

April 2020 | Volume **77** | Number **7**

Deeper Discussions Pages 68-73

[Issue Table of Contents](#) | [Read Article Abstract](#)

Blogging About Books

Jennifer Stewart-Mitchell

Taking discussions online can help students open up and get creative.

A number of years ago (and I will not tell you exactly how many), I was *that* 8th-grade teacher. The one who gave the same book to each student. For every chapter there were comprehension questions and class discussions. In the discussions, I would try to tease out opinions from students like Jordyn, an introvert who always had the most insightful written responses on the reading but was too shy to share them with the class. I was the facilitator of the conversation about what we were reading, and if I did not guide it, it was not going to go anywhere.

A few years later, literature circles emerged. This was a format where students were divided into small groups and asked to discuss a particular novel in depth, guided by prompts from the teacher. The students were also assigned specific roles, such as "discussion director," "word wizard," or "connector," and each role had specific tasks that needed to be completed and shared with the group during discussion. It was a step up from my comprehension questions, but it still did not engage students like Travis, who struggled to keep up and bluntly stated that the roles were dumb. He just wanted to talk about the book or "do something different." Literature circles *were* different, yet they still did not capture the students' interest to the degree I thought they would. Students were connecting in their smaller groups, but the conversations were not as in-depth as I had hoped, and there was still a need for more creative ways to capture their interest.

Several years ago, I was introduced to a new approach, the book club. The framework involved dividing a novel into five sections for five weeks of the study. Book clubs are somewhat similar to literature circles in that students are assigned to groups based on their interest and reading level, but there are no assigned roles. Instead of rotating through roles that sometimes seem tedious and overly prescriptive, my students dug deeper into discussions, trying to understand the author's message and reflecting on personal connections they made with the story. Each week had a different critical-response prompt—for example, on making predictions, exploring character development, and trying to understand the author's message. The opportunities for deep discussions were there, but was it enough to engage Travis or encourage quiet Jordyn to share her ideas?

Then I realized there *was* something more I could do. My students' smartphone obsession led me to the answer. It was apparent that with every tweet, text, or post, my students were completely engaged. I needed to capitalize on that connectivity. What would it look like to merge book clubs and a digital learning platform? Would my students' natural interest in communicating online transfer to an academic setting? Or would the discussions be superficial and challenging? I knew that I wanted to take the risk and find out.

Mind Your C's and Q's

I decided to try blogging and teacher-facilitated online discussions to create a digital book club for my students. I first taught the students the basics of blogging—navigating the blogging platform, writing catchy titles, including hyperlinks to relevant online sources—and then posted prompts each week for them to respond to. Students would then set up their own blog posts, labeled with "Week One, (Book Title abbreviation)", and then a catchy, original title, such as, "The Day Her Life Changed Forever" or "Revealing What was Hidden." The students' posts explored questions related to reading strategies or literary elements such as considering the setting or exploring conflicts.

Blogging allows students the opportunity to share in a space where their voice will be heard by more than just a teacher. But there is more to blogging than just writing an initial post. The key is to nurture a conversation through the comments section. Through teacher instruction and modeling of how to connect with the work of others, teachers can develop these meaningful online conversations. A teacher-facilitated discussion allows the teacher to guide, model, and nurture meaningful feedback, thereby pushing students to go beyond their perceived limits.

Some students needed to be encouraged to share their voices. For example, Jordyn became adept at making textual and personal connections with her classmates' posts, which gave her group members a sense of audience and the confidence to share their thoughts as well. These online connections allowed students to truly feel like they were heard—and not just by their teacher.

When facilitating a digital book club, it is also important to ensure that discussions are substantive. Teachers have to get students chatting about something they care about. This means not only providing a space where students can talk about issues or topics related to what they are learning, but also modeling how to comment and keep that discussion going.

Commenting is the key to developing in-depth digital conversations. The format that I have used for book clubs and all digital discussions is the 3C's and a Q framework, which I've tweaked from a framework I found online many years ago. It works like this: *compliment* (compliment the person on something specific in the post), *comment* (comment on something relevant and meaningful about what is

written), *connect* (make a textual connection—text to text, text to self, text to world, or text to media), and finally, *question* (ask a specific question about what is written and keep the conversation going).

Here's an example excerpted blog conversation using this technique, from students discussing *Legend* by Marie Lu. Michael posted the following on his blog in response to deep thinking questions about how one of the characters in the book dies:

How Did Metias Die?

Why does the main character's family always die, or why are they killed when something shouldn't have killed them? Day's dagger shouldn't have killed Metias and here's why. Day hit Metias in the shoulder with his dagger, not a fatal wound. For him to bleed out is just ridiculous because it would take about 5 to 10 minutes for him to bleed out. Maybe if he was somewhere other than a hospital [when the stabbing happened], it's dumb to think Metias would have died from that. This is why I think someone killed Metias after Day injured him.

