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Backchanneling Technology:

Transforming Students' Participation during Discussions of *If I Grow Up*

The linguistic concept of backchanneling describes the myriad ways in which listeners provide feedback to speakers through short utterances or flavoring particles, like "uh-huh" or "hmmm," and extra-linguistic cues, such as furrowing one's brow after a particular word is uttered (Schegloff, 1982). Yngve (1970) introduced the term *backchanneling* in his study of turn-taking behaviors to describe a listener's communicative gestures and vocalizations (McClave, 2000). Digital backchanneling refers to real-time, online conversations that occur while others are talking. TodaysMeet is one popular and free digital backchanneling tool that makes it possible for teachers to create online "rooms" in which students can "chat" through brief posts. In the literature classroom, this technology enables students to use networked devices (e.g., Smartphones, iPads) while face-to-face discussions take place simultaneously, potentially increasing the opportunities available for students to share their ideas, pose questions about the text, or make connections among ideas being offered (Li & Greenhow, 2015; Pollard, 2014).

Active participation during text-based discussions is important because broad and deep responses to literature can promote equitable learning opportunities for students (White, 2011). In particular, "silent" students' voices can be amplified through dialogue (Asterhan & Eisenmann, 2011; Hunter & Caraway, 2014), a phenomenon that is too often unrealized due to a longstanding tradition of recitation and the prevalence of transmission models that guide literary analysis and the coinciding ways of talking about literature in many classrooms in the US (Juzwik, Borsheim-Black, Caughlan, & Heintz, 2013; Nystrand, 2006).

In this study, we examine the ways in which adolescents and their teacher in one 10th-grade English language arts (ELA) classroom used TodaysMeet to mediate their responses to Strasser's (2009) young adult novel, *If I Grow Up*. This novel chronicles the adolescent years of DeShawn, following his life in the Frederick Douglass Project, where gang violence, substandard housing conditions, and failing school environments narrow the decision-making options available to those who live in DeShawn's neighborhood.

We address our research question—*How did high school students use backchanneling technology to participate during discussions of a young adult novel?*—by analyzing discourse produced in both a face-to-face discussion environment as well as transcripts of discourse produced in the TodaysMeet online forum. Prior to considering the findings from this project, we review critical insights from the research literature on literary discussion in ELA classrooms in order to situate the findings from this analysis within the ongoing disciplinary conversation.

Sociocultural and Dialogic Perspectives on Discussion

Speaking, like writing, mediates thinking (Vygotsky, 1986). That is, one comes to realize what one is thinking through the act of speaking. From a sociocultural perspective, students do not necessarily go into a discussion with a series of prepackaged utterances

and merely wait for the right moment to recite them. Indeed, talk and thought are shaped by what others are saying, how they're saying it, and in which context it is being said—phenomena that Bakhtin (1981) theorizes through concepts such as dialogism and the ideological environment.

Dialogism posits the notion that every utterance responds to previous utterances and simultaneously anticipates future utterances (Bakhtin, 1981)—an understanding of classroom discourse that problematizes the premise on which recitation practices are constructed and instead situates talk in particular social, historical, and cultural contexts. Such theoretical orientations position classroom discussions as sites for exploring ideas (Mercer & Littleton, 2007), negotiating roles and risk-taking (Christoph & Nystrand, 2001), and tensioning interpretive authority (Chisholm & Loretto, 2016).

Further, Bakhtin suggests that the ideological environment, which includes others and their idea systems (Freedman & Ball, 2004), shapes the worldviews of students and teachers as each individual engages in her or his own process of ideological becoming. In other words, the environment of the literature classroom is shaped by students' and teachers' language and literacy practices, which, in turn, shape the environment of the classroom. Indeed, researchers have demonstrated the ways in which a dialogic environment supports student achievement gains even more so than individual participation during discussion (Kelly, 2005) or the dialogic form that utterances take (Boyd & Markarian, 2015). In short, Vygotsky and Bakhtin, and the researchers in education who have mobilized their theories, allow us to conceptualize literary discussions as shaped by and shaping the environment of the classroom, which may or may not provide space for the "refraction" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 416) of voices leading to understandings rather than one authoritative voice handing down a singular truth.

