

Forums and Functions of Threaded Discussions

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Jerry, a student in my class thought about the post all day. “What will happen in Sounder? What evidence can I use from the cover and the online sharecropping presentation to back up my prediction?” These thoughts raced through his head. Once the school bell rang he headed straight for the computers at the local library. Jerry logged on to the secure threaded discussion used in his language arts class, and began to think back to the photo montage I posted on my classroom website. Then he recalled the image of the books cover I had uploaded. Next he sat down, typed the address of my website and clicked on the link to the online classroom discussions. Jerry scanned the posts of his peers, mentally judging the validity of the predictions and the quality of the post his classmates read. Now ready and with a picture in his mind, Jerry’s fingers excitedly danced across the keyboard.

I hope Jerry and his peers developed an understanding of literacy by posting questions and responses online, in a series of organized conversation to a class forum. I had integrated threaded discussions into their language arts classroom. Threaded discussions are online conversations people have by posting topics and responses to WebPages called forums. Participants consider each topic a thread, and replies as “strings” of conversations. This asynchronous conversation has found its way onto college campuses everywhere. Institutions and researchers have dedicated entire journals to the study of distance education. If teachers of K-12 students wish to develop the literacy skills students will need in secondary education then we must include threaded discussions into today’s classrooms.

Asynchronous conversations could allow students to more efficiently construct the knowledge and cognitive skills needed for the development of literacy, and instructors should include this powerful methodology into primary, intermediate, and high school settings.

Threaded discussions may: a) improve literacy integration, b) increase traditional literacy skills, and c) require and benefit from new literacies.

Literacy construction may develop from the use of threaded discussions because of the integration of modalities that asynchronous conversations require. Gavlek, Raphael, Biondo and Wang (2000) identified three categories of integrated language arts “integrated language arts, integrated curriculum, and integration in and out of school,” (pp 590). Each of these three components develops with the use of threaded discussions.

First, an integrated language arts approach involves simultaneous instruction of listening, talking, reading and writing. Threaded discussions provide a forum that requires students to both read and write in a new form of conversation.

Threaded discussions can also lead to a more integrated curriculum. Students can post response about how they read a textbook, or what they notice when reading that text. Students could also debate a current social issue. Infinite activities exist that would allow students to use literacy skills while constructing content knowledge.

Furthermore threaded discussions also integrate home and school. Research has shown that students involved in online discussion spend more time out of the house thinking about their learning and responding to teacher and peer questions (Meyer, 2003). The portal for asynchronous conversation becomes a virtual extension of the classroom. The motivation that students find when using technology will have students running home to access the online learning environment. Students who benefit from a language arts class that integrates digital text may build traditional literacy practices such as community, comprehension, motivation, and metacognition.

Students need a learning environment full of high quality talk to construct meaning (Duke & Pearson, 2002) because communities not only give students the opportunities to discuss prior knowledge, a text, or opinion but they provide students opportunities to try out strategies they are learning (Ketch, 2005). Teachers can easily build this community through the use of asynchronous classrooms. In fact, judging by the quality of responses, threaded discussions build these communities more effectively than the traditional talk found in the classroom (Grisham & Wosley 2006).

Students view discussion boards as communities. Many already have online personas that include avatars, pictures the students choose to represent themselves, and personal profiles. They interact with their peers, and their text. Teachers can use student familiarity with the technology to create a virtual classroom that extends beyond the school. Furthermore threaded discussions give students a chance to try out specific skills while discussing text or content. Imagine students online viewing and responding to the posts each other submits. They have to read the post and converse through written expression. By their very nature threaded discussions create the community necessary for the construction of knowledge. This social learning and talking about literacy may lead to gains in comprehension.

Teachers can use threaded discussions to lead to the greater development of comprehension. For example, studies have shown that students develop better online posts than written responses to literature (Beeghly, 2005) and students use higher order thinking skills in forums. In fact, students used some higher order thinking skills, such as evaluation to a greater extent in the online learning environment (Myer, 2003).

