

## The Web Pen Pals Project: Students' Perceptions of a Learning Community in an Online Synchronous Environment

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### *Abstract*

*This paper draws on data gathered from a five-month phenomenological study of middle school students' perceptions of the effects of computer-based technologies on a learning community in an online synchronous environment. Twenty-four eighth-grade students participated in the Web Pen Pals project, a university-secondary telecollaborative partnership which brings middle school students together with pre-service teachers enrolled in an adolescent literature course in online chat rooms to discuss young adult literature. The complexities of creating a community are explored through interviews of the middle school participants, which reveal several themes affecting the development of a learning community: 1) obstacles to community-making, which include anonymity and lack of ease with technology; 2) establishing friendships; 3) an emergent language system; and 4) the symbolic inversion of traditional "teacher" and "student" roles.*

The way students use today's networked information and communication technologies (ICT), specifically the Internet, at school is largely driven by the kinds of activities and assignments that teachers create. A U.S. national survey conducted in 1999 revealed that the most frequent instructional uses of computers in the classroom were for word processing or creating spreadsheets, followed by Internet research to help write papers or to complete class work or homework assignments (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). A recent 2004 study conducted by Levin & Arafeh for the Pew Internet and American Life Project finds students view the Internet at school as a "virtual textbook and reference library" (p. iii), and think many school-based Internet assignments are "unconnected to what [we are] learning," a "waste of time," or "boring" (p. 16). It comes as no surprise then that a "digital disconnect" exists between students' out-of-school and in-school Internet use. For example, while many schools prevent students from using instant messaging technologies, 16 million online teens use instant messaging outside of school to communicate with friends and relatives (Rainie & Hitlin, 2005). While this disconnect results partly from such factors as limited and/or lack of quality access to the Internet, it exists, too, because new Internet technologies, i.e., synchronized environments, require more sophisticated technologies so their integration

in K-12 progresses slowly (Dede, Brown L'Bahy, & Whitehouse, 2002). Karchmer (2001) explains another reason, however, for the disconnect is that teachers are not generally prepared to use new Internet technologies or to teach children how to use them effectively (p. 445).

As English teacher educators, we find this disconcerting because we know the Internet is changing how we define literacy and communication. Electronic texts can include animated graphics, video, and hyperlinks and thus require a different kind of reading than traditional prose; e-mail, as Naomi Baron (1998) has explained, reaches beyond the dichotomy of speech vs. writing as it is both a “conversation and a letter,” (Hale & Scanlon, 1999, p. 3), a “telegraph, a memo, and a palaver rolled into one” (Hale & Scanlon, 1999, p. 78). Asynchronous chat (chat in postponed time) preserves each participant’s “linguistic footprint” (Crystal, 2001, p. 135), over an indefinable period of time and its characteristic short responses and “route-map of a discussion” allows for a “dynamic, conversational feel” (Crystal, p. 145). Synchronous chat (real-time chat), in contrast, disregards standard conventions of discourse, i.e., turn-taking, sequence, and time-ordering, and allows for linguistic versatility that exists especially within young people.

Such new Internet technologies hold implications for English teachers and English teacher educators who hope to decrease the polarization of in-school and out-of-school literacy practices and close the gap between the school curriculum and the pupils who are taught. We created the Web Pen Pals project, then, because we see potential in the synchronous chat medium; it affords a kind of “virtual classroom” communicative space where pre-service teachers can engage in real-time chat with adolescents and learn how to facilitate discussion about literature while learning the linguistic properties of the medium. At the same time, adolescents get the opportunity to use new Internet technologies in ways typically prevented in school.

### **The role of talk in learning.**

As Bloem (2004) asserts, “Children need time to talk, verbally or in writing, yet when time gets short, talk is what is pushed out of the curriculum first. But, for many of us, it is talk that leads to understanding” (p. 54). Specifically, we think it is Barnes’ & Todd’s (1995) “exploratory talk” that leads to understanding, especially understanding that comes as a result of reconstructing existing ideas. Henson (1993) describes exploratory talk as the kind of talk where “many ideas aren’t complete, interruptions are common, some threads of the talk don’t go anywhere, some suggestions are far-fetched, and some things are said just for fun” (p.45); we think the synchronous chat medium may afford opportunities for students (and future teachers) to “try on” this kind of talk as the medium itself—with its short, simple sentence structures, spontaneity, and topic decay—lends itself to informal, unpolished “thinking out loud” kind of talk. As Henson (1993) points out, this exploratory talk happens more frequently outside-of-school and we see the synchronous chat medium as a conversation space, which gives secondary students the opportunity to engage in such talk.