Discussions of Literature in Secondary ELA Classrooms

Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran (2003) found that what are called "discussions" in many ELA classrooms are actually recitations—one-way modes of communication—that one might describe as oral quizzes of sorts. These "discussions" take the form of a discourse pattern commonly known in the literature as the I-R-E (Cazden, 2001) in which a teacher initiates a question, a student responds to the question, and the teacher evaluates the relative worth of the comment vis-à-vis her or his mental monologue. In his two-year study of 25 middle and high schools in eight different communities in the Midwest, Nystrand (2006) found that only 50 seconds per 8th-grade class and only 15 seconds per 9th-grade class could be characterized as "discussion." Eighty-five percent of each class day was devoted to lecture, question-and-answer-recitations, and seatwork. Although researchers have demonstrated the extent to which this discourse pattern characterizes talk in ELA classrooms, less clear are effective approaches to disrupting such discourse and the consequences of such disruptions.

In characterizing the I-R-E as a teacher monologue of sorts, it seems potentially useful to think about an alternative discourse pattern in high school ELA settings using the concept of dialogue, as Nystrand and his colleagues do in grounding their work in Bakhtin's notion of dialogic discourse. Dialogic discourse features a) authentic questions (i.e., questions posed by the teacher for which multiple "right" answers might exist), b) open discussion (talk among students without consistent teacher interjection), c) uptake (building on student responses to extend and deepen the conversation), d) high levels of evaluation from the teacher about student responses, and e) high cognitive levels in teacher-posed questions. Such dialogic interactions around text have different discourse features and patterns of interaction that lead to different learning outcomes (Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long, 2003).

Nystrand and his colleagues' decades of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research in this area offer a number of insights about the affordances of dialogue. We emphasize in this project the following two insights that derive from Nystrand's body of research: When *students* pose *questions* during discussions of literature, *the questions are usually "authentic,"* and *dialogue usually ensues* (additional questions, uptake, open discussion, high-level questions, and substantive evaluations).We privilege such dialogue in secondary literature classrooms because when dialogue happens, multiple perspectives are explored (Beach, Appleman, Hynds, & Wilhelm, 2011), alternative explanations are considered (Aukerman,

2007), ideas are reasoned through collaboratively (Chinn, Anderson, & Waggoner, 2001), and students internalize the knowledge and skills needed to engage in challenging literacy tasks (Applebee et al., 2003).

Young Adult Literature at the Center of the 21st-Century ELA Curriculum

YA novels can provide adolescent readers with the opportunity to come to know and clarify their own perspectives toward important social issues while engaging with new perspectives that might complicate their worldviews (Hayn & Burns, 2012; O'Donnell-Allen, 2011). Despite growing interest in the value of teaching YA novels in the secondary ELA classroom and the ever-expanding canon of compelling literary texts that comprise young adult literature (Beach et al., 2011), these texts continue to be marginalized in the curriculum (Groenke & Scherff, 2010; Miller, 2014).

YA novels are poised to provide students with the intellectual grist needed to engage in productive dialogue about the word and its relationship to the world (Freire, 1970).

Scholarship in the area of adolescent literacy has recognized the potential of YA novels to engage readers deeply in literary study (Cole, 2009), multimodal analysis (Parsons & Hundley, 2012), and critical approaches to literature (Connors & Shepard, 2013). Nevertheless, such narratives are often excluded altogether from the ELA curriculum. If YA texts do make their way into the hands of adolescent readers in the high school classroom, the titles are too often relegated to the margins of the curriculum—as independent reading for students, for example, but rarely as the focus for whole-class discussion (Groenke & Scherff, 2010). Recommendations that ELA teachers devote much of their reading instruction to informational texts and "complex [canonical] texts" in order to meet the goals outlined in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) and to prepare students to perform at high levels on standardized assessments do not make it any easier for young adult literature to make its way into the high school English reading list (Bull, 2012; Kaplan, 2011), even though such arguments do not preclude the inclusion of young adult novels as complex texts worthy of center stage in the ELA curriculum.

The critical literacy skills listed in the above paragraphs are necessary for the critical consumption and production of texts in the 21st century. These skills are also encoded in the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). For example, Speaking and Listening Standard 1.C for Grades 9–10 describes the college- and career-ready speaker as one who can "propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions." In some ways, the CCSS call for a reversal of roles in which students take on typical teacher moves (moving conversations along, making intertextual connections, posing questions, and calling into question answers to those questions). In such a conception of literary discussion, the teacher role transforms into that of guide, designer, and facilitator of dialogue and collaboration. YA novels are poised to provide students with the intellectual grist needed to engage in productive dialogue about the word and its relationship to the world (Freire, 1970).

