

Weaving Contexts of Participation Online: The Digital Tapestry of Secondary English Teachers

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Abstract

This article presents research from a qualitative study exploring five secondary English teachers' professionally oriented participation online. Drawing upon Cole's (1996) "surround" and "weaving" views of context, the specific line of research featured here was guided by the following question: What are the features of the online contexts that selected secondary English teachers weave in exploration of teaching, learning, and literacy? The author collected archived online artifacts (e.g., blog posts, microblog posts, and posts within social network sites) and employed an ethnographic content analysis. Findings revealed five notable contextual features that emerged across cases: multimodal affordances and a/synchronous flexibility, as seen from a surround view, and classroom teaching experiences, connections among teachers online, and a touch of levity, as seen from a weaving view. While providing directions for future research, these findings stand to support more nuanced understandings of the teacher-generated online environments to which many educators are turning in an effort to supplement their professional growth.

The intensification of teacher work (Apple, 1988) is characterized by greater scrutiny and increasing demands, and it often results in a reduction of time available for maintaining professional learning, an inhibiting and persistent work overload, and a general reduction in the quality of work (Easthope & Easthope, 2010; Hargreaves, 1994).

English teachers may feel a particularly acute sense of intensification, for as Burns (2007) asserted, "As literacy achievement is a central agent for testing in current accountability mandates, literacy teachers and English teachers are particular targets for scrutiny" (p. 123). With increased pressures and less time to meet with colleagues during the workday, what is an English teacher to do?

In the face of heightened scrutiny and in line with the rise of new media technologies (e.g., blogs, microblogs, and social network sites), many teachers are turning to teacher-generated online environments in an effort to supplement their professional development. For example, at the time of this writing, the [English Companion Ning](#), a social network site for teachers of the English language arts, has over 40,000 members. (*Editor's Note:* Website URL's are listed in the [Resources](#) section at the end of this paper.) Many of the site's members take part in routine online book clubs, maintain blogs, and contribute to discussion forums within the site (Faulkner, 2009).

Since the emergence of [Twitter](#), a popular microblogging platform, many educators have touted its potential as a tool for supporting teachers' professional learning (e.g., Demski, 2010; Ferriter, 2010; Trinkle, 2009). Furthermore, the ubiquity of blogs has continued to surge, with over 200 million blogs online (Richardson & Mancabelli, 2011), and increasingly teachers are writing about their practice via blogs as Richardson (2006) described.

Researchers have explored online participation in blogs, microblogs, and social network sites as practices that may aid teacher development. Studies have described blogging as a practice that supports teachers in developing their thinking through interaction with other readers and writers (Luehmann, 2008) and detailed the ways teachers are cultivating and sustaining knowledge sharing in professionally oriented social network sites (Booth, 2012). Thus, scholars encourage teachers to participate in teacher-generated online environments where they can engage their peers and explore matters related to teaching and learning (e.g., Hicks & Turner, 2013; Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2010).

Still, little research has emerged regarding the features of the online contexts teachers weave as they engage in professionally oriented participation online. Accordingly, the research reported in this article was guided by the following question: What are the features of the online contexts that selected secondary English teachers weave in exploration of teaching, learning, and literacy?

On Context

Context has long been a concept central to studies of language and learning. Vygotsky (1986) attended to the social context of language and recognized that a word's meaning remains stable, but its sense comes "from the context in which it appears; in different contexts, it changes its sense" (p. 245). In a similar fashion, Bakhtin's (1986) attention to context was reflected in his notion of voice: "Bakhtin stressed the idea that voices always exist in a social milieu; there is no such thing as a voice that exists in total isolation from other voices" (Wertsch, 1991, pp. 51-52).

Thus, it follows that utterances are spoken or written from points of view that are informed by the contexts in which they are expressed. Still, despite contributions from such forebearers of sociocultural theory, pinning down an exact definition of context seems impossible (Goodwin & Duranti, 1992; Lindfors, 1999). Yet, due precisely to the complex and indeterminate nature of context, continued exploration of the concept is necessary.

