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Online Collaborative Literature Circles For Small Groups Of Elementary Gifted Language Arts Students

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ONLINE COLLABORATIVE LITERATURE CIRCLES FOR SMALL

GROUPS OF ELEMENTARY GIFTED LANGUAGE ARTS STUDENTS

by

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Abstract

School schedules and the study of advanced literature content often do not allow enough collaboration time to meet the unique learning needs of gifted elementary language arts students. The author's guiding question to address this challenge was: how can I create and implement an effective online collaborative novel study unit for small groups of gifted language arts students? The literature review includes an examination of general literature circle models, including definitions and explanations of student and teacher roles; implications for integrating technology into literature circles; and an overview of several instructional models and lesson plan templates. Utilizing an online platform for collaborative literature circles is one method of helping meet the needs of gifted elementary language arts students when it is not possible to meet in face-to-face literature circle discussions. A Google Site was created as a platform to provide structure and interaction opportunities among students in an online literature circle format.

Keywords: literature circles, online learning, elementary

Dedication

To my supportive husband, Jason, who encourages my faith through all of life's twists and turns. To my four boys, Andrew, Jacob, Ryan, and Matthew, like the four directions on a compass, who guide me and provide inspiration for all I do.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Introduction to Capstone Project

There are just never enough hours in the day! This is a common phrase often uttered from those who wish to be more thorough, more effective, and more efficient with their time, especially in professional settings. This sentiment most certainly rings true in the education world as well. Teachers struggle each day while striving to provide meaningful learning experiences within the context of limited time allotted for a myriad of worthy educational pursuits and learning goals. When faced with a time crunch, or an explicit time deficit, teachers must get creative with educational content and instructional delivery models in order that learning goals are still reached. That premise of doing more, albeit differently in the classroom as a result of limited time with students is the basis for this Capstone project. Thinking about specific language arts learning goals for upper elementary students, along with their unique learning styles and collaboration preferences, is the focal point for developing a way to more efficiently and effectively use every precious moment of the school day for instruction. Creating more effective online collaborative novel study units and literature circles is the center of my research with the goal of maximizing students' potential to continue to learn and grow, despite never seeming to have enough hours in the school day.

Research question. This chapter introduces the following research question: *How can I create and implement an effective online collaborative novel study unit for small groups of gifted language arts students?* This question leads to many other related questions. More specifically, what technology, organizational, and executive function skills will be necessary in order for this academic extension opportunity to be successful? In addition, how will this experience with this group of students challenge and allow me to improve my overall teaching strategies and techniques? What impact will this method of gifted services support have on groups of learners, given the alternative is for far less interaction to occur without the implementation of a collaborative online learning community? Where, when, and with whom will I find time to develop the necessary technology skills in order to create and implement a comprehensive online learning framework? As you can see, one question leads to another, which can serve to enrich and further focus the original research question surrounding the development of an online collaborative literature circle framework.

Chapter overview. The primary purpose of this chapter is to introduce the brief rationale and need for a more creative use of classroom instructional time for small groups of gifted students in the area of language arts instruction. In contemplating the development of an effective online collaborative novel study framework for these small groups of gifted language arts students, professional and personal reasons for this Capstone project will be highlighted. The educational setting and context for this question will also be presented, as well as possible challenges to the creation and implementation of an effective, engaging online novel study framework for upper elementary students.

Rationale and Background Information

For the past three years I have served as a gifted specialist in a Minnesota school district of about 4,500 students, providing direct instructional support for approximately 300 elementary students on a weekly basis in three different buildings. The need for an online interactive novel study framework started to reveal itself as I worked out my schedule this past fall for providing direct gifted services for students in grades 3-5, and thus this became the basis for the research setting. In one particular elementary school, the building principal directed me to work with 4th grade students more frequently than the other grade levels, in part to help alleviate large class sizes. This equated to the majority of my time being spent supporting 4th grade students, and only allowed for 30 minutes a week to support advanced 5th grade language arts students. This time to meet with the 5th graders was on Friday mornings, as was the preference for the classroom teacher. This was more of a challenge than I originally anticipated. There were so many Fridays that students either were not in school due to holidays or there were special school-wide programs on Friday mornings that interfered with our time together. Ironically enough, the first time we met as a small group we only had half the time we planned since the rest of it was interrupted by a fire drill.

Seeking creative solutions to learning situation challenges. When thinking about ways to connect with these students other than our limited face-to-face opportunities, I began thinking about the possibility of creating an online novel study unit. Fortunately, all upper elementary students in the district have 1:1 access to an iPad and the district supports the use of Schoology as a learning management system. However, I am unfamiliar with how Schoology works from a teacher perspective and

have very limited experience posting assignments or using the other many features of the program that would allow for a smooth student online learning experience. It would take quite a bit of additional time for me to learn these skills in relation to the time I needed to dedicate to the other students who are in my scheduled gifted services groups. Then I wondered about the additional time I would be spending interacting with this group of 5th grade students online and whether there would be enough time to give based on all my other gifted specialist responsibilities.

As the only provider of direct gifted services in three elementary schools, it was difficult to coordinate schedules and find enough time to meet consistently with a particular 5th grade group of advanced language arts students. My schedule, and that of classroom teachers, did not allow me enough time to meaningfully meet with this group very frequently. I began trying to problem-solve to came up with a remedy for this situation that allows for more gifted services interaction time with these students. I began to wonder, "What if I took a novel study unit and integrated more technology and reconfigured it as an online collaborative discussion? What types of technology tools and teaching and learning strategies would students and I employ when working through an online unit together?" More questions began to surface as I contemplated creative new ways to best meet the learning needs of these gifted language arts students within very limited time parameters.

