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Critical Literacy in Cyberspace?

A Case Study Analysis of One Preservice Teacher's Attempts at Critical Talk about *Monster* in Online Chats with Adolescents

Despite the ubiquity of research that suggests discussion about literature helps to increase student engagement with literary texts and is an integral part of developing a working knowledge of stories (Brevig 522), little discussion occurs in language arts and English classrooms. In 1997, Nystrand and his colleagues reported that whole-class discussion averaged a scant 15 seconds a day in the hundreds of 9th-grade classes they observed (42). These results were largely replicated by subsequent research reported in 2003 by Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran in a one-year study of 974 students in 64 middle and high school English classrooms in 19 schools in five states.

As former English teachers and current teacher educators who have used and continue to use discussion as a predominant teaching mode, we know discussion affords students opportunities to hear diverse viewpoints and perspectives; engage in "exploratory" rather than "presentational" talk (Henson 45); and modify their original understandings. When this discussion occurs around young adult novels that highlight critical literacy topics (e.g., the relationship between power and language),

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opportunities also arise for students to go beyond the level of the book—or their own personal experiences—to a consideration of larger sociopolitical systems at work in society.

But facilitating discussion well—especially discussion of potentially volatile topics—is no easy task. As McCann et al. suggest, "Facilitating discussion may appear easy, but it involves skills that require development over time" (xiii). Yet, specific work in the craft of managing discussions is rarely a part of methods education.

When preservice English teachers take Susan Groenke's young adult literature course, they have not yet begun their extended fieldwork in local middle and high school English classrooms. As their field placement coordinator, Dr. Groenke knows few opportunities exist for them to practice facilitating discussion about literature.

Fewer opportunities exist for them to practice taking a critical stance toward literature instruction. Critical literacy is not encouraged in increasingly prevalent scripted reading programs that can silence students' voices and marginalize non-White students (cf. Jordan), or by school administrators who fire and

suspend teachers for encouraging the expression of controversial ideas (ex. Meyer; O'Quinn). This lack of opportunity holds implications: as Beck suggests, an "absence" of models "for bringing critical literacy to the classroom" may cause beginning teachers to adopt less-critical teaching methods (394). If we want beginning teachers to feel confident in adopting critical teaching methods, we must provide them opportunities to see what critical literacy can look like in classrooms.

Thus, in spring 2005, we implemented the Web Pen Pals project, a university-secondary partnership that pairs preservice English teachers in online chat rooms with local middle school students to talk about young adult literature (for project description and context, see Groenke & Paulus, 2007). One goal of our teacher preparation program is to encourage beginning teachers to use technology effectively in their future teaching. A particular goal of the Web Pen Pals project is for beginning English teachers to use computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools to practice taking a critical literacy stance in discussion of young adult literature (see Groenke, 2007–2008, and Groenke, Maples, & Dunlap, 2005, for rationale for use of CMC in facilitating discussion).

In this article we provide theoretical underpinnings of the project and report findings from a case analysis of one preservice teacher, Amanda (pseudonyms used throughout), who participated in the Web Pen Pals project. Specifically, the analysis focused on the discourse moves Amanda used to facilitate critical talk in the online chats. Findings suggest adolescents can and will raise critical literacy topics on their own, without the aid of teacher prompting, and teachers' follow-up strategies can encourage the potential for collaborative development of critical talk. But beginning teachers may need more guidance in facilitating substantive, fully developed critical talk. We end with pedagogical implications.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Taking a critical stance in discussion of young adult literature requires a critical perspective of reading instruction. This perspective differs from modernist and transactional perspectives of reading instruction. Serafini explains a modernist perspective of reading instruction can be seen in basalized and direct instruction reading programs that assume a unique, single meaning of a text resides solely in the text (which the teacher knows and the reader must "find") (par 14).

