Blended Literature Discussions Increase Preservice Teachers' Enthusiasm for Teaching Reading

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Abstract

In this study, blended literature discussions (face-to-face and blog) were implemented in response

to the International Literacy Association's charge to prepare teachers to integrate 21st century

technologies. Guided by the basic qualitative research design approach and informed by New

Literacies Studies and constructivism, this study examined 24 preservice teachers' blog postings

(*n* = 288) and four group reflection summaries. Analysis revealed initial trepidation about the

blended discussion format; the blended discussion model appeared to allow for extended

conversations about text; all participants intend to use blended literature discussions in their

literacy instruction; blended literature discussions requires detailed planning and teacher

scaffolding. Findings offer a promising technique for incorporating digital literacy into teacher

preparation programs. Future research might consider examining elementary students'

enthusiasm for reading while using the blended literature discussion method.

Keywords: blog, literature discussions, new literacies, reading, teacher preparation

Teacher educators have been charged with integrating digital technologies into their practice to prepare preservice teachers to teach using 21st century literacy skills (International Reading Association, 2009; International Society for Technology in Education, 2017). The revised ISTE (2017) standards have provided some unification of digital literacy practices with the addition of online professional development resources, such as lesson plans, learning scenarios, scaffolding support, and collaborative guides. Borthwick and Hansen (2017) proposed a challenge "to work together as schools, colleges, departments of education, and leaders in professional associations to move educator preparation" (p. 47) toward alignment with similar initiatives, such as the National Educational Technology plan and the Office of Educational Technology. Despite the progression of technology integration standards and guidelines, the integration of digital literacies in higher education remains largely underexplored (Paciga, Fowler, & Quest, 2018).

In light of New Literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011), this study examined how a blended (face-to-face and blog) literature discussion may influence elementary preservice teachers' enthusiasm for reading. New Literacies has been broadly defined as the many forms of representation of language and literacy, with a focus on how people communicate with one another in today's digitally networked world (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). New Literacies Studies require innovative research in "authentic digital literacy practices in social contexts beyond schools" (Mills, 2010, p. 262). A blended literature discussion model provides an additional space for people to communicate with one another, with the blog acting as a support for traditional face-to-face conversations about text.

The need to investigate digital literacy methods in preservice teacher training is important because researchers have revealed preservice teachers have a lack of enthusiasm for reading. In a

study of 379 elementary education preservice teachers, 52% were found to be unenthusiastic

readers (Applegate & Applegate, 2004). The researchers attributed this lack of enthusiasm for

reading to The Peter Effect–teachers who are unenthusiastic as readers are unable to motivate and

excite readers in their own classroom. A decade later, Applegate and colleagues (2014) revisited

the notion of the Peter Effect with 1,000 aspiring teachers and survey results were nearly

identical; 53% self-identified as unenthusiastic readers. These findings raise concerns because it

is possible teachers who are unenthusiastic about reading could influence their students to lack

enthusiasm for reading.

Much has changed in the digital literacy landscape since the initial Applegate and

Applegate (2004) research study. National survey results of 1,454 families in the United States

found that 98% of families own a mobile device (Rideout, 2017). Additionally, of 120 families

with elementary-aged children attending two charter schools in the southeastern United States,

99% reported their child used mobile technology to support reading development in the home

(Eutsler, 2018). The growth of digital technologies lends itself to a vision of new literacies,

"identified with an epochal change in technologies and associated changes in social and cultural

ways of doing things, ways of being, ways of viewing the world" (Coiro, Knobel, Colin,

Lankshear, & Leu, 2014, p. 7). This study focuses on how to respond to the changing

technologies by incorporating blended literature discussions in higher-education classrooms,

which may improve preservice teachers' enthusiasm and engagement with literacy while

positively increasing elementary students' reading enthusiasm.