Cole (1996) offered two related views of context: the surround view and the weaving view. Metaphorically, the surround view presents context as the environment in which an interaction is situated or embedded. For instance, the context surrounding interactions in

a formal educational setting may be a Socratic seminar conducted within a classroom housed in a private school that is situated in a diverse neighborhood in a suburban city.

As Lindfors (1999) warned, the boundaries of the immediate environment in this nested view may seem rigid, yet each individual involved brings into the environment prior knowledge, beliefs, and experiences that “contextualize utterances and interaction events” (p. 218). Thus, the context is ever changing, for individuals in the classroom continue to build new knowledge and experiences together.

The weaving view of context suggests that individuals “draw on the surround *context* to *contextualize* (weave) each interaction” (Lindfors, 1999, p. 232, italics in original). Context may be considered “a relational property” (Dourish, 2004, p. 22) from this perspective, as people draw upon the available resources relevant to their interactions with others.

Attending to what people do, the weaving metaphor “see[s] the surround context as the total set of available threads” (Lindfors, 1999, p. 232), the affordances and constraints, people may draw upon as they interact with others. The weaving view, then, sees context as something created as individuals engage others.

Conceptualizing context from a weaving view evokes Bakhtin’s assertion that utterances combine the repeatable and the unrepeatable (Lindfors, 1999). According to Bakhtin (1986), utterances draw upon the inevitable and repeatable linguistic elements of language employed when speaking or writing (e.g., syntactic and phonological elements), yet people make those linguistic elements their own as they craft unique utterances that serve particular communicative purposes. Likewise, from a weaving view of context, the surround context’s available threads may be used in various interactions; they are repeatable. People also uniquely select those threads and weave them in unique, unrepeatable ways (Lindfors, 1999).

Weaving Contexts in a Participatory Culture

Drawing upon the affordances of a participatory culture, many teachers are weaving unique contexts online in exploration of matters related to teaching, learning, and literacy. Jenkins (2006a) conceptualized participatory cultures as cultures in which people are encouraged to take part in the generation and distribution of new content. Contrasting with commercial cultures that emerge from industrialized production and commercial circulation (Jenkins, 2006b), participatory cultures account for “the transformation of former audiences into active participants and agents of cultural production” (Schäfer, 2011, p. 10).

Participatory cultures are recognized as having several distinguishing features: (a) relatively low barriers to expression and engagement, (b) support for creating and sharing one’s work, (c) informal mentorship, (d) a belief among members that contributions are meaningful, and (e) a sense of social connection among members (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 7). Such features enable individuals to generate new content and distribute it widely online.

Although Jenkins (2006a) conceptualized participatory cultures through the lens of media studies and focused on helping youths develop the new media literacy skills needed to participate fully in contemporary culture (e.g., play, networking, collective intelligence, and judgment), participatory cultures are not relegated to youths or to fans of popular media. Many teachers blog actively, engage in collaborative problem-solving with their peers, and hold voluntary affiliations in online communities based on their professional

interests in teaching and learning. Such activities open avenues through which two or more voices may come into contact, promoting meaning-making in the ways Bakhtin (1986) described.

Participatory cultures have taken shape in response “to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways” (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 8). Vygotsky (1978, 1997) asserted that tools do more than make a task easier; indeed, new media technologies are changing the way people think about and approach online content.

Blogs, microblogs, and social network sites mediated participation online for the teachers featured in this study, allowing them to extend their capabilities as teachers and learners and providing additional threads with which they could weave the contexts of their participation.

Research Method

I employed criterion-driven sampling (Patton, 2002) to identify prospective participants for this study (Table 1). The sample consisted of secondary English teachers who were directing their own professional development by participating online and in professional organizations. Thus, the criteria likely targeted teachers who were motivated to advance their professional development, which may distinguish them from some of their peers.

