TodaysMeet and Literary Analysis: Navigating Human Connections in Digital Spaces

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Abstract

This study examines the intersections of technology and literary analysis for senior students at

a Western United States high school. During the 2016-2017 school year, I integrated the web

application TodaysMeet into a British literature course during Socratic seminars as part of a

study of *Hamlet*. TodaysMeet served students as their main platform for communication and

collaboration during the sessions which were inspired by the Youth Lens framework for

young adult literature study. Using qualitative research tools, I analyzed data in the forms of

observations, interviews, and student-created artifacts to understand how TodaysMeet could

facilitate a particular form of literary analysis at the secondary level. Results of the study find

TodaysMeet to be an interactive medium for literacy education as well as an effective tool to

leverage students' new literacies toward academic achievement.

Keywords: young adult literature, new literacies, literary analysis, literacy leadership

It's not my thing, talking in front of people. I suck at it mostly, and most people

don't really listen to what I say most times anyway. Besides, most of my life is

online anyway. That's where I talk to my friends. I see them here and stuff, but

it's not the same. I just felt like what we were talking about in the book was

talking directly to me. I had so many ideas to get out. And typing was good

because I'm a way better writer than talker. (Wilson, Interview, April 1, 2016).

Wilson was a student in my British Genres course. Soft-spoken and reluctant to speak up

during class, Wilson's voice was one I seldom heard. I struggled to find ways to elicit his

reactions to texts and to translate his savvy technology skills into rich engagement during

literature study. Wilson describes a feeling of acceptance, an experience of his school tasks

matching his preferred methods of meaning-making. With the help of the digital tool,

TodaysMeet, he connected with literature in an authentic, personal manner. In 2014, I began

experimenting with TodaysMeet in my courses and quickly became interested in how it might

enhance learning in a 1:1 Chromebook environment, specifically, by promoting critical

engagement with literature in the digital age. The purpose of this study was to explore how

TodaysMeet can facilitate literary analysis for different types of learners during literature

study at the secondary level. My two primary research questions were: 1) How can a tool like

TodaysMeet create spaces for authentic literary analysis in Socratic seminars for high school

students? 2 How can new literacies compliment literature study designed in accordance with a

Youth Lens philosophy?

A Shifting Landscape of Literacy Practices

The long-assumed inequity of access within the digital divide has been complicated by

recent studies that indicate more parity than ever before (Howell, Butler, & Reinking, 2017).

Not only do a majority of schools including low-income institutions now have Internet

connectivity (Federal Communications Commission, 2010), but no significant difference

exists any longer in smartphone ownership between the lowest and highest income households

(Smith, 2013). Moreover, most teens are digitally literate web users including 86% of those

from household incomes of $30,000 or less (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). While technology usage

and access to devices are on the rise, schools are seldom able to employ technology in ways

that produce the same level of richness in multimodal communication and meaningful

interaction that students demonstrate within social contexts (Warner, 2016). A number of

factors contribute to this impasse such as teacher-dominated lecture patterns, outdated

approaches to instruction, and print-based, standardized curricula (Kesler, Gibson, &

Turansky, 2016; Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2009). While the Internet and

communication technologies have the potential to alter the nature of literacy in educational

settings, we are still searching for instances where digital practices can expand our notions of

literacy learning in schools on a consistent, change-inducing basis (Kress, 2003).

This challenge is marked for literature teachers who must confront the intersections of

traditional approaches grounded in print materials and the plethora of new literacies students

bring to school (Marlatt, 2018; Lenters, 2016). 21st Century students operate under spatial,

visual, audio, kinesthetic, digital, linguistic, and semiotic modes of knowledge construction in

classrooms that can reciprocate these literacies via transformative, situated design (Coiro et

al., 2009). Current notions of literacy should include alternative meaning-making settings

where social and cultural contexts contribute to multiple, coexisting realities, especially those

constructed with technology. Evolution of literature study begins by integrating digital

practices with traditional approaches, but more research is needed focusing specifically on

how particular technologies can facilitate particular forms of textual analysis. For teachers of

literature, the task of implementing technology involves not only choosing the right tool in the

right contexts, but also reflecting upon how we approach the literature itself.

21st Century Approaches to Literature

Literary theory in 20th century high school classrooms, along with university English

departments, was dominated by New Criticism (Gallagher, 1997). Teachers trained students to

examine works of literature in isolation by ignoring social, cultural, and historical contexts to

focus only on the meaning rendered between the text's ideas and its structure. Ironically, New

Criticism was motivated by a desire to make reading and analysis more democratic. The idea

was that as different students saw uniform concepts at work in a text, they would feel

validated as readers more so than in a scenario of numerous interpretations and differing

perspectives (Gallagher, 1997). Proponents also saw New Criticism as a way to level the

playing field in literature study because external factors brought to the text by the reader were

supposed to have no bearing on the text itself. As difficult as it might seem to approach

today's young adult literature students with the notion of one correct interpretation and one

singular way to read a text, teachers continue to resort to this technique (Cochran-Smith,

2008).

In fact, transmissive teaching patterns are alive and well, particularly in literacy

settings, where approaches and interpretations to texts are often prescribed and transmitted to

passive readers with little critical engagement (Sadoski & Paivio, 2007; Schraw & Bruning,

1999). In our current state of literature study, the teaching of canonical texts is especially

impacted by test-preparation curriculum and standards still dominated by print-based

approaches (Gatti, 2016). The decision by teachers to utilize technology only partially

responds to the needs of digitizing literature study. Rather, cultivating a critical digital

pedagogy involves diversifying instructional techniques in a way that enhances learning

experiences. In their recent study on teachers' perceptions of becoming digital pedagogues,

Wadmany and Kliachko (2014) challenge educators to, "develop student-centered teaching

that enables the students to control their learning processes with the help of the teacher who

serves as a facilitator" (p. 26). Teachers should be making decisions about technology

implementation with an acknowledgement of the theoretical underpinnings of those decisions

as well as their social and political outcomes. A critical approach to digitized literature study

steers educators in this direction by inviting us to ask more pertinent questions such as, when

do technologies help students engage with and analyze literature in critical ways? Which

technologies? Which students? Under what conditions? To what end? These are the questions

teachers should explore, and they should also drive research in new literacies integration.