Stephanie posted the following comment in response:

Great job Mike! I really like your second question, and it is obvious that you put a lot of time into it. Your comment about "someone else" killing Metias also has valid information backing it up and can possibly be true. I made the same connection of Day having to choose between his family and being found; but I found it as more of a risk between saving Eden (from the plague) or hiding his connection to his family for their safety. Overall great job, but who do you think killed Metias with what you have read so far?

Mike responded:

Thanks for the comments Stephanie. I think that someone higher up in the military had something to do with the murder. It could be someone else that was close to them that was also part of their troupe [sic] or something like that.

This example shows the 3 C's and a Q framework in action: Stephanie validated Mike's reaction, commented on something he'd written, and kept the discussion going with her question.

Provide Opportunities to Critically and Creatively Engage

Learning in a digital world means being able to engage critically with content as well as to represent ideas digitally using a variety of multimedia, including video, memes, storyboards, and other elements. Each week, students in the digital book club posted two different types of responses, a critical and creative response. The critical response focused on reading strategies and literary elements, in response to my prompt. Setting-focused critical response prompts, for example, included questions such as, "Where does the story take place? What year is it? Use a direct quote from the story to support your answer." To further their thinking, students were asked, "Based on the setting, what do you predict the conflict will be? What clues do you have to support your hypothesis?"

But it was with the creative response that the students really thrived. With this response, they were given a chance to represent their thinking through multimedia, where they could use elements like character memes, setting collages, key quotation GIFs, "in-character" social media posts, and videos. For example, one student created a series of visual memes portraying the reactions of characters who were selected to join in the games in *The Hunger Games*. Imagine an image of someone looking shocked with the caption, "*That moment you realize—there are kids in the games who trained to be tributes.*" Another student created a Dystopian Public Service Announcement video narrated from the perspective of the rebels rising in the novel *Among the Hidden*. To spark their creativity, students used tools such as Adobe Spark, WeVideo, Sway, and even PowerPoint.

Students should always be encouraged to take the lead when it comes to incorporating digital tools because this can deepen their engagement with learning. By giving students the chance to create with apps and online platforms on their devices, you are helping to bridge a tool they use for communication or entertainment with their learning. Giving this choice deepens their interest and engagement and empowers them to choose platforms that allow them to represent their thinking best.

Respectfully Disagreeing

Students like Travis could no longer just say, "Good job. I like your blog." They actually had to read and *engage* with the posts of their book club members. They had to follow the commenting framework and think about their connections and whether or not they agreed with the opinions or thinking of their fellow book club group members.

Sometimes they didn't agree, so they needed to be taught the language of how to politely and tactfully disagree. To help with the language, I provided sentence stems to frame their thinking. Stems such as, "*You make a good point about ..., but I want to point out that ...*", were used for commenting. Other connective stems included, "*When you say ... it reminds me of ...*", or "*I really like your point that*" Teaching students the language for engaging when they don't agree is central to teaching digital citizenship and online etiquette.

When students engage with the insights and ideas of their classmates, they develop a deeper appreciation of the perspectives of others. And through the process of exploring the writing of their peers, students are able to reflect on and understand their own reading better. For example, one of my students was struggling to understand the motivations of a character in *The Hunger Games*. He was actually angry about the character's motives, thinking he had betrayed another character. After reading another book club member's post, however, he came to a better understanding of the complexity of the motives, which helped enrich his own reading of the novel.

Broadening the Discussion

Since my first efforts with the digital book clubs, my district, the Regina Catholic School Division in Saskatchewan, Canada, has refined the format by connecting multiple classrooms at multiple schools. About six years ago, with the help of a few brave classroom teachers, we created an Interschool Digital Book Club. This took a great deal of collaboration and provided opportunities for students from different schools within the district to engage in online discussions. Today, our book clubs offer a variety of themes and grade levels and have spread throughout our district of 32 schools, with teachers from almost every school in grades 4 to 12 participating. These book clubs not only encourage students to have a passion for reading, but they have also created collaborative networks where teachers engage in teaching reading strategies.

A few years ago, I moved from the classroom to a position as the district's education technology coordinator. In this new role, I have been able to help expand this digital book club structure from within to create collaborative teaching communities. The buy-in has been wholehearted and exciting, as teachers have seen the positive impact that it has had on their students.

After the interschool book club launched, many students have commented that they made more effort when they worked on their blog posts, because it was not just *their* teacher or classmates reading them. Other students said they appreciated sharing with other classes and liked that "no one criticized anyone else's opinion." These comments provided insight into how student thinking and learning was positively impacted through connections. The students' insights also confirmed the importance of explicitly teaching how to interact in positive ways online.

The introduction of technology helped students like Travis and Jordyn engage in book discussions in a more meaningful way, improving their learning and pushing them beyond their perceived limits. By publishing their work to a wider audience, technology allowed them to share their voice and, more important, encouraged them to become more reflective writers. Making books clubs digital and connected helped me meet my students where they were and created a safe place for them to share their thoughts and opinions.

They were so involved and excited about the collaborative process that they didn't even stop to think about how much they were learning.

Jennifer Stewart-Mitchell is the design and training coordinator for the Regina Catholic School Division in Saskatchewan, Canada, with a background in middle years education and as a teacher-librarian.