The online chat room affords students opportunities to write and talk as well as to develop crucial literature-based critical thinking and comprehension skills.

**Role of community in classroom talk.**

Classroom community is crucial to the development of exploratory talk. Within each school are classrooms, and whether or not those classrooms develop a sense of community is determined by a teacher's philosophy and the role of talk within the classroom. From a social constructivist paradigm, personal knowing and social learning relate to the understanding of talk within a classroom community (Watson, 1993). Through talk in a community, Henson (1993) explains that students can work together collaboratively rather than competitively, and the teacher and students are all learners and experts.

The role of talk affects the development of community in several ways. Henson (1993) points out that talk is not just used to supply information, but it also helps to maintain group identification among its members. Furthermore, talk can be ritualized which can also bind a community as long as it is not restrictive and accepts diversity (1993).

**Classroom community.**

Learning communities can exist in both traditional classrooms and online environments. The traditional classroom offers some interesting contrasts to the online environment when looking at types of communities that evolve. Most schools use the individualistic model of community; Thayer-Bacon and Bacon (1998) give a description of the teacher and students in this model: "A good teacher in an individualistic model is someone who is able to control the class, keep the students quiet and in line...students most often work by themselves at their own desks and are not allowed to talk to each other" (p. 9). Discussions in this model are often led by the teacher who follows an I-R-E pattern (teacher initiation, student response, and teacher evaluation); such a pattern emphasizes the teacher leadership of the interaction and content with few opportunities for student involvement beyond responses to questions (Gambrell, 2004). As Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman, Thornam, & Dunlap (2004) point out about this type of classroom, "When those forms of interaction predominate, a sense of community does not really develop" (¶ 7). Often talk in schools is really pseudo-communication as it is dominated by teacher-talk (Henson, 1993).

**Online classroom community.**

Kearsley (2000) states that the creation of online learning communities "is a new phenomenon in education" (p. 58). Liu (1999) states, "While the concept of 'virtual community' is still an issue of much debate, an even more fundamental problem is what exactly constitutes a 'virtual community' and whether the current activities on the Internet can be considered as a 'community' in the sociological sense" (¶1) which further complicates the idea of a definitive definition of community in an online environment.

Several definitions of a virtual learning community are based on certain components of community that appear in virtual environments. Some researchers (Hu, Wood Fowler, Smith, & Westbrook, 2004; Heuer & King, 2004; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Utz, 2000) have focused on the importance of the social interaction in an online community. Within the social dimensions of the online space, patterns such as the role of the instructor, establishing relationships, and developing identity all exist and can influence community-building as well as the learning process. These patterns emerge

because of the nature of the virtual classroom due to the anonymity that results when participants are previously unknown to each other and are communicating at a distance. However, this social dimension in community-building leads to “the opportunity to interact with other learners in sharing, constructing, and negotiating meaning,” which leads to knowledge construction (Lock, 2001, p. 396).

In addition, some studies support the claim that online environments are more democratic (Schallert et al., 1996). By democratic, the online space seems to provide an arena for participation by all of its members. In studies that focus on higher educational settings, the online space provides a level playing field between the instructor and the students, generating an equitable participation where the instructor does not dominate the discussion (Bump, 1990; Heuer & King, 2004; Hiltz, 1986).

The social dimensions and democratic environment for all members in the online space can be problematic, however, for secondary teachers unaccustomed to such classroom dynamics. Online discussions, as seen in our study between pre-service teachers and middle school students, shift the traditional teacher/student roles and thus have the potential to change the traditional classroom discussion from the I-R-E model to exploratory talk. The online discussion is a challenge to the teacher-centered didactic approaches where the teacher transmits knowledge to learners because the online medium has the potential to be learner-centered and participatory (Wade & Fauske, 2004).