Table 1
Criteria and Rationales for Participant Selection

Criterion	Rationale
The prospective participants are currently employed as secondary English teachers in a face-to-face setting.	Secondary English teachers were appropriate for a study on English teacher education.
The prospective participants engaged in two or more online environments within which they explored issues related to teaching, learning, and literacy.	To build an understanding of the features of the online contexts teachers weave as they participate online, English teachers who have had those experiences were vital.
The prospective participants are members of a reputable professional organization that has historically informed research and the teaching of the English language arts, such as the National Council of Teachers of English or the National Writing Project.	Though not foolproof, this criterion was intended to ensure a measure of quality in terms of the teaching practices prospective participants share online. Presumably, the practices of a teacher holding membership in a professional organization would be informed by the professional literature.

I began this study by locating online artifacts or “digital footprints” (Richardson, 2008, p. 16) to help identify individuals who met the participant criteria. Richardson (2008) described digital footprints as those indicators of “who we are, what we do, and by association, what we know” (p. 16) that individuals leave behind as they make

contributions online. These indicators may include blog posts and comments, wiki entries, tweets, open discussion forum posts, and YouTube videos.

I scanned and reviewed profiles, posts, comments, videos, and other documents shared online by the English teachers in my own learning network to find those who met the criteria for participation in the study. I then expanded the search by looking for potential participants in the networks of individuals with whom I had connected online. Sorting through the networks of individuals from my own network had the effect of snowball sampling (Patton, 2002), directing me to other professionals who fit the criteria for participant selection.

Description of Participants

Five practicing English teachers agreed to participate in the study. Participants were each given the option of creating a pseudonym to conceal their identity and to ensure anonymity. However, having completed member checks (Hatch, 2002) throughout the study, the participants opted to forgo pseudonyms, a decision that seems to mirror the open and public nature of their participation online.

Meenoo. Meenoo is an Indian female in her early 30s who teaches at an urban magnet school in the Northeastern region of the United States. In her sixth year as a high-school English teacher at the time of this study, Meenoo taught English to 11th- and 12th-grade students. In addition to being affiliated with the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), Meenoo is a National Writing Project (NWP) teacher-consultant and a National Board Certified Teacher. Meenoo also holds a master's degree in secondary education.

Online, Meenoo microblogs via Twitter, and she is the founder and moderator of #engchat, a weekly Twitter chat for English teachers. To support #engchat, Meenoo maintains an accompanying blog of the same name: [#engchat](#). Meenoo also contributes to NWP's [Digital Is](#) website, and she is an active member of the English Companion Ning.

Brian. Brian is a White male in his mid-40s who teaches at a suburban middle school in the Northeastern region of the United States. In his 17th year as an English teacher at the time of this study, Brian taught five sections of creative writing to eighth-grade students. In addition to his affiliation with NCTE, Brian is an NWP teacher-consultant, and he holds a master of education degree in English.

Brian writes about teaching, learning, and literacy on his blog, [Walk the Walk](#). Brian microblogs via Twitter, and he is also a member of the English Companion Ning, though he did not contribute to the social network site during the data collection period of this study. In addition to teaching, Brian worked as an assistant coach for a Division II football program at a nearby university at the time of this study.

Cindy. Cindy is a White female in her mid-30s who teaches at a rural high school in the Northeastern region of the United States. In her eighth year as an English teacher at the time of this study, Cindy taught English to ninth- and 12th-grade students (both academic and honors), including those enrolled in a composition class through a local community college. She also served as the yearbook advisor at her school. In addition to her affiliations with NCTE and the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the NCTE (ALAN), Cindy is an NWP teacher-consultant, and she holds a master of education degree in English.

Cindy microblogs via Twitter, and she is a member of the English Companion Ning. Cindy also co-facilitates and contributes to an award-winning blog that celebrates books, particularly those written for children and young adults, and literacy: [Nerdy Book Club](#).

Gary. Gary is a White male in his early 50s who teaches at a suburban high school in the Midwestern region of the United States. In his 32nd year as an English teacher at the time of this study, Gary taught literature and composition courses to students in grades 10-12. A member of NCTE, Gary holds a master of arts degree in composition and rhetoric, and he is a co-author of *Expository Composition: Discovering Your Voice* (Romano & Anderson, 2013), a writing textbook. Gary explores issues related to teaching, learning, and literacy on the [What's Not Wrong?](#) blog, on Twitter, and on the English Companion Ning.

