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Voices from the Ning:
How Social Networking Created a Learning Community in a YAL Classroom

I n an age where information and communication can be exchanged quickly and efficiently, being able to read, think critically, and communicate via an online venue is just as important as competence with the more traditional means of literacy, such as reading a book or writing a letter to a friend (Leu, Leu, & Coiro, 2004). Larson (2009) challenges educators to respond to the ever-changing ways that technology can enhance our learning by offering students new opportunities to expand their learning community into virtual spaces. Furthermore, the International Reading Association (2009) and the National Council of Teachers of English (2007) call for teacher education programs to prepare preservice teachers to integrate and utilize the new literacies in the classroom by providing them with the training they need to amalgamate technology into instruction. This article will demonstrate how I used the Ning (www.ning. com), a Web-based online service that allows users to create their own social network, to establish a learning community in a college classroom. The Ning operates in much the same way that Facebook does, but you can create a social network for a particular group of people. I created a social network for my undergraduate students who were enrolled in my Young Adult Literature class during the spring 2010 semester.

Today's students not only use the traditional pencil and book as tools for learning, they also use new literacies, including electronic books, online reading, and online social networking (Larson, 2009). Research has confirmed that today's student needs to acquire the skills and strategies to navigate constantly changing information and communication technolo-

gies (Larson, 2008). While the International Society for Technology (2008) has published the National Educational Technology Standards (NETS) to provide guidelines to help teachers prepare students for a changing digital age, it is crucial that teachers gain a thorough and practical understanding of the technologies that are available to enhance students' learning.

As Larson (2009) points out, today's student has a keen knowledge and awareness of technology, especially when it comes to communicating with others. There is an urgent need for teachers and researchers to find ways to mesh together students' traditional types of literary experiences with the more technologically advanced literary experiences that are part of their daily lives outside of school. Ferenstein (2010) observed how using Twitter helped to boost student engagement in a college classroom where students tweeted comments and questions to a teaching assistant who responded to them in real time. He found that using Twitter in the classroom pulled more students into a discussion, particularly those who were too shy to talk in class. He also found that Twitter chatter often spilled over into students' free time as they continued an online conversation long after the class was over, building community in and outside of the classroom.

Rogers (2009) noticed that her teacher certification students created a Facebook page just for those members of the course so that they could talk about what they were learning. When Rogers asked her students about the benefits of this online forum, students relayed that they used Facebook to discuss assignments, ask and answer questions, bounce ideas

off of each other, post pertinent information, and support each other. Rogers (2009) called for professors to utilize social networks to enhance their teaching, as social networking can "promote student reading through book clubs, book discussions, and shared readings" (p. 34).

Methodology

Participants

The participants for this study were 19 undergraduates, ranging from sophomores to seniors, enrolled in a course called Young Adult Literature. A majority of the students were preservice teachers, while others were taking the course as an elective. An assignment for this course was for students to post a blog each week on the Ning. Students were assigned a young adult novel to read each week and were free to post anything they wanted on their Ning page. Each student created a My Page space in the Ning and invited members of the class to join the Page and its discussion forum (in the form of a blog) to discuss course readings and relevant topics. Students managed their own My Page, enabling them to experience from a teacher's vantage point the operation of a blog in an actual classroom setting wherein the professor receives email alerts for approval of new posts. Figure 1 shows the assignment description for the Ning given to students on the first day of class.

Data Collection and Analysis

The primary data source used for this research study was the content of participants' blogs throughout the

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Ning Assignment

Part of your grade will also be your participation on the Ning, an online social network created specifically for this course. Each week, prior to our class, you will need to post your thoughts and reactions to the book that you read for that week. You also need to respond to at least two other posts. My hope is that this experience will create a conversation that will continue beyond the walls of our classroom!

Figure 1. Ning assignment description

course, consisting of 220 posts and 464 comments. As a final course evaluation, students also answered the following questions:

1. How has the use of technology helped or not helped you to learn?
2. What (if anything) have you learned about technology (or anything else) in this class that will help you in your future endeavors?
3. What can you tell me about the use of technology to enhance learning and teaching?

Prior to collecting the data, a preliminary list of codes was created. After the data were collected, I created folders, or nodes, on NVivo 8, a data management software tool that organizes and stores data. This software allowed the coding process to run quickly and helped me to better connect with the data so as to generate themes and patterns (Basit, 2003). Participants' blogs, comments, and final reflections were placed on NVivo 8 and reviewed line by line. Data were analyzed to determine how they answered the research question and how it correlated with the codes created to compare participants' views, situations, actions, accounts, and experiences. By looking for frequency (items that are identified because they are numerous), omissions (items that never appear, even though the researcher suspected that they would), and declarations (items that participants identify as present or significant), themes emerged (LeCompte, 2000).