We feel much can be learned regarding the role of classroom community in discussion through close observation of interaction and participation in the online synchronous environment because we believe technology can provide a promising forum for fostering dialogue, increasing interaction and collaboration, and enhancing learning for marginalized students (Gambrell, 2004). A literature group serves as an appropriate platform to observe how students socially and cognitively construct meaning. More research is needed, however, in secondary classrooms. Positivist studies offer insight to secondary students’ online preferences (Lenhart et al., 2001), but much knowledge can be gained from looking at the online experience itself from the perspective of the participants.

### **Motivation for the Study**

Initially, this study was designed to investigate the quality of questions pre-service teachers asked to elicit responses from students about literature within a critical literacy framework. The chat room space provides pre-service teachers an opportunity to practice teaching students in a safe space before beginning their internship in the fall semester. As the study evolved, it became apparent that the online space itself was an interesting forum. We became particularly interested in watching how the eighth-grade students manipulated the online space to create a community of learners. The students’ and pre-service teachers’ interaction, the ebb and flow of the roles of the participants, and the language development became impossible to ignore as they established their community. As the phenomenon emerged, it was clearly different from the face-to-face classroom space to which we had grown accustomed in our years as teachers. For those reasons, the research question shifted to how eighth-grade inner-city students experienced and understood their participation in the online learning environment because it was essential to understand what was going on in the space to even attempt to look at critical literacy and the types of discussions that were occurring as a result.

## Description of the Study

This study focused on the interaction between eighth-grade students and pre-service teachers in a synchronous online chat room. The chat room space used in this study has a restricted access granted by the researchers that offers a secure and safe online space that can be monitored and archived. It has a number of chat rooms that can be used by the middle schoolers and the pre-service teachers. The rooms provide the participants a synchronous online environment conducive to host literature discussions on two assigned novels that both groups read (Appendix A). Three students were randomly placed with one pre-service teacher in an assigned room to discuss the novels on six different occasions in a fifteen-week period, and these groups stayed the same the entire project. Eight different chat rooms were used to accommodate the participants. The first three chats were a literature discussion about the book *Nothing But the Truth*, by Avi, and the final three were about Walter Dean Myer's young adult novel, *Monster*. Along with the archived transcripts from the chats, other data included journals kept by the students, field notes, a transcript from a group interview, and transcripts from seven 45-minute interviews, and student artifacts such as a netspeak/online slang dictionary created by the middle school students.

### Participants

Students from an average reading class in an urban school in East Tennessee were chosen to participate in the Web Pen Pals project with English Education pre-service teachers from a research one university in East Tennessee. 24 students participated: 15 males (five African American and 10 European American) and nine females (one African American and 10 European American). Eight pre-service teachers also participated in the project: seven European American females and one African American male.

### Methods

We used a phenomenological approach to understand how eighth-grade inner-city middle school students' perceive the effects of computer-based technologies on a learning community in an online synchronous environment. Through analysis of interview transcripts and transcripts of online discussions, we were able to observe and understand the complexities of creating an online community through the conceptual world of the participants. Through the constructive paradigm, we let the phenomena guide the focus of the research rather than assuming there was an established "truth" or cause.

The interview method was used with seven students (three males and four females) in addition to a group interview method with all 24 students. All of the interviews were approximately an hour in length and pseudonyms were also used to protect the students' identities. The first interview was the group interview, and individual interview participants were chosen based on their responses made during the group interview as well as behavior in the chat rooms. The individual interviews also served to confirm or reject information derived from the group interview. The interviews provided multiple realities of the socially constructed experience in the chats that had symbolic significance for the participants (Denzin, 2001). An interview discussion guide

of such general topics as participants' roles in the literature discussions, the relationships with their peers and pals, the constructed meaning of the online experience, and the role of netspeak was generated. Other topics were addressed as they emerged from the interview itself to ensure emic descriptors were understood and represented rather than etic descriptors. Interviews were conducted by two interviewers, audio-recorded, and transcribed.

Another method used in this study was participant observation. As Jorgenson points out, the participant observation role affords the researcher to "overview a scene, noting major and distinctive features, relationships, patterns, processes, and events" (1989, p.56). As participant observers, we were given access to documents such as students' journals they were keeping about the online experience as well as the netspeak/middle school slang dictionary they created for the pre-service teachers. The archived transcripts of the chats and copies of students' written journals served as data in the participants' own words. Furthermore, the chat transcripts provided an opportunity to observe the learning community formation without the influence or presence of the researcher. Jorgenson warns to be careful in the participant observer role so as to not become obtrusive in the setting (1989), which is avoided through the use of the archived transcripts. They provide an opportunity to capture the phenomena in a naturalistic setting.