Theoretical Framework

The Youth Lens

The need for a nuanced perspective of young adult literacy is at the heart of the Youth

Lens (YL), an approach to literature that combines multiple theories such as post-structuralism

and feminism into a complex view that reconsiders representations of adolescence in texts

(Petrone, Sarigianides, & Lewis, 2015). The YL stresses that the labels placed upon youth are

done so externally by disconnected adult entities, and understanding adolescence as a social

construct is important in literacy education because it helps teachers and students observe

youth culture. The YL acknowledges that many sociocultural factors affect our assumptions of

what youth and adolescence are and challenges the notion that there is any single story for

young people. Experiences of immigrant youth, working class youth, and ethnically diverse

youth are just a few examples of the diversity within the story of adolescence that the YL

considers. Limited, simplistic conceptions of youth affect not only how teachers approach

interactions with students, but also the texts they incorporate and textual analysis strategies

they model for readers (Petrone et al., 2015).

To create spaces for this depth of analysis for our literature students, we must ask

descriptive questions about characters and model analytic critiques exploring how adolescence

figures in the text while encouraging students to search for implications of these connections

in society. Our questions can start on the surface level then systematically delve into deeper

explorations. These analyses hold numerous possibilities for personal textual connections as

well as opportunities for cross-cultural examination of adolescence in a variety of curricula

including short stories, novels, poems, films, magazines, advertisements, media studies, and

more. Critical literature study has the potential to open doors to inclusive, multicultural

literacy learning (Smagorinsky, 2008). As the diversity of YAL in schools continues to

increase, it is crucial for both teachers and students to collectively denaturalize normative

ideas about growing up and imagine how alternative perspectives might enhance our

communities of literacy.

The practice of modeling how to dissect a text critically can be transformative for

teachers and students (Reid, 1999). Recognizing multiple contextual factors in communication

with one another informs essential questions for course design; shapes thematic units; crafts

well-rounded syllabi; and positively impacts programs, departments, and policy. By re-

envisioning adolescent experiences, we become empowered to pursue entirely new takes on

both canonized and alternative works, all the while dispelling stereotypes, inviting multiple

voices, and aiming for accurate representations of what it means to be young. This perspective

reminds educators that there are many paths to growing up, and the blueprint for progressing

through literacy, school, and life is subjective. Considering its sociocultural connections

between young adult literature study, and new literacy practices, the YL offers an ideal

framework for analyzing conditions of a 21st Century literacy classroom, one that is highly

digitized and collaborative.

TodaysMeet

While researchers have explored implications of numerous technology tools in literacy

settings, TodaysMeet presents a unique set of characteristics and classroom applications

(Tolisano, 2014). In a format that resembles a large group text message, TodaysMeet (Figure

1) displays the contributions of anyone who has signed in to the meeting room. As creators of

the room, teachers have the ability to post prompts, moderate activity, regulate content, and

provide feedback. Students have the power to respond to prompts, collaborate, offer feedback

to peers, post links to other sites, add images, embed video, and more. TodaysMeet is

deceptively simple. While its physical structure appears to be a tower of sequential text

messages, teachers can create any format they wish, and transcripts of the discussion are

available for download at any time. As a platform for collaboration, its single running thread

and character limit makes interaction within TodaysMeet more immediate and inclusive than

in other learning management systems such as Canvas or Blackboard.

Figure 1. TodaysMeet Homepage.
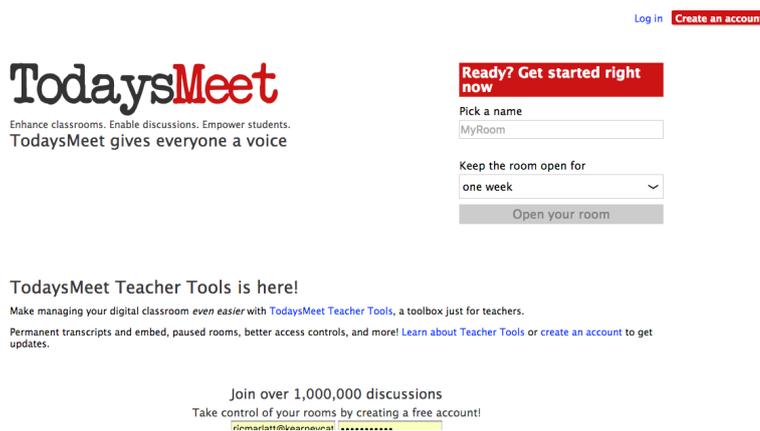
TodaysMeet is a relatively new program, and early results of its usage in educational

settings appear divided into two categories: as a component of individual lesson plans and as a

formative assessment tool. Tolisano (2014) analyzes the use of TodaysMeet in an 8th grade

humanities class, where the goal of the lesson was to describe the author's utilization of plot,

theme, and characterization. As different students were assigned different elements, parallel

discussions ensued. For an added layer of collaboration, the live text was displayed through

the projector, enabling all students to see the combined text. Tolisano (2014) points out that

while students performed different functions within the lesson, they all contributed to the

digital discussion.

In his use of TodaysMeet as a formative assessment tool, Juarez (2014) discusses its

impact on student engagement with course content. According to Juarez (2014), TodaysMeet

puts the power of learning in the hands of students, and when they "witness my eagerness to

see their performance of the curriculum, they are equally enthusiastic to provide support that I

can use to enrich and facilitate their learning" (para. 5). Juarez (2014) stresses the

application's efficiency and ease; it creates a running feed that educators can use in real time

while requiring little to no preparation. Signing in and opening up a room consumes seconds,

and as long as students have some kind of connected device, the landscape for digital

communication has been paved.