Impact on teaching practices and possible challenges. This interest in creating an online novel study framework for 5th graders could enhance student interactions and provide additional service opportunities for other gifted small groups. The intention is that researched best practices in online literature circles be the focus of any newly

developed plan for working with these groups of students. Learning new technology skills is always a good thing, but there was already limited time to connect with classroom teachers about the academic extensions I was providing, let alone try to find time to connect with other staff members who could help me digitize my novel study groups. Part of me resisted this process as I lamented the fact that I had so little time to devote to these students in the first place. They deserved that time to come together face to face, be with a group of intellectual peers, and share experiences that support them academically, and socially and emotionally as well. However, on a positive note, developing online literature study groups also allows more opportunities to collaborate with other staff members and improve my own general teaching strategies. In addition, there is also the potential to show the impact on gifted students' learning experiences when quality interactions take place regularly with staff trained in gifted services. This has positive implications for future teaching and learning opportunities as more gifted students are identified in the district and need additional quality language arts enrichment or extension activities.

Summary

Throughout this chapter, a brief rationale and need for more creative use of classroom instructional time has been illustrated. A proposal to develop new ways to interact online during learning experiences with students has been discussed. Thus, the following research question emerged: *How can I create and implement an effective online collaborative novel study unit for small groups of gifted language arts students?* The educational setting and context for this question was detailed, as well as possible challenges to the development and implementation of an online novel study framework.

Chapter Two focuses more on the research behind and educational best practices for implementing effective and engaging online collaborative literature circles.

In Chapter Two, the literature encompassing effective online collaborative novel study units is reviewed. My research question guided the literature search because I was interested in finding out how others have previously created and implemented such novel study units for small groups of gifted elementary students. Throughout this Literature Review, four general topics have emerged as dominant areas of research related to online literature circles, including theory and background information on general literature circle models, research studies and recommendations for online literature circles, instructional models and lesson plans for the implementation of online literature circles, and the construction of knowledge and the building of communities of learners through online literature circles.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction and Chapter Overview

The main goal of this Capstone project is to help create a more effective online collaborative novel study framework and literature circles with the goal of maximizing students' potential to continue to connect with others and to learn and grow. As a result, the guiding research question is this: *How can I create and implement an effective online collaborative novel study unit for small groups of gifted language arts students?* In this chapter, the literature encompassing effective online collaborative novel study units will be reviewed. Throughout this Literature Review, four general topics have emerged as dominant areas of research related to online literature circles, including theory and background information on general literature circle models, research studies and recommendations for online literature circles, instructional models and lesson plans for the implementation of online literature circles, and the construction of knowledge and the building of communities of learners through online literature circles.

The primary purpose of this chapter is to review the literature and research around the theory and background of literature circles, recommendations for literature circle structures, relevant instructional models and lesson plans, and the way in which collaborative online literature circles can help students construct knowledge and build community. Research into this topic reveals why and how others have previously created

and implemented effective online collaborative novel study units for small groups of gifted elementary students. This Literature Review includes numerous sources related to the research question. Several key words were utilized in this literature search: online, literature circles, elementary, instructional strategies, novel study, gifted, online learning, reading comprehension, and Socratic Seminar. Throughout this Literature Review, several topics have emerged as dominant areas of research related to online literature circles and four general topical categories follow.

Background information on general literature circle models. The articles included here provide a general overview of the literature circle instructional strategy. A definition of literature circles, an explanation of student discussion roles and the teacher's role, and grouping strategies are included, as well as a look at the historical and current significance of the use of Socratic Seminar as a literary instructional strategy. The research also offers expert advice about how to use literature circles in the classroom and explains how this instructional strategy can be used online. As noted in research, online literature circles can promote meaningful discussions, differentiate instruction, and are most successful when expectations are fully outlined and good questions are utilized. The literature circle models described in these articles delineate various roles students can take on during literature circle discussions, including those based on Socratic Seminar effects and structures.

Definition of literature circles. In the study of the background and potential use of literature circles in the classroom, it is important to understand a working definition of the literature circle model. "According to Harvey Daniels, author of the book *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom* (Stenhouse Publishers,

1994), literature circles are small, temporary discussion groups of students who have chosen to read the same work of literature" (Brown, 2013, What are Literature Circles? section). As defined, literature circles fit into many widely accepted classroom best practices, including Harvey Daniels and Marilyn Bizar's "Methods That Matter Model" and the Irene C. Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell literacy program (Daniels & Bizar, 2005; Fountas & Pinnell, n.d.).

Expert advice. Two articles by Brown (2013) and Kilbane and Milman (2010) provide a good general overview of the literature circle instructional strategy, which include information useful in designing an online novel study. Both begin with a definition of literature circles. Mary Daniels Brown wrote an *Education World* article which offers expert advice from real teachers about how to use literature circles in the classroom (Brown, 2013). As noted in research, online literature circles can promote meaningful discussions, differentiate instruction, and are most successful when expectations are fully outlined and good questions are used (Kilbane & Milman, 2010). Brown also discusses the use of this instructional strategy for at-risk students as a means to engage students who might otherwise be turned off by basic reading tasks in the regular classroom (Brown, 2013). Enjoyment and motivation to read increase greatest among challenged students who can identify with and discuss characters who are like themselves (Brown, 2013). In addition to the research and background information provided by Brown, Kilbane, and Milman, a dissertation by Waterman (2015) also provides a model for the creation of new online collaborative literature circle units and additional supporting materials (Waterman, 2015). Further expert advice from the field

also includes an explanation of student discussion roles and the teacher's role, grouping strategies, and connections to Socratic Seminar components.