Also, when teachers provide students a forum to discuss text analysis students will have to draw upon specific comprehension strategies in order to effectively participate. Furthermore,

students can share background knowledge and build collaborative digital texts to promote word study. These tools may help students become more aware of what and how they learn. The opportunities to have students think about any number of skills can only lead to gains in literacy. Construction of knowledge does not happen without reflection, and threaded discussions force students to reflect on how they learn.

How an instructor organizes a threaded discussion can influence the level of metacognition involved in learning. For example, when teachers design a discussion board for the classroom they should allow for many opportunities for reflection. Students can reflect on their use of the forums, specific comprehension skills, connections they have to characters, their role as readers and writers, or even current events. These types of student centered learning activities may lead to students more willing to learn.

Threaded discussions can lead to higher motivation. First, the use of asynchronous conversation improves the role of reluctant readers (McNabb, 2006). Also, students produce a higher quality of work when they know their words will appear online (Kymes, 2005). Having students communicate online will connect school to the online world. Students will want to rush home, or to the library to see what their peers have posted. Many students will extend learning beyond the text and draw connections to their personal lives. In order to benefit from this higher motivation students will need new skills and knowledge, because the process of learning in a threaded discussion differs greatly from both conversation and traditional written response (Larson & Kaiper 2002). Therefore forums also require new literacies to navigate.

In today's digital world people constantly define themselves, the world, and literacy with ever changing speed as digital text include video, blogs, vlogs, wikis, rss feeds, and many more collaborative reading and writing tools evolve. This collection of new Internet Communication

Technologies redefine literacy and increase the collaborative nature of reading and writing (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004). In fact, the International ICT Panel (2002) defines information communication technology literacy as " using digital technology communication tools, and/or networks to access, manage, integrate, evaluate, and create information in order to function in an information society." (pp 6). Not only do these new literacies define students, but that definition can evolve with each new emerging technology. Threaded discussion represent one of those ICT's that change how students learn through reading and writing.

For example, students can locate information on the Internet and include a hyperlink in a post, but what makes their source viable? Students need to read digital texts critically and evaluate the validity of information online as a cornerstone of new literacies. How do distant learners decide what information the audience will find useful? Then students have to use these sources for elaboration. Finally, how do they communicate those ideas in a forum that combines elements of writing and conversation? Each of these scenarios highlights the changing nature of literacy. Leu (2006) defines new literacies as:

The new literacies of online reading comprehension include the skills, strategies, and dispositions necessary to ... use the Internet and other ICT to identify important questions, locate information, analyze the usefulness of that information, synthesize information to answer those questions, and then communicate the answers to others.

Threaded discussion not only require students to question, locate, analyze and communicate information, but they also build the knowledge and skills of new literacies. Imagine a child who just downloaded and read one article opposing school uniforms and viewed a website supporting strict dress codes. The student has to form an opinion and post a reaction to the article in a threaded forum. She decides that more information is needed and searches the Internet. Then she

finds the support necessary for her post. To communicate this information, and to cite a source she highlights the claim from the research and inserts a hyperlink the audience can follow back to the original source. This example highlights the fact that threaded discussion both require and build new literacies.

### Getting Started

First, teachers need to choose what software to use, and many options for the integration of threaded discussions exist. Educators can decide on commercial or free software with different benefits and learning curves. Teachers need to consider security, cost, learning curves, and technical support when evaluating options for threaded discussions. Schools need to pick software that fits the needs of the local learning environment.

Most importantly, threaded forums need to be secure. Students should only access their accounts using a screen name and password. The forums should not be open to the general public.

