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Utilizing online literature circles to improve reading comprehension

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Abstract

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The importance of this project is to provide teachers with curriculum that is supported by technology. Specific research and practice is cited to support the rationale of combining technology and reading. The most significant findings include the development of the lower achieving student as a result of working with a more proficient peer.

Utilizing Online Literature Circles to Improve Reading Comprehension

A Graduate Project

Submitted to the

Division of Educational Technology

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

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has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the
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Abstract

Literature circles are an important part of a balanced reading program. They require students to work with others to become independent problem solvers. With the introduction of online literature circles, students get the added experience of using technology in an authentic learning situation. As a result of this technology integration, students' reading comprehension and proficiency with computers will improve.

The importance of this project is to provide teachers with curriculum that is supported by technology. Specific research and practice is cited to support the rationale of combining technology and reading. The most significant findings include the development of the lower achieving student as a result of working with a more proficient peer.

Introduction

The author will introduce the use of online literature circles at the third grade level in the Council Bluffs Community School District. "Literature circles are small, peer-led discussion groups who have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book" (Daniels, 2002, p. 2). Students in the groups choose the books to read, decide on sections to read, and organize a time to meet to discuss the readings. Traditional literature circles meet in the students' classroom during a reading block. This project will take the framework of the literature circle and infuse technology. The literature circles will take place entirely online through an Internet discussion board. A discussion board is a collaboration system that provides a tool for communicating ideas between participants (Lamb & Smith, 1999). The discussion board will be the place where students meet to post their thoughts about the assigned readings or to pose and answer questions.

This project was developed to get students motivated to read by providing them the opportunity to participate in a collaborative environment via the Internet. This author believes that students who are motivated to read will have greater success in reading.

Purpose/Importance

The purpose of this project is to give students an experience with telecommunications or communicating online and to motivate them to want to read. If students are more interested in reading, then they will read more and their reading comprehension will improve. According to Hollingsworth (1998), increasing the amount of time a student reads increases the student's ability to read. Furthermore, providing students with a choice in reading materials increases motivation for reading. The author found that when students are engaged in authentic reading activities such as discussing

novels in literature circles that they selected, reading comprehension improved and interest in reading increased.

This project is important because the student participants are in a low socioeconomic area and have little access to technology away from school. Page (2002) wrote that computer technology, when integrated into the classroom for significant periods of time, may also have more significant effects among students classified as low socioeconomic status. Lehrer and Randle (as cited in Page, 2002) compared the effectiveness of interactive software on first-grade students of low socioeconomic status and found that among the treatment group, problem solving was significantly enhanced and children were more adept at learning to learn. This author believes that this use of technology will give these students a rich learning experience and help them to become better readers.

Literature Review

The literature review involves two areas of study, literature circles and telecommunications. These topics have been chosen because they are the foundation of this project. The importance of this review is to cite relevant research and practice that support this project's development from traditional literature circles and the successful use of telecommunications in the classroom.

As a result of the No Child Left Behind Act, school districts across the nation have felt pressure to raise reading scores on standardized tests. Many districts are adopting new reading programs to combat their failing grades, while others are focusing on teacher training and staff development. In Iowa, the Council Bluffs Community School District is using the approach of teacher training to improve students' reading

scores. The belief in Iowa schools is that the best way to improve student achievement is to improve the teacher. The Iowa Department of Education (as written in the policy summary on Teacher Quality, 2001, P.1) stated, "Iowa can now become the state that provides the most effective professional support for beginning teachers and the strongest professional development and continued learning for experienced teachers....this effort responds to our goal of improving student learning..." Teachers in the Council Bluffs Schools are currently being trained on how to use literature circles in their reading workshops to improve student learning.

This literature review will answer two questions:

1. How can literature circles change students' attitudes toward reading?
2. Why should telecommunications be used in the elementary classroom?