The Study

Methods

On four occasions during one academic trimester, whole-class discussions of *If I Grow Up* (Strasser, 2009) were digitally video-recorded in one 10th-grade ELA class. Discussions took the form of a "fishbowl," a popular discussion strategy in which an outer circle of students in the class look in on an inner circle of students who engage each other in discussion (Smagorinsky, 2008). Fishbowls transform the physical space in which discussions typically take place, which can have the effect of shifting traditional speaking and listening roles and responsibilities for participation from the teacher to the students.

For each inner-circle conversation, the teacher posed a question to spark discussion out of which additional student-generated ideas emerged. Using

TodaysMeet, students in the outer circle managed the conversation by commenting on the inner-circle discussion or exploring topics beyond the scope of the face-to-face discussion. Upon moving to the inner circle, students who started in the outer circle picked up the conversation where the inner circle left off or elaborated on the TodaysMeet topics they were exploring online. Students who were seated on the outside of the fishbowl were able to respond to the text by typing into their mobile devices other questions, comments, intertextual connections, and textual evidence (see Figure 1). As students posted their responses outside the fishbowl, a running record of the "conversation" was automatically updated to their devices (either their personal phones or a school-supplied iPad), which the teacher monitored while taking notes, probing for elaboration, and generally facilitating the inner-circle fishbowl conversations.

To provide a depiction of the ideological environment in which this study was conducted, we describe the instructional context of the teacher, the researchers, the text, and the tool that shaped the focal classroom environment. We then identify data sources and our approaches to analysis.

Instructional Context

Thirty-four students in two 10th-grade ELA classrooms participated in this trimester-long qualitative study. In this article, we focus only on the participation of one class section of students. The high school was situated on the outer fringe of a large urban school district in the South. Identified as a "persistently low achieving" institution, approximately 1,000 students attended the high school, 68% of whom qualified for free or reduced-price lunches. The district had just approved a policy that permitted the use of cell phones for instructional purposes in approximately one out of every three high schools, including the focal high school in this study.

The Teacher

Mr. Z (a pseudonym, as are all names of persons and places identified in this study) was a second-year teacher who had just successfully completed the state's required yearlong internship program for beginning teachers. After completing his teacher education program and student teaching experience in a small rural town, Mr. Z moved to the large urban district in which this high school was situated. Mr. Z did not self-identify as a "traditional" ELA teacher, and the lack of tension between his beliefs and practices did not typify the experience of beginning ELA teachers in the US. That is, although Mr. Z lived in a world with "competing centers of gravity" (Smagorinsky, Rhym, & Moore, 2013, p. 148), he did not demonstrate a conflicted stance when it came to his teaching; in fact, Mr. Z had developed a reputation as an advocate for his students and their learning, especially if that meant speaking out against over-testing practices and the standardization of education.

The Researchers

Both James and Ashley, this article's authors, are former secondary ELA teachers who incorporated technology and young adult novels in their classrooms. James was an observer-researcher in Mr. Z's classroom once per week for two trimesters. They met when James taught a teacher education course in which Mr. Z was enrolled; it centered on teaching writing and literature in secondary schools. James was

Figure 1. A graphical representation of a digitized and dialogic fishbowl discussion format

also Mr. Z's university supervisor during his student teaching experience. James and Mr. Z both took new jobs in the same city and, given their shared interest in technology and inquiry-based ELA instruction, met to talk about potential teaching and research collaborations. For this study, James and Mr. Z selected the young adult novel, coauthored interpretive questions, and met to debrief after each session. Ashley worked as a graduate research assistant during this study and organized, transcribed, and analyzed much of the data collected in Mr. Z's classroom. Since beginning work on this project, Ashley has become a participant-observer in Mr. Z's classroom, where both Ashley and Mr. Z are examining ways in which student identities can be leveraged to inform multimodal instructional practices.

TodaysMeet, as a backchanneling tool, allows users to post responses up to 140 characters per message. These posts make it possible for students to engage in real-time online conversation or respond to ideas that are being deliberated during a face-to-face discussion.