### **Analysis and Evaluative Criteria**

All data were analyzed through a process of inductive analysis. Inductive analysis is defined as, "the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis" (Patton, 2002, p. 390). The interview transcripts, chat transcripts, and journals were scanned for emergent themes. The redundancy criterion (Taylor, 1994) was applied after a number of interviews revealed similar themes regarding the participants' construction of the online environment.

Trustworthiness was the main evaluative criteria used to ensure the validity of the study, meaning how well the realities of the participants were presented. Trustworthiness of the study was maintained in several ways. The data (interview, chat transcripts, journals, artifacts) all reflect the constructed meaning of the participants. The interviews were verified by the participants through a member check to make sure their meaning was accurately portrayed. Also, during the interviews, the participants were questioned about terminology to obtain emic descriptors and accurate definitions. Transcript verification of the chats and the interviews were reviewed through a peer audit to ensure the validity. The findings are supported with the participants' words reflecting the specific context of their online experience. A variety of methods (individual interviews, a group interview, and participant observation) were used to accumulate the data to see if the emergent themes were present in different forms of data.

### **Findings**

The findings of this study revealed four major patterns that affected the development of an online learning community and thus the kind of talk that occurred. The major patterns resulted in the following categories: obstacles to community,

establishing friendships, an emergent language system, and the effects of the symbolic inversion of traditional “teacher” and “student” roles. The insights about these categories emerged from three data sources: journal entries, interviews, and computer archived transcripts of the chats.

### *Obstacles to Community*

Before a community was established, there were certain obstacles that the students had to overcome. In this study, the technology proved to be an obstacle along with problems understanding the elevated vocabulary of the pre-service teachers and not personally knowing the Web Pen Pals.

Technology itself was a hindrance to the literature discussions as well as the community development. The students’ own words are used to convey the frustrations felt about the technology. The following passages from student journals show exactly the hindrance of technology in this project:

The person I have for a Webpal is lame. She can’t even type fast.....We did not talk much because everybody was slow at typing. [black male]

Yesterday was like no other experience. I’m always on the phone, so of course it was different. Haveing to type and say something to someone is totally different. The computer processes our typing too slow. [white male]

On the other hand my computer was messing up so I couldn’t see what the other people were saying until I pressed send so I would say something and it would be after the other people said something and it made me look stupid [white male]

In the group interview, these feelings about technology were confirmed by the students in the following excerpts:

Sara: Um I think that it’s easier to talk because typing it’s like I’m just lazy and I like to abbreviate a lot and it’s annoying because I don’t always type everything that I want to say so yeah. And when you’re trying to type on the laptops, your arm hits the mouse thing and moves the mouse and hit the click thing. It may go away, and you’ll stop typing in the middle of it. It’s annoying. [white female]

Carrie: Um like I said, I’m a slow typer and so whenever I have to look down at the keys and I miss what they are talking about on the little screen....I kind of miss half the conversation and I’m looking down at my keys cause that’s happened a lot. [white female]

Another obstacle to developing community in the beginning was the vocabulary of some of the pre-service teachers. It hindered the discussions as seen in these passages:

It was sort of fun talking to that dude Bsmith He seemed relly smart because He kept on using huge words and things I couldnt understand. [white male]

The one thing that I do not like about the chat is that the person that I got paired up with, Bsmith, was using too many big words and what he was he was typing did not make sense at all. [white male]

Davon: uh sometimes the college teachers will say a word and we don't actually know the meaning to it and then like uh you're like, "What's that supposed to mean?" and they're like, "You guys don't study this?" or whatever so they don't know what level we are on like our teachers would like and that makes it kind of hard. [black male]

In fact, the vocabulary became such an obstacle it became a topic in one of the chats:

rmaples 2/8 3:03 PM what are you saying bsmith???? I DON'T UNDERSTAND!!!!!! [white male]

lhill 2/8 3:03PM I have no idea what u r talking about [white male]

rmaples 2/8 3:04PM bsmith is using too many big words!!!! [white male]

