to each other for our final online round.

With the last round of online literature circles, we waited until all students were completely finished with their books before we had our discussions. In the previous rounds we noticed that some of the talk centered on such superficial questions as, "What page are you on in the book?" or "Hey, you aren't supposed to be that far ahead." We also found that some students gave away the endings of the books, because they had finished the books early. For this final round, students were given two weeks to "power read" the books and prepare for the discussions. We believe that having one discussion after everyone had completed reading the books eliminated the page number questions and the problem of giving away the endings. Having one online discussion also led to deeper dialogue among students.

Closely self-evaluating our teaching helped us along this journey. By reading the literature circle transcripts

> **We believe it is imperative that all teachers find ways to connect education to their students' lives through technology.**

When Sally and I analyzed the comments and feedback students gave each other about the extension projects, we realized we needed to teach a mini-lesson to help them think critically. Many student comments were vague, cliché, or uncritical, such as "That was good" or "I like it." We wanted our students to think about how they were responding to their peers' work and look at their responses and the feedback they received with a critical eye.

We began our mini-lesson by discussing that "critical friends" help us become stronger students and learners by giving us constructive feedback. The "fluffy" feedback was fine to cushion the truth, but we wanted them to avoid being too general or too broad. We asked them to read and view the character sketches and poems they created as extension projects and try to get a feel for what the author did. We asked them to think about these questions: Does it contain all of the components and

and student self-reflections, we were able to determine what we needed to change and teach. This reflective teaching was essential in helping us modify the online literature circles for our sixth graders to be successful.

Learning from online literature circles

Sally's middle school students were involved in using technology outside school, so it was very natural for them to use technology in school. In fact, we believe it is imperative that all teachers find ways to connect education to their students' lives through technology. Some of Sally's reluctant readers become more engaged in reading and participated more frequently and deeply in the online discussions than in face-to-face discussions. We found that using Think Quest piqued the sixth graders' interest, and the majority of the students were

genuinely excited about the online discussions. Middle grades students can be hard to please, but the students' enthusiasm and engagement helped validate online literature circles as a valuable tool to use in a reading and language arts classroom. The interest we saw from the online literature circles has not been matched by anything else we have tried in our teaching careers.

Osterman (2000) stated that community is not present until members experience feelings of belonging, trust in others, and safety. Sally's students participated in a virtual community in which students cared for and supported each other and collaborated together. We believe her sixth graders felt a sense of belonging, which motivated them to read their literature circle books and participate in the online discussions. Like Tyson (2009), we learned that providing a rich academic environment tailored to social and emotional development empowers young adolescents. Our middle grades students thought critically about the books they read, designed and created extension projects, edited and revised their projects and their individual web pages, and even conducted research about authors and other books.

The students also realized there is much more to technology than playing games or IMing with friends. From this experience, students gained practice reading for a variety of purposes, such as interpreting the textual and visual elements in the extension projects, navigating a Web 2.0 tool (i.e., Think Quest), contributing to and commenting on peers' postings, putting their thinking into words, and keyboarding their thoughts. Students also learned how to give critical, constructive feedback to their peers and self-reflect on their own learning.

Overwhelmingly, students favored the online discussions versus the face-to-face discussions. In a final survey, 27 students said they preferred the online discussions, six said they liked the face-to-face, and six students suggested there should be a combination of face-to-face and online discussions for each book round. Students' comments included, "Talking about books online is fun. Discussing books face-to-face is boring" and "I don't get nervous talking online like I do in a small group. I am much more confident." Another student said, "When we talk online, we have time to think about a response for a little bit without dead silence. Also, you're never interrupting anybody when we type a response."

When we interviewed students to find out more, one student suggested, "There should be a combination of

online literature circles and face-to-face, because you can discuss faster face to face, but we're on track more with online." Another said, "I would like a combination of both. With the face-to-face you can look in the actual eyes of the people you are talking to. Online is a little more comfortable, because you can say anything you want. I think it would be good to have a little bit of both." In the future, we hope to couple face-to-face discussions with online discussions in one round. Students would participate in both discussion formats with one book.