   Explanation of student roles and the teacher's role. Planning for and implementing literature circles requires clearly defining the teacher's role and student discussion roles. The teacher's role can be defined as a planner and facilitator of the learning structure and supporter of student roles (Kilbane & Milman, 2010). Kilbane and Milman further describe the literature circle model and delineate various roles students can take on during a literature circle discussion. The student's role can include the following: discussion facilitator, connector of the readings and group experiences, illustrator of ideas brought forth in discussions, vocabulary expert, and summarizer (Kilbane & Milman, 2010). This article also offers ways to introduce students to online literature circle responsibilities (Kilbane & Milman, 2010). Structures suggested in the article can be contrasted with the tasks and assignments contained in face-to-face novel study units to determine what will best suit particular student group learning needs in relation to student discussion roles and the teacher's role in supporting collaborative online learning (Kilbane & Milman, 2010). When developing an Edutopia blog, Cooper (2015) described how literature circles are managed specifically in a fourth-grade classroom in an online environment. A two-day cycle is highlighted, including numerous weekly literature circle job descriptions for students (Cooper, 2015). Bowers-Campbell (2011) shares a different study and describes a look at graduate students and their interactions in virtual online literature circles. The study findings include meaningful information, such as ways to promote group membership, various student roles, and a

variety of methods to engage in the reading process, which can be translated to experiences with elementary age students (Bowers-Campbell, 2011).

Grouping strategies. Additional components of literature circles to consider are the composition of group membership and how groups will be formed (Bowers-Campbell, 2011). Brown gives recommendations for groupings based on heterogeneous or homogeneous student abilities and how to make adjustments to expectations accordingly (Brown, 2013). One such way to group students is by reading ability, keeping in mind student voice and choice for group members if possible (Brown, 2013). A discussion of the differences in literature groups based on the age of students reveals potential benefits for students from first grade to high school. In the Brown article, sixth-grade teacher Pam Chandler concludes "that literature circles would be 'especially appropriate for gifted children of third grade or so and above'" (Brown, 2013, Which Age Group? section).

Socratic seminar. An instructional method called Socratic Seminar, based on Socrates' belief in the power of asking questions, is used in classrooms to promote discussion and critical thinking of a text within a social context. In "Examining Multiple Perspectives in Literature" contained in *Inquiry and the Literary Text: Constructing Discussions in the English Classroom*, Elfie Israel defines Socratic Seminars and highlights their benefits for students. "The Socratic seminar is a formal discussion, based on a text, in which the leader asks open-ended questions. Within the context of the discussion, students listen closely to the comments of others, thinking critically for themselves, and articulate their own thoughts and their responses to the thoughts of

others. They learn to work cooperatively and to question intelligently and civilly"

(Holden & Schmit, 2002, p. 89).

A careful look at the Socratic Seminar, teacher roles in Socratic Circles, and

benefits to students are all components of a 2015 doctoral dissertation and can be used to

influence the structure of online collaborative literature circles (Cleveland). According to

Cleveland, essential roles of teachers in Socratic Circles include creating a safe, inclusive

learning environment, selecting a text, and keeping discussions focused (2015, p. 19).

More specifically, Cleveland also discusses the fostering of critical thinking in a fourth

grade classroom through comprehensive Socratic Circles, which adds to the examination

of this literary strategy in relation to online literature circles. Furthermore, Cleveland

examines, measures, and documents changes and growth in critical thinking as a result of

student dialogue and reflections in Socratic Circles (2015). In contrast to this elementary

student level discussion, Roberson (2013) wrote regarding motivation towards learning

perceived in Socratic Seminar versus traditional lecture at the high school level and

includes information about the basic, yet essential, components of the Socratic Seminar

teaching and learning strategy (Roberson, 2013). Both dissertations by Cleveland (2015)

and Roberson (2013) describe the purpose of Socratic Seminars and student participation

levels. Waterman (2015) explains a great deal of information about student participation

and motivation around a particular Socratic Seminar curriculum-development project. In

this project, the guiding theme of student participation is to engage students in

discussions and questioning based on the selected text, and in turn discuss "important

issues relevant to their lives" (Waterman, 2015, p. 32).

Research studies and recommendations for online literature circles. Several articles take a look at integrating technology into literature discussions, including promoting collaboration, engagement, and deeper literature responses. They also examine how to integrate and manage literature circles with an online learning environment in an elementary classroom, including specific digital learning management systems. There is also a comprehensive look at the process of implementing online literature circles, including laying the foundation and evaluation. Also discussed are mixed approaches to literature circles, including exposing students to face-to-face groups and online groups over the course of the entire school year. Different types of interactions take place between students when engaged in both online and in class literature circle discussions, including academic and social interactions.

Integrating technology into literature discussions. Researched information in this section includes using technology to enhance student voice and participation (Bowers-Campbell, 2011), specific implementation suggestions (Campbell, 2009), and online learning management system considerations (Cooper, 2015; Ebarvia, 2016).

Bowers-Campbell (2011) takes a look at integrating technology into literature discussions to honor student voice and diverse communication styles. As students interact through technology, teachers are using this strategy to promote collaboration, engagement, and deeper literature responses (Bowers-Campbell, 2011). There is also a substantial portion of this article that outlines the general benefits of online literature circles (Bowers-Campbell, 2011). Bowers-Campbell shares benefits such as students being more engaged in reading as a result of talking about their reading and increased "positive social and communicative skills" (2011). These anecdotal and research findings

can inform similar online collaborative literature circle project research and development. Specifically, this information can be used to help students see the benefits of an online literature circle before they even get started. This same information could also be used to help set students up for success and avoid certain pitfalls and challenges that can present themselves in a virtual novel study group (Bowers-Campbell, 2011).