Much of the research associated with literature discussions has focused on the classroom-

based context where students read books in separate spaces and come together at a scheduled

time to discuss the story, inquire, and make connections with the text and one another (Evans,

2002; Maloch, 2004). Despite the traditional approach to literature discussions, the nature of how

people communicate with one another has seen a dramatic change since the release of iPhone and

other smartphones in 2007, followed shortly by iPad and similar tablet devices in 2010. Since

these technological advances, there is a pressing need for teacher educators to equip preservice

teachers with approaches to literature discussion that reflects the current digital landscape.

Face-to-Face Discussions

Face-to-face literature group discussions is an effective instructional strategy known to

improve comprehension (Cantrell, 2002) and engage elementary students in discussions about

text (Allington, 1984; Davis, Resta, Davis, & Camacho, 2001). Strategies used for planning and

implementing traditional literature group discussions have varied greatly, spanning from

structured teacher planning to student constructed learning.

Following a collaborative partnership with 20 teachers ranging from kindergarten to

college-aged students, Daniels (2002) contends 11 key features should be considered when

planning literature discussion groups. Some features include giving students freedom to choose

their book, systematic group meetings to discuss the book, teacher as facilitator, and having

"natural conversations about books" that lead to open-ended questions and discussions (p. 18).

Similarly, others emphasize the importance of giving elementary students a choice of books,

instead of forming groups according to reading ability levels (Vacca, Vacca, & Gove, 2000;

Worthy, 1996).

Unlike Daniels' (2002) structured approach to literature group discussions, an example of

a teacher-led discussion about text is the ABC's of drama: "*A*ll need to face a *B*ig problem that

we all *C*are about" (Edmiston, 1998, p. 49). Employing engagement strategy techniques, fourth-

grade students worked with their teacher to "use their imagination to question, investigate, and

interpret particular text events to enhance and deepen meaning making with fiction and

nonfiction" (Long & Gove, 2003, p. 351). These strategies acted as a scaffolding technique to

promote critical responses to text.

In another context of one third-grade teacher planning for literature group discussions, the

teacher encouraged students to respond using interpersonal strategies during literature discussion

groups (Maloch, 2004). This response-oriented focus helped the teacher understand how

students' response to literature and focus on relationships helped students relate to one another

and handle group conflict (Maloch, 2004).

While there are a variety of strategies to engage elementary students in face-to-face

literature group discussions, shared characteristics have typically included a teacher-led

environment where students read and discuss the text together in the classroom.

Blended Discussions

Face-to-face methods of literature group discussions are highly valued and remain the

primary method to conduct literature discussions; however, teachers must adapt to meet the

demands of 21st century instructional technology standards, such as blended literature discussions

(Hicks & Turner, 2013). Hicks and Turner (2013) argue for the need to include blogging in an

actionable manner, because "unfortunately, we see teachers using blogs in ways that do not

capitalize on the conversational opportunities that blogging offers" (p. 60). Instead, "teachers

pose a question and students respond to that prompt" (Hicks & Turner, 2013, p. 60). The present

study agrees with Hicks and Turner's (2013) argument that blogging should be an active learning

process, particularly that blogging could be considered a blended learning pedagogical

adaptation. Blended learning is "any time a student learns at least in part in a supervised brick-

and-mortar location away from home and at least in part through online delivery with some

element of student control over time, place, path and/or pace" (Staker, 2011, p. 3).

The blended model of learning can benefit the literature group discussion experience

because "those who use blended learning environments are trying to maximize the benefits of

both face-to-face and online methods—using the web for what it does best, and using class time

for what it does best" (Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003, p. 227). Web 2.0 innovations such as the

blog offers an interactive and collaborative style of learning, giving people the ability to connect

with one another within the affordances of the "social web" (Wheeler & Wheeler, 2009, p. 1).

Despite the effectiveness of face-to-face literature discussions and their ability to elevate

literacy learning in teacher education (Cantrell, 2002; Davis et al., 2001), online communication

and the use of a blog has been gaining momentum as a method to support literacy training and

development (Handsfield, Dean, & Cielocha, 2009; Penrod, 2007; Witte, 2007). Serafini and

Youngs (2013) contend there is a need to extend children's literature discussions beyond the

traditional face-to-face application because it "presents new opportunities for readers to discuss

literature outside the boundaries of the physical classroom as video conferencing technologies

such as Skype, FaceTime, and iChat create spaces for readers to discuss what they have read"

(Serafini & Youngs, 2013, p. 402). In one graduate English course, online discussion-based

literature groups motivated students to read and talk about text (Bowers-Campbell, 2011).