Cost remains another concern. Free software does exist that allows schools to integrate forums into threaded discussions. Many online resources exist that evaluate free threaded discussions. Teachers can visit Berkeley's English as a second language [file://localhost/site at http://www-writing.berkeley.edu/TESL-EJ/ej26:m1.html](http://www-writing.berkeley.edu/TESL-EJ/ej26:m1.html). This site evaluates the pros and cons of free threaded discussions. This software, however, does not come without pitfalls. Some companies fund these programs with banner advertising. These ads can often contain messages inappropriate for students or malicious programs that slow down computers or track users. Teachers can also use *wiki* software, free collaborative data software, to host threaded discussion, but this often requires knowledge of some basic programming tools. One example of this

collaborative software is the collaborative encyclopedia wikipedia.org. Teachers can download wiki software from <http://wikimedia.org> or use web hosting wikis such as <http://pbwiki.com>. Other free software such as <http://www.moodle.com> provides safe and open source classroom management tools that allow teachers to use threaded discussions, but they often have steeper learning curves than commercial products.

Many companies such as <http://www.finalsite.com> provide educators with tools to integrate forums into a class website. Educators will find this software easy to use, but requiring an investment of resources. Anyone who can use a basic word processor can manage the discussions. Commercial companies may also provide on site training as part of the contract and have easily accessible customer service when compared to free resources. When considering what product to choose teachers need to balance security, cost and ease of use.

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Table 1.2

Resources for Teachers

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Moodle <a href="http://moodle.com/">http://moodle.com/</a>	Free online course management. Teachers can run threaded discussion, post course materials.
Mediawiki <a href="http://www.mediawiki.org/wiki/MediaWiki">http://www.mediawiki.org/wiki/MediaWiki</a>	Free software teachers can use to build collaborative websites. Educators could structure it for threaded discussion.
PBWiki <a href="http://pbwiki.com/">http://pbwiki.com/</a>	Free and easy to use wiki designed for classroom use. Includes many extras.

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Thinkpad

<http://www.typepad.com/>

The world's most popular blogging software can bring free online discussions to the classroom.

Webct

<http://www.webct.com/>

Commercial course management tool used on many college campuses.

Finalsite

<http://finalsite.com/>

Educational web hosting company that has a easy to use threaded forum modules.

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### Organize

After choosing software that meets the needs of the local environment, the instructor must also organize the threaded discussion. First, choose your goal. Do you want to build comprehension, or increase literary discussion? Next, decide on how you wish students to accomplish those outcomes. This includes determining the rules and structure of the posts. Will students be required to post a specific number of times? Will different threads be used for different discussions? Students should draw upon their prior knowledge and have choice in how the conversation unfolds. When organizing a threaded discussion classroom, educators must develop an active role for the student.

### Model

Then, teachers need to model the skills students need to effectively post online (Wosley, Biesenbach-Lucas, & Meloni, 2004). Once an instructor decides on the purpose of the

conversation and determines the criteria for a good post and conversation, he or she needs to model not only the use of the technology but also the qualities of good threaded discussions. This can involve the creation of a classroom models, showing exemplars from past classes, or even ongoing teacher posts to the conversation that help facilitate the discussion.

### Facilitate

The instructor not only acts as a model, but also a guide that facilitates conversation. For instance, if teachers do not ask students to respond to each other's posts students will make more declarations rather than clarifications (Larson & Keiper, 2002) in classroom forums. Teachers can offer simple praise when they see students responding to each other posts. Also, teachers can move along threads that can get caught in the minutia of debates. Students often need to be guided into conversations. Many times they will just answer each others' questions or address the topics posted by the teacher. The instructor must provide a system that moves students beyond declarative statements. In order for conversation to develop students need t critique the posts of their peers, debate, and write collaboratively. Finally, teachers need to facilitate any conflicts and monitor the boards for appropriateness.

### Assess

Also, teachers need to continuously assess the progress of students as they use threaded discussions in the construction of knowledge and skills. This includes not only the quality of the post, but any literacy skill being developed or content knowledge being constructed. In other words the quality and the content of the conversation can act as an authentic measurement tool that provides students with an opportunity to learn from assessment (Edelstein & Edwards, 2002). This assessment must also include differentiation for students who demonstrate different

levels of mastery of literacy skills such as comprehension and literature response (Wosley et. al., 2004).

