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A Look at Face to Face and Virtual Discussion Circles

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**Abstract**

The study to follow will concern using discussion circles in both face to face and online formats. The subjects were twenty 9th grade students in a suburban high school in Georgia. The research is intended to answer the following question: Do students have more productive literature circle discussions online or face to face? The study includes reading two texts and groups of discussion circles in both formats for each text.

Literature Circles in Face to Face and Online Formats

**Introduction**

 Technology is changing education. Lee (2006) pointed out that “how teachers use information and communication technologies in their classrooms” is at the heart of education reform. Teachers need to be purposeful in choosing when and how to use technology and ensure that its use enhances education rather than detracting from it. But what if an assessment typically carried out in the classroom can be completed in a virtual environment? How does a teacher decide which method to use?

 The purpose of this study is to provide an answer to one specific instance in which an activity has been successfully completed by students in both face to face and virtual formats. This activity is known as a literature, or discussion, circle. *Literature circles* “are small, temporary discussion groups composed of students reading the same story” in which they “report what they have read, determining themselves what is significant in their reading and why” (Blum, Lipsett, and Vocom, 2002, p. 100). These can be formed in the confines of the classroom among students (*face to face*) or they can be comprised of a group of students meeting in some form of a discussion board or chat room (*virtual*). This proposed study intends to answer the following question: Do students have more productive literature circle discussions online or face to face?

 Cobb County School District is encouraging all students to partake in at least one online course before they graduate. The expected surge of students moving to this format necessitates studies seeking to discover which instructional strategies are successful for the online platform. It is unfair to suggest participation in online classes without confidence in the methods used for instruction. As well, students in the traditional classroom setting may benefit from altering their assessment practices by incorporating techniques known to be successful in online classes.

**Literature Review**

In 1989, a landmark study was conducted on literature circles, a format that moved away from traditional question and answer discussion led by teachers towards student-centered text-based discussions. Eeds and Wells (1989) found literature circles fostered an environment which triggered four areas of talk: constructing simple meaning, which deals with basic comprehension of the story; personal involvement, in which a student relates personal stories inspired by the reading; inquiry, comprised of hypothesizing, interpreting, and verifying; and critique, when a student discusses what was liked and why. Literature circles have helped to revolutionize the language arts and English classrooms. Burns (1998), Stien and Beed (2004) also concluded that literature circles can change a classroom atmosphere. Marchiando (2013) agrees that literature circles allow “each student to leave the group with a greater understanding of the text” (p. 18). Avci and Yuksel (2011) and Wilfong (2009) also concluded a great depth of understanding because of student participation in literature circles. The opportunity for students to discuss ideas and events within a story encourages peer to peer discussions to unlock meanings for all levels of readers. Students become eager to participate in real discussions (Fredericks, 2012). Clarke and Holwadel (2007) were able to give the students strategies “that they needed to discuss books but also the ones that would help them in their interpersonal relations beyond the literature circle discussions” (p. 28). This implies that the benefits of the circle extend beyond the classroom into real life skills. Confidence grows among readers because of this (Blum, Lipsett, and Yocom, 2002; Mills and Jennings, 2011). Furthermore, Long and Gove (2003) believe that students “should interpret from more than one perspective and point of view” (p. 350). The ability to take skills outside the classroom and view ideas from multiple perspectives is a valuable commodity in a world that is becoming more connected and collaborative each year.

 While the benefits of literature circles have long been known and encouraged, there are deficiencies in the face to face model. Pearson (2010) reasoned that “if [the] aim is for children to use more elaborated reasoning and for them to back up their opinions with explicit reference to the text, this would have to be more thoroughly modeled and taught over a longer period of time while the children explored both the texts and their responses to them” (p. 9). Properly partaking in a literature circle requires explicit instruction. It is not merely the assigning of roles with the expectation of adherence to the guidelines. Students need modeling and structure to be productive. Clarke and Holwadel (2007) noticed when the students were left to their own devices, “what started as a civil discussion about the book rapidly declined into chaos” (p. 21). Students may be on task while the teacher is part of the group, but when he leaves, there is little incentive or initiative to stay on task. This means that while one group is working properly, five or six other groups may also be in a state of chaos and not discussing the intended literature.