For elementary students to partake in blended literature discussions, preservice teachers

need hands-on training to show them how to incorporate blended discussions. One study by

McVee, Bailey, and Shanahan (2008) explored ways to assist preservice teachers with

implementing New Literacies practices, and results indicated the need for teacher educators to

facilitate shared problem-solving and distributed learning, to support design and multimodal

redesign of texts, and explore literacy and technology as transactional processes. The idea of

literacy and technology being transactional could be achieved through preservice teachers' use of

a blog to discuss literature.

Another exploration of online literature discussions engaged preservice teachers in the

Electronic Reading Workshop (Larson, 2008). In the workshop, participants read e-books and

chats were held synchronously and asynchronously, using threaded discussions. Online

discussions brought advantages such that preservice teachers had time to reflect on reading and

compose meaningful responses to others, ease associated with staying on topic, and the space for

safe sharing of personal connections to the book (Larson, 2008).

In a case study of seven preservice teachers participating in digital literature circles with

implications for elementary-aged students, researchers found that digital tools offered multiple

modalities to explain thinking, improve depth of conversations, and enhance understandings of

the book (Bromley et al., 2014). This conclusion was reached because "as students talked, they

supported their discussion of the literary elements (setting, character development, themes, plot,

and style) with multimodal evidence" (Bromley et al., 2014, p. 234). The blog space afforded

learning opportunities that facilitated extended learning outside of the brick and mortar walls,

while allowing students to make deeper connections about text. The present study seeks to

contribute to Bromley and colleagues' (2014) research. This study examines the experiences of

24 preservice teachers using blended literature discussions for the first time. I investigate how

this experience relates to preservice teachers' enthusiasm for reading and, as a result of the

blended literature discussion experience, whether preservice teachers' intend to incorporate

blended literature discussions in their future classrooms.

Theoretical Perspectives

This study is grounded in New Literacies Studies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011) and

constructivism as a method for teaching (Schunk, 2008), which provides a space for

understanding that student collaboration when engaging in blended literature discussions is

inherently a social experience.

New Literacies

New literacies practices include "skills, strategies and dispositions necessary to

successfully use and adapt to the rapidly changing information and communication technologies

and contexts that continuously emerge in our world and influence all areas of our personal and

professional lives" (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004, p. 1572). The blended literature

discussion is an example of how discussions about literacy are evolving in response to innovative

communication technologies (Coiro et al., 2014). Engaging in discussions about text within the

blog and face-to-face environments is a highly social and collaborative process.

Constructivism as a Method of Teaching

While New Literacies Studies demonstrates how collaborative discussions about text can

occur in multiple spaces, positioning this theory within a teaching framework is needed to

acknowledge that blended literature discussions are most effective when the teacher acts as a

facilitator. Much attention has been drawn to constructivism as a method of teaching (Schunk,

2008). Constructivism has become the method of pedagogical choice because it allows students

to engage in authentic, collaborative learning activities (Ertmer & Newby, 2013), especially

within the context of Web 2.0 affordances, such as a blog. The use of the blog, with its individual

accountability and flexible learning space, may result in increased collaboration and authentic

learning experiences. Together, New Literacies and the constructivism epistemology help discern

that preservice teachers may be more enthusiastic about reading while participating in blended

literature discussions.

Guided by New Literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011) and constructivism as a method

for teaching (Schunk, 2008) to capture the experiences of preservice teachers participating in

blended literature group discussions, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. How might preservice teachers participation in a blended (face-to-face and blog) literature

    discussion influence their enthusiasm for reading?

2. After participating in blended literature discussions, what are their intentions to use blended

    literature discussions in their future elementary classrooms?