A Master's thesis research project by Campbell (2009) addresses the question of how to integrate literature circles with an online learning environment in an elementary classroom. It documents a teacher's personal journey in the process, including creation, implementation, and reflection on the unit. This project includes handouts and rubrics which may be highly useful in adapting to other specific student groups and their experiences with an online novel study. This article also informs other projects and creates a sort of road map for further research into the implementation of online literature circles. However, there may be a need for changes and technology updates based on the fact that seven years have passed since the completion of this particular research project (Campbell, 2009).

Another consideration in integrating technology into online literature circles is the selection and implementation of an online learning management system (Cooper, 2015; Ebarvia, 2016). Cooper (2015) describes how literature circles are managed in a fourth-grade classroom in an online environment and specifically discusses the use of Schoology, an online digital learning management system available in many school districts. An important factor to consider in selecting an online learning management system can be the availability of time in which students are able to meet face to face or work in a virtual learning environment (Cooper, 2015; Ebarvia, 2016). In an online post,

Tricia Ebarvia, a teacher author from Pennsylvania, shares details with her class about an upcoming online novel study unit also to be hosted in Schoology (Ebarvia, 2016). Step by step directions are included for students to navigate to the correct features within Schoology in order to participate in online literature circle discussions. The blog post addresses a high school honors world literature class and directions would need to be adapted to be more appropriate for small groups of gifted elementary language arts students meeting once or twice a week. For example, elementary students may need more explicit directions on how to access an online literature circle experience or how to correspond respectfully with others in an online learning environment. This article provides a sample set of student directions that can be used as a guide for other online novel study frameworks. Clear and concise directions for accessing certain Schoology features and assignments are included (Ebarvia, 2016). In addition to general literature circle navigation cues, Ebarvia also specifically reminds students that Schoology may become an extension of the classroom and guides interactions with other students to be positive and productive. Cooper's article also provides an example of a generic novel study unit designed for upper elementary students to interact with in a primarily online environment (2015). The sample literature circle discussion prompts included could apply to books chosen for many elementary grade level gifted language arts students or other small groups. Interestingly, the teacher author also cites references and prompts from *Integrating Differentiated Instruction and Understanding by Design*, a widely accepted text used in another graduate level education courses (Cooper, 2015).

     Mixed approaches to literature circles. In some teaching and learning scenarios it is a luxury to have academic time available to meet with groups of students face-to-face.

Several authors (Day & Kroon, 2010; Skeen, 2014) share ideas for a mixed approach to literature circles, including exposing students to face-to-face groups and online groups over the course of an entire school year. Not all groups have the opportunity to model literature circle protocol face-to-face before implementing the literature circle framework online. Detailed explanations of student experiences are included in the following discussion and can be useful in helping set up an effective online or mixed approach to the literature circle experience (Day & Kroon, 2010; Skeen, 2014).

Day and Kroon (2010) wrote an article describing the experiences of sixth graders who participated in three rounds of online and face-to-face literature circles. The article documents a comprehensive look at the process of implementing online literature circles, including laying the foundation and evaluation. The authors also show samples of general questions that can be asked no matter the book chosen for study. This article is also very well researched and includes many sources worthy of further investigation. Most of all, reading this article provides an overview of two other teachers' experiences, including their successes and identified challenges with online and face-to-face literature circles (Day & Kroon, 2010).

Skeen (2014) also examined the different types of interactions that take place between students when engaged in both online and in class literature circle discussions, including those that are academic or social in nature. Student motivation was examined to help teachers encourage student participation in both types of literature circles. Of note, a difference between this article and the Day and Kroon article is that the Skeen study also includes an important discussion of reading comprehension (Skeen, 2014). This study presents anecdotal and statistical evidence of the effectiveness of both online and in class

literature circle discussions for improving reading comprehension and increasing positive social and academic interactions among students (Skeen, 2014). This lengthy and comprehensive study can help support the goal of creating an effective online novel study framework for gifted elementary language arts students since it contains such detailed research information. It also includes a discussion of student responses to literature as well as social interactions, all of which play a key role in successful literature circle experiences (Skeen, 2014).

As noted, there are several research studies and articles that provide recommendations for online literature circles. They demonstrate how technology can be integrated into literature discussions to promote collaboration, engagement, and deeper literature responses. Mixed approaches to literature circles, including face-to-face groups and online groups, can also be an effective literacy instructional practice with positive effects on student motivation and engagement. The next section of this Literature Review includes specific instructional models and well-developed lesson plans that can be used as a basis for the development of an online literature circle framework.

Models and lessons for implementing online literature circles. Several research-based instructional models and lesson plans are reviewed in this section, including two from ReadWriteThink.org which is based in research and best practices for language arts instruction and backed by the International Literacy Association and the National Council of Teachers of English (Fink; Larson). Vital components of effective novel study groups are highlighted. The lessons included here are designed to help students develop written communication skills, formulate effective literature discussion prompts that elicit insightful conversations, and participate as reflective members of an

online literary community. Also included in the lesson plans are a guide to help create prompts, reading schedules for online literature circles, student progress reports, transcripts for group reflections, and student self-reflections. Another research supported source that is included in this section is Navigator, which "is a collection of questions and activities intended to support group or independent study of a selected novel or picture book. The Navigator series was developed by the Center for Gifted Education at The College of William and Mary as a language arts resource for teachers and students" and prepared especially for gifted and talented students (William & Mary School of Education).