Literature circles

Literature circles are a great way to get students interested in reading. While participating in a literature circle, students get to choose the reading material, divide the chosen book into reading sections, choose a role, and decide when to meet to discuss the assigned readings. This independence gives students the opportunity to work at the center of their own learning. As a result of this student-centered learning, "Students have opportunities and increased responsibility to identify their own learning needs, locate learning resources, and construct their own knowledge based on those needs." (InTime, 2001). Students will have more motivation to read and to learn if they have a stake in the situation. Student-centered learning will give them that opportunity. Students will have a direct and purposeful experience during the project. According to Dale, "It is the purposeful experience that is seen, handled, tasted, felt, touched, smelled" (Dale, 1946, p.

170). This first-hand experience will motivate students because they will be participating in a real-life learning situation.

To be successful in the literature circle, students must work well together and be able to share the power given to them by their teacher. According to InTime, a model that uses technology and standards to improve student learning at all levels, defines this power sharing as "...students directly participate in an activity in which the teacher enables the students to share authority and responsibility and a just division of roles and accountability for their tasks" (2001). Students will learn to be tolerant of other perspectives. Each student that comes to the circle has a different background. As he/she applies this prior knowledge and experience to the group discussions, all students involved benefit and learn a different perspective. Traditionally when the teacher has been the primary director of knowledge, students have had little opportunity to share their unique perspectives. But within the framework of the literature circle, all students have that opportunity. Daniels (2002) believed in introducing literature circles by using predefined roles that students take turns fulfilling. Some of the roles include: connector, questioner, passage finder, summarizer, and word finder. The connector is responsible for making connections between the reading and self, world, and other texts. The questioner is responsible for thinking of questions that will make the other group members think critically about the information in the text. The passage finder is responsible for identifying important passages in the book that should be looked at very closely. The summarizer is responsible for summarizing the important events in each reading section. And the word finder is responsible for identifying and defining any tricky word that is important in understanding the information in the book.

For students to achieve great success within the literature circle, they need to be proficient readers. In order to read proficiently many things must take place simultaneously. They must be able to recognize words, adjust reading rate, predict what is about to happen, synthesize the information, and make direct connections with one's self, the world, and other texts. Literature circles are important because they promote these active and thoughtful stances toward reading (Brabham & Villaume, 2000). The struggling reader also can have success by participating in the literature circle. Vygotsky (as cited in Lin, 2002) theorized that effective learning takes place when learners recognize their own needs and are in charge of their own learning through collaboration with more competent peers and adults. Literature circles exist because of this collaboration.

The teacher's role in the literature circle is to facilitate and to observe. Through facilitation, he can model the expected outcomes and oversee operation. Each role should be modeled by the teacher so all students completely understand the expectations. The teacher will also need to facilitate if the group is reluctant to get moving. This can easily be done through the posting of a question about the reading. The primary job of the teacher is to assess student learning without getting in the way. Assessment can be done by observing the group in action. One intermediate teacher has all of her groups meet at once while she roams among them (Brown, 2001). A middle school teacher found that she gains valuable assessment information from observing her groups. What works best for her is having one group meet at a time while she sits nearby and takes anecdotal notes (Brown, 2001). Teachers should listen for the questions students are asking along with the answers. A lot can be learned from what the students deem as important. They may

discuss events that are not critical in the book. Through observation, teachers will be able to identify this and briefly “step-into” the group to model the more appropriate outcomes. The idea is to let the students have more independence and responsibility in decision-making but to stay nearby to capture the learning that is happening. This responsibility given to the students will lead to more interest and motivation towards reading.

Telecommunications

According to the National Communications System Technology and Standards Division (1996), telecommunication is any transmission, emission, or reception of signs, signals, writing, images and sounds or intelligence of any nature by wire, radio, optical or other electromagnetic systems. In the K-12 setting, the transmission of information usually occurs over the Internet via the World Wide Web or electronic mail (email). In 1996, the Telecommunications reform act mandated that advanced telecommunication services be affordable to schools (Berenfeld, 1996). “Provisions in the act ensure that schools, libraries, hospitals and clinics are given access to advanced telecommunications services as soon as possible. These provisions are stimulating the overall national effort to connect every school child in every classroom in America to the nation’s emerging information superhighway system” (NADO, 1996). As a result of this act, most children in America’s schools are connected to the Internet.

One powerful way to use this connectivity to help children learn is through computer-mediated communication (CMC). Lamb & Smith (1999) wrote that CMC refers to computer applications for direct human-to-human communication.