Method

Context and Participants

This study engaged preservice teachers in blended literature discussions to explore how

the use of New Literacies might improve their enthusiasm about reading. The study took place

between August and December 2015 and included 24 preservice teacher participants enrolled in

an intermediate reading methods course at a major public elite university in the southeastern

United States. Students were in their third-year of a four-year Elementary Education teacher

preparation program, where approximately 80% of students commit to an optional fifth-year

master's program before beginning their career as a professional teacher. There were 23 females

and one male–20 Caucasian, two Black, and two of Latina origin. The 23 females were between

20-22 years old, with the male between 25-29 years old.

Research Design

This qualitative study was guided by the basic qualitative research design approach

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), which helped ascertain how the blended (face-to-face and blog)

literature discussion method might have an influence on preservice teachers' enthusiasm for reading. A basic qualitative study has foci on meaning, understanding and process; a purposeful sample is used, documents collected become artifacts, analysis is inductive and comparative, with findings richly descriptive through categorical representation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This method helped to identify the following: "How people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purpose is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences (p. 23)." Adherence to the basic qualitative research design approach called for open-ended response-types, which helped reveal the ways in which blended literature discussions influenced preservice teachers' enthusiasm for reading and their intention to use blended literature discussions in their future classrooms.

Data Collection and Procedures

As part of a course assignment, 24 preservice teachers participated in small group blended literature discussions. Though none contested participation in this study, an alternate assignment option was that preservice teachers could complete literature discussions as previous course sections had, by documenting discussions on paper and organizing meeting notes in a paper-based group binder.

To begin the study, preservice teachers divided themselves into four equal groups containing six members each, and agreed on a book to read. Then they created their own group blog on Weebly, a free and user-friendly website creator. Over the span of the study, there were four literature discussion meetings–three face-to-face (synchronous) and one online (asynchronous). Students posted individual discussion posts to their group blog before, during, and after each literature discussion meeting. Following this approach, the blog acted as a blended

discussion support for the three face-to-face meetings and was the only communication medium during the one online meeting.

Data collection was consistent for each discussion meeting. Using the assignment description provided by the instructor, each group posted and organized their blog around the assignment guidelines (Figure 1). Prior to each meeting, the Blogmaster composed three blog entries: individual preparation planning sheet; recorder; evaluation checklist.

Figure 1. Assignment Guidelines

Before every meeting, each preservice teacher posted a blog entry which served as their response to the individual preparation planning sheet. This planning sheet required the Blogmaster to choose a reading comprehension strategy to focus on during the assigned reading (e.g., predicting, questioning). While reading the text on their own, preservice teachers annotated two sticky notes that addressed the identified comprehension strategy and then posted these "sticky note" annotations to the individual preparation planning sheet blog entry (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Individual Preparation Planning Blog Entry

Meeting #1 Individual Prep/Predicting

9/22/2015   12 Comments

Meeting # 1- Individual Prep Planning Sheet/ Sticky Note Comprehension Strategy
Strategy this week is PREDICTING!
As you read, USE STICKY NOTES throughout your book as anecdotal notes to record your thinking and ideas. Include connections, interpretations, opinions, questions, notes for discussion, and any other thoughts while you are reading. Also jot a **page #** on each sticky note. Respond to this entry with 2-3 of your sticky notes.

(Include page numbers for passages that support your ideas)

What are key ideas from the text?

What did you notice about the literary structure, elements, and craft of writing?

What themes do you see emerging in the text?

What connections have you made between parts or elements in the story, to other texts, or to the world?

What inferences have you made while reading?