Sarah. Sarah is a White female in her late 20s who teaches at a suburban high school in the Midwestern region of the United States. During the course of this study, Sarah taught English, including a course devoted to young adult literature, to students in grades 9-12. A 5th-year teacher at the time of this study, Sarah was also working toward a master's degree in reading and language arts with a reading specialist endorsement, and she has since completed her degree.

In January 2012, Sarah received the Teacher of the Year award in the school district where she was employed at the time of the study. Sarah is a member of NCTE and ALAN, and she writes about matters related to the reading and teaching of young adult literature on her blog, [Y.A. Love](#), and via Twitter.

Data Collection and Analysis

To address the question guiding this thread of a larger study, I collected participant-generated online artifacts created between summer 2011 and spring 2012. For those artifacts generated prior to the start of data collection, which began in January 2012, I visited the participating teachers' blogs, microblogs, and social network sites. Those artifacts generated after I started collecting data were gathered via Really Simple Syndication (RSS), a Web feed protocol used to distribute works that are updated on a routine basis, such as blogs or news sites (Educause Learning Initiative, 2007). To assist with triangulation, semistructured interview data were also collected in spring 2012.

Drawing from Altheide's (1987) ethnographic content analysis, an approach to analyzing documents that is rooted in qualitative traditions, I conducted an analysis of the online documents and materials gathered during data collection. Oriented toward description, Altheide's ethnographic content analysis is helpful when researchers aim to "document and understand the communication of meaning" (p. 68). In this case, I appropriated Altheide's methods in describing the features of the contexts selected secondary English teachers wove as they engaged in professionally oriented participation online.

The substance of ethnographic content analysis emerges through repeated engagement with collected data. In this way, the researcher is central to ethnographic content analysis. Moving reflexively between data collection, coding, analysis, and interpretation, I aimed to adhere to a systematic yet not overly rigid process (as in Altheide, 1987).

I began the analysis of participant-generated online documents and materials during data collection. After collecting an item, my first reading was an attempt at familiarizing myself with it. Then, I uploaded the documents and materials to Dedoose, an online program designed to assist in the organization of data. Once documents were uploaded, I began rereading the collected material and applying initial codes to the data. Employing

the technique of constant comparison that Altheide (1987) advocated, I reread the artifacts and my initial codes, considered how each might align with or contest others, and, as appropriate, collapsed initial codes into families of focused codes.

As I established focused codes I also began making “textual notes” (Altheide, 1987, p. 41), writing brief overviews of the categories of data that emerged and marking the extreme and typical cases within each category. This recursive process continued as I completed data analysis.

By examining the data across individual cases I was able to identify common contextual features of teacher-generated online environments, as well as any notable variations. During this phase of data analysis I also turned to data collected through semistructured interviews as a means of extending my analysis, a process akin to data triangulation (Denzin, 1989; Patton, 2002), and engaged participants in member checking (Hatch, 2002) throughout, inviting response from participants as they reviewed transcribed interviews and findings as they became available.

Findings

Scholars recognize context as a complex concept (e.g., Goodwin & Duranti, 1992), one that is “impossible to specify completely, different for each individual, drawn on differently in each instance of speaking and interpreting, and ever in a process of change” (Lindfors, 1999, p. 219). In light of Lindfors’s cautionary note, I present this section to examine prominent contextual features of teacher-generated online environments through the surround and weaving views of context described by Cole (1996) and Lindfors (1999). Recognizing the complexity and fluidity of context, I focused on identifying and describing meaningful contextual features that emerged across cases and on examining how those features may have supported the selected teachers’ participation online.

Surround Features

A surround view accounts for the “possibilities and constraints” (Lindfors, 1999, p. 232) within the contexts in which interaction is situated. If focusing on a brick-and-mortar classroom as the surround context, one might attend to the physical environment (e.g., desk configuration or classroom exhibits) and curriculum (e.g., texts of study or corresponding assessments) as contextual features.