CMC through the Internet allows students to submit projects, debate issues, share ideas, and reflect on readings. Henri & Rigault (as cited in Li, 2002) claimed that CMC is a

device which provides a framework for group collaboration from a distance and which, in pedagogy, can enhance collaborative learning. Coleman (as cited in Li, 2002) wrote, "The enthusiasm for collaborative learning has become so widespread that most researchers and educators believe that students learn better when they work in groups as compared to when they work autonomously." Increased levels of student-to-student interaction in computer learning environments appear to provide positive levels of student achievement (Page, 2002). A study on elementary student mathematics and science collaborative learning found "that collaborative learning in CMC settings fosters different interaction and communication patterns than in traditional face-to-face settings" (Li, 2002). CMC provides an outlet for the shy, quiet type of student. Students who are reluctant to participate in traditional classroom discussions will feel more comfortable with this non-confrontational format. Students will enhance their social, communication, and collaborative skills as they interact with others (Berenfeld, 1996). In a 2001-02 study of online literature circles in the middle school, Helt discovered:

...online discussion boards, can open new pathways for students who otherwise have difficulties succeeding in regular types of settings. For those students who do not often participate in discussion groups, possibly for having their ideas made fun of or for not sounding as smart as someone else, a discussion board takes away those threats. Without the face-to-face contact, students are free to express themselves and their ideas in a non-threatening environment (p. 58).

The findings by Helt (2003) support the inclusion of CMC. "61% of the sixth graders identified as reading below grade level in the fall, read at or above the expected level by

the end of the year” (p.31). One of her sixth grade students said, “Having a partner online was better than just the in-class discussion because someone other than your teacher and classmates hear and respond to what you have to say” (2003, p. 58). In traditional reading groups the teacher is the one who usually asks all of the questions. He assigns work, grades assignments, and provides all feedback and reinforcement. But with CMC, the teacher is not the only one to read the students’ work. Depending on how large the online community is, several peers and adults have the opportunity to provide feedback and shape the learner through reinforcement. The author believes that this is one of the most powerful aspects of telecommunications and specifically CMC. Skinner (1954) wrote about the infrequency of reinforcement in the classroom. Providing adequate feedback and reinforcement to shape all learned behaviors is impossible for one teacher to give all students on a daily basis. But with CMC, students will receive much more needed feedback. This will help all students’ learning to improve.

Because of the positive impact telecommunications has on the reluctant learner, the growth of reading achievement and critical thinking documented in many studies, and the frequent feedback and reinforcement that students receive in CMC, the author believes that telecommunications should be included in the elementary classroom.

Methodology

The author's project, online literature circles, will combine the use of literature circles and CMC. The development of the project will be discussed through the five domains of Instructional Technology: management, design, development, utilization, and evaluation (Seels & Richey, 1994).

The Management Domain

"Management involves controlling instructional technology through planning, organizing, coordinating and supervising" (Seels & Richey, 1994). The classroom teachers, along with a possible media specialist or technology coordinator will manage the project. They will be responsible for the planning and coordinating of the teacher/student participants. This project will first unite two classrooms from different buildings through CMC. The product managers must identify the classes that will participate in the project. The before mentioned individuals will also be responsible for setting up access to the computers and Internet, along with a discussion board. The technology coordinator will be responsible for setting up the discussion board. The teacher will be responsible for parental consent. The technology coordinator or teacher will be responsible in teaching all involved how to use the required technology. The technology coordinator will be responsible for backing up all information that is stored and to ensure that the hardware is working when needed. Each literature circle will have five student participants, so each site will need to have five computers with Internet access. However, one computer with Internet access will suffice if the classes use a rotating cycle. A budget will not be needed unless the participating classes do not have the required equipment.

The Design Domain

“Design is the process of specifying conditions for learning” (Seels & Richey, p.30). An important part of design to be considered in this project is learner characteristics. A needs assessment will be administered to identify the needs of all learners, adult and student. This needs assessment will focus on technology usage. In order for successful implementation, all participants will need to have basic technology skills. Each literature circle will consist of five third graders. Their ability levels will vary, and depending on the target classes, backgrounds will vary as well. The author’s classroom consists of twenty-five students of low-socioeconomic status. According to the research cited, students from low-socioeconomic areas can benefit greatly from CMC. The students range from below grade level to above.