What questions do you have about the characters, events, or other elements in the text?
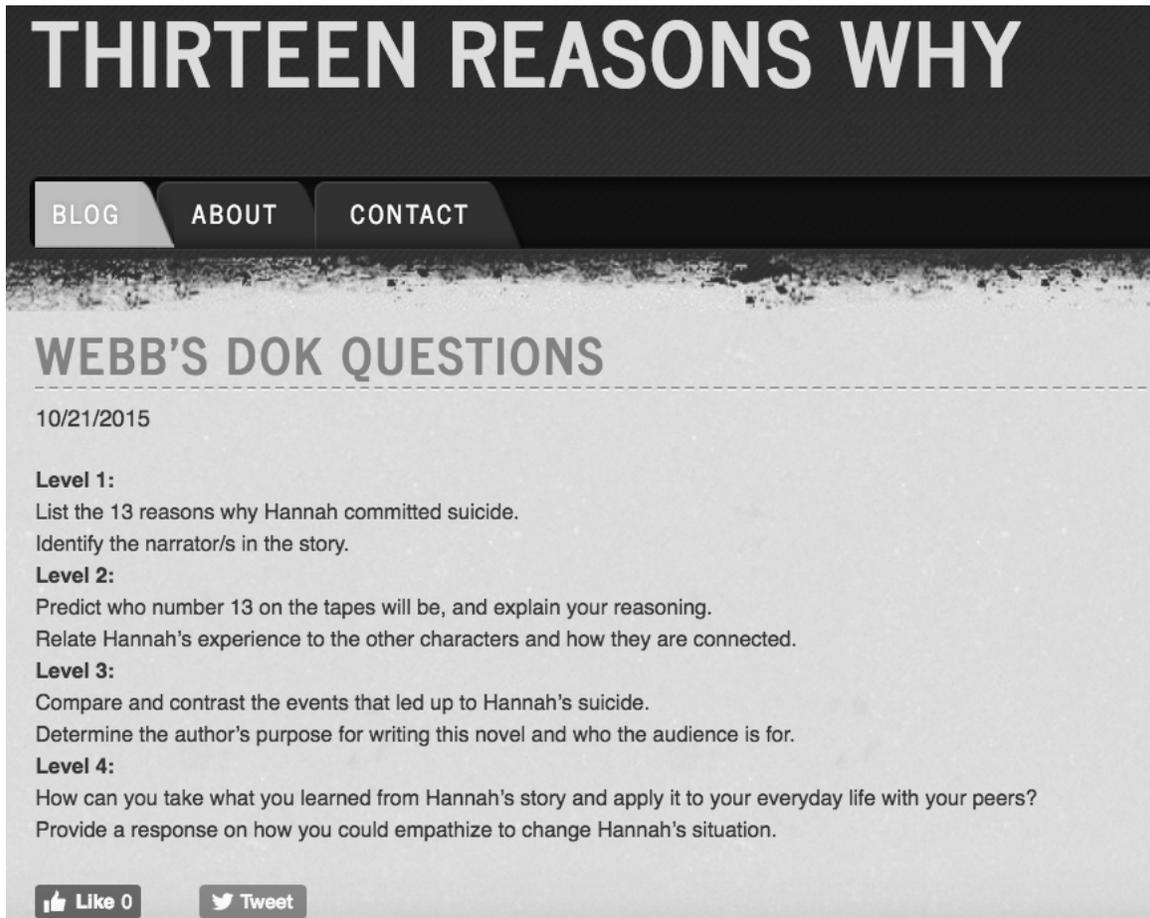
Like 0   Tweet

12 Comments

After the group met face-to-face or online for their discussion meeting, the group recorder posted a summary reflection, which highlighted topics of discussion and provided perceptions of the climate of the discussion. Also following each meeting, each preservice teacher chose two areas to reflect on using the discussion resource developed by Fountas and Pinnell (2006) entitled "Checklist for Evaluating Literature Circle Discussions." Areas of focus from the checklist included: preparation; discussion–process; discussion–content; discussion–strategies; assessment.

After the fourth and final discussion meeting, the group completed a guided reading lesson plan (Figure 3) and a group reflection summary. To complete the guided reading lesson

plan, preservice teachers created questions in accordance with Webb's (2002) depth of

knowledge hierarchical levels of questioning.

Figure 3. Guided Reading Lesson Plan

Following the fourth and final group meeting, preservice teachers critically analyzed the

blended discussion experience and provided explicit feedback in the group reflection summary

about the blended method experience used to conduct literature group discussions.