The surround contexts at the heart of this study are teacher-generated online environments. Thus, in line with the dynamic quality of virtual spaces, the contextual features described here are less concrete. For the purposes of this study, I present two broad contextual features that were evident across cases and contexts when examined from a surround view—multimodal affordances and a/synchronous flexibility—and I describe how those surround features supported the selected teachers’ participation online.

Multimodal Affordances. The new media technologies used by the teachers in this study feature multimodal affordances they could leverage to advance their own unique purposes and, in the Vygotskian sense, to extend their capabilities. That is, the new media technologies used by the participants allowed for the integration of multiple modes of expression that may enhance communication.

Those multimodal affordances contributed to the surround contexts of teacher-generated online environments. For example, in addition to allowing for alphabetic writing (Kress, 2003), blogs allow users to embed videos complete with moving images and audio, as well as static images and hypertext, giving bloggers the opportunity to make each post a multimodal reading experience for their audience.

The teachers in this study consistently leveraged multimodal affordances in the blog posts they wrote. For example, on the [Y.A. Love](#) blog, Sarah wrote weekly posts previewing forthcoming or recently released young adult literature, including titles such as *Insurgent* (Roth, 2012), *Hunted* (Rainfield, 2011), and *A Monster Calls* (Ness, 2011). With each “Book Trailer Thursday” post, Sarah introduced a book, its author, and its release date; expressed her thoughts about the novel at hand; and provided a summary of the text from [Goodreads](#), a social cataloging site for readers.

Sarah moved beyond the alphabetic with each post, embedding an image of the cover of the book in question and a video trailer promoting the release of the book. Using multiple modes, Sarah was able to enhance her posts. She moved beyond the summary she provided in alphabetic writing by providing a portal to additional information outside the blog post via hyperlinks. She offered a glimpse of the book via the cover image, and she conveyed the book’s tone and significant plot lines through the embedded video’s moving images, music, voiceovers, and other sounds.

Figure 1 displays a screenshot of a typical Book Trailer Thursday post on the [Y.A. Love](#) blog. The screenshot highlights Sarah’s efforts to capitalize on the multimodal affordances of the blogging platform as she previewed *Freshman Year and Other Unnatural Disasters* (Zeitlin, 2012).

The multimodal affordances that contribute to the surround contexts of teacher-generated online environments are not unique to blogs. Social network sites also have multimodal affordances that may foster interactions among teachers. Like blogs, and typical of participatory cultures (Jenkins, 2006b), social network sites have a low barrier to expression and engagement. To a degree, that low threshold is evident in the 40,000-plus English teachers, teacher educators, and prospective teachers who, as of this writing, are members of the English Companion Ning (ECN).

Though not every member is likely active on the site, many surely are. Gary, a participant in this study, is one such member. He and his online peers capitalized on the site’s low barriers to engagement and its vast multimodal affordances, particularly in the design of sessions in the 2011 ECN Summer Webststitute.

The Webststitute was housed in a group within the social network site. Within the Webststitute group, Gary and his online colleagues provided hyperlinks to scheduled sessions facilitated by a range of teachers, authors, and scholars. Some sessions were offered in separate video-enhanced chat rooms outside of the ECN, yet others were hosted through the standard discussion forums available within the site. The multimodal affordances of the social network site made standard discussion forums a viable venue for Webststitute sessions. Presenters moved beyond alphabetic writing to demonstrate practices described and to facilitate discussion among members attending the session virtually.