A transactional perspective, as predominantly exemplified in reader-response practices and literature-based instruction (e.g., Rosenblatt; Wilhelm) assumes meaning of a text occurs through a transaction between a reader's life experiences and the text; the prior experiences, values, and beliefs a reader brings to a text will influence how the reader interprets the text. Thus, the focus of such a perspective often stays on the life of the reader through personal response (Lewis).

Critical literacy theorists and researchers (e.g., Comber & Simpson; Muspratt, Luke, and Freebody; Davens and Bean; Van Sluys, Lewison, and Flint) believe both the processes of reading and the texts being interpreted are power-laden. Thus, a critical perspective understands a reader's experience *and* the language and structure of a text— authorial choices— combine to influence the multiple meanings a text can hold. A critical reader, then, as Shor explains ". . . does not stay at the empirical level of memorizing data, or at the impressionistic level of opinion, or at the level of dominant myths in society, but goes beneath the surface to understand the origin, structure, and consequences of any body of knowledge, technical structure, or object under study" (24).

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Advocates of young adult literature see its potential for helping adolescents "go beneath the surface" of facts and personal opinion to a deeper understanding of one's own reading processes and the sociopolitical systems we belong to. Edelsky believes young adult literature may help students "notice . . . 'systems of domination' and 'systems of privilege'" (12). Glasgow explains young adult literature can provide "a context for students to become conscious of

their operating world view and to examine critically alternative ways of understanding the world and social relations" (54).

In the Web Pen Pals project, one of the focus texts we used was Walter Dean Myers's young adult novel *Monster*, which tells the story of 16-year-old Steve Harmon, who has been accused of serving as a lookout for a robbery of a Harlem drugstore. The owner was shot and killed, and Steve is in prison, awaiting trial. Throughout the novel, Steve struggles to prove to himself that he is not the "monster" the prosecutor, the jury, and society believes him to be. We had previously taught *Monster* to urban ninth grade students and middle schoolers who considered it a "favorite," and we felt the book lent itself to critical literacy discussions and instruction.

To help the preservice teachers in the young adult literature course understand how *Monster* could be considered from a critical stance, we introduced them to Lewison's, Flint's and Van Sluys' "Four Dimensions of Critical Literacy" (383-384) (see Figure 1). The "Four Dimensions" represent a synthesis of critical literacy definitions as they have appeared in the literature over the last 30 years. The dimensional perspective is not necessarily linear or best demonstrated in a developmental move across dimensions. Rather, developing critical literacy is an interrelated process. Lewison et al. explain the last dimension—taking action—is "*the* goal of critical literacy," but it cannot be attained without "expanded understandings and perspectives gained from the other three dimensions" (384, italics in original).

In the young adult literature class, we discussed the dimensions as they might apply to Myers's novel; brainstormed questions/topics we might ask/raise to help our pals engage each dimension (see Figure 1); and then used these questions/topics to guide our own in-class discussion of *Monster* before beginning the Web Pen Pals project.

Researching the Web Pen Pals Project

This article reports research from a larger qualitative case study of three preservice teachers who participated in the Web Pen Pals project. In the larger study, the preservice teachers chatted online about two novels: Avi's *Nothing but the Truth*, and Myers's *Monster*. To limit the scope of this article, we focus on the talk that occurred about *Monster,* and we focus on

the case of one preservice teacher, Amanda, and her middle school pals because the case was unique (Yin); of the three preservice teachers who participated in the larger study, Amanda's chat transcripts revealed a significantly higher number of "critical talk" episodes, and Amanda and her pals came closest to achieving engaged, substantive critical talk. Amanda's middle school pals included two females—Sarah and Kendra—and one male, Dave. The group participated in three one-hour chat sessions about *Monster*. Amanda was instructed to serve as a "reading buddy" to her middle school pals.

Methodology

Data Collection

The central question guiding this analysis was: *How does Amanda facilitate critical talk about young adult literature in online discussions with adolescents?* The transcripts of each of Amanda's one-hour chat sessions served as the primary data source. They were downloaded into word processing documents at the end of the semester. Analysis of the chat transcripts occurred on several levels to answer the research questions. Secondary data sources included Amanda's written reflections, which were collected after the semester was completed, and the transcript from one 1-hour interview, conducted with Amanda at the end of the semester.