Data Analysis

This study's use of the basic qualitative research design approach (Merriam & Tisdell,

2015) allowed for a six-phase thematic analysis of the blog entries ($n = 288$) and group reflection

papers ($n = 4$). This approach allowed me to use an inductive and comparative analysis, which

helped to provide depth and meaningful understanding of how blended literature discussions

might have influenced preservice teachers' enthusiasm for reading.

Phase one began with reading through the entire qualitative dataset, notating impressions,

thoughts, and preliminary interpretations. Following the initial reading, the second phase

consisted of rereading the dataset to identify initial patterns codes from the data. From this

analysis, a list of nine codes were compiled, which included questioning, curiosity, retelling, and

trepidation about using a blog to facilitate discussion.

In phase three, the initial codes were compared to determine meaning based on

relationships within the data. Then, terms and phrases were sorted based on connections

and relationships. This comparative analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) led to a collective list of

six initial domains. Some of the initial domains included mixed-emotions on the blended method,

judgement of the instructor's pedagogy, and inquiry toward future applications of blended

literature discussions in the elementary classroom.

Phase four involved delving back into the dataset to determine whether all data fit within

the initial domains, and whether new domains may be needed. This was accomplished by sorting

data based on the six initial domains. From here, phase five involved revisiting the data to

examine terms, examples, and relationships within and across the domains to discover key

themes. This deeper analysis resulted in the creation of four key themes. Following the

identification of the four themes, the final phase consisted of color-coding the dataset to represent

the four identified themes, as presented next in the results section of this paper.

Results

Data analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) of blog entries and group reflection summaries

revealed how blended literature discussions might have influenced preservice teachers'

enthusiasm for reading, in addition to identifying whether preservice teachers intend to use

blended literature discussions in their future classrooms. The analysis captured four key themes

to: initial trepidation about the blended literature discussion method; the blended discussion

model appeared to allow for extended conversations about text; all participants intend to use

blended literature discussions in their literacy instruction; blended literature discussions requires

detailed planning and teacher scaffolding.

Enthusiasm for Reading During Blended Literature Discussions

The first research question, *How might preservice teachers participation in a blended (face-to-face and blog) literature discussion influence their enthusiasm for reading?* sought to understand

how blended literature discussions may have influenced preservice teacher's enthusiasm for

reading.

> **Initial trepidation about the blended literature discussion method.** Responses showed

preservice teachers had initial trepidation about how reading and participating in face-to-face and

online discussions would unravel, but this worrisome hesitation quickly led to excitement about

blended literature discussions. Responses exhibiting trepidation contained feelings of

nervousness and confusion. Statements filled with trepidation were as follows: "I was very

confused about the literature circle at the beginning of class;" "at the beginning of the literature

circle portion of class I was extremely nervous because I was confused about how everything was

supposed to work and blend together;" "at first I was a little hesitant about the literature

discussion groups but I have to say I really enjoyed it."

> The blended literature discussion method was perceived as an exciting way to experience

literature discussions. Before blended discussions began, one student said, "I am really excited

about our literature circles, and to see how this effectively works with the blog aspect." Others

reflected, "the blended discussion process was a fun way to experience our book," because this method provided "an escape from the rest of our academic duties without the pressure of assessment." One preservice teacher who was hesitant about the blended literature discussion approach realized, "now, at the end of class, I am excited to use the blog and it's exciting to talk about the book." Although the blended discussion method induced initial hesitation about the literature discussion experience, preservice teachers were enthusiastic and positive about the ability of blended discussions to foster lively discussions about text.

The blended discussion model appeared to allow for extended conversations about text. The blended discussion method gave preservice teachers time to think about and process text before in-class discussions, which enabled the blog to serve as a reference to deepen text discussions. Preservice teachers described how their roles before and during the literature discussion meetings kept them actively involved in discussions. "Before each meeting, each individual member would respond to the preparation post on our blog by answering the six questions addressing the reading and the sticky note strategy." Then during the meeting, the "Blogmaster would begin the discussion and the rest of the members would chime in with their thoughts. Then, we would incorporate our reading strategy into our discussion as well by asking questions, making connections, commenting on others' thinking, etc."