The Navigator resources are appropriate for the research question posed in this Capstone project because they address the language arts learning needs of gifted and talented elementary level students. However, the resources and activities outlined in the Navigator novel study units are not explicitly designed for online student engagement in the content. But these materials can still be used as a guide when creating an online novel study framework for elementary gifted language arts students. Navigators contain many rich and complex questions and activities to develop students' vocabulary and writing style. Similar to the components of a Navigator unit, themes and concepts, literary elements, and real-world connections can and should be included in an online novel study framework for advanced elementary level language arts students (William & Mary School of Education).

Lisa Storm Fink, an educator from Illinois, provides a resource from ReadWriteThink.org based in research and best practices for language arts instruction. It includes a full lesson plan for the introduction of literature circles for students in grades

3-5. This recurring lesson plan, called "Literature Circles: Getting Started," includes all the vital components of effective novel study groups, elements which should be included in an online literature circle framework for gifted elementary language arts students. Although there are some online tools in these recurring lessons, they are not designed specifically for significant or sustained online interactions between students. This resource could inform an online literature circle project by serving as a basic template for the inclusion of essential elements of literature circles. Alignment is also available for Minnesota state language arts standards. Resources, instructions to prepare materials, printouts, associated websites, and a full instructional plan with student objectives are included.

Lotta C. Larson, Ph.D. from Kansas provides another resource from ReadWriteThink.org. It includes a full lesson plan for promoting rich discussions in online literature circles for students in grades 5-12. This standard lesson plan, called "Thoughtful Threads: Sparking Rich Online Discussions," includes instruction to help students develop written communication skills, formulate effective literature discussion prompts that elicit insightful conversations, and participate as reflective members of an online literary community. These are important skills to hone for students participating in an online novel study framework, however this material may be a little too advanced for some groups of elementary students. Included in the lesson plan are a guide to help create prompts, reading schedules for online literature circles, student progress reports, transcripts for group reflections, and student self-reflections. This resource serves as a basic template for the inclusion of advanced elements of literature circles. It is also helpful that alignment is available for Minnesota state language arts standards.

Resources, instructions to prepare materials, printouts, associated websites, and a full instructional plan with student objectives are included.

This section of the Literature Review includes research based instructional models and lesson plans for the implementation of literature circles, highlighting essential components of effective novel study groups. The lessons included promote a variety of important skills as students learn from and connect with other students. The final section of this Literature Review further highlights how online literature circles can assist in the construction of knowledge and in the building of communities of learners.

Constructing knowledge and building communities of learners. In today's complex, interrelated world it is essential that we produce students who actively search for understanding while becoming thinkers and problem solvers. Constructivist practices can help us achieve these goals in the classroom so students are ready and more prepared for what lies beyond the schoolhouse doors. Learners construct knowledge in a wide variety of ways and utilizing online literature circles can be a useful mechanism for students as they collaborate and share individual learnings with others. There are numerous benefits of building these online communities of learners, including increased self-efficacy, motivation and means to accomplish a shared goal, and the strengthening of academic and personal bonds. The chronological discussion included in this section highlights the theory, background, and benefits of constructivist and community building practices as related to online literature circle experiences.

In 1999, Jacqueline Grennon Brooks and Martin G. Brooks wrote a pivotal book called *In Search of Understanding: The Case for Constructivist Classrooms.* The first part of the text, "The Call for Constructivism," conveys the importance of honoring the

learning process, considering the possibilities of that learning, and making learning relevant and meaningful, which are all hallmarks of the constructivism theory. Students create new knowledge by what they can generate and exhibit, rather than just what they can repeat on assessments (Brooks & Brooks, 1999, p. 16). "Educators must invite students to experience the world's richness, empower them to ask their own questions and seek their own answers, and challenge them to understand the world's complexities" (Brooks & Brooks, 1999, p. 5). Socratic Seminars and online literature circle experiences can be the vehicle for new student understandings to be developed and refined.

The 2009 book *Teacher Collaboration for Professional Learning: Facilitating Study, Research, and Inquiry Communities* by Lassonde and Israel provides information to support the importance of collaborative learning communities (2009). According to the authors, one primary purpose of teacher learning communities includes professional collaboration as a means to developing reflectiveness, enlightening new perspectives, increasing knowledge transfer, and building social support among teachers (Lassonde & Israel, 2009, p. 9). While the text is mainly directed toward teacher learning communities, the research and outcomes surrounding positive and effective inquiry-based learning communities is applicable to student learning groups as well. Collaboration enhances the learning process and the importance of this fact will be reflected in the collaborative nature of the learning experiences within the Capstone project online literature circle framework.

A 2011 journal article by Kingsley discusses Socratic dialogue in asynchronous online discussions and asks if constructivism is redundant. This article presents a learning situation that may be evident as designs take shape and implementation occurs

in elementary level online literature circles since it will not always be possible to be online at the same times interacting with the literature or other students. Since Socratic dialogue can be both written and oral, asynchronous discussions allow for many to access the learning experiences regardless of location or common time available to interact. Lessons learned from this journal article can be used along with personal experiences from online graduate level course interactions, combining them into best practices for elementary level learners to collaborate and construct new knowledge around shared literacy experiences.

In a 2014 journal article in the *Gifted Child Quarterly* on the topic of constructivism, "Implementing Enrichment Clusters in Elementary Schools: Lessons Learned," Fiddyment provides theory, research, and guidance as enrichment clusters are implemented with elementary school students. There is quite a natural link between constructivism and teaching for enrichment, as evidenced by this article quote, "Constructivist learning theory (Bruner, 1960; Dewey, 1913; Piaget, 1975; Vygotsky, 1978) lies at the heart of enrichment teaching and learning" (Fiddyment, 2014, p. 288). The foundational learning theory of constructivism creates a solid base on which to build an online learning circle framework for advanced elementary level language arts students.