Initially not knowing the pals personally or being able to see them caused problems in developing a community:

The person from UT (Mary) seemed really nice and was at least it seemed like, patence (or how ever you spell it). I think she got the wrong impression from me. That whole not being able to see the person sure makes a difference cause I think she might have taken some things the wrong way. [white female]

I prefer talking to people directly over this because you can show emotions and there isn't as much down time. [white male]

Sara: I think I like it better when a teacher is like physically in front of me teaching me instead of on a computer talking to me cause I can ask her certain questions instead of just sitting there talking to her by myself. I can just talk to her personally. In person. [white female]

### ***Establishing Friendships***

Another theme that emerged in the study was the intimacy and friendships that developed between the students themselves and with their Web Pen Pals. The online space provided an opportunity for them to get to know each other better despite their initial disgruntlement about being paired with peers they normally wouldn't interact with or didn't like:

Other than that I liked the chat room. Except I wish we could go on the chat room with people we know better not just a random group of people. [white male]

Man, the chat room was lame! I have a sort of lame group too. Missy Moore, who I don't even talk too. [black male]



I think the two people from our class that have the same chat room buddy as I do are okay. I would not say that we are friends or anything though. [white female]

Surprisingly, many students did not know their fellow classmates even though they had been in class together all year. Even in the chat room a student admitted to not really knowing his peer:

Davon 2/8 3:12PM lisa u r pretty funny and I don't even know who u r

Their perspectives change from having no relationships to developing friendships:

I liked it, because we got to chat with people who we usually would not talk to. I think by chatting it will give us the chance to talk to people and bond with other UT students. [black female]

Davon: I mean I'd be I would want to be in there with my friends but it wouldn't hurt me to be in there with Lisa and to stay with Lisa and Chris cause Lisa like I said she's funny she's a funny person and Chris he don't talk much but I mean you could get to know him cause he's in all of my classes so you could get to know him better if you was around him more..... yeah yeah yeah I got like course I didn't know her at first and then reading a book together in our groups and uh the project we did and everything we got to know each other better....yeah yeah she's yeah she's a good friend [black male]

Carrie: I know Bill but I never really knew Megan. Like but know since we have been together we're better friends. Because we spend more time together and b/c we talk to each other and we agree on a lot of the same things in the chats. [white female]

Even students commented on their feelings about their Web Pen Pals.

Bill: I see her as a good friend I could probably trust if I you know if I actually knew her [white male]

I thought it was kool because we got to talk to our webpenpals friend because she was in class. She was kool. [white female]

This experience wasn't like any other. We were able to communicate with students at the college. That was my first time interacting with someone at another school from mine. I am looking forward to continue talking to this student. [white male]

### ***Emergent Language System***

As with any new community, eventually a language system develops (Baron,

1998). In the case of online environments, this has been called “netspeak” (Crystal, 2001). The students were more tech savvy in this area and also complained about the pre-service teachers not understanding their middle school slang:

Like I said “\*yawn\* Im ready to go home. Don’t take that the wrong way you all arnt boring me (completly) lol.” LOL means laugh out loud or lots of laughs but she responded “well I’m sory this is boring to you. We’ll try to mach it more interesting.” Who knows maby I took it the wrong way but doesn’t that sound like she was getting deffencive? [white female]

I can’t say things like nvm (nevermind), idk (I don’t know), or gtg (gottago) without having to explain it and argue with Jake about them. [white female]

Davon: but another different thing about it is our teachers know our slang and they don’t. So we gotta explain it. [black male]

Beth: We have little abbreviations cause no one feels like typing a whole word the whole word. And it’s like they don’t understand and they type back, “What are you talking about?” [black female]

As a result, the students created a netspeak/middle school slang dictionary (Appendix B) to help the pre-service teachers understand their language on the computer and their everyday slang. Similarly, some students used emoticons as part of their language used to communicate in the chats:

Bill: I talked so much on online to certain you know the same people everyday and we came up with you know basic you know hypens of certain words and stuff so we figured it’d be easier than typing the whole word like nevermind or you know laughing out loud you know spell the whole thing .....I’m you know being serious like it’s if something’s funny or someone makes a comment you know it it is quicker than writing out like say oh that was funny you know it’s a lot easier. [white male]