The Text

Mr. Z and James selected Todd Strasser's *If I Grow Up* (2009) as the primary novel for Mr. Z's unit, which centered on insider and outsider perspectives across a variety of literary, multimodal, and informational texts. They chose *If I Grow Up* because they appreciated how Strasser draws on different text genres in the novel and presents issues of poverty, race, and life in a gang in ways that invited students to think critically about the circumstances in which DeShawn, the protagonist, lives. Additionally, they had recently read a compelling analysis of language conventionality in Strasser's novel in which Glaus (2014) noted the use of multiple registers of English language, the presence of multiple text genres, and knowledge demands that provide rich opportunities for students to infer meanings in transaction with the text. Drawing on different text genres (e.g., statistics, song lyrics) and presenting issues of poverty, race, and life in a gang in ways that complicate any simple explanations for how these issues shape and are shaped by society convinced them that *If I Grow Up* is as complex a text as any they teach in the ELA curriculum.

The focal text features DeShawn, a character who finds himself confronted consistently with conflicts for which no simple solution exists. Each chapter is organized by a year in DeShawn's adolescent life and details the ways in which drug- and gang-related violence, chaotic school environments, and extreme poverty lead many young people in DeShawn's community to drop out of school, go to jail, or die. Although the plot compelled students to address difficult questions about race, White privilege, poverty, equity in education, and violence, the narrative structure of the text proved equally intriguing. This element was marked as such by Mr. Z in the pre-discussion questions he asked students to consider and in the ways in which he interjected questions and comments during discussions.

Mr. Z and James constructed comprehension, interpretation, and evaluation questions to guide students' readings and encourage students to examine the events of *If I Grow Up* critically and empathetically. During their discussions of this novel, students noted how DeShawn's circumstances resonated with them, which led us to believe that the issues addressed in the novel and its reflection of the time in which the novel is set were still relevant for the participants in this study. Students shared the rewards and challenges of growing up in a single-parent household in a place like the Frederick Douglass Project, as well as first-hand experiences of homelessness, violence, and gang life.

The Tool

TodaysMeet, as a backchanneling tool, allows users to post responses up to 140 characters per message. These posts make it possible for students to engage in real-time online conversation or respond to ideas that are being deliberated during a face-to-face discussion. Additionally, TodaysMeet allows teachers to moderate and revisit ideas posted online, as it automatically archives conversations, including time stamps and user names. As such, the transcript can be used as a reflection tool for teachers and students alike as they seek to engage in productive dialogue (i.e., talk that generates meanings) around literary texts. We recog-

nize the division of attention that the use of such a device during an instructional activity might cause. In fact, we experienced difficulty as we experimented with the tool ourselves. However, it did not take long for students to develop "multimodal dexterity" (Hunter & Caraway, 2014, p. 80), wielding this tool in ways that convinced us they were able to attend to multiple conversations productively.

Data Sources

Data sources for this study included eight 20–25-minute discussion transcripts created from digital video recordings of the face-to-face inner-circle discussions and eight TodaysMeet backchanneling conversations archived online that took place in the outer circle during each fishbowl discussion. Two face-to-face discussions and two TodaysMeet backchanneling discussions occurred during each class session, since each half of the class had the opportunity to be both on the inside and outside of the fishbowl during each class meeting. Additionally, we drew on field notes written during observations in order to provide additional context about the instructional environment and to triangulate or disconfirm findings from our discourse analyses.

Data Analysis Techniques

Face-to-face discussions were digitally video-recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were segmented into turns at talk for each participant. TodaysMeet transcripts were segmented automatically into unique posts by individual users. We combined face-to-face and online transcripts and organized each transcript rhetorically (Mishler, 1991) to allow for a temporal and sequential reading across discussion environments and to foreground different speakers' voices.

A time-stamped record of the online discussions was archived and compared with the time-stamped transcript from the face-to-face discussion. To examine how students used the backchanneling tool during literary discussions, we engaged in open coding of the discussion transcripts and employed the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014) throughout data analysis. We relied particularly on positive discourse analysis (PDA) (Rogers, 2014), a type of critical discourse analysis that examines the positive uses of power, agency, and identity (and not only the ways in which discourse is used negatively to disempower, marginalize, and stigmatize). To that end, we marked the ways in which participants used language to empower speakers with interpretive authority, promote agency, and celebrate student identities.