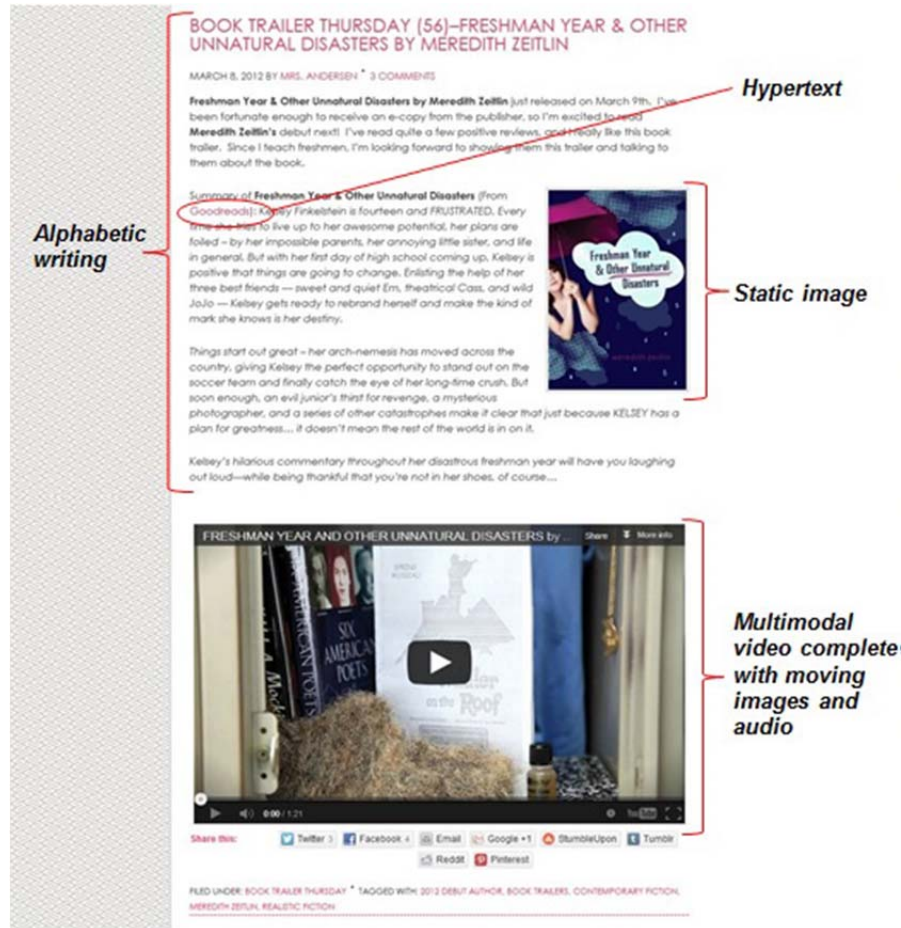




Figure 1. A screenshot of a multimodal "Book Trailer Thursday" post on the [Y.A. Love](#) blog.

The forum Gary established to be hosted by Glenda Funk, a National Board Certified Teacher and an alumnus of the Folger Teaching Shakespeare Institute, is a notable example. In her forum, Glenda facilitated a discussion about teaching the works of William Shakespeare by tapping the multimodal affordances of the ECN. Her forum featured an animated presentation, embedded videos from her classroom that showed students engaging in instructional activities such as [line tossing](#) (Video 1) and [silent scenes](#) (Video 2), and hyperlinks to corresponding assignments and handouts she had uploaded to the ECN.

The ECN's low barrier to expression and engagement allowed Gary and Glenda to incorporate multiple modes in crafting the forum's opening message (Figure 2)—a compelling one at that. Opening a virtual window into Glenda's classroom, those multimodal components helped to facilitate dialogic interactions, as attendees responded to the embedded videos by expressing concerns about how such activities might work in their unique teaching contexts and by seeking clarification about the goals of the instructional activities shared.

 Tuesday, July 12 4-5 p.m EST Glenda Funk
"Twice-told Tales and Old Odd Ends: Com Ideas in Shakespeare and Young Adult Lit"
Posted by Gary Anderson on July 4, 2011 at 5:57am in 2011 ECN Summer Webstute: Classic and Young Adult Literature with Students
[Back to 2011 ECN Summer Webstute: Reading Classic and Young Adult Literature Students Discussions](#)

 All of the materials for this session are posted below, discussion is underway here. Jump right in!

Join Glenda Funk to learn about and discuss ideas that emerge from Shakespeare and Young Adult literature. Glenda's National Board Certification is in Adolescent Young Adult/English Language Arts, and she is a Folger Teaching Shakespeare Institute Alum.