Teachers and students can construct knowledge and skills on their own, but their efforts are enhanced when learning occurs in community, raising the potential for growth and development for both students and their teachers alike. A 2016 journal article focuses on the effects of trust, communication, and collaboration on the learning process (Li, Hallinger, Kennedy, & Walker, 2016). These are important considerations to include

when designing the online literacy learning experiences, taking care to build trust among literature circle participants in an effort to increase communication and collaboration.

Formative assessment is an integral part of classroom experiences grounded in constructivism and self-regulation. In considering the connection between constructivism and assessment, a 2016 article by Baron begins with a bang. "Twenty-five years of teaching grades 8-12 mathematics has shown me that students learn best when they can construct their own knowledge (constructivism) and that students, given appropriate guidance, can and will take on responsibility for their own learning (self-regulation theory)" (Baron, 2016, p. 47). There are many practical strategies and tools for implementing effective formative assessment that can be developed, shared, and supported among educators. Students can also be involved in the process of developing rubrics, exit slips, and self-assessment protocols to increase participation in meaningful discourse and clarify criteria for performance. Formative assessment can be interjected into online learning modules and it is a worthy avenue to explore as a means to deepening online learning outcomes for students.

In contrast to many constructivist proponents, Krahenbuhl wrote a journal article in 2016 that brings caution to the presentation of student-centered education practices and constructivism, offering challenges, concerns, and clarity to the discussion. The author pumps the brakes a bit as educators clamor to board the constructivist bandwagon and cautions against a blind adherence to this particular teaching and learning methodology. The article acknowledges that "constructivism is the dominant pedagogical theory in contemporary educational circles" (Krahenbuhl, 2016, p. 98). Krahenbuhl then warns against total adherence to constructivist theories when it comes to equipping students

with the skills and dispositions necessary to be successful in constructivist classrooms. "When utilizing constructivist pedagogy and compelling our students to construct their own meaning teachers should use caution because constructivist learning theory points us to deficiencies students have that directly impact their learning" (Krahenbuhl, 2016, p. 102). Diverse approaches to teaching and learning are important in any classroom because of the inherent diversity among learners' needs, and this includes considerations for constructivist and community building practices as related to online literature circle experiences.

Teaching and learning is a social and cultural process. Developing an effective online literature circle framework has great potential for students to construct knowledge and build communities of learners in ways not possible in traditional classroom literacy experiences. Students will be better equipped and supported to actively search for understanding while becoming thinkers and problem solvers. Online literature circles can provide a means for students to collaborate and share individual learnings with others near and far. Furthermore, when students are involved in the self-assessment process, they are active participants in the construction of knowledge and new skills according to their learning needs and readiness. A component to include in this Capstone project may be pre, during, and post learning experience surveys and conversations to monitor students' individual place and progress in the learning process in the online literature circles that are developed through this Capstone project. Regarding knowledge construction and constructivism, a "one-size-fits-all" approach to teaching and learning is a tricky proposition so one must exercise caution and use a variety of teaching methods to

help students construct and gain new knowledge online and in the classroom, just as pure constructivists would champion.

Summary

In Chapter Two, the literature and research around effective online collaborative novel study units was reviewed. The research question of *"How can I create and implement an effective online collaborative novel study unit for small groups of gifted language arts students?"* guided this investigation. Four general topics emerged as dominant areas of research related to online literature circles, including theory and background information on general literature circle models, research studies and recommendations for online literature circles, instructional models and lesson plans for the implementation of online literature circles, and the construction of knowledge and the building of communities of learners through online literature circles. This Literature Review produced numerous examples of effective online literature circles, including how they were created and implemented. It is helpful to look carefully at how such units were developed and carried out with students, including the technology platforms used, and how that might apply to particular online learning situations with gifted students. This careful review includes general background information on literature circle models, relevant current research studies about online literature circles, available instructional models and actual lesson plans for implementation, and the potential for constructing knowledge and building communities of learners through an online literature circle framework.

Chapter Three provides a project description and focuses on the development of an effective online literature circle framework. Key to this development is the utilization

of research and educational best practices to implement engaging online collaborative literature circle experiences. The intended audience, educational context, and specific content will be highlighted. A review of the project timeline is also included in the discussion of the online literature circle framework.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction and Chapter Overview

As stated earlier in this Capstone paper, the research question is this: *How can I create and implement an effective online collaborative novel study unit for small groups of gifted language arts students?* In answering this question, an online platform was created for collaborative literature circles with the goal of helping students construct new knowledge and build new communities of learners. In this chapter, a detailed project description is provided, including some of the rationale of the why and the how this project benefits learners. The intended audience for whom this project was designed have been identified. The context and general educational setting in which students interact with the online platform is addressed. Methods used to develop the project have been shared, including the foundational theories and research used to create the project and an outline of the format and specific content. In addition, an approximate timeline for project implementation is described.

Intended audience. The students for whom this project was designed are upper elementary advanced language arts students. Offered through limited gifted education services, select grades three through five students received pull-out advanced and differentiated language arts experiences in three different elementary schools. The students who participated in small group sessions have not been formally identified as

gifted. Some have been referred to the groups based on high reading achievement test scores and/or teacher recommendations. Students often are not part of these pull-out group sessions unless they have also exhibited certain academic attitudes and behaviors, such as high motivation or strong work ethic. Many students would not necessarily fall into the gifted range for language arts, but rather could be categorized as good students or bright learners. This brief background on the learners for whom this project has been designed leads to the next section of this paper in which the project context will be described.