As stated by Klemm (2005), the instructor must include the learner in the assessment process of online conversations. Grisham and Wosley (2005) found that both students, pre-service teachers, and experience teachers can identify good writing in a post and score posts with high reliability among readers. Including students in the assessment process leads to authentic measurement that allows students to learn.

Teachers and researchers have created many rubrics for the measurement of online posts (Edlestin & Edwads, 2002). These rubrics measure both the quality of the post and the use of content knowledge. Whether an instructor chooses a criterion based rubric, that assigns an overall score to a student's post or an analytical rubric that measures specific components of a good post depends on the goals and outcomes the teacher identifies. In other words, a rubric for teaching students the quality of a good post may differ from a rubric that measures student's understanding of content through asynchronous conversation. Furthermore, instructors need to take into account the needs of students when designing measurement tools. One model of assessment that can adapt to any type of rubric is a model I developed called CRAVE. This assessment tool asks students to reflect on their own work, and helps to guide intermediate students in the use of threaded discussions (see table 1.2).

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Table 1.2

CRAVE

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C-Connect to another thread or post

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R- Respond to and Restate the purpose of the thread

topic

A-Answer the thread topic with specific details

V-Use vocabulary from the classroom or text

E- Provide examples from the text or outside sources.

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### Examples for the Classroom

If teachers integrate threaded discussions into their literacy instruction they must include student-centered, meaningful, and engaging learning activities (Sprague & Dede, 1999). To understand the role of the student in a threaded discussion it may be useful to look at some instructional strategies.

#### *Response to Literature*

Teachers will find literary discussions to be one of the easiest models to adapt to the online learning environment of threaded discussions. The methodology works much like the questions and response sessions teachers use in oral discussions. Basically the teacher or students develop questions and their classmates post responses. The teacher needs to guide students into developing queries that will spark meaningful conversation and use the forums to teach literature response.

To develop an understanding of the skills necessary to write a quality response to literature teachers can also put holistic rubrics online and examples of posts that would meet the

criteria of each score. Students could be challenged to write a post that would then qualify for each score on the holistic rubric.

In my class we begin the year by reading Willam Armstrong's Souder, a story of a boy who turns to reading to overcome tragedy, loneliness, racism and poverty. First students viewed a PowerPoint montage I posted online, and a preview of the cover that I uploaded to the Webpage. Students could then develop prediction questions or respond to the queries of their peers online or in a traditional journal (see table 1.4). Since, at the time, I did not have access to threaded discussion software students submitted their thread topics or responses through web forms. Then I posted threads online by using simple tables. Luckily, our web hosting provider, like much software and services available today, makes it so anyone capable of word processing can build a website. The students began responding to literature not as an assignment, but on their own time and outside of the class.

The example I provide was a small snippet of a pre-reading activity. The complexity of the literature responses will depend on the classroom. High school students could post essays detailing their analysis of the Hemingway's archetype hero and primary students could fill in the blanks of prompts or even post stars as review of books in class.

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Table 1.3

Example of Literature Response Thread

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## Predict

Thread: Predict what <u>Sounder</u> will be about.	Posted by: Mr Mac
I predict Sounder would be about a boy who is black, and a sharecropper and is in the time of the Great Depression. He has to find out how to live and to work with others to earn money and get food. He has to work with an absentee landloard and some other people. He also lost his family. That is what I predict the book Sounder would be about.	
I predict that the book Sounder is about a boy that found a dog. The boy was a sharecropper and he wanted to run away. Also becuae there wasn't anyone ells on the cover besides the boy and the dog, I think that the boy has now family members or he just cant reach them.	
I think it will be about a boy and his dog named Sounder and they run into some sort of trouble. Maybe a family member or friend gets sick or dies from being a sharecropper and working too hard. I predict that the boy and his dog will be on there own because only him and his dog are on the cover. Maybe Sounder will get sick or die or get hurt. That's what I predict Sounder will be about.	
I think that sounder will be about a boy and a dog and how the boy was asharecropper and how he and his dog lived together in a bad house all alone and when there ther something good might happen like them becoming free from sharecropping.	
I predict that Sounder is about a little African-American boy that is a sharecropper. I also might think that his parents might be sharecroppers. I think his family is very poor and might live in a very old looking, dirty, and small house with his family and other people. I think that he might work for someone out in the cotton feild because that whats alot of young boys did and that his parents work for a person.	
i think sounder will be about a boy who has lost his parents, has to be become a sharecropper not by chioce, and his only compaignion is his dog sounder. sounder is the only thing he can trust , rely on, depend on, and he is always there for him. he will never leave.	