From a sociocultural perspective, TodaysMeet holds great potential. Its communicative

interaction involves far more than creating texts (Perry, 2012). Literacy is not only about the

texts we produce, but also very much about what we do with those texts (Gee, 2012).

TodaysMeet operates via multimodal literacy; it is part-social media, part-text messaging, and

part-interactive discourse. Polls, rotating stories, collaborative poems, crowdsourcing, digital

citizenship, video creation, image conglomeration, biographical audio feeds are several

activities the program can facilitate. Participation in TodaysMeet can help foster an

environment that resembles Gatti and Payne's (2011) definition of a democratic environment,

where students and teachers are equally engaged on academic and civic levels. This

technology responds to Wadmany and Kliachko's (2014) call to move the center of power

away from the teacher and spread accountability throughout the classroom.

21st Century classrooms, where technologies and literacy practices collide, allow for

fresh research opportunities of specific operations within literacy learning. Gaps exist in the

literature regarding how different forms of technology such as TodaysMeet can facilitate

different forms of literary analysis in secondary English. In conjunction with a YL that affords

the ability to approach literature in a way that is centered on students' multiple literacies, a

tool like TodaysMeet offers a new kind of textual analysis, one that has the potential to impact

the education of underrepresented students and language learners alike. Despite the increasing

number of case studies involving TodaysMeet, an investigation of its effects in specific

literacy settings has yet to be undertaken. By exploring what kinds of analyses students

produce using TodaysMeet, we might better understand its uses and implications for literature

study in the digital age.

Participants

A total of 26 students in my British Genres course participated in the study. Names

have been replaced with pseudonyms. All participants were seniors, and a few were taking the

course as a dual-credit option. As a university prerequisite course, the roster includes students

who have either been admitted or intend to enroll at a university following graduation. In

general, these contexts make for a broad range of aptitudes and interests, particularly in their

tastes for textual activity, not to mention a diverse set of cultural backgrounds and ethnic

heritages. What unified the participants was a shared experience in using devices in a 1:1

environment as RCHS had issued each student a Chromebook two years before. In accounting

for the potential of TodaysMeet to be a distraction rather than a learning aid, I relied upon

participants' prior knowledge of classroom Chromebook expectations. These students were

accustomed to supplementing their learning with technology. And while they had utilized a

number of programs at school, none were familiar with TodaysMeet until our activities in the

course.

Method

Data Collection

Understanding the conditions under which students conduct literary analysis within a

YL framework necessitated qualitative inquiry because such a research objective requires

exploration of experiences in the field (Creswell, 2008). And to explore and later describe

students' everyday literacy practices within the classroom community, I drew from an

ethnographic design (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011; Glesne, 2006). Students participated in

Socratic seminars with the use of a school-issued Chromebook and were largely the designers

of the learning environment. My role as a facilitator allowed me to write extensive field notes

from my observations and to collect various samples of student work. Using Spradley's (1979)

two-fold guide to conducting the ethnographic interview, I interviewed and audio recorded

participants regarding their usage of TodaysMeet and referred to texts they analyzed and

created as well as other specific literacy practices. After I expanded my field notes, I

integrated them with in-process memos and integrative memos to produce a chronological

collection.

Data Analysis

After reviewing my collection of artifacts and literature, I followed Agar's (1996)

coding procedure by taking words or phrases from transcriptions and field notes and placing

them into like categories. I also coded my own integrative memos, grouping similar concepts

and ideas together below each entry. The coding phase allowed me to organize simultaneously

what I had reflected upon in reviewing field notes and what was said in the interviews by

participants. At this point I began establishing emergent themes in the data (Creswell, 2008).

Drawing upon the YL theoretical framework, I took the initial codes and their coded data and

combined them into categories of theoretical hypothesis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam,

2009). Table 1 contains a sample of the development of categories which resulted in the

identification of themes. I searched for recurring themes in an effort to understand the

intersections of technology and literacy as they were revealed in the everyday practices of

meaning-makers (Street, 1995).

Table 1. Sample of Development of Categories.

Example of coded data	Initial code	Revised category
"Up until senior year, I hadn't really even read a book since junior high. I mean I skimmed and did Sparknotes and stuff, but I never really read. I like to read, it's just that I have to find a book that I'm interested in or I don't take the time."	Student emphasizes her desire for authentic relations between her texts and her life.	Student: Beliefs and Approach
"It's good most of the time. I like when we use it for discussions. People come up with some really good questions that they can just type in and people don't have to stop the circle or interrupt. It actually makes it kind of fun. It makes you pay attention though because you have to listen and think of what to type at the same time."	Student describes positive aspects of TodaysMeet including its efficiency and contributions during Socratic circles and literature discussions.	Student: Response to TodaysMeet
"Having the Chromebooks is good because I don't have to always be worried about answering questions in front of everyone and maybe getting it wrong or whatever. Some classes you get put on the spot. Technology makes this more laid back like you can just do your work."	Student discusses the positive aspects to teachers using technology to enhance learning.	Student: Reaction to tech integration

Hamlet

I viewed *Hamlet* as an ideal candidate for YL-inspired literature study because the protagonist's motivations and psychological undertones are ripe with ambiguity, and he also demonstrates conflicting versions of youth and maturity (Golden, 2009). He undergoes a quest to avenge his father's murder which initially suggests to some readers a hero's journey. Yet, he arguable does so with a juvenile sense of life, death, and love. At various points in the play, Hamlet behaves childishly and bemoans his plight with long, petulant soliloquies that precede violent outbursts toward friends and foes. While he often portrays himself as a manipulated victim of circumstances, he is at other moments tactful and cunning and appears completely in control of his destiny. This juxtaposition of adolescence/adulthood allows readers to reconsider expectations we place upon coming of age and fulfilling our roles in society. Shakespeare explores realms of sexuality, race, gender, and class--the very issues the YL framework encourages teachers and students to explore.