Online literature circles can help build a virtual community among students and their teachers. photo by Alan Geho

Those who are not as comfortable with computers or keyboarding could benefit from the face-to-face. Those who are not at ease with verbalizing their thoughts and prefer the anonymity of online could benefit from the virtual literature circles. Combining face-to-face and online in each round sounds like the perfect solution.

Organizing online, or even face-to-face, discussions requires time for setup, maintenance, and many demonstrations, but student enthusiasm far outweighs all of the work. As teachers think about integrating technology into their literacy programs, we have two recommendations: (1) read professional literature on integrating technology and literacy, and (2) find a colleague who wants to do online literature circles. Reading professional literature about literature circles and technology will inspire and motivate you. Visiting

Marc Prensky's website and reading articles by Grisham and Wolsey (2006) or Carico and Logan (2004) will help you think about how to use technology to enhance learning and motivate your students. Other ways to integrate technology might include having students join goodreads.com to keep reading logs, using wikis to help students revise and edit their writing, and setting up a class blog in place of a newsletter or letter home to parents.

Having a partner or "critical friend" will encourage and help you along the journey. Consider your school's reading specialist, media specialist, or even your computer specialist. It was very invigorating for us to try something new together. We were able to observe students talking about books, enjoying books, gaining different perspectives from books, and using technology to learn. We could brainstorm issues or problems and determine solutions together.

Extensions
The authors implemented online literature circles in an English language arts class. How can teachers the adapt online literature circles concept to integrate literacy skills and enhance learning in other subject areas?

References

Anstey, M., & Bull, G. (2006). *Teaching and learning multiliteracies: Changing times, changing literacies.* Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Borsheim, C., Merritt, K., & Reed, D. (2008). Beyond technology for technology's sake: Advancing multiliteracies in the twenty-first century. *Clearing House, 82*(2), 87–90.

Carico, K. M., & Logan, D. (2004). A generation in cyberspace: Engaging readers through online discussions. *Language Arts, 81,* 293–302.

Daniels, H. (2002). Resources for middle school book clubs. *Voices from the Middle, 10*(1), 48–49.

Grisham, D. L., & Wolsey, T. D. (2006). Recentering the middle school classroom as a vibrant learning community: Students, literacy, and technology intersect. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 4,* 648–660.

Hill, B. C., Noe, K. L., & King, J. A. (2003). *Literature circles in middle school: One teacher's journey.* Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.

Johnson, H., & Freedman, L. (2005). *Content area literature circles: Using discussion for learning across the curriculum.* Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.

Joseph, L. (2000). *The color of my words.* New York: HarperCollins.

Latendresse, C. (2004). Literature circles: Meeting reading standards, making personal connections, and appreciating other interpretations. *Middle School Journal, 35*(3), 13–20.

National Council of Teachers of English. (2005). Position statement on multimodal literacies. Retrieved from www.ncte.org/positions/statements/multimodalliteracies

Osterman, K. F. (2000). Students' need for belonging in the school community. *Review of Educational Research, 70,* 323–367.

Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants. *On the Horizon, 9*(5). http://www.marcprensky.com/writing

Rosenblatt, L. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem.* Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Sachar, L. (1987). *There's a boy in the girls bathroom.* New York: Random House.

Short, K. (1997). *Literature as a way of knowing.* York, ME: Stenhouse.

Tyson, T. (2009). Rediscovering substance of soul in 21st century middle schools. *Middle School Journal, 40*(5), 37–40.

Editor's note: Readers should also consult Kissle, Hathaway, and Wood (2010), "Digital Collaborative Literacy: Using Wikis to Promote Social Learning and Literacy Development" in the May 2010 issue of MSJ.

Deanna Day is associate professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Washington State University, Vancouver. E-mail: dday-wiff@vancouver.wsu.edu

Sally Kroon is a sixth grade language arts teacher at McLoughlin Middle School in the Vancouver (WA) School District.