Data Analysis

Relevant topic segments. First, because we were interested in understanding how critical talk occurred about *Monster,* we focused on the conversational turns which were on the topic of "book talk," that is, *Monster.* When a comment seemed to introduce a "book talk" topic, comments responding to it were coded (Dodson).

Critical talk topics. The next analysis involved using the "book talk" topical episodes to locate "critical talk" episodes in the discussions for microanalysis. We used Lewison et al.'s four dimensions of critical literacy as criterion to determine critical talk. As a result of this analysis, we located five total "critical talk" episodes in Amanda's *Monster* chat sessions.

Types of discourse moves. To understand what discourse moves Amanda used to facilitate critical talk in the critical talk episodes, we implemented

Four Dimensions of Critical Literacy	Characteristics	Topics/Questions as related to *Monster*
1. Disrupting the Commonplace	• Problematizing all subjects of study (including adolescence, learning), and understanding existing knowledge as a historical product • Interrogating texts: "How is this text trying to position me?" • Including popular culture and media as a regular part of the curriculum • Studying language to analyze how it shapes identity, constructs cultural discourses, and supports or disrupts the status quo	Re-thinking traditional notions of masculinity/toughness (watch Media Education Foundation video, *Tough Guise*). What are alternative ways to be masculine? What determines one's identity? Why is this text written in this multi-genre style? How does it affect the reader's experience of reading the novel? Why might Myers put the reader in the position to judge Steve's character? Representations of African-American males as "gangster,""thug" exist in the novel. Who benefits from these kinds of representations? Are they accurate? What would different representations look like? Steve's lawyer tells him: "You're young, you're Black, and you're a male. You're already guilty in the jury's eyes." What does this quote mean?
2. Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints	• Reflecting on multiple and contradictory perspectives • Asking: "Whose voices are heard and whose are missing?" • Paying attention to and seeking out the voices of those who have been silenced or marginalized • Making difference visible	What if Steve were White? What if the lawyers and judge were Black? Why does Steve's mother wonder if they should get a Black lawyer? The multi-genre novel forces the reader into this dimension—is Steve telling the truth? Who *is* Steve? The reader gets some information through his journal entries, but the information differs from what he writes in his screenplay. Flashback scenes cast doubt on Steve's innocence. Steve is called a "monster," and his lawyer and dad seem to doubt his innocence, but his teacher supports him and he is a loving brother. He seems like a "good guy."
3. Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues	• Going beyond the personal and attempting to under-stand the sociopolitical systems to which we belong • Challenging unquestioned legitimacy of unequal power relationships • Redefining literacy as a form of cultural citizenship and politics that increases opportunities for subordinate groups to participate in society and as an ongoing act of consciousness and resistance	Consider reasons once-thriving urban centers have become economically disadvantaged and look at links between this and masculinity for young African-American males Who is to blame for youth violence? Why might joining a gang be something a person would do? Percentage of young Black males in prison vs. other popula-tions Research shows Black males are incarcerated at higher rates than other non-Black males
4. Taking Action and Promoting Social Justice	• Engaging in praxis—reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it • Using language to exercise power to enhance everyday life and to question practices of privilege and injustices • Analyzing how language is used to maintain domina-tion, how nondominant groups can gain access to dominant forms of language and culture, how diverse forms of language can be used as cultural resources, and how social action can change existing discourses	Local community action to raise awareness about youth violence and consider ways to prevent it Youth take action in school to encourage alternative views of masculinity

Figure 1. Adapted from Lewison, Mitzi et al. "Taking On Critical Literacy: The Journey of Newcomers and Novices." *Language Arts* 79 (2002): 382-392

Spradley's strict inclusion semantic relationship and his means-end semantic relationships. We coded Amanda's and her pals' turns within each critical talk episode line by line under the semantic domains of "X is a kind of Y" (strict inclusion) and "X is a way to do Y" (means-end). Next, we identified salient domains and looked for domains supported by the data. Then we developed subcategories within the domains to show what was happening within the data. We continually refined these categories.