Socratic Seminars

Socratic seminars allow students to construct and express ideas around a central text

through controlled discourse facilitated by course topics (Cuny, 2014). Though modified

according to individual teacher preferences, the format of Socratic seminars typically involve

a circular structure where students engage in dialogue designed to enrich their understandings.

TodaysMeet enhanced student participation and engagement in Socratic seminars because the

digital interaction gave everyone a purpose as well as a voice. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the

shift from passivity to participation in the classroom's structure.
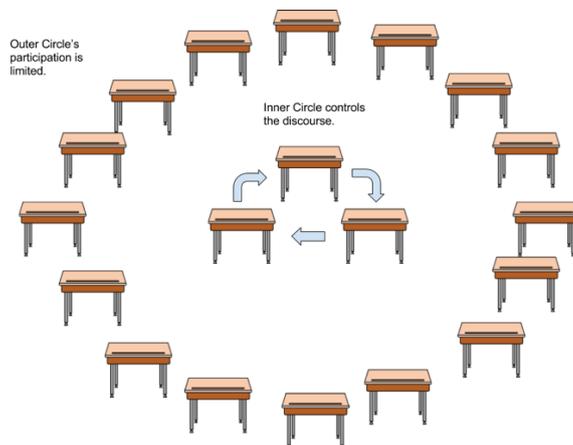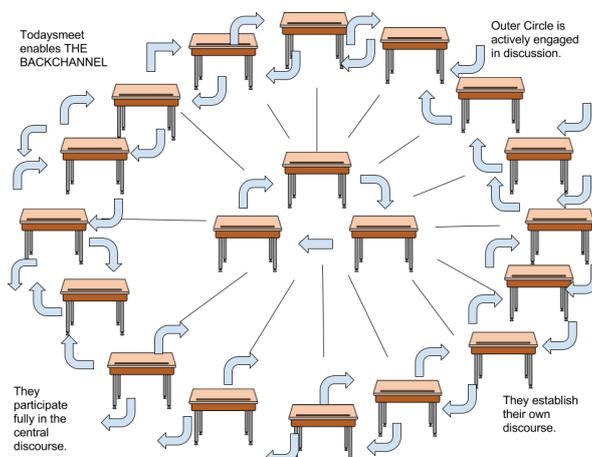
Figure 2. Standard Socratic Seminar.

Figure 3. Digitized Socratic Seminar.

While we read the play, students created annotated scene summaries which were used

in the seminars at the conclusion of all five acts. One of the primary objectives of the seminars

was to create a space where students could consider the youth/maturity paradigm exemplified

by Hamlet. Some key questions I asked students to consider included, *What is Hamlet, is he a*

man, a boy, or something else? In what ways does Hamlet exhibit the demeanor and actions of

an adult in the play; conversely, in what ways does Hamlet demonstrate juvenile behavior?

Are there instances in the play when Hamlet is performing both roles simultaneously? Does

Hamlet ever reach adulthood, and if so, when? More importantly, how?

Students fulfilled three roles during the seminars. 1) Discussion Directors facilitated

the analysis using questions I had provided to get them started. They also used synchronous

backchannel discussions on TodaysMeet to decide which direction to take the conversation,

which follow-up questions to ask, and which textual elements to emphasize. 2) Inner Circle

members answered the director's questions and used them as a springboard for further

conversation. 3) Remaining students formed the Backchannel in a ring outside of the Inner

Circle, co-constructing ideas and reacting to their peers' responses, all the while guiding the

Discussion Director's choices within the discourse. Both the Director and the Backchannel

were allowed their Chromebooks for TodaysMeet in addition to their annotated scene

summaries, while the Inner Circle could use their summaries only.

Findings

TodaysMeet provided an interactive platform for YL literary analysis in distinct ways.

In the following section, I share results from the digitized Socratic seminars. Findings are

shown in the form of excerpts from observations and interviews as well as descriptions of

artifacts. These findings are presented in three sections: 1) instances when backchannel

discussions bolstered the content and authenticity of literary discourse; 2) moments of

personalized experiences in literature study; 3) inclusion of multiple voices in textual

discussions.

To Read or to Read Well, That is the Question: The Backchannel

Designed from a YL perspective, the implementation of TodaysMeet in *Hamlet*

Socratic seminars enabled opportunities for genuine textual analysis. While the central

discussion took place in the Inner Circle, members of the Backchannel used TodaysMeet to

post reactions to their peers' statements, suggest follow-up questions for the Discussion

Director, and co-construct new meanings within the text. The opening minutes of our first

seminar are detailed in the following excerpts and descriptions. We begin with field notes that

describe the scene:

> Aaron settles everyone down and calls the seminar to order. He addresses the
> Inner Circle of Roger, Jennifer, and Josie. The rest of the class are circled around
> them, participating in the backchannel. Aaron asks, "Would you say that Hamlet
> displays the behavior of an adult or of a juvenile?" After several seconds of
> silence, Josie speaks first and states that Hamlet acts more like an adult because
> he has vowed to avenge the murder of his father. Roger argues that Hamlet has
> not shown the ability to actually go through with his plan, and this weakness
> makes him more juvenile than adult. Jennifer is silent as Roger and Josie debate
> whether or not Hamlet will kill Claudius and if that will answer the initial
> question one way or another. (Field Notes, March 18, 2016).

The Inner Circle considers Hamlet's enigmatic characteristics within the context of stepping

into power via the accomplishment a life objective from a position of powerlessness. With

readers collectively summarizing key moments from Act I by citing dialogue and plot points,

responses to the literature begin at the comprehension level, then gradually increase in

complexity. This interaction bypasses the need for an anticipatory set and launches right into

textual discussion. Meanwhile, the Backchannel, featured in Figure 4, carries on a lively

conversation of its own.