Project context. The specific context for which this project has been developed can be generalized to other similar educational settings and circumstances. In a particular central Minnesota school district of about 4,500 students, one gifted specialist provided direct instructional support for approximately 300 elementary students on a weekly basis in three different school buildings. Depending on the individual school size and schedule, small group sessions of pull-out enrichment support occurred once or twice a week, ranging from 20 to 35 minutes per session. Most of these small group sessions included students in grades three through five and ranged from seven to 14 students. Because there were such limited face-to-face opportunities to meet, there became a need for creating an online collaborative novel study unit. Another important consideration regarding the context of these groups is that in this school district all upper elementary students had 1:1 access to an iPad during school hours. Most students also took their iPads home on a daily basis, however this was not a requirement. The availability of access to technology for all students was a key component of the development of online literature circles to be

implemented in lieu of limited face-to-face learning time available for these small groups of students.

As stated previously, school and classroom teacher schedules did not allow enough time to meaningfully meet with small groups of students very frequently. Advanced language arts students were often left to challenge and engage themselves in individual reading experiences, without the benefit of peer collaboration or teacher support. This situation occurs in other similar educational settings as well. So there became a need to problem-solve and come up with a remedy for this situation that allowed for more continuity of gifted services, guided academic challenges, and interaction time with these students. This question began to surface in daily teaching reflections: "What if a novel study unit could be integrated with more technology and reconfigured as an online collaborative discussion?" As this unanswered question lingered, various types of literature circle models were researched, including the theories behind them and their general format and content structures, in order to develop a curricular model for an online literature circle framework. These project elements will be addressed in the upcoming section.

Online project framework. After researching online literature circles for elementary students, and not finding many formats easily accessible, the structure of this Capstone project began to take shape. The available research into several key areas was incorporated into the project format. In particular, reviews of theories and background on general literature circles were completed, with a focus on the investigation of the structure of online literature circles. There was also an examination of several instructional models and lesson plans, as well as more general information about

constructing knowledge and building communities of learners. To create the Capstone

project website, all these theories and research were combined to create an online

literature circle platform, of which the general format and content will be detailed.

Theories and research. Journal articles, books, and dissertations have been

written that chronicle academic and affective benefits of the literature circle model when

used with upper elementary students (Brown, 2013; Kilbane & Milman, 2010; Waterman,

2015). Specific articles and dissertations on this topic written by Kilbane and Milman

(2010), Cooper (2015), and Bowers-Campbell (2011) explain various student and teacher

roles to be incorporated into online literature circles. These research recommendations

have been taken into account when developing interactive questions and in establishing

the Capstone project's general online literature circle discussion framework. In addition,

Bowers-Campbell (2011) and Brown (2013) specifically give recommendations for

grouping strategies to promote effective online literature circles, ensuring collaboration,

engagement, and deeper literature responses. In particular, the Socratic Seminar format is

an effective instructional strategy when used to guide student discussions in literature

circle interactions (Cleveland, 2015; Roberson, 2013; Waterman, 2015). Essential

literature circle components, grounded in theory and research, were weaved into the

project website structure as much as possible.

Format and content. This section includes methods, tools, and rationale used to

develop the Capstone project and a general description of the website content. To access

this online literature circle website, called "Connected Literature Circles," visit the web

address listed in the Appendix. The format of the website was constructed with a Google

Site, which is universally accessible via a sharable URL address using any Internet

browser. Google was chosen to support the online literature circle framework because it was a platform that is readily available to most learners. Google products are available online to students whether or not a school district subscribes to a particular learning management system, such as Schoology or Moodle, which was a limitation of other online literature circles.

The goal of this Capstone project was to produce an online website in which elementary students discuss and share ideas about pieces of literature. Students develop and contribute to online discussions surrounding a particular piece of text. Currently, there is a Home page and two auxiliary pages, labeled Literature Circle A and Literature Circle B, which provide a basis for online literature circle interactions among students. Each literature circle page contains a Google Doc which can be edited by anyone with online access to the website. Students are able to pick a literature circle role and contribute both questions and responses in online discussions (Purifico, 2015). Two sample literature circles are provided on the website using the books *Wonder* (2012) by R.J. Palacio and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) by Roald Dahl. Also linked to the Home page is the "Connected Literature" Twitter feed. It was created so that students have a common hub to access authors, publishers, and others who wish to engage in online literature circle discourse. An adult teacher's Twitter account and supervision is needed in order for students to post their contributions to Twitter conversations, but there is value in connecting with a world-wide audience in 140 characters or less. Links to other text resources and author websites are also embedded throughout the project website.

Project timeline. This Capstone project was developed over the course of the summer months to be used with students beginning in the fall of 2017. Successful implementation of the online literature circle platform is flexible so that it may be used with small groups of students during a wide range of times during the school year. Ideally, students would be comfortable with any technology needed, such as iPads, so the use of the technology tool itself does not hinder the online learning experiences. In addition, sufficient background knowledge and skills in the areas of online safety and digital citizenship must be addressed before students engage with others in an online environment. To ensure that these important skills and understandings are in place, it is recommended that implementation of online literature circles begins in late fall to early winter.