What themes/ideas transcend classic texts to share space in YA lit? How can teachers use YA to bridge to classic works and the classics to engage students in YA lit? Let's share ideas about student required and free-choice reading and methods that engage student readers. I'm interested in finding common ground among the classics and YA texts.


 Twice-Told Tales and Old Odd Ends: R...
by Glenda Funk
Twice-Told Tales and Old Odd Ends:
Performance Methods from the Folger
Shakespeare Library
English Companion Ning
Summer Webstute, 2011
Start Prezi
Tableaux vi
Living Pict

Figure 2. A screenshot of an excerpt from the opening message of a synchronous discussion forum featured in the 2011 ECN Summer Webstute.

Following the location metaphor associated with a surround view of context, the selected teachers' professionally oriented participation online appeared to be situated in online

environments that allow for the integration of multiple modes of expression (e.g., alphabetic writing, hypertext, static images, moving images, and audio). That is, across cases, multimodal affordances contributed to the surround contexts of teacher-generated online environments, enhancing the selected teachers' capabilities to convey their messages and to invoke dialogic interactions among their peers online.

A/synchronous Flexibility. Applying the surround view of context to the online environments constructed by the five English teachers featured in this study revealed another notable contextual feature: a/synchronous flexibility. That is, depending on teachers' purposes, they may have the flexibility to engage others in synchronous or asynchronous interactions in the contexts of teacher-generated online environments. Asynchronous interactions occur in delayed time and do not require simultaneous participation among individuals. Conversely, synchronous interactions occur in real-time, and they require simultaneous participation (Johnson, 2006). Popular new media technologies, such as blogs, microblogs, and social network sites, are often recognized as mediating asynchronous interactions, for responses to initial posts tend to be delayed. Conversely, instant messaging and videoconferencing tools typically require simultaneous engagement among users.

A cross-case analysis of archived online documents revealed numerous asynchronous interactions among participating teachers and their online peers. Among three participants, a number of asynchronous interactions took place in discussion forums within the ECN. For example, Figure 3 captures Meenoo turning to her online peers for support as she prepared to teach *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 2004) for the first time.



Figure 3. A screenshot of an opening message in an asynchronous discussion forum on the English Companion Ning.

In this instance, the opening message in Meenoo's discussion forum served as an attempt to crowdsource from her peers in the ECN ideas regarding activities and assessments that might prove useful when teaching Fitzgerald's classic. With a couple of weeks until she

would begin teaching the book, Meenoo could afford the wait-time required of traditionally asynchronous tools like a discussion forum. Before long, Meenoo's wait paid dividends. Within 24 hours, Meenoo received responses from four teachers.

Responses ranged from tips for locating *Gatsby*-related content elsewhere on the ECN, various assignment descriptions and handouts, and testimonials about the value of pairing the novel with a film to extend an exploration of the American Dream. Responses continued to trickle in over the next several days, including those featuring hyperlinks to online resources beyond the confines of the ECN, recommendations for exploring the novel via Socratic seminars, and reports from teachers about students presenting the novel as a play.

Leveraging the asynchronous possibilities of the discussion forum, Meenoo was able to capitalize on the strengths of asynchronous interactions noted by scholars (e.g., Galland, 2002), giving potential respondents time to review her inquiry and consider the ideas and materials they might share before responding.

As with discussion forums within social network sites, blogs and microblogs tend to foster asynchronous interactions. Participants consistently wrote a blog post or tweet at one point in time, any number of their peers online read the post or tweet and, as moved or as time allowed, others responded to the post or tweet, adding another link to the dialogic chain. Though perhaps delayed, asynchronous responses like those Meenoo received resound with dialogicity. As Bakhtin (1986) explained, responses in dialogic interactions need not be immediate, for “[s]ooner or later what is heard and actively understood will find its response in the subsequent speech or behavior of the listener” (p. 69).

Although asynchronous interactions were typical for participating teachers, the flexibility to organize and carry out synchronous interactions is a noteworthy contextual feature upon which each participant drew. As with many synchronous interactions that occur face to face (e.g., department meetings, interviews, and sessions at professional conferences), ensuring synchronous interactions online often requires forethought and advanced communication.