Within the design domain, instructional strategies are the events and activities of the project. The main instructional strategies in this project will be creative responses to literature and peer discussion. Students will post an initial response to the discussion board and be required to respond to two peer’s initial responses. This will support B.F. Skinner’s theory of reinforcement and feedback. Students will receive frequent feedback from peers.

The medium for the messages to be passed will be the think.com discussion board. Mainly it will consist of text, but the availability of “virtual” post-it notes and graphics can be included in the postings. These types of visuals can motivate learners and define misunderstood concepts (Donaldson, 2002).

This project is ongoing, that is, as the instructional systems have been developed, they are revisited. The learning outcomes are based on the National Educational

Technology Standards for Students (2002) grades three through five and the National Council of Teachers of English (2001), (see Standards section). The information will be learned through collaboration with peers and interaction with the teacher. The computer skills will be learned from the teacher and student exploration, while the information from the literature will be learned through reading and conversation on the message board. Formative evaluation is used to see if the instructional design is adequate or needs improvement. The instructional design of this project was developed from the research on traditional literature circles and the success of telecommunications in the classroom. Initially an outline for the project was created to visually see a linear flow of the project.

The Development Domain

“Development is the process of translating the design specifications into physical form” (Seels & Richey, 1994). The physical form of this project will consist of integrated technologies. Students will read books and use the computer and discussion board to post their thoughts and ideas. This area of the project will not be linear in that the student can move back and forth from the book to the discussion board. Besides the book, all other resources will be found on the think.com site that will evolve from its initial setup by the instructor as more discussions take place. This domain and area of the project is dependent on the resource manager. Without proper functioning computers and access, the project will not be a success.

The Utilization Domain

“Utilization is the act of using processes and resources for learning” (Seels & Richey, 1994). This domain was critical in the development of this project in that the learners who participated had little access to technology away from school. The idea is to

have the students work in a technology rich environment. Much has been written about getting students at the center of their own learning and giving them a real-life learning situation to participate in. An implication of this project is to provide students with telecommunication experiences. Success with this type of communication will be essential in their future. Future success of this project depends on successful implementation. Will students be motivated to read? And if so, will reading comprehension improve? These questions must be answered for the project to become a natural part of the curriculum.

The Evaluation Domain

“Evaluation is the process of determining the adequacy of instruction and learning” (Seels & Richey, 1994). When implementing this project, the nature of the learner must be identified. What skills do they possess? What skills do they lack? This can be done through a needs assessment. The information gathered from this will require some decision making. If the learner is unfamiliar with the medium of instruction, the design will need to be altered. In addition, if the learner is very familiar with the medium of communication, revisiting the design of the project would be beneficial in challenging the learner’s needs.

The Scholastic Reading inventory will be given to the learners before the project to get some baseline data on their current reading level. This Inventory is a standardized test administered through the computer. Students read passages and answer multiple-choice comprehension questions. This inventory provides an accurate measure of reading comprehension and current reading level. The test will be given again after the literature circle project has ended and will be used as a post test to identify improvement in reading

comprehension. Students will also be given a reading survey before they participate in the project. This survey will ask questions about students' attitudes toward reading. The same survey will be given when the project is completed.

In the spring of 2003, pieces of this project were field tested in a third grade class from The Council Bluffs School District. The students used the think.com site to respond to questions about the book *Holes* (1999). On a main discussion board, all students responded to the following question: Who was your favorite character in the story and why? 19 of the 22 students answered the question. As the facilitator of this project, the depths of their answers were reviewed. Answers ranged from several complete sentences to just a few words. From that, a rubric was developed to provide a guide of the expected outcome. After the students initial posting, they were required to respond to one classmate's posting. Students who traditionally were very quiet and reserved in class, opened up nicely on the discussion board. The research cited in the literature review supports this finding. The author also noticed that students would add comments like, "I like you," or "you are nice." This was mainly due to their lack of experience with this medium of communication. The author recommends a trial run with this medium. In other words, let the students get familiar with the technology by just posting information about themselves. This will give students experience and will help to ease the tension.