In one example, Mr. Z marked explicitly in the online environment dialogic discourse moves taken up in the face-to-face fishbowl: "Did you notice how Tiny gave others a chance to provide an example first [before answering the question on the floor]?" We coded such turns as "Marking Student Participation during Discussion," a code we subsumed under the category we labeled Metacognitive Reflections on Participation Structures. Additional PDA categories included Engaging Multiple Perspectives, Supporting Interpretive Contributions, and Participating in Complex Interactions across Discourse Environments. Table 1 displays the number of dialogic discussion features per transcript that were coded within the PDA categories above: a) reflecting on participation structures, b) engaging in perspective taking about the meanings of the text, c) marking classmates' interpretations, and d) posing authentic questions (Nystrand, 1997).

Findings

Since each discussion was split in two, each student had the opportunity to respond to the text and his/her peers on TodaysMeet (TM) and in a face-to-face (FtF)

Table 1. Total dialogic discourse codes as percentage of total number of posts in TodaysMeet

Dialogic Code	Session 1 ($n = 109$) # (%)	Session 2 ($n = 152$) # %	Session 3 ($n = 138$) # %	Session 4 ($n = 146$) # %
Participation Structures	51 (47)	87 (57)	63 (46)	64 (44)
Multiple Perspectives	26 (24)	14 (9)	18 (13)	19 (13)
Marking Interpretations	14 (13)	18 (12)	28 (20)	27 (19)
Authentic Questions	8 (7)	7 (5)	11 (8)	3 (2)

Note: The n in each column refers to the total number of posts by participants in each TodaysMeet session.

format. To provide a sense of when each discussion took place during the semester, as well as during the lesson, we indicate from which of the four class sessions each excerpt comes (T1–T4), as well as the line number in TodaysMeet (L.1–L.252). To keep track of the relationships (or lack thereof) between the online and face-to-face conversations, we use arrows as transcript conventions to indicate to which conversations participants were responding. Arrows to the left indicate that the TodaysMeet post responded to a face-to-face event. Upward arrows indicate that a TodaysMeet post responded to a previous backchannel event. Finally, to distinguish between face-to-face utterances and online contributions, we refer to the individual responses during the discussion as *turns* and *posts*, respectively.

We calculated participation in both the face-to-face and online environments (see Table 2). Evidenced in both of these discourse platforms and across all four sessions were the teacher's limited interjection and students' relative ownership of the discussions in both environments. Students were responsible for between 84% (Session 1) and 89% (Session 2) of all face-to-face turns at talk. This discourse pattern reflects a clear deviation from the typical I-R-E discourse in which the teacher accounts for two out of every three turns at talk. Student participation was even more pronounced in the online mode. Between 94% (Session 1) and 99% (Session 4) of all TodaysMeet posts were made by students.

Table 2. Turns at talk and post tallies for students and the teacher during face-to-face and TodaysMeet discussions

	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4
	(FtF: n = 204) (TM n = 109)	(FtF: n = 252) (TM n = 152)	(FtF: n = 194) (TM n = 138)	(FtF: n = 280) (TM n = 146)
Participant (Environment)	# (%)	# %	# %	# %
Student Turns (FtF)	171 (84)	224 (89)	167 (86)	247 (88)
Teacher Turns (FtF)	33 (16)	28 (11)	27 (14)	33 (12)
Student Turns (TM)	102 (94)	147 (97)	133 (96)	144 (99)
Teacher Turns (TM)	7 (6)	5 (3)	5 (4)	2 (1)

Note: FtF = Face-to-face transcript; TM = TodaysMeet transcript.

In the rest of this section, we consider the nature of those responses as we present and analyze excerpts from the face-to-face and TodaysMeet transcripts to indicate the ways in which students used TodaysMeet a) to reflect metacognitively on face-to-face and online participation structures, b) to promote multiple perspectives and mark insightful contributions, and c) to engage in complex interactions across discourse environments.

Marking Participation Structures

Students used TodaysMeet to comment on the ways in which other students participated during the face-to-face discussion. Students thought extensively about how they were or were not talking (see Table 1) as depicted in the following excerpt from the online transcript:

T2.TM.L.22 Hank: ←No body would be talking without Wheeler and dave

…

T2.TM.L.24 Abigail: ↑The same people always talk @ashley

…

T2.TM.L.27 Sarah: ←It's the same couple of people talking

T2.TM.L.28 Mr. Z: ↑Why is it that they can keep talking, but others are silent? Why is it so easy for them to talk?

…

T2.TM.L.30 Abigail: ↑I don't think it really matters who's in the circle. The second circle always does better. We have more time to think.

Hank, Abigail, and Sarah marked the participation of two classmates who either rescued or dominated the face-to-face discussion (Posts 22, 24, & 27). The teacher pushed the group to reflect on why so many were quiet during the face-to-face discussion while two classmates talked so much. These questions prompted Abigail to identify what later became a widely believed fact about these digital fishbowl discussions—specifically, Abigail's comment (Post 30) that the first

face-to-face group served as a warm-up of sorts for the second group; this sentiment was reiterated throughout the semester. After having responded for 20 minutes on the outside of the fishbowl, the second group inside the fishbowl was consistently more talkative.

We also coded comments such as, "They are respecting others' opinions" or "off topic" as metacognitive reflections on participation structures during the discussion. Such reflection could be identified in every transcript over the course of the trimester and represented students' awareness of others and their own ways of participating during discussion. As noted in Table 1, we coded across all four class sessions between 44% and 57% of all TodaysMeet posts for the marking of participation structures.

Engaging Multiple Perspectives and Supporting Interpretive Contributions

In the first discussion session, students used the TodaysMeet platform to begin to predict what might become of DeShawn as his story unfolded. As they did this, students provided multiple perspectives from which to read the narrative, as well as multiple ways to read DeShawn. In the following excerpt, Hank imagines that DeShawn will have no choice but to join a gang—a perspective that is intimated on the book jacket: "What if, sometimes, the only choice you have is no choice at all?"

T1.TM.L.74 Hank: ←I think deshawns going to almost have to join the gang like have no other choice

…

T1.TM.L.79 Nate: ↑Or something similar because he said that he liked the feeling of the gun in his hand when he pointed it at Terrell and Jules @hank

T1.TM.L.80 JT: Whoa

T1.TM.L.81 Lester: ←Parker [classmate] did a good job keeping them going

…

T1.TM.L.83 Harriet: ↑I think deshawn is going to get influenced into the gang because he know he has other options such as going to beechhill @hank

T1.TM.L.84 Hank: ↑Maybe he likes the power or will end up needing money to support his family

Hank's prediction that DeShawn would have no choice but to join a gang was supported in Post 79 by Nate, who drew on textual evidence to provide a different perspective yet still supported Hank's claim. Nate claimed that DeShawn was intrigued by the power he might have felt when he held a gun in an earlier scene in the text. JT's remark seemed to function as a commentary on Nate's post. In the subsequent turn, Lester marked Parker's participation in the face-to-face discussion and provided encouraging support to his classmate for "keeping them going."

When interesting connections, questions, or literary responses emerged during the online TodaysMeet discussion, students sometimes directed the content of their posts to those ideas generated online rather than the face-to-face conversation on the floor.

In Post 83, Harriet provided another perspective in response to Hank's original claim. She reminded the group that DeShawn's grades and test scores had put him at the top of his class in his school (but nowhere near the level of top students in other schools) and that, as a result, a high-achieving school ("Beech Hill") that might have recruited him was no longer a possible choice for him. In Post 84, Hank acknowledged Nate's insightful contribution to his original idea and provided another reason why DeShawn might end up joining the gang: "[DeShawn] will end up needing money to support his family."

Between 9% (Session 2) and 24% (Session 1) of all posts in the online environment marked *multiple perspectives* on the text, and between 12% (Session 2) and 20% (Session 3) of all posts in the online environment marked *insightful contributions* made during the face-to-face or online discussions (see Table 1).

Participating in Complex Interactions across Discourse Environments

We identified two consistent ways in which students engaged in complex dialogic interactions across dis-

course environments. First, TodaysMeet users engaged in *parallel conversations* online that connected only initially with the topic of the face-to-face discussion. Second, we identified *dialogic exchanges* that occurred across discourse platforms. In these instances, online participants "talked back" to perspectives in the face-to-face discussion.

Parallel Conversations

When interesting connections, questions, or literary responses emerged during the online TodaysMeet discussion, students sometimes directed the content of their posts to those ideas generated online rather than the face-to-face conversation on the floor. In some instances, students would begin to engage in what they perceived to be a "better" online conversation after they evaluated the quality of the face-to-face discussion. In any case, the online conversation took on a life of its own, as most dialogic discussions do.