Figure 4. The Backchannel.

In a traditional Socratic seminar, students in the outer ring are typically silent, perhaps taking

notes, but generally not contributing to the discourse. In the digitized seminar, they participate

on multiple levels. First, they have a platform to respond to the Director's question, thus

taking equal part in the summary and analysis. Second, they have the ability to interact with

their peers and respond accordingly. Third, they directly impact the conversation by offering

suggestions and feedback for the Director. Finally, the Backchannel takes a leading role in the

overall literacy setting by creating content that coheres around fluid collaboration. Members

of the Backchannel not only consider the central question, they interject their own reactions

while offering inspiration for further Inner Circle discussion while extending their analysis

even deeper into Hamlet's psyche.

As the seminar quickly expands, Aaron appears inspired by the Backchannel's web of

content and reframes the question in light of the ground that has been covered in both the

physical and digital forums. We see conversation enriched by a number of personal

connections in the following excerpt.

> Jennifer interjects and says that she believes Hamlet is more juvenile than adult
> because he is unsure about things. Aaron asks Jennifer if she believes Hamlet is
> obsessed. Jennifer responds that he is. Aaron asks how different obsessions
> impact how we see people either as adult or juvenile. Jennifer responds that
> obsession is a tricky term because she wouldn't say she was obsessed with her car
> even though she enjoys driving it and depends on it daily, but she would say she
> is obsessed with getting into college. She adds that one obsession seems juvenile,
> one seems adult-like. (Field Notes, March 18, 2016).

What began with a single question about the main character and produced a thorough

summarization of Act I has transformed into a democratic forum, a chorus of voices

orchestrating a web of intertextual associations. The discussion is indicative of digital

interaction in that subtopics flourish in a nonlinear fashion, sparking ideas in different

directions. All the while, the umbrella topics pertain directly to considerations of

youth/adulthood in the text. Josie then wonders if Hamlet can even discern the difference

between what is real and what is not. The Backchannel facilitates all of these subtopics, with a

range of responses.

Students explore obsession deeply, but with great care to balance their personal

connections with adherence to the text. This sustained analysis is difficult to accomplish in a

high school class. And yet, students appear to be thriving in this blended environment, with a

mix of physical and digital interaction. The Backchannel proceeds virtually on their own

devices but also takes their cues from the Inner Circle and its activity. Engagement occurs on

multiple levels, as students listen to the discourse in the Inner Circle while simultaneously

tracking the concurrent conversation in the Backchannel, incorporating both nonverbal and verbal communication.

Backchannel activity encouraged engagement from students who actively listened to the central discussion while referring to their notes and sharing reactions to what was said in real time. In this sense, while students were collectively contributing to the main dialogue, they were also constructing their own conceptions of the adolescence paradigm in the text. Because students were bringing their own experiences and understandings to the Backchannel and subsequently affecting the Director's choice of questions, the literacy collaboration was dialogic. While pursuing notions of adolescence/adulthood, readers made connections to texts, co-constructed with peers, and investigated contexts of their own lives.

I was able to further enrich the content for the Backchannel by posting links to scholarly sources and references to Hamlet in popular culture. In one instance, I provided a link to a review of the 1994 Chicago Humanities Festival (Kilian, 1994) which featured Chief Justice Anthony Kennedy and Appeals Chief Judge William Bauer participating in a mock trial designed to determine Hamlet's innocence or guilt in the multiple deaths he both directly and indirectly causes. Although the trial was carried out for entertainment purposes, students were exposed to the cultural weight carried by Shakespeare's work. More importantly, the supplement generated renewed interest and sparked new lines of discussion.

TodaysMeet offered a new kind of literature study experience for students. Many technology interventions ask students to construct a set of ideas about the text, then formally enter the digital space. With TodaysMeet, the digital space was actually the entry point into students' investigations. This technology was more than a tool. Students navigated a digital world in which they created and collaborated, making their analysis a participatory act similar

to their social literacies outside of the classroom (Howell, Kaminski, and Hunt-Barron, 2016).

TodaysMeet offered academic activity not distinct from their usual meaning-making; it was an

extension of their literacy lives.

Monica. I probed the Backchannel further by asking at what point does Hamlet

sacrifice his innocence. A fresh wave of responses appeared, but one was particularly

gratifying. Monica was an outspoken but polite young lady who had recently been

experiencing some attendance issues due to a number of factors including caring for her

siblings in a single-parent home, holding a full-time job at a shoe store in the mall, and having

just gone through a breakup with her boyfriend of two years. She had been behind in her

assignments but was a hard worker who was always able to get caught up. One of the

assignments she missed was an overview of Aristotle's tragic hero, a protagonist who

possesses a fatal flaw that leads to his own demise as well as those he cares for. Her answer to

my question was quick and sharp: "He can never be innocent because he's tragic. He can't

make a decision and that's his flaw. When a boy won't commit, that's when you run."

Monica's response indicated that she not only completed the assignment she had missed but

had thought about its outcome in the play as well as its thematic connection to her life. I had

known Monica to be a persistent student serious about carving out a positive future for herself,

but I really appreciated her at that moment for who she was and what she brought to the class.

Later, in an interview with Monica, I alluded to Kilian's (1994) article, "Guilty or

Innocent, That is the Question--and Hamlet Goes Free." I asked her to what degree she

thought Hamlet was innocent. She offered the following response:

> At first I thought he was brave. I didn't think about innocence. He did what he
> thought was right even though he didn't seem like the type to fight. He also acts
> crazy, so maybe it wasn't bravery but insanity. But our group started talking about

their families and stuff and people who follow their heart can be inspiring. I

thought about that, too. But he wasn't trying to be inspiring. He just wanted to

live his life and make his father happy. So yeah I think he was innocent. Not like

a little kid innocent but like a grownup. (Monica, Interview, April 9, 2016).

