

ONLINE Referencing



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As I sat down with one of my colleagues to plan out a Grade 6 Literature Circle unit, we decided to break away from the traditional group discussion format. We were ready to try something new. In addition to the usual benefits of teaching reading through literature circles, we really wanted to be able to focus on explicitly teaching non-fiction writing with our students. Earlier in the year, I attended a workshop focusing on the use of online conferencing as a method of discussion with students. We wanted to make a link to the knowledge acquired in the workshop and put it to practical use. Immediately, we began to see the potential for turning our traditional literature circle discussions into online communities including blogs and wikis. Students would be using conferencing as a way to build knowledge, improve on each others' ideas, have an authentic audience for their work, and write lots and lots of non-fiction.

What is Online Conferencing?

Online conferencing allows students to meet and discuss their thoughts, questions, and opinions by posting responses in a central conference through email. Every member of the class has access to the conference and participates by posting questions, comments, opinions, and reactions to topics of discussion. While this unit was originally created using a program called First Class, the same type of conferencing, emailing and discussions could be replicated using a Wiki instead.

What were we hoping to achieve?

We decided that the following outcomes were important to us during the teaching of this unit.

- Increase our students' motivation to participate, read, and write about their selected reading materials through the use of technology.
- Allow students a variety of different ways to respond to their readings and discussions. For example: How can we involve those quiet students that rarely participate orally in group discussions? How can we provide students with more time to think and respond effectively to the questions posed?
- Provide an authentic audience.
- Improve communication between the parents, teacher and students.
- Collect student work to be assessed and evaluated over time.

How did we start?

1. Set up student accounts and teach them how to use the software.
2. Address expectations to students and parents around the use of email and online conferencing for educational purposes.
3. Collect some initial data from students around their feelings about reading, writing, and the use of technology at school. We used the website *surveymonkey.com* to collect student responses.
4. Model with students how to respond effectively to a question that has been posted for discussion. Model and re-teach this skill after students' first attempts.
5. Finally, introduce how the literature circle discussions will take place and explain how to post and respond to each others' questions in the conference.

Unexpected Benefits

Overall, the work produced by our students was better than we could have expected and their work exceeded our beginning objectives and expectations. To begin, the



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students were extremely motivated to participate in the online discussions and were engaged and focused while working on the computers. When we asked students how they felt about using online conferencing for doing their school work we received some responses such as

“It is so great to be able to use email conferencing at school because you can use new technology (computers etc) instead of writing on paper. It is a different, fun way of doing work.” ~ Lauren, Grade 6

What surprised us the most, however, were the huge improvements we saw in their non-fiction writing. Initially, the students’ responses were surface answers with little depth of thought. Their writing had many spelling and grammatical errors and were full of text messaging terms (i.e. cuz). They were barely writing one or two sentences.

Once students could see the public nature of their work and the fact that their entire class could read their answers, spelling and grammar improved dramatically. In addition, once we had the opportunity to take some of those initial posted responses and discuss how to improve their answers, how to make deeper connections, and how to expand and defend their opinions, we were suddenly seeing three- and four-paragraph responses. In addition, the students were building upon one another’s responses, adding thoughts, comments, and suggestions to their classmates’ answers. Students learned how to respond respectfully to one another’s answers and develop more refined responses.

From an assessment and evaluation point of view, we as the educators were able to collect pieces of written work from every single student and assess their growth over time. We were able to conference with students both in class, and through email. It allowed us to provide students with much more individualized

attention and support. One of the challenges of literature circles has always been how to accurately assess students’ discussions around the books because so much of the work is oral. By using online conferencing, we were able to see exactly what each student was thinking and effectively evaluate the group process. It improved participation in group discussions and allowed all students an equal voice in the talks. As one student wrote:

“I really like using on-line conferencing at school because it is a really fun way to communicate with the whole class, without having to have a big group discussion where it’s hard not to talk out of turn because you want to share your ideas so much! Instead, we can all just type our answers and ideas, and no one gets left out.” ~ Emma, Grade 6

Overall, online conferencing provided us with so many more benefits than we ever imagined, and we discovered that the educational possibilities are endless. What a great way to teach students to write clearly and precisely, to respond respectfully to their classmates’ thoughts and opinions, while also providing authentic tasks and an audience for non-fiction writing. **The question from our students is no longer “What do we have to do now?” but instead “What can we do next?”** ■