One of the significant benefits of this online literature circle structure is flexibility in time, place, and duration of implementation. A timeline for use with students includes collaboration and shared learning time, which could be spread over several weeks and conducted in several online interactive sessions. Students connect in live or asynchronous time, interacting online with one another and the literature circle content. Students work with project material in school or outside of school hours if technology tools and an Internet connection are available to them. The time students need to interface with online literature circles fits into a guided reading structure or small group rotations approach to teaching literacy skills. Online interaction time should not replace independent reading in a daily language arts structure, but rather be a part of literacy skills work or a writing center. A key to successful implementation would be to set and post an approximate reading schedule prior to launching a particular literature circle so that participants are

aware of the pace and expectations for posts prior to beginning the online platform interactions. Online Google Calendars are embedded in the project website for this purpose. (See the Appendix for a link to the project website.) The project timeline depends on length and complexity of the reading material as well as specific reading goals determined by teachers and participants. Typically, students would interact with the online literature circle content a few times a week over the course of several weeks. Online literature circles conclude when students have completed the reading and reflection interactions, however there is flexibility for the text conversations to continue when interest in staying connected to the group participants or reading material endures.

Summary

The goal of this project is to create an effective online collaborative literature circle framework to help students construct new knowledge and build new communities of learners. The question of *"How can I create and implement an effective online collaborative novel study unit for small groups of gifted language arts students?"* guided this project development process. Chapter Three described the online project framework and its creation, rationale and benefits, the educational context and intended audience, and a projected timeline for implementation.

Chapter Four offers a reflection on this Capstone project process and shares conclusions about the effects of the online literature circle platform. Challenges and successes in the project development process will be highlighted. Methods to gather anecdotal evidence as to the effectiveness of online literature study groups will be described. Future potential uses and other recommendations will also be shared.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusions

Introduction and Chapter Overview

Gifted elementary language arts students have unique learning needs which often cannot be met due to limited school schedules and the study of advanced literature content. The guiding question to address this challenge was: *How can I create and implement an effective online collaborative novel study unit for small groups of gifted language arts students?* Literature review research revealed an examination of general literature circle models, including definitions and explanations of student and teacher roles, implications for integrating technology into literature circles, and an overview of several instructional models and lesson plan templates. An online platform for collaborative literature circles was developed to help meet the needs of gifted elementary language arts students when face-to-face literature circle discussions are not possible. A Google Site was created as a website platform to provide structure and interaction opportunities among students in a flexible online literature circle format.

Chapter Four offers a reflection on the Capstone project process, briefly revisits the literature review, and shares conclusions about the effects of the online literature circle platform. Methods to gather anecdotal evidence as to the effectiveness of online literature study groups are described. Challenges and successes in the project

development process will be highlighted and future potential uses and other

recommendations are also shared.

Brief review of the literature. The Campbell (2009) Master's thesis research

project addresses the question of how to integrate literature circles with an online

learning environment in an elementary classroom. This was especially helpful in guiding

this project process, including the creation, implementation, and reflection on the final

product. As the actual online project framework took shape, elements of effective digital

learning experiences as described by Day and Kroon (2010) were utilized. Much was

learned from others' experiences regarding the format and content of online literature

circles, and that guidance also assisted in developing timelines in which students interact

and learn from one another when implemented with upper elementary age students.

Effects of the online literature circle framework. A procedure for gathering

anecdotal evidence to determine the effectiveness of online literature study groups will be

part of the process. Data gathered by means of research and feedback methods can be

analyzed to look for trends in satisfaction with online literature circles as well as the

academic effectiveness of this instructional method. This provides one way of gauging

the benefits of an online collaborative novel study framework. In order to gather such

data, a Google Form will be created and shared with students at the conclusion of each

interactive experience based on the specific text used in the online literature circle.

Challenges and successes in the project development process. Creating a

graduate level Capstone project and accompanying paper was challenging since it was

new for me as a student and a new option for Hamline University graduate school

candidates. I had never written such a lengthy or heavily researched paper. It was tricky

balancing family life, graduate school expectations, and a full-time working schedule. At times there was conflicting information about peer reviewer or formatting guidelines. It was very late in the summer when I finally found a peer reviewer to help edit and revise the work and settled on a standard APA format and style. Choosing and using a specific website development platform created a challenge as well. Many other colleagues encouraged me to use the Schoology learning management system since it can be readily formatted for online discussions and is available in my school district. But since this would limit access to only students whose school districts provide access to this platform, I wanted to avoid this unnecessary limitation so that any student could access the online literature circle framework through a shared Google Site. Since I am learning how to create a Google Site it is clear there is room to add more robust and interactive features to the online literature circle platform. One success in this whole Capstone project process is that I have the confidence to persevere in the face of challenging academic circumstances in order to create a useful educational tool for the benefit of the students who will use it.

Future use of project website and other recommendations. As a new school year begins, I will look for opportunities to use this new online literature circle framework with advanced language arts students. I will also seek the collaboration of teachers not only within a school building or district, but continually find ways to help students connect to other students near and far with a shared online literature circle experience.

Summary

This concluding chapter of the Capstone project highlighted what was learned throughout the development process, briefly revisited the literature review, and

considered possible implications and limitations of the project. Recommendations for future research or project implementation were also included. Specific and focused examples of critical reflection from my personal Capstone project experience and professional practice are shared as well.

Creating more effective online collaborative novel study units and literature circles was the center of my research with the goal of maximizing students' potential to continue to learn and grow, despite never seeming to have enough hours in the school day. As I strive to be more thorough, more effective, and more efficient with precious time in the classroom to assist elementary gifted language arts students, I now have a researched, interactive method framework to share online literature circle experiences. As students enter the world of "Connected Literature Circles," they can engage with other readers and writers near and far, deepening their understanding of text, themselves, and the world around us.

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php

APPENDIX

"Connected Literature Circles" Project Website: https://sites.google.com/hamline.edu/connected-

literature-circles/home

Shortened URL: https://goo.gl/nL96Ex

QR Code: