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Enhancing Classroom Discussion with Wiki Technology

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Introduction to Study:

The current generation of students are digital natives; not only do they demonstrate a level of comfort with technology, but there is an expectation that technology will be part of the educational process. This led to my research question: How will incorporating an online threaded discussion forum enhance classroom discussion?

Method of Study:

To implement the study, I first created a Wikispace site to aid in classroom discussion and test preparation of the novel *Native Son* by Richard Wright. The site, which limited access to those students who joined the site and created a username, prompted students to discuss a major theme of the novel. Each student was to respond at least once to my original prompt and at least twice to the comments made by their peers.

Context of Study:

My study was implemented in a large high school in central Illinois. The participants were students from three sections of an Advanced Placement Literature class, and data was taken from sixty-five students ranging from seventeen to eighteen years of age. My study was conducted over the course of a week, and took place at the end of a literature unit on the novel *Native Son* by Richard Wright. The threaded discussion forum (Wikispace site) was used to facilitate discussion about a major theme in the novel – the effects of racial oppression on the individual and on a group of people.

The responses received from students on the Wikispace site were used to create this Wordle. It is a visual representation of the key themes of the novel, and evidence of what students frequently mentioned in their posts to the site.

Corresponding Literature:

- Online responses validate individual opinions, which students may not risk in small group or whole class discussion. Also, the online forum does not allow for interruptions, which means each participant has an opportunity to speak without pause (English)
- For the "silent student," an online discussion forum removes the social positioning of the actual classroom and allows him to find his voice (English)
- Students need to feel there is a purpose behind using technology for discussion, and the time must be taken to explain the assignment and the way to properly interact with the technology (Cole)
- In a collaborative learning situation, students will verbalize their understanding (van Boxtel, van der Linden, Kanselaar)
- Users become publishers rather than merely consumers of information (Cole)

A screenshot of the Wikispace site used to implement my study on the possibility of enhancing classroom discussion through the use of technology

Findings:

- Setting up this type of online discussion forum requires a certain time commitment – not only does it take time to create the site itself and choose the content, but explaining the assignment and having students join the site calls for some undivided classroom time
- Many students feel comfortable enough with the technological medium that they transfer their common antics from the classroom to the virtual environment
- There were some struggles with implementation, including issues with user access and student hesitation to participate
- Student roles in online discussion – the roles some students took in the online discussion differed from those they took during traditional classroom discussion; some became more active participants, others were very critical of the assignment, and some remained as active and eager to participate as they were during class
- When asked about the usefulness of the Wiki technology in aiding in classroom discussion and test preparation, the majority of students responded positively – the common concerns were the amount of time allotted for engagement with the online discussion forum and the nature of the prompt given to spark discussion

Classroom Implications:

My study could be bettered with further research. I would like to continue looking at how Wiki technology can be used as a way to facilitate classroom discussion, especially if implemented over a significant amount of time. The study also has classroom implications for subject matters beyond English Literature. Using Wiki technology to facilitate discussion is a beneficial way to encourage students to converse about different topics outside of class. This not only helps students remain engaged in the material, but could also help teachers monitor student progress and use content from the responses to lead traditional classroom discussion.