A relatively new twist on the traditional face-to-face literature circle is the virtual literature circle. Virtual literature circles attempt to promote the same principles as the former method; however, discussions are typed rather than written. There are many similarities between the face-to-face and the online discussions. Bowers-Campbell (2011) reported, "Virtual literature circles facilitated collaborative, socially constructed affiliations while also compelling students to engage deeply with text" (p. 566). Eeds and Wells (1989) found similar results in their original study without online collaboration. Stewart (2009) concluded, "Participants in the virtual literature circle were able to gain social value by developing mutual respect and, as a result, felt comfortable sharing ideas with each other" (p. 33). This, too, is an intended outcome of face to face literature circles. The good news is that Whittingham (2013) believes "Literature circles…can easily be transitioned into an online environment" (p. 57).

There are some differences between the two methods, however. Students tend to have a more equal voice when participating in online discussions (Bowers-Campbell, 2011 and Pate-Moulton, Klages, Erickson, and Conforti, 2004). Some students shy away from speaking up in class while others enjoy the spotlight. Using a virtual discussion room helps level the playing field for all students, giving each one an opportunity for equal voice. Voices are not the only leveled commodity; thinking time is also differentiated. Bowers-Campbell (2011) observed that "since asynchronous discussions were not real-time chats, students could continue to revisit their ideas in a recursive thought process" (p. 565). Those students who process information more slowly than others get time without pressure to think through ideas before responding. As Stewart (2009) noted, "Participants in the virtual literature circle were able to gain social value by developing mutual respect and, as a result, felt comfortable sharing ideas with each other" (p. 33). There is a stigma involved in not answering questions in front of a whole group. Allowing a student to respond on his or her own timeline encourages mutual respect for the ideas of all students.

Drawbacks come along with the benefits of online collaboration. Klages, Pate, and Conforti (2007) found that "there are limitations to online discussions and to managing a large project" with online partners (p. 307). In order for the group to succeed as a whole, each student must fill his or her respective role properly and in a timely manner. Failure to do so impacts the entire group. Also, Pate-Mouton et al (2004) report "students felt no personal connection with their DLP (Distance Learning Partner)" (p. 32). The lack of face to face time hinders essential pieces of successful communication. Some students do not feel comfortable sharing personal ideas with people they do not know. Pate-Mouton et al (2004) also found “the experience would have been better for…students had there been more structure" (p. 33). Lack of structure can be disconcerting to students in an online format when the teacher’s presence is not immediately available. The traditional model needs to be changed (Thein, Guise, and Sloan, 2011; King, 2001).

While literature circles, both virtual and face to face, have proven benefits, they both have limitations. The question this study aims to answer is as follows: Do students have more productive literature circle discussions online or face to face?

**Methodology**

**Participants**

The participants are twenty 9th grade literature and composition students, ages 13-15, in a team taught environment at Hillgrove High School in the spring of 2014. Hillgrove’s student population is 61% white, 30% black, 6% Hispanic, and 3% Asian. The percentage of economically disadvantaged students is 16, and students with disabilities total 12%. However, since my classes are co-taught inclusion classes, the percentage of students with disabilities is about 25% of my class.

**Research Structure**

The research design is a repeated measures. For Reading 1, students read “Birthday Party” by Katharine Brush. Block 1 students engaged in virtual discussion circles; Block 2 engaged in face to face discussion circles. For Reading 2, students read “The Educators” by D.M. Black. Block 1 students carried out discussion circles face to face while Block 2 students used virtual discussion circles. The data was collected on two different days over a period of about one month.

**Research Procedures**

Students already had some experience with discussion circles based on previous readings, both face to face and virtually, so there was not a learning curve to influence research results. Students were randomly placed in their discussion circles and stayed in the same circle for both the virtual and face to face formats.