Preservice teachers also expressed enthusiasm for reading and appeared very willing to participate in the blended discussions. Statements supporting the in-depth discussions attained by blended literature discussions include: "we learned the usefulness of peer groups to review literacy where discussions helped us develop a deeper understanding of the text;" "the literature circle was a really fun way to work reading into collaborative work. It motivates students to read and encourages them to share with group members;" "I enjoyed the blogging and meetings to

discuss different opinions and see how we all could infer the same sections differently;" "students

can build the responsibility, communication skills, and connectedness that we saw with our

literature circle discussion experience." Blended discussions allowed for in-depth analysis of the

text, as indicated in the group reflection, "our experience with the literature discussion group has

helped us understand how our students can benefit from an in-depth discussion at specific points

in a reading with their peers."

Intention to Use Blended Literature Discussions in Future Elementary Classrooms

To address research question two, *After participating in blended literature discussions, what are*

their intentions to use blended literature discussions in their future elementary classrooms?,

preservice teachers expressed their intention to use blended literature discussions in their future

elementary classroom, but emphasized the importance of detailed planning and teacher

scaffolding.

All participants intend to use blended literature discussions in their literacy

instruction. Response data revealed that preservice teachers intend to use blended literature

discussions in their future elementary classrooms. For some, reasons to include blended literature

discussions centred on enjoyment and affirmation of the blended literature discussion format:

"the literature circle has been a very fun experience. I will definitely use literature circles in my

classroom;" "I like the format of it and I want to be able to use a similar concept with my

students;" "getting to choose our own book definitely made it more enjoyable;" "I can see how

great this would work in an elementary classroom [elementary school] and look forward to

implementing it in my class!"

Others perceived the blended literature method as a helpful teaching strategy to gauge

student participation and monitor academic progress: "I really like the idea of posting on a blog

so participation and professionalism is accurately recorded;" "we learned the usefulness of peer

groups to review literacy. Literary assessments shouldn't be individually summative, but rather

formative with peers over time to correct misunderstanding and for each individual to share and

improve the overall group understanding."

Blended literature discussions requires detailed planning and teacher scaffolding.

Although preservice teachers envisioned themselves using blended literature discussions in their

future elementary classrooms, they cautioned that successful implementation requires detailed

planning and ongoing teacher involvement.

Preservice teachers reflected on the structured and organized nature of their own blended

discussion experience: "each week, we assigned a specific reading strategy to think about and use

while completing our weekly reading. The four strategies we focused on included questioning,

making predictions, making connections, and summarizing;" "each member had the

responsibility of being the blog master or the recorder for a specific meeting;" "we would

typically begin by discussing the important events that occurred in that week's reading using

evidence from the text;" "after each meaningful discussion, we individually evaluated the

meeting addressing the checklist."

Perhaps as a result of the structured-nature of their own blended literature discussion

experience, preservice teachers relayed recommendations to facilitate explicit teacher-guided

instruction. There were "some concerns about the amount of autonomy students should have to

successfully conduct literature circles;" "structure is key to student success in this strategy;" "we

all agreed the level of independence will differ for each class…the more mature and organized

students are the more they will be able to do on their own;" "with additional scaffolding, students

could easily conduct literature circles;" "strategies for each meeting can provide some of the scaffolding."

There was group consensus that teacher-guided instruction is critical to maintain student engagement in blended literature discussions because "younger children would be far more dependent on the teacher to facilitate discussions. It can probably be done, but the appropriate environment would have to be set up and it would likely need more structure compared to what older students would need." Literature discussions "can be a very useful tool to help students understand text while still having fun. However, it is crucial that the teacher explicitly explains how the process should look to make sure students are prepared before the meeting."