The final analytic step was a detailed analysis of specific threads and how Amanda's discourse moves impacted the critical talk episodes. This phase of the analysis involved examining Amanda's discourse moves in the context of the discussions.

Findings and Discussion

This analysis explored the discourse moves a preservice teacher, Amanda, used to facilitate online discussions about literature with middle school students in a synchronous CMC environment, and the

impact of these moves on the development of critical talk about the young adult novel, *Monster*.

Amanda used a variety of discourse moves to facilitate discussion about *Monster*. Most salient in the analysis, however, was her use of *uptake, sharing her personal opinions, and soliciting authentic student opinion*s (see Table 1):

Nystrand defines *uptake* as a teacher discourse strategy that "validates . . . students' ideas" (6). That Amanda used this strategy is significant for several reasons. First, it signifies that the students were participating in the discussion—posing questions and initiating topics on their own. Second, Amanda's use of *uptake* positioned students' contributions as the focus of discussion. Many of the students posed critically-minded questions; thus, Amanda's use of the *uptake* strategy positioned the student-initiated critical talk questions/topics as the focus of discussion. This discourse move—paired with Amanda *sharing her own opinions* and *requesting student opinions*—also seemed to encourage the collaborative development of critical talk.

In the excerpts which follow, we present examples from Amanda's first chat illustrating the various discourse moves she used to facilitate critical talk throughout the chats. In the first excerpt (see Figure 2), it is Amanda's *uptake* of her pal, Kendra's, question, which ultimately seems to create the opportunity for a collaborative critical discussion to emerge.

In Amanda's discussions her pals often initiated topics for discussion and frequently asked questions of the group. It is a question posed by Kendra—"do you think the color of Steve has anything to do with it?"—that prompts the discussion which occurs in the above excerpt—a question which inspired the emergence of critical talk through examining race as an issue within the text.

In response, Dave and Sarah shared opposing perspectives (lines 102, 103). Amanda followed up Kendra's question with an *uptake* discourse move (line 105), which positioned Kendra's question as the focus of discussion and encouraged the students to elaborate on their viewpoints. Typical to Amanda's discussion style, Amanda seemed to act as a co-participant with her pals, and often *shared her opinion* to the students' questions, as she does to Kendra's question, "I think it does have something to do w/ things" (line 106). In line 107, Kendra extended her

Table 1. Amanda's Main Discourse Moves in the Critical Talk Episodes		
Discourse Moves	Description	Frequency
Uptake	To inquire into something a student contributes to the discussion	11
	To share comments or information to extend student's contribution	6
Share Opinion	To share one's personal belief or attitude about a topic	14
Request for Opinion	Request reader's general attitude toward the written text, author, etc.	12
Challenge	Elicit a defense or line of argument	7
Praise	To appreciate or recognize a person or idea	6
Give Directive	To instruct or guide	5
Agree	To support another's position or belief	5
Request for Elaboration	Elicit more information about a student response to teacher-posed question	5
Acknowledge	To provide affirmation or confirmation of a comment	4
Provide Example	To give an idea to represent or clarify a concept	3
Investigate	Request for students to look deeper into a certain topic; probe	2

Line #	Speaker	Turn	Discourse move
101.	Kendra	do you think the color of Steve has anything to do with it ?	Student initiation
102.	Dave	not at all	
103.	Sarah	i do	
105.	Amanda	everyone please explain why they think what they think about the color question	Uptake
106.	Amanda	i think it does have something to do w/things	Share opinion
107.	Kendra	if he was white would he have a different outcome ?	
108.	Amanda	i think his color plays a part	Share opinion

Figure 2. Excerpt 1 from Chat 1. *Note:* Conversations overlap in synchronous chat rooms. Thus the missing line numbers indicate chat turns that were part of a different conversation than what is being analyzed here. With the exception of adding pseudonyms, all examples are presented verbatim.