The summative evaluation to be used at the end of the project will include a rubric, the Scholastic Reading Inventory, and the learner survey. This will be used to evaluate the success of the project. The data collected will be analyzed and the design of the project will be altered to improve instruction.

The Curriculum Project

Two classes from different schools will take part in a literature circle online. For the initial implementation of this project, five students from each class will be chosen to participate. They will be randomly chosen. Both classes will need to apply for the privilege to use the think.com web site as a medium for communication. This can be done online and via a fax. All student participants will need to have parental permission.

One of the classes will need to set up a teacher's page on think.com that will serve as the main discussion board. It is recommended that both classes practice using the site to get to know each other and to become comfortable with the medium of communication.

Procedure

Each teacher will choose five students for a total of ten students. The students will take the needs assessment so the teachers can identify their students' experiences with computers and the Internet. The students will then be given the Scholastic Reading Inventory and the reading survey. Next, the students will be instructed how to use the think.com web site and how to post information. Each of the ten students will post a short paragraph about him or her self. Students will then choose one of the books the teachers have available to read. The teacher will provide a variety of books that support the current curriculum. All ten students will read from the same book. Students will be introduced to the roles of the literature circle which includes the connector, questioner, passage finder, summarizer, and word finder. Students will choose which role each would like to do by making a statement on the discussion board. Since there will be ten participants, there will be two students per role. After the book and roles are assigned,

students must preview the book to decide on the sections to read. Each student will post their ideas and the group must come to a conclusion on the discussion board. The teachers will help if there are any problems. Next, the students will need to decide on a timeline to complete each of the sections and discussions. A five day school week should be adequate for a typical section. After a section has been read, all of the students will make an initial posting to their role's discussion board. All students will respond to a minimum of four of their peers. They must respond to four different roles. After that, all students will be required to make a minimum of one reply to someone who responded to them. This will end the discussion of the section.

Materials

Needs Assessment

Students in third grade have a wide range of reading levels and experiences with computers. Some of them may be well below grade level and have very little experience in using computers and the Internet while others are on or above grade level and have many experiences with computers. In the ideal situation, all of the students will be at or above the third grade level in reading. All of the students will meet the NETS standards for technology use at the third grade level and they will be effective communicators through CMC.

Plan for conducting the needs assessment

A survey will be administered to students to identify their attitudes towards reading, their favorite books, authors, and hobbies, along with their knowledge of using the Internet, a word processor, and saving and retrieving documents from a server. Students will also be given the Scholastic Reading Inventory to identify reading levels.

This data gathered will be analyzed to identify needs. Along with identifying current reading levels, the SRI contains a literacy inventory that will identify students' favorite genres of literature. Parents and former teachers should be contacted to learn more about the students' experiences and attitudes towards reading and computer usage.

Literature Circle Roles and Descriptions

There are five literature circle roles. The connector is responsible for making a connection between the reading and self, the reading and another book, or the reading and the world. For example, while reading the book Holes by Louis Sachar, the main character Stanley reminded me of a friend I had when I was younger. Stanley, like my friend, seemed to have bad luck wherever they went. But for both of them, their luck eventually changed.

The questioner is responsible for asking questions about the reading that will make everyone in the literature circle think. For example, how did the main character change from the beginning of the book to the end? This question makes the reader think. Stay away from questions that can be answered with a yes or no. They do not require much thinking.

The passage finder is responsible for finding a passage in the book that he/she feels is very important. This could be when a character is introduced in a fiction book, or an idea being explained in a non fiction book. The page number must be included.

The summarizer is responsible for writing about the main idea of the reading section. This should be brief and to the point. Write about the most important thing in the section. This will be a big focus on the discussion board.

The word finder is responsible for identifying any tricky, new, or interesting word found in the reading section. The word finder is responsible for finding the meaning of the word, posting the sentence where it was found (including the page number), and posting an original sentence with the “word” included.