Face to face discussion circles were recorded so the conversations could be transcribed and analyzed. Virtual discussions were carried out on Edmodo.com. Both formats of discussion were done in a school setting. Face to face discussions took place in the classroom and lasted 15 minutes. Virtual discussions took place in a school computer lab and also lasted 15 minutes. For the purposes of the study, student responses from outside school allotted time were not considered in the data analysis. Statements by students were evaluated and categorized based on quality of the statement. The rating systems was as follows: 1-Statement is adds to the discussion and propels it forward; 2-Statement is accurate and appropriate, but lacks depth; 3-Statement may be accurate or inaccurate, related to the reading, but not relevant to current discussion; 4-Statement is not relevant to the discussion at all.

**Data Analysis**

The ratings of the statements for each discussion circle were averaged to get one number. The numbers for each group have been analyzed with paired t-tests, correlation analysis, and descriptive statistics. I compared each discussion circle’s performance between the two readings. For example, the score for Block 1 (“Birthday Party” virtual discussion) was compared to their score for “The Educators” face to face discussion. This was done for each group. As well, there was a significant difference in the number of comments made between face to face and the virtual setting; a correlation analysis was made between these two data points.

**Limitations**

Due to the small convenience sample, only 20 students participated in the study. The students are freshmen in high school who did not return permission slips in great numbers. This may be due to their relative lack of maturity or to the inconsistent school schedule as a result of the winter storms that closed school for days at a time, which immediately preceded the study.

Another limitation was the virtual discussion circle design. This is a new method of communication for scholastic purposes for the students; it is not a practiced method of discussion for them yet since they just started this semester. Discussions turned out to be more question and answer than a true developed discussion of an idea. Students really need to be trained in how to properly maintain an on-line discussion.

By reason of the students’ lack of online communication skills, there is a potential for reliability of the study to be compromised. The same study done with students who have more experience with online discussion circles may have much different results.

**Results**

There were a total of four face to face sessions and four virtual sessions. The average group score for face to face discussions was rated at 2.05, with 1 being the highest rated statement and 4 being the least desired statement. The group scores ranged from 1.88 to 2.26. Virtual discussion groups had a higher average score: 2.24, while the range was slightly smaller: 2.07 to 2.4.

**Table 1:** Descriptive Statistics for Face to Face and Virtual Group Discussion Scores

|  |
| --- |
| *Face to Face* |
|  |  |
| Mean | 2.0575 |
| Standard Error | 0.085281397 |
| Median | 2.045 |
| Mode | #N/A |
| Standard Deviation | 0.170562794 |
| Sample Variance | 0.029091667 |
| Kurtosis | -2.502833615 |
| Skewness | 0.290963889 |
| Range | 0.38 |
| Minimum | 1.88 |
| Maximum | 2.26 |
| Sum | 8.23 |
| Count | 4 |
| *Virtual* |
|  |  |
| Mean | 2.24 |
| Standard Error | 0.071063352 |
| Median | 2.245 |
| Mode | #N/A |
| Standard Deviation | 0.142126704 |
| Sample Variance | 0.0202 |
| Kurtosis | -1.166405254 |
| Skewness | -0.168584758 |
| Range | 0.33 |
| Minimum | 2.07 |
| Maximum | 2.4 |
| Sum | 8.96 |
| Count | 4 |

A correlation analysis was completed to see if the amount of statements made were related to the overall score of the group.

**Table 2:** Correlation Between Group Score and Amount of Comments in a Discussion

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | *Comments* | *Average Score* |
| Comments | 1 |  |
| Average Score | -0.354784305 | 1 |

 Since there is a negative correlation, the generalization is that more comments made within a group means the overall score went down. In the case of this study, a lower score means a higher quality statement. This suggests a moderate correlation between the amount of comments from within a group and the quality of statement made.

 Finally, a paired t-test was performed to discover if there was a difference between the groups’ face to face performance and their virtual performance.