The following excerpt illustrates the online and face-to-face discussion that occurred when a parallel conversation emerged. In the face-to-face discussion, participants considered whether or not it would be wise to help someone in need if one suspected that the money would be used to feed an addiction that would only exacerbate the problem. That conversation led students to consider hypothetical scenarios or comparable situations in their own lives and how they might act in those circumstances. Online, students considered whether or not DeShawn would be justified in joining a gang because he was responsible for taking care of his family. That authentic question, posed while the face-to-face discussion considered social policies at play in the text and in the world, became a conversation in its own right:

	T2.TM.L.154 (Elena): ↑But sometimes you have to do[what] you have to do
	T2.TM.L.155 (Nate): ↑If he dies then who can take care of the kids and grandma@adam
T2.FtF.L.219 (Nelson): I would've helped my sister. [inaudible]	…
…	
T2.FtF.L.221 (Sarah): You can't make [people on government assistance] dependent, they have to learn to be independent.	T2.TM.L.159 (Nate): ↑But what about lightbulb, he isn't affiliated with the gang and is doing Good . . . can't Deshawn do what he is doing
	T2.TM.L.160 (Nate): ↑Elena
	T2.TM.L.161 (Elena): ↑They are in different situations

The parallel conversation on TodaysMeet featured a response that supported the notion that DeShawn had viable reasons that would justify a choice to join a gang: "Sometimes you have to do [what] you have to do" (Post 154). In Nate's next post, however, he called into question that rationalization by noting the dangers involved in joining a gang, as well as the risk DeShawn would take with his life by joining a gang. If DeShawn died or became incarcerated, who would take care of his family (Post 155)? Nate provided a counter-example from his reading of another character's decisions in the novel to ask why DeShawn couldn't avoid joining a gang like Lightbulb did. Although there would later be real debate about whether or not "Lightbulb is doing good," Nate's contribution here drew on the text to push his online discussion partners to think about the meanings in the novel from a different perspective. In essence, Nate's ideas continued the stance toward dialogue that initially sparked this online conversation. Elena responded to Nate's post by noting that a comparison between Lightbulb and DeShawn was more complicated than Nate was assuming it to be—a type of discourse move that characterizes the most dialogic of discussions.

Dialogic Exchanges

Another way in which students "talked back" to the text and each other in the online forum was to respond directly to ideas that were presented in the face-to-face discussion. In the following excerpt, students in the online environment consider Harriet's face-to-face discussion response to the notion that the gang leader's (Marcus's) death will shape DeShawn's future decisions in consequential ways; that is, with

the death of Marcus, DeShawn will have to take on a new identity of sorts.

T3.FtF.L.21 (Harriet): I mean, it kind of makes sense because Marcus was his father figure and now he's gone, and his grandmother's stressed with the kids and all that and Nia can't help because she doesn't know anything about kids so it's [inaudible]

T3.TM.L8 (Hank): ←… I think Marcus's death is pushing deshawn to grow up BC now he has nobody to look up to. And with the baby being on the way

T3.TM.L9 (Abigail): ←I feel like he..
…
T3.TM.L11 (Nate): ↑Yeah because he has to step up in the gang #princess

T3.TM.L12 (Abigail): ←↑Needs Marcus now more than ever

Hank's response on the TodaysMeet feed was in conjunction with Harriet's turn during the face-to-face discussion. Hank built on Harriet's reflection that Marcus's father figure was gone by noting that Marcus's death would force DeShawn to grow up quickly without the role model he once had. Hank's post also reflected the growing up DeShawn would do with the birth of his baby—an idea that Harriet hinted at in the face-to-face discussion by remarking that Nia, DeShawn's sister, wouldn't be able to help because she is struggling to make ends meet with her own child. In Post 9, Abigail began a response to Harriet, which she then completed in Post 12: "I feel like . . . [DeShawn] needs Marcus now more than ever." This post responded to both Harriet's point, as well as Hank's post, creating at least two platforms from which TodaysMeet users could access and respond to the text. Since Harriet and the rest of the face-to-face discussion participants had access at this point to neither Abigail nor Hank's responses, the dialogue across discourse platforms only occurred in the online environment.