Standards

The National Educational Technology Standards for Students will be used to assess technology usage. The purpose of NETS is to develop national standards for educational uses of technology that facilitate school improvement in the United States (2003). The standards for students were first introduced in 1998 and focused on assessing student progress and evaluating the use of technology in learning and teaching. These specific NETS will be used for this project:

- 1.1 Discuss basic issues related to responsible use of technology and information and describe personal consequences of inappropriate use.
- 1.2 Use keyboards and other common input and output devices (including adaptive devices when necessary) efficiently and effectively.
- 1.3 Use telecommunications efficiently to access remote information, communicate with others in support of direct and independent learning, and pursue personal interests.
- 1.4 Use telecommunications and online resources (e.g., e-mail, online discussions, Web environments) to participate in collaborative problem-solving activities for the purpose of developing solutions or products for audiences inside and outside the classroom.

NCTE Standards for the English Language Arts will be used. The vision guiding these standards is that all students must have the opportunities and resources to develop

the language skills they need to pursue life's goals and to participate fully as informed, productive members of society (2002). These specific NCTE will be used for this project:

2.1 Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

2.2 Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.

2.3 Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

2.4 Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

2.5 Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

2.6 Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.

2.7 Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

2.8 Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.

2.9 Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

2.10 Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

Instructional Goals and Objectives

There are two goals for the project. Each goal has one objective.

Goal 1: Students will actively participate in a discussion group.

Objective: Given a section of reading, the student will do the assigned reading then post a response to the discussion board based on his/hers role's description.

Goal 2: Students will read on grade level.

Objective: When given a grade level book, students will read 100 words with ninety-five percent accuracy.

Rubric

A four point rubric will be used to assess students during the project. A three represents the standard. A four means the student exceeded the standard. A two means the student approached the standard. A one means the student did not approach the standard.

4 – The student took an active part in choosing a role on the discussion board. The student offered insight in deciding the reading section and timeline on the discussion board. The student made a thoughtful initial posting on the appropriate message board. The student responded to more than four of his/her peers of different roles. The student replied to more than one peer who posted to his/her initial posting. All Postings were thoughtful, insightful, and on time. Each posting reflected the student’s understanding of the reading.

3 – The student chose a role on the discussion board. The student posted his/her idea for the reading section on the discussion board. The student participated on the timeline to complete each of the sections and discussions. The student made an initial posting on the appropriate message board. The student responded to four of his/her peers of different roles. The student replied to one peer who posted to their initial posting. All postings were on time. Each posting reflected the student’s understanding of the reading.

2 – The student chose a role on the discussion board. The student posted his/her idea for the reading section on the discussion board, but may not have been active in the discussion. The student participated on the timeline to complete each of the sections and discussions, but may not have been active in the discussions. The student made an initial posting on the appropriate message board. The student responded to less than four of

his/her peers of different roles. The student replied to one peer who posted to their initial posting. Some postings may have been late. The postings reflected some understanding of the readings.

1 - The student did not choose a role on the discussion board. The student did not post an idea for the reading section on the discussion board. The student did not participate on the timeline to complete each of the sections and discussions. The student may have made an initial posting, but to the wrong message board. The student responded to less than four of his/her peers of different roles. The student did not reply to one peer who posted to their initial posting. Many of the postings were late. The postings were not thoughtful or insightful. The postings did not support the student's understanding of the reading.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This author feels that this project will be widely accepted by administration and any curriculum and instruction personnel. The project is based on NETS and NCTE standards and gives students the opportunity to improve their communication skills through the use of telecommunications. The research cited supports the use of telecommunications on reading improvement. Students will enjoy this project because their needs will be met. They will get to choose the books that they want to read and will have the opportunity for independence and collaboration. This will give them ownership in the project. Students will have a direct and purposeful experience during the project. This first-hand experience will motivate students because they will be participating in a real-life learning situation.

This author recommends the use of the website www.think.com. It is a free site that provides teachers with control to set up a discussion board and email service. Students are provided with their own website that they can create that will have a direct link with the other participant's sites.