Line #	Speaker	Turn	Discourse Move
118.	Amanda	we read an article that said whites were arrested just as much and more sometimes than blacks,	Uptake (extend)
119.	Amanda	but blacks r more likely to be convicted and have a harsher punishment. Why do you think that is?	Uptake continued/ Request for opinion
123.	Kendra	from movies we have a certain outlook	
127.	Dave	people don't stop to realize things about them	
124.	Sarah	i think it is b/c they have a bad reputation	
131.	Sarah	its like they were talking bout [another local high school] it has a bad reputation even though the school isnt bad i think the black ppl have a bad reputation but some of them arent bad	Extend

Figure 3. Excerpt 2 from Chat 1

initial question, which seemed to problematize the issue of race and provided another perspective for her pals to consider. In line 108, Amanda again *shared her opinion*: "i think his color plays a part."

As the discussion continued (see excerpt in Figure 3), Amanda presented information from an article she had read in the young adult literature course concerning race and arrests of juvenile male offenders to perhaps further or deepen the topic. Here, by sharing the information about the article, Amanda did several things to encourage the continuation of the talk. First, she collaboratively developed a critical talk topic with Kendra and Sarah by *uptaking* their questions and adding information to help further extend the discussion. She also presented information that might have countered some of her pals' assumptions, which may have encouraged critical talk ("whites were arrested just as much and more sometimes than black"). Perhaps to generate more discussion about the information she shared, Amanda asked an *opinion* question, "why do u think that is" (line 119).

All of the students responded, implying they were engaged in the conversation. Kendra provided a possible justification (line 123), connecting the media's influence to how people look at African-

Americans. This seemed to show she understood a connection existed between the representation of a group by the media and the discriminatory actions carried out against particular groups. Sarah contributed her own perspective to the question and said, "i think it is b/c they have a bad reputation" (line 124). Dave responded, "people don't stop to realize things about them" (line 127).

In line 131, Sarah elaborated on her earlier response (line 124) to Amanda's *opinion* question about why black male offenders may be convicted at higher rates than white male offenders. Here, Sarah brought up a local high school in the area and made a local, real-world connection to extend the idea of how stereotypes and misrepresentations can be inaccurate. The potential for the talk to become critical is present—as the students and Amanda consider how perceptions of others are formed—and Amanda and her pals seem willing to delve beneath the surface of facts to generate possible explanations for why race might play a role in how the character of Steve is treated and judged in *Monster*. But ultimately, the discussion ended as Amanda changed the topic (see Figure 4).

Line #	Speaker	Turn	Discourse Move
132.	Dave	blacks are more of my friends than most white people	
133.	Amanda	awesome Dave that means you r more open minded then some other people	Individual Praise
135.	Amanda	we need guys like u in the world to help stop the craziness	Individual Praise
142.	Kendra	ppl are afraid of things they cant explain or understand	
144.	Amanda	great job Kendra	Individual Praise
155.	Sarah	ppl judge ppl by what color they r even if they dont try 2 they still do it	
156.	Sarah	its hard not to	
157.	Amanda	and that is why we need to recognize this and affect the world what do u think?	Acknowledge Request for Opinion
158.	Kendra	ppl go by what statistics say	
160.	Amanda	Can you explain to me why you chose the line from the book you did?	Initiates new topic

Figure 4. Excerpt 3 from Chat 1

Throughout the discussion, Dave seemed to take the topic of race personally and seemed to feel the need to present himself as an ally to African-Americans: "blacks are more of my friends than most white people" (line 132). In line 142, Kendra continued to generate possible reasons for racism and said, "ppl are afraid of things they cant explain or understand." Amanda praised her for her comments (line 144). Sarah pointed out that, "ppl judge ppl by what color they r even if they don't try 2 they still do it its hard not to" (lines 155 & 156). Amanda responds that this is why people need to "recognize and affect the world" (line 157).