**Table 3:** Paired *t*-Test Between Mean Group Scores

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *t*-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means |  |
|  |  |  |
|  | *Face* | *Virtual* |
| Mean | 2.0575 | 2.24 |
| Variance | 0.029091667 | 0.0202 |
| Observations | 4 | 4 |
| Pearson Correlation | 0.730152002 |  |
| Hypothesized Mean Difference | 0 |  |
| df | 3 |  |
| t Stat | -3.096818035 |  |
| P(T<=t) one-tail | 0.026714071 |  |
| t Critical one-tail | 2.353363435 |  |
| P(T<=t) two-tail | 0.053428143 |  |
| t Critical two-tail | 3.182446305 |   |

The mean score of the groups were all higher in the face to face discussion. There is a significant difference at the p = .05 level as p = .027 in this case.

**Discussion**

Students clearly performed better in the face to face discussions than they did in the virtual discussions. This research did not aim to discover why those differences exist; however, this is potential area for further study. Likewise, students seemed more engaged in the face to face discussions as evidenced by the greater amount of comments made in those conversations. Another area for further study might inquire why engagement is higher in that particular setting.

A more comprehensive study would benefit from a wider range of student grade levels to discover if more experienced students perform better on the virtual discussions than their younger counterparts. However, the current study suggests that freshmen students will have more productive discussions in a face to face setting until they are taught to communicate virtually for scholastic purposes.

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Appendix A

“The Educators” by D.M. Black

In their
limousines the
teachers come: by
hundreds. O the
square is
blackened with dark suits, with grave
scholastic faces. They
wait to be summoned.
 These are the

educators, the
father-figures. O you could
warm with love for the firm lips, the
responsible foreheads. Their
ties are strongly set, between their collars. They
pass with dignity the exasperation of waiting.

A
bell rings. They turn. On the
wide steps my
dwarf is standing, both hands raised. He
cackles with laughter. Welcome, he cries, welcome
to our elaborate Palace. It is indeed. He
is tumbling in cartwheels over the steps. The
teachers turn to each other their grave faces.

With
a single grab they have him up by the shoulders. They
dismantle him. Limbs, O
limbs and delicate organs, limbs and
guts, eyes, the tongue, the
lobes of the brain, glands; tonsils, several
eyes, limbs, the tongue,
a kidney, pants, livers, more
kidneys, limbs, the tongue
pass from hand to hand, in their serious hands. He is
utterly gone. Wide

crumbling steps.

They
return to their cars. They
drive off smoothly, without disorder;
watching the road.

Appendix B

“Birthday Party” by Katharine Brush

They were a couple in their late thirties, and they looked unmistakably married.

They sat on the banquette opposite us in a little narrow restaurant, having dinner. The

man had a round, self-satisfied face, with glasses on it; the woman was fadingly pretty, in

a big hat. There was nothing conspicuous about them, nothing particularly noticeable, until

the end of their meal, when it suddenly became obvious that this was an Occasion—in

fact, the husband’s birthday, and the wife had planned a little surprise for him.

It arrived, in the form of a small but glossy birthday cake, with one pink candle

burning in the center. The headwaiter brought it in and placed it before the husband, and

meanwhile the violin-and-piano orchestra played “Happy Birthday to You,” and the wife

beamed with shy pride over her little surprise, and such few people as there were in the

restaurant tried to help out with a pattering of applause. It became clear at once that help

was needed, because the husband was not pleased. Instead, he was hotly embarrassed,

and indignant at his wife for embarrassing him.

You looked at him and you saw this and you thought, “Oh, now, don’t be like

that!” But he was like that, and as soon as the little cake had been deposited on the table,

and the orchestra had finished the birthday piece, and the general attention had shifted

from the man and the woman, I saw him say something to her under his breath—some

punishing thing, quick and curt and unkind. I couldn’t bear to look at the woman then, so

I stared at my plate and waited for quite a long time. Not long enough, though. She was

still crying when I finally glanced over there again. Crying quietly and heartbrokenly and

hopelessly, all to herself, under the gay big brim of her best hat.

Appendix C

**Statement Rating System**

1-Statement is adds to the discussion and propels it forward

2-Statement is accurate and appropriate, but lacks depth

3-Statement may be accurate or inaccurate, related to the reading, but not relevant to current discussion

4-Statement is not relevant to the discussion at all