### ***Symbolic Inversion of “teacher” and “student” roles***

The findings also revealed that the symbolic inversion of traditional “teacher” and “student” roles in the online environment caused by the anonymity of the chat room created the shifting of power that would not happen in the regular classroom. Babcock (1978) defines symbolic inversion as “any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values, and norms...such as ‘rituals of rebellion,’ role reversal” (p. 14). The inversion caused the teachers’ roles to be more ambiguous which also affected traditional discourse rules in the classroom. As a result if the anonymity, students felt more liberated to speak their minds in the online environment rather than in the traditional classroom:

Melissa: Really the college people are students just like us and they’re not really a

teacher.....They're not going to say anything about what you say on the computer.  
[white female]

Kevin: Well you can't get in trouble [black male]

Ray: yeah b/c sometimes when we're in the chat room like Kent when he just sits there like one time I think it was the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> time we were in there I wasn't in there the 4<sup>th</sup> time b/c I had to leave but um we were in there and we sat there it was me and bsmith and derrick and we just sat there and we talked and talked and talked and for 17 minutes Kent didn't say anything..... because he knows there's not a teacher in there and he knows that he can get away with it like even [white male]

The students discussed how online the traditional discourse rules of the classroom were no longer applicable in the online environment:

Sara: Like in class if I said like I thought Phillip was wrong to do everything and everyone....like not a bunch of people would yell out and be like, "Oh that's stupid. Don't think that." but on the computer if you're like "I think Mrs. Narwin's a really really good teacher" and people will be like, "Oh that's stupid. She's not a good teacher." And they're not afraid to like voice what they think about what you think. On the computer if you say something, you get what everybody thinks about your opinion. [white female]

Davon: I mean you can express your feelings you can say what you need to get off your chest you don't have to raise your hand or you know you don't have to is it my turn to speak can I speak now see in the classroom you have to raise your hand and wait for all these other people to be answered that raised their hands before you so in the chat room you can just speak freely when you need to well when you want to speak or whatever [black male]

Carrie: I think it's like fun cause you get to talk about the book but you also get to talk about other stuff and in the classroom you don't. You just have to stay on topic and I hate staying on topic . [white female]

The anonymity of the online chat created a safe space for students to express their ideas that they wouldn't have shared otherwise:

Greg: When you're in the classroom there's a lot of people and you might feel embarrassed to say something to some of them, but when you're on the computer there's only 3 people so there's less embarrassment (cough) [white male]

Bill: It feels like it's easier cause because there's not like that many people around and you're not talking to them face- to- face you're just you know you're typing it

and it's just what you're thinking you're not exactly just you know having a conversation with them so it's it's easier too I guess. [white male]

I really thought that being able to type on the computers were a lot easier than talking to the person face- to- face. I do not think that I would have said most of the stuff if we were face-to-face. [white female]

These findings will be examined in terms of the existing body of literature in the next section.

## Discussion

The aim of our study is to determine how students create a learning community via an online environment. Although the findings are limited due to the experience itself and the scarcity of research on secondary students and pre-service teachers in online environments, some of our findings are confirmed in the existing literature as well as contribute new findings to help expand the literature. It is acknowledged that these findings are representative of the students and their experiences with an online environment and are not representative of every secondary classroom. The areas the findings can lend support to are the development of relationships in an online environment, the technology element, the development of a language system, and the symbolic inversion of teacher and student roles.

Our findings support the research that suggests that synchronous discussions actually promote intimacy among its members (Hu et al., 2004). As seen in the findings, students created relationships with students online that did not exist in the regular classroom. In fact, intimate exchanges are encouraged in the online environment where students have to carefully construct their messages instead of the telephone or in a face-to-face discussion (Lenhart et al., 2001). This research serves to explain why the students had been in a regular classroom for a whole semester (face-to-face) before developing stronger bonds through the online environment. This literature helps explain the change of students' perceptions of their relationships online.