Monica's digital interaction allowed her to look deeply into the text and to reconcile her own

preconceptions of innocence with how it plays out in the world. The complexity in her

analysis, specifically, her reconsideration of what she originally thought was a strategy of

resistance when reading. Monica, along with her peers in the seminar, appeared to not merely

be reading, but reading well. Their analyses demonstrated thoughtful insight and authentic

connections. The combination of critical reactions and interconnected literacy offered an

alternative setting where students could go further without leaving the room. It was all right

there, happening in real time. And their participation was grounded in real lives.

To Thine Own Self Be True: Personalizing the Experience of Literacy

I wrote the following question on the whiteboard to begin the seminar following Act

III: *What does Hamlet want?* This is a complex question that requires reader inference to

crack the codes of Hamlet's intricate phrasing and to consider the subtlety of Shakespeare's

verbal and dramatic irony. Esther, who was paired with Harry in the Inner Circle, started the

discussion swiftly. The following excerpt describes the activity that ensued:

> Esther says that Hamlet wants a number of things: to avenge his father's death, to
>
> punish Claudius, to return to college, to eventually be king. She adds that it is
>
> possible that Hamlet does not know what he wants. As the backchannel's
>
> keyboards click in the background, Harry remarks that Hamlet would make a terrible
> king. This draws laughter from the backchannel. After Esther concedes that Harry is
> probably correct, Quinn (backchannel member) types "we should talk about that."
> Forbin (director) then asked, "OK, what makes a good king?" (Field Notes, March 26,
> 2016)

Quinn. The first wave of students offered rather predictable responses, except perhaps for Quinn, who posted, "Someone who actually wants to do the job." While the conversation carried into the realm of Hamlet's credentials (or lack thereof) for the throne, I bookmarked this comment and made a point to ask Quinn about it later.

The resulting debate over Hamlet's fitness to be king was captivating. It featured a variety of topics including the school's administrative team, the presidential campaigns, student council elections, and responsibilities of step-parents. TodaysMeet allowed for personal analysis from students while serving as a multifaceted tool for myself as both a researcher and instructor. The teacher in me could gauge students' comprehension of textual elements such as plot and characterization. I could also measure the level of critical insight with which students were navigating the text, as well as their ability to examine thematic qualities embedded in the narrative. The researcher in me observed sociocultural new literacies at work in an organic zone of literacy learning where thoughtful analysis operated via digital interaction.

Later, when I got the chance to sit down with Quinn, I asked him about his idea that a good leader is someone who "actually wants to do the job." He invoked our earlier study of *Macbeth* by saying that Malcolm (the rightful heir to the Scottish throne) is a good leader because he understands what it takes to be king. When I pressed him further for examples, he said that his father wanted him to work for him after graduation and eventually take over the family plumbing business. Quinn said he didn't mind the work and could potentially see himself doing it, but he also liked drafting and wanted to study to become an architect. He added that his younger brothers would be around to take over the business if he did not. I asked Quinn if he wanted to follow his own path. He said, "It's nobody else's."

This dialogic conversation in which Quinn connected his prior readings to his current analysis while drawing parallels to the contexts of his life and enriching my understanding of him as a person was made possible by a single remark made earlier in the virtual forum. His statement was brief and in a traditional oral discussion might well have gone unnoticed. Underpinning his comment was an entire sequence of thoughts and considerations that drove his interpretation of the play and revealed authentic interaction with the literature. I later suggested he watch *The Lion King* with his brothers and look for connections to the play. I did this with the knowledge that Quinn was interested in the coming of age storyline, that he spent time with his younger brothers, and that he had reflected upon where his own path might lead him. How gratifying it was weeks later to hear him discuss with peers the similarities and differences between the Disney film and Shakespeare's work. With TodaysMeet, Quinn was able to participate candidly yet comfortably within the parameters of the seminar.

Diego. The concept of being true to oneself also seemed to resonate with Diego, although in an unexpected way. Diego's family is from Mexico and moved to the city after the turkey farm his father managed was shut down due to contamination a year before. Diego is a bright student and had earned a "Success Bound" scholarship to the city's university based on his youth leadership and desire to become the first in his family to attend college. He receives ELL support, and as a supporter of his achievement, I used a variety of scaffolds including alternative texts and multimodalities to empower him toward literacy. While the British Genres placement was perhaps not ideal for Diego, he did need credit for the course in order to enroll in university the following fall. His take on what Hamlet should do with his life caught my attention and is annotated with an arrow in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Diego.

Academically speaking, the Chromebook has been a blessing for Diego as he possesses

excellent digital literacies, especially typing skills that he relies on far more often than his

handwriting, which he refers to as, "sick chicken scratch." On a personal level, however,

Diego dislikes the idea of having to carry his computer with him. In fact, while he is a hard-

working, pleasant young man with spirited brown eyes, he is not enamored with the concept

of school and actually displayed mixed feelings about his scholarship during an interview

later:

> Everybody is so excited for me to go here. It would be cool and all that but I'll
> probably end up starting my own business like my dad so I don't even think I
> need to do college. My mom made me apply for it. I guess I'll go but I don't
> know. School is OK. Reading ain't bad but I like outdoors. Probably just be my
> own boss. (Diego, Interview, April 19, 2016).

Out of all my students, Diego perhaps connected the most with Hamlet's dilemma of deciding

what to do with his life. I knew Diego had a passion for his agricultural background and talked

fondly of helping his father on the farm, but I was unaware of his reservations about accepting

post-secondary plans that weren't his own plans all along. Diego's textual connection was

direct, and I felt the weight of his anxiety even weeks after our interview. I thought it was

courageous for him to explore the play so personally and to share his story with me. When I

asked him about his comment on TodaysMeet, he reiterated the notion that sometimes youth

are never asked what they want. I asked if it bothered him when no one asks what he wants.

