**Canvassing New Possibilities: How Alternative Online Discussion Forums**

**Could Benefit Collaborative Written Argumentation**

**Objectives**

Argument writing is prioritized in national standards for secondary literacy education (e.g., Common Core State Standards, 2010). However, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) “Writing Report Card” has found that only 27% of eighth- and 12th-grade students performed at the “proficient” level on persuasive-writing tasks (NCES, 2011). Research remains to be done on the teaching and learning of argument writing in secondary schools.

A recent line of inquiry has focused on the teaching and learning of argument through processes that include oral argumentation (Kuhn et al., 2016; Reznitskaya & Wilkinson, 2017; VanDerHeide, 2017). This research has suggested that practice with collaborative oral argumentation can benefit students’ writing. Yet few studies have examined whether and how online discussions might offer the same benefits.

Some studies have examined the unique spatial and temporal features of online discussion forums (Beeghly, 2005; Gao, 2011), including anonymity and asynchronicity, that offer new possibilities and pitfalls for interaction. For example, online discussions invite collaborative writing, which may be a deterrent for struggling readers, but may also increase participation from less outspoken students (Larson & Keiper, 2002). Opportunities remain to study how the design of different types of online forums might enable or inhibit students’ participation in collaborative written argumentation.

In this presentation, we examine data generated in a Southern US secondary school during a unit on media literacy about articles related to climate justice by students who participated in two types of online discussion forums: 1) a linear chat forum similar to the type popular in social media platforms; 2) a forum designed by Author2 that culminated in collaborative responsive writing. Using qualitative discourse analysis, we examined the quality of students’ collaborative, written argumentation in each forum; we also examined how the design and implicit purposes of each forum might have influenced students’ argumentation.

**Framework**

In online discussion forums embedded in Learning Management Systems sold by corporations to school districts, one design dominates: the *threaded* discussion forum. Threaded forums invite posts that form a hierarchical “tree” structure; yet branching responses can become isolated from other posts, limiting students’ *uptake* (Collins, 1982) of others’ words/ideas (Gao, 2011; Hewitt, 2005; Author1, 2017). Uptake of others’ words/ideas is associated with collaborative, *dialogic* argumentation of the kind often used in academic and civic settings to make a decision, solve a problem, elaborate an idea, or interpret a text (e.g., Reznitskaya & Wilkinson, 2017; Author1, 2014). The design of threaded forums can inhibit students’ opportunities to participate in collaborative argumentation.

Some researchers have explored the use of alternative platforms that organize students’ participation differently (Gao, 2011; Ravenscroft & Matheson, 2002; Scardamalia, 2004; Author1, 2017). Similarly, studies of face-to-face discussions have found that the implicit purposes of different types of discussion (e.g., interpretation of a central text or deliberation about a shared course of action) can encourage or inhibit certain kinds of dialogic argumentation (Parker, 2001). Our study examines how the design and purposes of two alternative types of forums might have influenced the quality of students’ collaborative argumentation.

**Methodology**

Our study included tenth grade students at a Southern US high school who participated in a unit on media literacy, Making Moves with Evidence, in which they first studied the types of claims an author makes in their text, and then the types of purposes for using quotes and evidence in writing, before reading articles about perspectives on environmental responsibilities, and participating in two kinds of online discussion forums: 1) a linear chat forum and 2) a forum designed by Author, called CREW, that embedded a collaborative writing space beside the discussion. In addition to curricular materials like the articles and teacher slideshows/handouts used during the unit, the data we generated during this process included 24 discussions among 12 groups of 2-5 students each, as well as the accompanying collaborative writing composed by each group. To analyze these data, we downloaded discussions from online forums into excel spreadsheets; each member of the research team then used dialogic discourse analysis to code for students’ uptake of curricular texts and of previous posts, comparing our codings to trace the development of students’ written arguments.

**Findings/Significance**

Preliminary findings showed that responses in both linear chat and CREW forums often included uptake of ideas from multiple, prior posts that appeared in students’ subsequent collaborative written arguments. This finding affirms and extends prior research (Gao, 2011; Hewitt, 2005; Author1, 2017) in suggesting that eliminating the isolating hierarchy typical in threaded forums can increase uptake of ideas during students’ collaborative argumentation.

However, combining responses into a single thread in linear chat forums also resulted in misunderstandings or unaddressed questions—what we have called *tangles*. In CREW forums, tangles appeared less frequently, and participants resolved them more often in an apparent effort to reach consensus. This finding affirms and extends previous studies of students collaborative oral argumentation (Mercer, 1995; Reznitskaya et al., 2007; Wegerif & Mercer, 1997), indicating that online forums designed to foster deliberation about collaborative writing (rather than mere sharing of unrelated interpretations) may increase uptake during collaborative argumentation.

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