It’s important for my graduate students to leave class understanding that talk is an important part of reading and literacy instruction (NCTE & IRA, 1996). Whether or not we like or dislike a book, agree or disagree with an author, most of us have a desire to talk with others about what we’re reading. We want to share what we’re thinking, feeling and learning. We’re also interested in knowing what other people are thinking. Are their reactions similar to ours, or do they see things differently? Thought-provoking and relevant conversations expose us to different ways of organizing and interpreting information. They also provide us with opportunities to try out our ideas, sort out what we’ve learned, develop deeper understandings, and formulate new questions. At times, conversation may even cause us to reevaluate our initial impressions and understandings (Holt & Bell, 2000; Smith 1988). Pearson & Eeds (1990) refer to these kinds of conversations as “grand conversations.” I wondered if on-line conversations would foster grand conversations. Would they help students refine their understandings and construct new knowledge? Would they help meet individual student needs? What might my students and I learn about instruction for K-12 students from participating in electronic conversations?

This session will begin with an overview of what I found when I introduced asynchronous e-lit discussions in a literacy methods course. The on-line conversations fostered “grand conversations” (Pearson & Eeds, 1990) that helped students refine their understandings and construct new knowledge. In addition they helped meet individual student needs and to a certain extent fostered classroom community. The rest of the time will be used to discuss the benefits and challenges that come with using a form of communication that may be more comfortable for students than for their teachers.