He responded, "It's my parents' job to do what's best for me. But that's my job, too."

Literacy teachers strive for connections--between students and their texts, between

textual elements and readers' lives, and among peers. These connections depend upon a

discernible level of student engagement with texts which can be aided by digital integration.

TodaysMeet was unlike any program I had previously utilized. Students like Quinn and Diego

identified multiple points at which their personal lives could not only help them understand

deeper elements of the play, but also ways in which their analysis could help them consider

their own experiences and futures. The digital space offered a personalized reading

experience. Students responded to texts on their own terms and in textual operations that

reflected their own methods of meaning-making in social settings. This level of intimacy with

literature has implications far beyond success in academic settings and has the potential to

steer young adults toward a life in literacy.

The Play's The Thing: Inviting New Voices Through Digital Opportunities

Class discussions about literature often fall into the same two or three students

controlling much of the discourse, which contributes to the consolidation of authority while

excluding others from the conversation. Prolific talkers dominate discussions because know

they answers and enjoy being heard while their peers lose engagement and resort to silence.

When teachers accept this as the norm, literacy learning becomes public act of exclusion.

Reluctant contributors miss out, not just on the co-construction of knowledge, but also on

meaning-making through literature. TodaysMeet offers all students a chance to collaborate,

especially those whose classroom operations are more introverted. Our seminar following Act

II focused on Hamlet's plot to expose Claudius's guilt in the king's murder. I wanted students

to think about the steps Hamlet was taking to discover the truth and consider what those

motives reveal about his character. What struck me about the ensuing discussion was that

TodaysMeet provided a platform for new voices to contribute.

Wilson. Wilson was a student from whom I did not hear much throughout the

semester. He is a bright, pleasant young man, but he preferred to work independently and

didn't engage in conversation with his peers. He always had a book with him and would sneak

pages in whenever he could, so I knew he at least had some interest in literature. During our

first week of class, I asked students for one word to describe themselves. Wilson's response

was, "Gamer." He wore headphones often, listening to his Dungeons and Dragons podcast.

Rarely did he seem to look up from his book or computer at his surroundings, much less join

in on discussions. When activity started, he consistently closed off. And yet, when offered the

chance to contribute digitally, Wilson not only exhibited an interest in *Hamlet* and the

discussion it produced, but he became a consistent contributor who provided text-based

evidence for his opinions. With the use of TodaysMeet, Wilson became a strong member of

the literacy community and a valid facilitator of its discourse.

After offering very little in class dialogues or interaction with peers, Wilson

demonstrated a new level of textual interest while using TodaysMeet. Much to the surprise of

all of us, Wilson was suddenly leading the analyses and spearheading exchanges. For

example, after Tela (Director) asked Jennifer and Diego (Inner Circle) how courageous

Hamlet is in devising his trap for Claudius, both remarked that they thought Hamlet was more

scared than anything else. Wilson took charge of the Backchannel and generated a number of

points propelling the discussion forward. Wilson's initial comment is at the bottom of Figure

6. He then responds to my prompts.

Figure 6. Wilson.

Wilson considers weighty issues of courage and fear, both of which tie in directly with young

adult readers' perceptions of their journey toward adulthood. Wilson considers what it means

to be in a high-stress situation and connects those reactions with his textual analysis. Based on

Wilson's topic, Jennifer and Diego's conversation then transitioned into how civilians view

soldiers and our perceptions of veterans, particularly in the contexts of the ongoing War on

Terror. Wilson later posted a link to a news article about returning veterans being acclimated

back into society while dealing with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

In a subsequent interview, I asked Wilson about his group's discussion. He told me

that his uncle had been a Vietnam Vet and had shared stories with him about what it was like

to serve in the war and then return home. I told him that he helped spark an important

discussion, and I asked him why he hadn't shared ideas like this in the past. The following

interview excerpt contains part of his response:

> I don't really hang out with anyone in the class. I mean I get along with everyone
> it's just I've never been a big talker. It was fun to see what people put and then
> share back. I like the videos you can post. To me this was a good way to talk
> about Shakespeare. (Wilson, Interview, April 1, 2016).

In the digital space, Wilson made powerful academic strides not only as a serious reader, but as a classroom leader as well. His remarks challenged his peers to complicate their preconceptions of veterans and sparked new understandings of what life might be like for those returning home from combat to re-assimilate into civilian life. The critical thinking about veterans' futures was reminiscent of youth as a symbolic placeholder, the idea that we attach to the concept of adolescence the notion that the future holds high hopes beyond the threshold of adulthood, that there is something greater out there for all of us if we follow a prescribed formula (Petrone et al., 2015). TodaysMeet granted license for a greater number of voices to contribute to the discourse and allowed for discursive literacy learning. For students like Wilson, this was a first. As for me, I had been hoping Wilson would break out all year, and I relished the moment when he finally did.

Brett. While Wilson was originally reluctant to share his voice, Brett was quite the opposite. With a class rank perennially near the top of his peers and a confident, well-spoken command of language, Brett is a student whose academic excellence is obvious. And he is not bashful about his talents. In fact, he often draws consternation from peers for his prolific, elaborate answers. Brett is a nice kid. But he is also a know-it-all, and he knows it. In past discussions, Brett had a tendency to dominate the discourse, to occupy the space almost single-handedly in some instances. TodaysMeet and the Socratic format offered Brett (Figure 7) the chance to continue to demonstrate his knowledge and understanding but to do so in a way that was constructive to the classroom climate.