Palinscar and Brown (1984) created a literacy intervention to encourage students to internalize four cognitive processes used during reading. Teachers can apply this same strategy online.

First the teacher creates one thread for each of the four skills, or for other comprehension skills such as visualizations or connections. Then a teacher can place students in learning groups. One group can facilitate the board a week. They “teaching group” will be responsible for posting a summary of that week’s reading, post predictions about what will happen next, and for posting questions for student’s to answer before, during and after reading. Finally, the group can identify concepts for an online dictionary of key terms and vocabulary. The other groups will then assess the teaching group’s summary. Next they respond to the discussion questions and to each others’ posts. Finally, they add definitions and clarifications to the online dictionary thread.

### *Online Case Studies*

Instructors might want to consider a case study model for students with higher comprehension skills when building a threaded discussion to teach literacy. Researchers have noted that threaded discussions need to move beyond bulletin boards and into the realms of collaborative writing (Klemm, 2005). Case studies provide a perfect platform for such a transition.

Teachers can first create a thread with an initiating question, and students can post initial thoughts. Thus, activating prior knowledge. The instructor then can include two opposing viewpoint as attachments to a thread. Next, students download and read the material. Then students discuss with group members, their opinions about the reading.

After the students analyze and reflect on the text, the instructor creates a thread with a final question. Each group must create a response to the question and validate their position with

the provided text. The internal debate of the groups as they develop a final draft will foster learning. In fact research into higher order thinking skills during threaded has shown that the largest increase in skills, especially evaluation, occurs during debate (Jeong, 2003).

Once each group has posted a final draft of their collaborative writing each person will then have to evaluate and analyze another group's post and then publish a reflection on their original post.

### *Book Club*

The book club model offers teachers a way to increase involvement, motivation, and accountability in independent reading or sustained silent reading curriculum. Students could post reviews of books they have read, talk about favorite authors, or discuss literature in groups revolving around genre choice. First the teacher designs an independent reading curriculum. Then he or she decides how the students will post response. Then provide students with classroom time to independently read and respond online.

Activities such as these can encourage and motivate students to read. Reluctant readers may find a genre or author they enjoy. On my website, <http://www.ctreg14.org/page.cfm?p=913>, I created a threaded discussion entitled, "What are You Reading Now?" Students would post reviews of books they read.

### *Author's Corner*

Educator's can also use threaded discussion to increase time students spend independently writing. First, create forums specifically for authors. Students could use these threads to post original poetry. Creative writers could share ideas for short stories. Essayists could debate positions in persuasive editorials.



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Then the students could create an area that offers support and critiques the author.

Collaborative groups would peer edit pieces through replies. Students could discuss each other's work in an online environment. Imagine having students not only practicing peer editing but also finding it beneficial and enjoyable.

### Conclusion

Teachers who wish to develop curriculum and methodology to teach new literacies while building traditional skills should incorporate threaded discussions into the classroom. These online conversations will motivate students to read and talk about literature while building the new literacies people need in the global economy. Anyone with basic word processing skills can now build the forums for asynchronous chat. In fact educators have many free and commercial programs to evaluate and choose. Once the forums begin teachers can adapt many learning activities such as literature response, reciprocal teaching, and case studies to the online environment. In fact literacy instructors will quickly see students like Jerry that flock to the computers, even after the final bell, to talk about what they read in class.

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