To make the students more accountable during this project, an online quiz could be developed to ensure that they have read and comprehended the reading. After the discussion time frame has ended each member of the literature group would need to pass a five-question quiz in order to move on to the next section. This idea has roots in Keller's Personalized System of Instruction or (PSI). Keller wrote ... "you must show your mastery of each unit (by passing a "readiness" test or carrying out an experiment) before moving on to the next (Keller, 1968, p. 185). Students could take the quizzes at Quizlab.com. Quizlab is a pay site that allows educators to create multiple choice or free

response quizzes. Students can take these quizzes on a computer that has Internet access. Students would have the opportunity to take the quizzes twice. If they failed the first time they would need to reread the assigned pages and review the discussion. The teacher/facilitator, who created the quizzes, will have the final say in passing the student onto the next section if the quiz is failed a second time. The quizzes and the discussions will weigh equally in the decision to move the student on. This will require more work from the manager, (teacher or technology coordinator), but will yield more data to be used to assess reading comprehension.

The introduction of online literature circles can help students to improve their reading comprehension by motivating them to want to read. Research points to the relationship between motivation and success in school. The independence and collaboration that takes place during this project will motivate students.

The technology used in this project will give students an opportunity to participate in an online community. Students will learn how to become effective communicators and become proficient with the Internet and a message board forum. For these reasons cited, the author recommends the use of online literature circles in the elementary classroom.

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Appendices

Survey for students

Do you like to read? Yes No

Who do you know that you think is a good reader?

What makes that person a good reader?

Do you think you are a good reader? Why or why not?

What are some of your favorite books?

What types of books do you like to read?

Who are some of your favorite authors?

What are some of your hobbies?

Do you know how to log on to the computer network at school? Yes No

Do you know how to get on the Internet? Yes No

Do you know how to use Email? Yes No

Do you know how to use a word processor? Yes No

Do you know how to save your work on the computer? Yes No

Do you know how to open up your saved work? Yes No

Literature circle roles, descriptions, and directions

Connector

The connector is responsible for making a connection between the reading and self, the reading and another book, or the reading and the world. For example, while reading the book *Holes* (1999), the main character Stanley reminded me of a friend I had when I was younger. Stanley, like my friend, seemed to have bad luck wherever they went. But for both of them, their luck eventually changed.

Questioner

The questioner is responsible for asking questions about the reading that will make everyone in the literature circle think. For example, how did the main character change from the beginning of the book to the end? This question makes the reader think. Stay away from questions that can be answered with a yes or no. They do not require much thinking.

Passage Finder

The passage finder is responsible for finding a passage in the book that he/she feels is very important. It could be when a character is introduced if it is a fiction book, or an idea being explained in a non fiction book. The page number must be included.

Summarizer

The summarizer is responsible for writing about the main idea of the reading section. This should be brief and to the point. Write about the most important thing in the section. This will be a big focus on the discussion board.


Word Finder


The word finder is responsible for identifying any tricky, new, or interesting word found in the reading section. The word finder is responsible for finding the meaning of the word, posting the sentence where it was found (including the page number), and posting an original sentence with the “word” included.

Example of a message board

This is what a message board on think.com looks like.

Literature Circle #1






Message Board - June 15, 2003
Passage Finder

New! You are responsible for finding a passage in the book that you feel is very important. It could be when a character is introduced if it is a fiction book, or an idea being explained in a non fiction book. Be sure to include the page number.

Messages:

↑ Move ↓




Message Board - June 15, 2003
Questioner

New! Write a question about the reading. Remember, make us think. What do you want us to know about the reading?

Messages:

↑ Move ↓



Message Board - June 15, 2003
Connector

New! Write about a connection you had between the reading and yourself, the reading and another book, or the reading and the world.

Post a Message

Messages:

↑ Move ↓

Cut & Paste Delete Edit



Message Board - June 15, 2003

Word Finder

New!

Write the word you found. Be sure to tell us what it means. Write the sentence it was used in and write a new sentence using it.

Post a Message

Messages:

↑ Move ↓

Cut & Paste Delete Edit



Message Board - June 15, 2003

Summarizer

New!

Summarize the section. Be sure to write about the main idea in the section. What do you think was the most important part?

Post a Message

Messages:

↑ Move ↓

Cut & Paste Delete Edit