Discussion and Conclusion

Throughout the face-to-face and TodaysMeet transcripts can be found instances of metacognitive reflection on participation structures, engagement with multiple perspectives, the celebration of literary interpretations, and participation in parallel and dialogic conversations. These categories for use of the backchanneling tool were not mutually exclusive or used in isolation. In fact, quite often these uses were woven throughout an interaction around an authentic question. In any case, students interacted with the text, the teacher, and each other in ways that allowed them multiple, alternative modes of participation during a literacy practice that has the potential to increase student learning about literature and literacy (Applebee et al., 2003; Juzwik et al., 2013).

The TodaysMeet backchanneling tool provided students in this study multiple opportunities to respond to the text that might not have been available in a face-to-face discussion where speakers constantly negotiate for the floor and power dynamics can preclude some students from taking the risk to talk.

Evidenced throughout the face-to-face and online dialogues were the positive ways in which students used various discourse platforms to explore multiple ways of thinking about the text and to promote each other as readers and authors of ideas, while the teacher trusted his students to provide important perspectives that could push back productively against the collective reading of the novel. Instead of rejecting ideas that might seem outlandish or inappropriate to explore, Mr. Z, who interjected intentionally and infrequently during TodaysMeet and face-to-face discussions, encouraged students to elaborate on their thinking. In so doing, Mr. Z positioned himself as a fellow reader and his students as critical inquirers.

The TodaysMeet backchanneling tool provided students in this study multiple opportunities to respond to the text that might not have been available in a face-to-face discussion where speakers constantly

negotiate for the floor and power dynamics can preclude some students from taking the risk to talk. Nevertheless, a number of additional characteristics of these literary discussions compel us to think about a constellation of discursive features that created an ideal space in which to introduce this discussion tool.

In [t]his classroom, students asked the questions, noted participation structures, and evaluated responses. The teacher listened, probed, modeled, elaborated, and facilitated conversations around text.

First, as stated earlier, teachers and researchers can benefit from paying close attention the ideological (e.g., dialogic) environment in which discussions take place. Clearly, students in Mr. Z's classroom felt comfortable putting forth their perspectives about the text. Such a classroom culture wasn't created by the introduction of a digital tool or even a complex young adult novel; rather, Mr. Z cultivated relationships with each student to such an extent that mutual trust between the teacher and the students helped to establish a serious and critical approach to the text and the tool. Thus, Mr. Z can be said to have co-constructed with his students a dialogic stance toward literary discussions (Boyd & Markarian, 2015).

Second, we were struck by the role reversals evident in the data. The teaching adage, "If you're the one talking, you're the one learning," if true, bodes well for Mr. Z's students. In his classroom, students asked the questions, noted participation structures, and evaluated responses. The teacher listened, probed, modeled, elaborated, and facilitated conversations around text. Additionally, students had the opportunity to practice listening intentionally to others' thinking about meanings in a literary text. Outside of the fishbowl, students had time to process multiple perspectives explored inside the fishbowl and in the online discussion forum. These are important implications to consider for teachers and students who seek to work toward co-constructing dialogic discussions that promote generative interactions around texts.

Finally, students' conversations about *If I Grow Up* were not unproblematic; however, being unproblematic is not a goal of dialogue. In fact, problematic perspectives often opened up the possibility for the discursive disruption of oppressive ideologies in this secondary ELA classroom (O'Donnell-Allen, 2011). For example, aspects of the face-to-face conversations represented in some of the above transcript excerpts featured extractions from the novel into societal structures in which students talked in stereotypes and generalizations that seemed to lead to marginalizing positions that reproduced and perpetuated deficit perspectives about urban youth, gang culture, African American fathers, people who receive government assistance, and other groups. Nevertheless, these perspectives, if not directly confronted by participants in the face-to-face discussion, were considered (often critically) by the participants on the outside of the fishbowl as they witnessed the reaction (or lack thereof) to the ideological stances of their classmates. The interrogation of multiple perspectives and counter-perspectives about complex topics that impacted the daily lives of many of these high school readers led to student ownership over the interpretations that were generated about the novel and its relationship to contemporary society.

Future studies of the instructional affordances of young adult literature, digital technologies, and innovative pedagogical practices should take into account the ideological environment in which such texts, tools, and teachers are situated. The importance of quality teacher-student interactions should not be overlooked. These interactions are improved when, to echo Nystrand's (1997) assertion, teachers trust students to take on challenging roles, texts, and tasks and to position themselves as critical inquirers, designers, and creators of new knowledge.

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