Other research about online environments discusses the hindrance of the technology itself in forming a community. Our findings confirm and further expand this aspect of the literature. The literature does not discuss the inability to use the technology. Mainly studies reflect Greene's (2005) idea about the pace of the chat as a difficulty to overcome

Not only does the pace hinder communication, but the format of chat rooms can affect community- building as well. Lapadat (2002) found that the chronological record of discourse can be frustrating to users because of the incoherence in the sequence of the discussion. As a result, speed is needed by the user both in typing and reading of the screen. The students in our study initially expressed difficulty adjusting to these obstacles. Even though research of online environments in educational settings is limited, research that is available examines the need for substantial typing skills and also considers the affect of the short wait time for participants to respond to a discussion

thread (Murphy & Collins, 1997). These obstacles were present in our study and confirm what the literature states.

The emergent language system as seen in the students' use of netspeak and middle school slang is a pattern seen in the literature as well. Huffaker and Calvert (2005) found that netspeak could be combined with other forms of language such as slang as a form of communication developed in online environments. Even though they do not directly relate it to middle school slang, the idea itself is applicable to our study. The students incorporated netspeak as well as their unique slang in talking in the chats. Many studies point to the importance of language development in establishing an online community (Greene, 2005; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Lapadat, 2002; Murphy & Collins, 1997). In online communities, a common language is constructed by its members, and this is in contrast to the regular classroom where the teacher and the texts determine the language to be learned (Dede, 2004).

Finally, much of the literature discusses the space in an online environment and how the anonymity affects the experience. In our study, the inversion of roles occurred because of the anonymity the students felt. A consequence of this inversion of roles is that students "can develop communication habits that might be disruptive to an instructional setting; and protected by the anonymity of the computer medium with few social context cues to indicate 'proper' ways to behave, users are able to express and experiment with aspects of their personality that social inhibition would generally encourage them to suppress" (Murphy & Collins, 1997, p.181-182). By the space creating participants' anonymity, it becomes more democratic for all involved. Because bodies disappear in online environments, students feel more comfortable participating in discussions.

Also a shift in power for teachers and students occurs online and levels the playing field. The teacher's role shifts from imparting knowledge to helping students create meaning in a learning community (Heuer & King, 2004). As Wade & Fauske (2004) point out, "In peer-led discussions the teacher's authority is decentered, and students' voices govern the nature of the dialogue. This does not eliminate power relations, but it changes them" (p. 137). For some teachers, this change can be uncomfortable. Anonymity causes some unusual tensions not seen in a regular classroom.

### **Conclusion**

Although this paper explores only one setting of an online environment, it adds to the limited research about the online experience for secondary students. With the progression of technology, online environments should be researched thoroughly because they provide an opportunity to establish a learning community and encourage talk.

The study was limited by the fact that it represented the unique experience of eighth-grade inner-city students in an online environment. However, much of what they experienced supports patterns seen in the literature about higher education and distance education experiences. Another limitation of the study was its focus only on the description of the students and their perceptions rather than considering how this information could have been applied to the teacher/student online environment. Further research regarding the role and experiences of the pre-service teachers would likely prove

fruitful as well. Other research considerations include an analysis of student responses to the literature itself as well as research regarding the effectiveness of the project on reading instruction and understanding. Another study could be done with secondary students to see if their realities are similar to this group of participants.

Through the implementation of a qualitative study with a phenomenological perspective, the experience of creating an online learning community is understood and examined. The factors of developing friendships, language systems, and creating a democratic space provide necessary insight into how an online learning community is developed and experienced.

Overall, online environments used by secondary students need further investigation by scholars. They are an important educational setting for teachers, parents, and students. The implication for educators is to acknowledge that shared power can form a partnership between students and teachers where both have a stake in the learning. Furthermore, when teachers and students construct a common language in the classroom, the students can make connections between their out of school learning which can only enrich their overall learning. Finally, the online community provides a space where students can feel belonging and are able to share and construct knowledge together.