Figure 7. Brett.
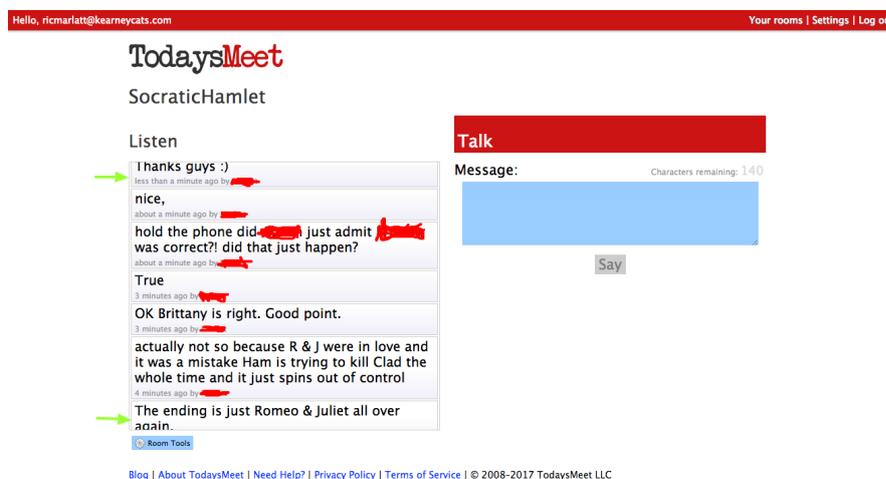
As a member of the backchannel, Brett was forced to confront his unilateral tendencies

and regard his peers' ideas to frame his own remarks within the conversation. This was a new

skill for him and one that he developed nicely over time. For the first time, Brett appeared to

be learning from his peers, and through his interaction, they in turn saw him in a new light as

well. TodaysMeet not only facilitated close analysis of the play, it also served to solidify peer

relationships. I viewed their analysis as serious and insightful, yet the tone of their work was

often playful. This notion of play and creation was rooted in doing things with the literature

and was entirely student-led. A range of student voices were invited to participate in the

digital activities. From the previously disengaged to those accustomed to controlling academic

discourse, TodaysMeet met the needs of all learners and helped to cultivate collaboration

among different personalities.

Discussion

Integrated with Socratic seminars, TodaysMeet can facilitate successful literary

analysis at the high school level. This research has implications for the fields of literacy and

technology in that it contributes an application of digital pedagogy in a typical classroom,

featuring the intersections of textual operations, both print and digital. The study showcases

current conceptions of digital tools in action and explores the impact of technology on literacy

tasks within the context of literature study. Literacy scholars and educators are discovering

how new technologies can be implemented in teaching and learning as smartphones,

computers, tablets, and other devices continue to work their way into secondary institutions.

These findings could point us toward a framework for technology integration in literature

study and literacy practices in 21st Century school settings.

The YL was instructive as the study's theoretical framework and lens through which I

designed the Socratic seminars. It also sheds light on a number of interpretations I was able to

draw from the data. By complicating the ways in which we ask students to approach literature,

we reprogram young adults' notions of what reading can be, as well as what literature can

offer students beyond passing a quiz or earning credit for a course. Through individualized

literacy experiences, participants challenged both their previous assumptions about reading

and their future aspirations. These students operated through the text in ways I had not

observed in our prior interactions. This critical awareness is extended to instructors as well. I

felt a different sense of urgency in the depths of questions I was helping to facilitate.

Searching for answers such as how we think about growing up and what it means to fail

weren't merely features of a curricular unit. Rather, the YL asked me to rethink the act of

teaching altogether. As an educator, I was surprised at how the framework pushed me to new

realms of pedagogy. And as a researcher, I am curious about how the YL can further enhance

studies in literature and potentially impact operations in other disciplines as well.

Technology implementation, like all curricular decisions, should be approached critically, with acknowledgement of the theoretical and practical consequences that underpin what we do in education. Researchers and practitioners alike should approach pedagogy by asking *to what end* learning opportunities are designed. Technology, in this case, TodaysMeet *to what end?* As demonstrated previously, TodaysMeet can be an effective tool to facilitate literary analysis for high school students under certain circumstances. Yet, it is likely not an optimal choice in other cases within the English discipline. Formal units measuring skills such as expository writing, research techniques, or composition and rhetoric may not have significant uses for TodaysMeet because of its limits both in textual space and the number of characters it allows.

In addition, because all users can see what is previously posted prior to adding their own text, imitation or plagiarism of ideas is always possible, as is a stifling of students' participation if they view their own thinking as being of a lesser quality than their peers. After we had used TodaysMeet a few times, and I had obtained an understanding of the platform it provided, I was careful with what kinds of prompts I suggested and monitored closely the kinds of operations I facilitated. In these supplemental instances, results were mixed. I found that using it as a traditional assessment tool of their interpretations of a film adaptation for instance was not productive. While a few students freely shared their thoughts regardless of their uniqueness, many students opted to simply paraphrase what their peers had said. In cases like this, TodaysMeet did not yield student-led conversation or free exchange of original ideas. The digitized Socratic seminars were successful because they were designed using a YL to explore a central text. Successful technology integration involves more than the digital tool, but depends contexts of literacy practices and desired outcomes.

Conclusion

During YL-inspired literature study, TodaysMeet facilitated strong examples of literacy collaboration through Socratic seminars that produced interactive text-based activities. Collected data included extensive observations, interviews, work samples, and artifacts of technology usage and literacy practices. The study suggests that TodaysMeet enabled textual analysis centered on constructive literacy learning through engaged literature study. Participants collaborated via multimodal tasks in which they learned from one another, and their activities remained focused on the text. Their explorations of youth and adolescence sparked new analyses of a canonized work. TodaysMeet allowed for human connections in digital spaces through a revered, traditional text. In response to my research questions, I observed new kind of literary analysis. Students guided one another, and they challenged both peers and their instructor to read closer and to dig deeper. TodaysMeet opened up new literacy territory for me as a researcher and educator. As Hamlet might say, I had the chance to pluck out the heart of its mystery and hold it up to the light.

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