Once the data were coded, I used thematic networks (Attride-Stirling, 2001) to organize the data by mapping out three classes of themes: (1) basic themes; (2) organizing themes (categories of basic themes grouped together to summarize more abstract principles); and (3) global themes (super-ordinate themes that capture the principal findings in the study as a whole). Using thematic networks allowed me to not only look for frequency of occurrence, omission, and declaration, but also create patterns of "things that go together" (LeCompte, 2000, p. 150) in meaningful ways. Once thematic networks were created, I revisited the data not in a linear way (line by line in the raw data), but rather through the global, organizing, and basic themes in order to bring together the data and the interpretation (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

Findings

As the blogs and comments were coded, it became clear that students were constructing knowledge and critically thinking about young adult literature with the other members of the class, and the Ning gave students the time to do this. This finding is evident not only in the number of posts and comments the participants' made (220 posts and 464 comments), but also by the depth and breadth of the comments.

The Ning Gave Students Time to Respond

When the topic for the week was reading the classics, Sue's blog created an online conversation over the classic Steinbeck novel, *Of Mice and Men.* In this early Ning conversation that focused on the pros and cons of using the classics in a young adult classroom, four students participated in an online dialogue about the book. They pulled out themes on the American dream and gender representations, and tried to make sense of the novel, particularly the complexity of the characters. This in-depth conversation actually lasted for a week, as students went back and forth trying to make sense of the story and wondering how young adults would connect with the book. This might not have happened in the classroom, especially since the class only met once a week. Even when I organized students into smaller groups during class to generate conversation, dialogue was often superficial as students tried to respond to each other's comments and answer each other's questions. As one student noted in her final reflection of the course,

> I think that using technology throughout the course of the semester really helped me to look a little deeper into each of the books we read. While I was able to formulate my own opinions and personal questions about each piece of literature, I think reviewing the comments and insights of others really helped drive certain issues home, or helped me see things differently. For example, I wasn't crazy about *Mexican White Boy*, but after reading a couple blog posts from the other people in class, I was able to appreciate the text a little more. Additionally, I think that reviewing how others would incorporate each book into their own classroom really helped me think outside the box—just because we were reading YA literature does not necessarily mean that only teens should be reading these books. Sure we talked about a lot of this stuff in class, but many times people do not get the chance to speak, or simply do not want to, so posting on the Ning really helped everyone have a voice.

Using the Ning gave students the time they needed to provide a written reflection on the novels as well as to respond to others' reflections.

Critically Thinking about the Books

Because the Ning allowed students the time to reflect and respond, they were able to critically think about the books that they were reading. They became "active thinkers" (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 52) as they questioned the author's purpose (What do you think were Steinbeck's purposes for doing this?), tried to understand the power relationships in the novel (I thought the book was about prejudice and social class. To me, there were 3 tiers—the ranch owner and Curley [and by marriage his wife], then the guys in the bunkhouse, and then finally Crooks), promoted social justice (Another theme could be treating people with dignity even though they are different), and recognized those voices that were marginalized in the story (She is simply always referred to as "Curley's wife"). Critical literacy is a significant skill because it encourages the reader to read text in a deeper and more meaningful way. Critical literacy allows the reader to move beyond just accepting the text as is, and to become more active in the reader–author relationship (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004).

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The Ning provided these students with opportunities to critically think about young adult literature because they were feeding off of each others' responses and trying to make sense of the themes, issues, and characters in the books. Furthermore, the Ning allowed students the time to generate conversations before the class met so that we could use class time to continue thinking critically about the novels we were reading, answering questions collectively, and commenting on the novels.

Connecting with Their Peers before Coming to Class

The Ning became a helpful tool to use in this college classroom because students were able to not only reflect on the novels they were reading, but also

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comment on other reflections before coming to class. It also became a way to begin a conversation during class (since students had already begun talking about the novels) or continue conversations that were started in class. The following comment comes from a blog about the book *Hard Love* (2001) by Ellen Wittlinger:

> You raise some great questions and I hope that we can talk about them in class. The significance of John's zine, Bananafish, is perplexing. What is a bananafish (I am going to google it)? As for Marisol, I couldn't quite put my finger on that girl. I did want her to "switch sides" but I think it's because then everything and everyone would fall into place—a happy ending (at least in my weird little world?). Let's bring up these questions in class and see what everyone else thinks.

The Ning made class discussions more meaningful because students created the conversation online first. They were able to process the books, think about their reactions to the books, then reflect on their thoughts and reactions. The Ning allowed them the time to do all of this. As one student wrote in her final reflection of the course, "The Ning helped me as a learner to make my thoughts concrete, which helped me articulate them better. I am always better at writing them than saying them on the spot. In other words, it gave me time and helped me process."

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Connecting to Other Avenues in Their Lives and the Lives of Their Students

Finally, students used the Ning to construct knowledge and critically think about how other avenues in their lives connected to the young adult literature they were reading. Students in the class sat in on a lecture given by Dr. S., an assistant professor, who discussed his research on the migration of people and how globalization makes the world more culturally diverse. On Cindy's blog, entitled How to Become a More Globalized/Culturally Aware Student/Teacher, she connected the books *Bang!* (Flake, 2007), *Tree Girl* (Mikaelsen, 2005), and *Mexican White Boy* (De la Peña, 2010) with Dr. S.'s seminar and other courses that she had completed. She writes,

> I love . . . when classes begin to relate to one another . . . and to life . . . . Dr. S. discussed the role of education as a social institution for this identity construction and further understanding of the cultural influences that accompany identity . . . not only dependent on legal status, but on one's cultural sense of belonging . . . .