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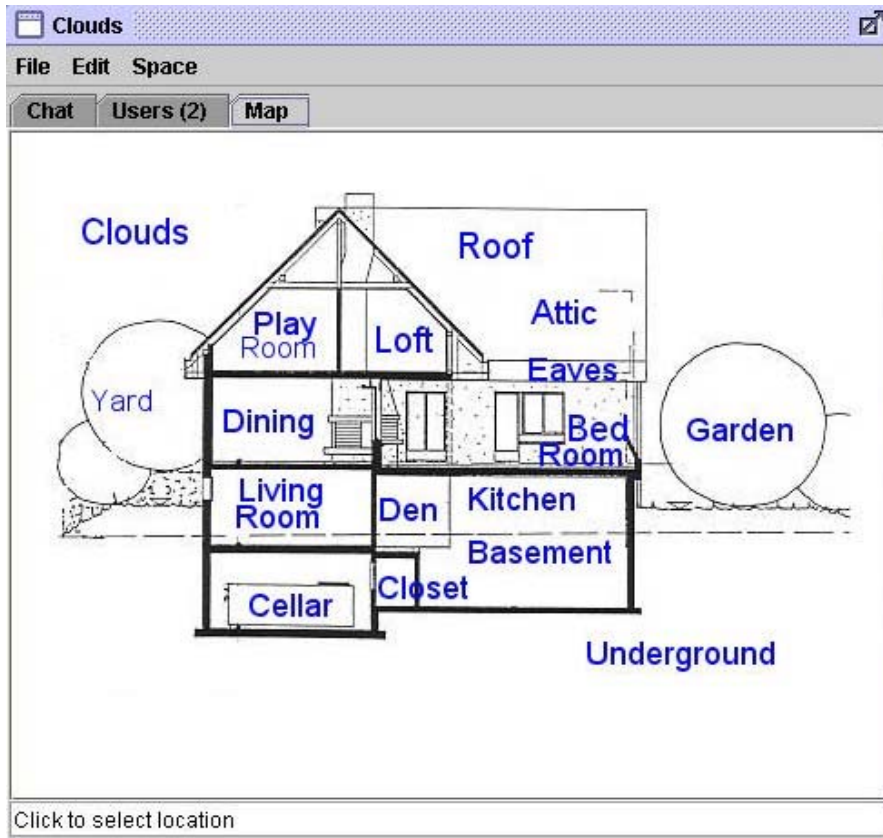
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### Appendix



Appendix A. Map of House with Assorted Chat Rooms

## The Meaning

What are they  
trying to say?



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• cu-see you</li> <li>• l8ter-later</li> <li>• y-why</li> <li>• lol-laugh out loud</li> <li>• jk-just kidding</li> <li>• nvm-never mind</li> <li>• r-are</li> <li>• g2g-got to go</li> <li>• sry-sorry</li> <li>• gr8-great</li> <li>• cuz-because</li> <li>• h/o-hold on</li> <li>• k-okay</li> <li>• ne-any</li> <li>• j/j just joking</li> <li>• b/c-because</li> <li>• brb-be right back</li> <li>• 4-for</li> <li>• b-be</li> <li>• w/e-whatever</li> <li>• ur-your</li> <li>• kno-know</li> <li>• o-oh</li> <li>• me2-me too</li> <li>• w/b-write back</li> <li>• j/h/o-just hanging out</li> <li>• n2m-not too much</li> <li>• cyl-see you later</li> <li>• gl-good luck</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• rofl-rolling on floor laughing</li> <li>• lil-little</li> <li>• OMG-oh my gosh</li> <li>• idk-I don't know</li> <li>• ttyl-talk to you later</li> <li>• idc-I don't care</li> <li>• ☺ or : ) happy</li> <li>• ☹ or : ( sad</li> <li>• **-oops spelled something wrong</li> <li>• ???-what?</li> <li>• j/m-just messing/ playing around</li> <li>• j/w just wondering</li> <li>• kewl-cool</li> <li>• kool-cool</li> <li>• *word*'s around a word means an action, like *smiles*</li> <li>• sup-what's up</li> <li>• hru-how are you</li> <li>• dl-down low/ keep quiet</li> <li>• i8-I ate</li> <li>• w/-with</li> <li>• b4-before</li> <li>• ih8u-I hate you</li> <li>• sk8ter-skater</li> <li>• j/a-just asking</li> <li>• tho-though</li> <li>• n/m-nothing much</li> <li>• bbl-be back later</li> <li>• c-ya -see you</li> <li>• ihtg-I have to go 4</li> <li>• j/c- just chilling</li> </ul>
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Appendix B. Netspeak/Middle School Slang Dictionary created by middle schoolers for college-level students.