Discussion

This study's implementation of blended literature discussions among 24 preservice teachers' helped to engage them in reading and elevated discussions about text. Based on the findings that more than half of preservice teachers' lack enthusiasm for reading (Applegate & Applegate, 2004; Applegate et al., 2014), using blended literature discussions to engage preservice teachers in New Literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011) as guided by a constructivist approach (Schunk, 2008) offers a promising technique for incorporating digital literacy into other teacher preparation programs.

Although recent research found 99% of elementary education families permitted their child to use mobile technology to support reading development in the home (Eutsler, 2018), it is interesting that all 24 preservice teachers in the present study were unfamiliar with the New Literacy method of using blogs to facilitate literature discussions. However, after preservice teachers engaged in the blended literature experience, each one shared that they felt equipped and excited to integrate blended literature discussions into their future literacy instruction. Since 98%

of children have access to a mobile device in the home (Rideout, 2017), it is important for

teachers to include New Literacies into their teaching to prepare students to navigate 21st century

digital literacies within educational contexts (International Reading Association, 2009;

International Society for Technology in Education, 2017).

Most compelling, the flexible nature of the blog engaged preservice teachers in reading

and discussing literature in and outside of class. The blog was easily accessible via the Weebly

app, and preservice teachers used their smartphones to read and respond to other group members.

It is also likely that because preservice teachers constructed their own learning spaces by creating

their own group blog and were given freedom to complete discussions in their shared space, this

may have contributed to their enthusiasm for reading and willingness to engage in the

discussions. The blog space fostered opportunities to thoughtfully reflect on and analyze the text

and peer discussions (Larson, 2008), which also enabled preservice teachers to collaborate and

extract meaning from text. "Meaningful discussion, planning, and practice help learners delve

more deeply" (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001, pp. 925-926).

Whereas traditional face-to-face discussions require turn-taking, the blended method

afforded each group member time to think critically about the text, individually respond, and read

and reflect on each other's blog postings. Blended literature discussions allow for extended

discussions about text beyond school contexts (Bromley et al., 2014). In the present study, the

blog acted as an individual accountability measure where preservice teachers posted initial

reactions to the text, read and responded to each other's thinking, and reflected on the discussions

before coming together for a face-to-face meeting. During face-to-face meetings, discussions

were lively since there was no concern or contentions about who had completed their reading and

discussions. The blended literature discussion format increased enthusiasm for reading because it gave each member a guided sense of belonging throughout the reading and discussion process.

This study also contributes to earlier findings that preservice teachers require explicit scaffolding to implement new literacies methods (McVee, Bailey, & Shanahan, 2008). Although preservice teachers in this study exhibited trepidation about participating in blended literature discussions because it was a new experience, all 24 preservice teachers said they planned to include blended literature discussions in their future elementary classrooms. Giving preservice teachers an opportunity to collaborate about literature in a blended discussion format contributed to the realization that blended literature discussions can be an innovative strategy to improve digital literacy practices within teacher preparation programs.

Implications and Future Research

The infusion of digital literacy into teacher preparation programs needs to reflect the demands of technology standards and consider an individual's access to technology. Future research might consider a larger sample of preservice teachers using blended literature discussions to compare the experience to a group of preservice teachers who engage in a traditional face-to-face literature discussion method. Additional research may also examine the ways in which preservice teachers use blended literature discussions in elementary classrooms. In this future research, studies might explore how elementary students' and the classroom teacher's enthusiasm and interest for reading may be influenced by blended literature discussions, and how the blended literature discussion experience compares with elementary students' and the classroom teacher's perceptions of face-to-face literature discussions.

Conclusion

In response to stakeholder requests for the application of New Literacies into literacy instruction (International Reading Association, 2009; International Society for Technology in Education, 2017), teacher preparation programs must train teachers to integrate technology into literacy by engaging them in hands-on experiences that could be applied within their future classrooms. The importance of preparing digitally literate teachers (Harrison, Dwyer, & Castek, 2010) who are enthusiastic about reading has never been greater than the current time. Online discussions about literature should not replace the teacher or face-to-face discussions; rather, blended literature discussions offer an extended learning space to help readers connect with one another and think more deeply about text.

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