In her blog, Cindy continued to reflect on the three novels—*Mexican White Boy* and Danny's struggles with his own identity, the political underpinnings and issues of culture and border crossing presented in the book *Tree Girl*, and the ways that a family copes with the death of a child in the book *Bang!*—and challenged her peers with the following question: "Does your perspective on teaching some of the books that we are reading as a class change based on your own personal connections to these books?" Her peers responded:

Cathy: . . . Culturally diverse, am I prepared? Professionally, yes, personally, no. I have been taught up the waaazoo about how to be culturally sensitive. . . . we all know culture is not limited to ethnic background or race . . . . What's been on my mind lately is the "migration" I am about to make. We "Northerners" have a very different culture from the lovely people in the South. The way we interact professionally, speak, socialize personally, EAT, dress . . . it all varies from school to school, from town to town, from state to state . . . . From East coast to West coast . . . I've studied abroad before, but I don't think anything has prepared me to move from where I have lived for 22 years.

Cindy: It's nice to have someone who will be experiencing a big culture shock with me. . . . It's funny because life is all about "border crossing" and "culture leaping." We will make it . . . I promise.

Barb: Thanks for bringing up Dr. S's lecture! I was there and I also saw some great connections and it caused me to consider my cultural thinking. This is right on time for me to begin my student teaching next fall in [Big Town], which is one of the most diverse towns I know of. . . . It is so hard to define culture and I think it is important for us as teachers to have our students examine their multiple cultures, whether they are from another country or not. Everyone has multiple cultures and it is

important to recognize and appreciate them! I love making connections between my classes, my field studies, my readings. ANYTHING I can wrap my brain around. If I can find how something relates, it makes my learning so much easier and my understanding deeper. I definitely see how *Bang, Tree Girl,* and *Mexican White Boy* all relate to one another and with the topic of transmigration.

What is interesting in this blog is that these students were helping each other out as they were coming to terms with their own biases, and their reflections on diversity influenced others as they wrestled with the contents of the lecture, their other classes, and the books that they were reading. Throughout this blog and its comments, students were valuing the opinions and views of others, discussing how their courses have prepared them to be teachers, and basically experiencing an "aha" moment as all that they have learned began to come together and connect.

Students used the Ning to construct knowledge and critically think about the books they were reading for this course. The Ning proved to be an outstanding tool for this class because it gave students the time to respond to the novels and to each other with breadth and depth.

Final Thoughts

This article attempts to add to the emerging literature on what a social network classroom could look like with young adults. Blogs on the Ning were used to create discussion groups to enhance conversations about young adult literature and build a positive learning community. Social networks not only bring together a community of people who share an interest, they also allow them to talk to each other on their own terms. Zawilinski (2009) reminds us of how literature response blogs can provide students with an "out of school" tool as a different means to respond to literature (p. 653).

After a careful analysis of the electronic conversations, I can conclude that the asynchronous nature of online discussions encouraged students to think deeply about their reactions to the books and to other members' responses. Online entries allowed students the time to respond thoughtfully to their peers' postings. This finding is similar to those of Larson (2009)

and Grisham and Wolsey (2006), in which students' entries created a more authentic discussion than a traditional face-to-face discussion would in a literature circle. As Larson (2009) points out, online reader response encourages students to "respond deeply to the literature, share their ideas with others, and carefully consider multiple perspectives and thoughts" (p. 646). Furthermore, using the Ning allowed students the time they needed to reflect and respond to the literature, as well as to think critically about the complexity of the characters and themes. As Grisham and Wolsey (2006) indicate, "When students are given the opportunity and appropriate structures, they are competent and willing to think critically about complex situations and to work together to construct an understanding" (p. 648).

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It became apparent that undergraduate students were learning through their interactions with other members of the class. They were refining their identities as teachers as they wrestled with the pros and cons of the issues and themes in the books that they were reading. They were encouraging each other, sympathizing with the characters in the books, and mentoring each other as they shared their thoughts and reflections. They were not only dialoguing and connecting to young adult literature, they were also making text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections as they made associations between this course and other courses and lectures.

Finally, the students gained a sense of authority over the use of the technology, while also experiencing the collaborative nature of a blog in which public discourse generated enthusiasm for engaging in written communication. Thus, although the students met the goals of the curriculum—to engage in reading Adolescent Literature and plan lessons and units based on the literature—they also saw the benefit of using an online social network as a public collaborative writing space and could envision ways in which such an environment could enrich the educational lives of their future students. As one student said,

"The Ning has shown me that I can create small, private networks for my classes, which I fully intend to use as a teacher. Having people post responses to their readings is a great way to track who is reading and how they understand the materials; it also generates opportunities for talking points in class."

As exemplified in this small study, the blog posts and comments issued by these undergraduate students created an important form of social interaction—one of the goals of social networks. While posting their blogs on the Ning provided these undergraduates with the opportunities to express their thoughts, concerns, and dilemmas about the books that they were reading, comments by their peers gave them the opportunity and the time to collaborate, encourage, and support each other.

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