But before ideas about how to actually "affect the world" could be shared, Amanda posed a question which initiated a new and unrelated topic, "Can you explain to me why you chose the lines from the book you did?" (line 160), referring to a previous conversation where Amanda has asked her pals to share lines they felt important to the text.

Pedagogical Implications

As Simpson explains, critical discussions of literature often result not from teachers' carefully crafted questions, but from the students' own questions and curiosities that emerge through discussion (124). In Amanda's case, it was often her pals' questions and comments which fostered the potential for critical talk to occur.

The development of critical talk may depend on a collaborative exchange, then, where teachers act as co-participants—sharing their own opinions, "thinking out loud" with students about issues—rather than as sole facilitators or discussion managers. Amanda seemed to play the role of co-participant successfully most of the time, and thus critical talk seemed to occur, or have the potential to occur. However, sometimes the critical talk episodes ended as a result of Amanda posing a new question that didn't build on or extend the critical talk that had developed. Thus, Amanda and her pals did not reach the fourth dimension of critical literacy, "taking action."

Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys posit that newcomers to critical literacy rarely get beyond the second dimension of "Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints" to the fourth dimension of "Taking Action," which they describe as the goal of critical literacy (384). Amanda and her pals did seem to get beyond this second dimension, as the talk in the first chat moved from questions about the role Steve's race played in how he would be judged, to how the media's representations of African-American males may influence negative stereotypes that people perceive to be accurate.

But just as the talk may have developed into considering ways to take action locally—or even to reconsider one's own beliefs and perceptions of African-Americans, and what makes racism difficult to combat—Amanda initiated a new question and topic, and thus shut down the opportunity for the critical talk to continue and possibly reach the fourth dimension of critical literacy.

This implies Amanda may not have been committed to the task of developing or encouraging a critical stance, and may have had other expectations or understandings of the discussion task. The post-project interview data may shed some light on Amanda's expectations for the discussion. Amanda explained she saw her role in the discussions to be "to

keep [students] on topic, to keep them moving . . ." (Interview transcript, December 8, 2005). When we asked why she felt she needed to do this, Amanda responded, ". . . [so] you can get everything covered" (Interview transcript, December 8, 2005). Ultimately it seems Amanda viewed one of her roles in facilitating the chat dialogue as covering an agenda. That Amanda came to the computer lab for each chat session with a prepared list of questions (Fieldnotes, February 15, 2005) seems to reinforce this interpretation.

What may be needed in the young adult literature course, then, is the opportunity for beginning teachers to examine their own histories of schooling and how their orientations toward reading and reading instruction—as well as the expectations they hold for teachers' and students' roles in discussion—come to be what they are.

Of course, Amanda may not have known how to take her students to another level of talk, and more preparation for beginning teachers to take on critical literacy topics in the classroom may be required in teacher preparation coursework if substantive, well-developed critical talk is the goal.

We have begun to think that effective critical talk about literature may require an anthropological or "ecological" approach (Hillocks xi). Such an approach in the young adult literature course may involve preservice teachers developing larger curricular structures (e.g., units and yearlong programs) that engage them in long-term critical inquiry. As example, for *Monster*, preservice teachers might be given more time to thoroughly research juvenile incarceration rates by ethnicity and gender; explore depictions of masculinity in the media; and consider economic changes (e.g., effects of neoliberalism) on urban areas before engaging in (and during) discussions of the literature itself. In their future teaching, they might

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also encourage their students to engage in similar research.

Finally, we know it is important to remember, as McLaughlin and DeVoogd suggest, that teachers cannot just "become critical," that it is a "process that involves learning, understanding, and changing over time" (55). We believe providing opportunities for beginning teachers to see alternatives to the current, modernist-driven reading instruction in the young adult literature course is a crucial part of this process.

Note

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