Returning to the 2011 ECN Summer Webststitute offers a prime example. Structurally, the discussion forum Gary established for English teacher Glenda Funk to lead is no different than the forum Meenoo created spontaneously to generate ideas about teaching *The Great Gatsby*. However, the Webststitute had been planned in advance.

By advertising the date and time of each session on the ECN (Figure 4) and broadcasting those details via Twitter and email, Gary positioned Glenda to facilitate a synchronous interaction as teachers explored the common ground between select titles of young adult literature and the works of William Shakespeare. Through the presentation of an excerpt of a discussion thread about secondary students' capacity to read and comprehend the works of William Shakespeare, participants like Cindy and Gary were able to respond to one another just minutes apart during the Webststitute—the time it takes to read and consider the thoughts of others and to generate a response (Figure 5). This synchronicity simulated the experience of face-to-face interactions with others at a professional conference.

MONDAY July 11	Session	Place
4:00 – 5:00 pm EDT	Teresa Bunner <i>Balancing the Literary Scales</i>	Adobe Connect
5:00 – 6:00 pm EDT	<i>Young Adult Lit SuperPanel:</i> Jo Knowles, David Macinnis Gill, and Kate Messner	Adobe Connect
6:00 – 7:00 pm EDT	Tom Liam Lynch <i>Reading Bytes</i>	Adobe Connect
TUESDAY July 12	Session	Place
4:00 – 5:00 pm EDT	Glenda Funk <i>Twice-told Tales and Old Odd Ends: Common Ideas in Shakespeare and Young Adult Lit</i>	See Glenda’s Discussion in the Webststitute’s Group on the Ning
5:00 – 6:00 pm EDT	Teri Lesesne	See Teri’s Discussion in the Webststitute’s Group on the Ning
6:00 – 7:00 pm EDT	Everyone! <i>Bring your best stuff!</i>	Adobe Connect

Figure 4. A screenshot of the advertised schedule for the 2011 ECN Summer Webststitute


Meanwhile, given the spontaneity of her post about teaching Fitzgerald’s classic, Meenoo received delayed responses over a number of days. In each case, dialogicality was evident regardless; meaning emerged, as each post brought two or more voices into contact.


Another notable example of participating teachers leveraging a/synchronous flexibility is evident in Meenoo’s work with #engchat, the weekly Twitter chat she founded in 2010, and her blog of the same name. Meeting virtually each Monday at 7 PM (EST), #engchat is a synchronous Twitter chat session that draws individuals with a shared interest in the teaching of English. Over the course of an hour, people sharing an affinity for the teaching of English interact simultaneously as they explore a scheduled topic related to teaching, learning, and literacy. Using “#engchat” as a hashtag to categorize tweets, individuals from across the globe may take part in the chat, following along and making contributions as they see fit. From separate locations, teachers may exchange ideas, share resources, and explore English-language-arts-related topics in real time.


Meenoo supplemented #engchat, the Twitter chat, with the [#engchat](#) blog. Acting as a curator of sorts, Meenoo organized and featured blog posts authored by guest moderators of upcoming #engchat sessions. With no immediate response required or expected, the guest posts were asynchronous, working like anticipation guides for forthcoming chat sessions. Guest posts added an element of structure to the synchronous #engchat sessions, as they provided a frame within which participating teachers might consider the topics of forthcoming sessions (Figure 6).



The screenshot displays a vertical list of four replies in a discussion forum. Each reply includes a profile picture, a timestamp, the user's name, and the text of the reply. The first reply is from Cindy Minnich at 1:24pm, discussing language comprehension in a play. The second is from Gary Anderson at 1:28pm, emphasizing the word 'Play'. The third is from Cindy Minnich at 1:31pm, asking about language retention. The fourth is from Gary Anderson at 1:33pm, comparing text to video. Each reply has a 'Reply' button, and the last two have a 'Message' button.

 [Reply](#) by [Cindy Minnich](#) on July 12, 2011 at 1:24pm
They absolutely can read WS in the original. They need some help adjusting to the language at first, but they catch on. In performance, the actions supplement the words, often making it easier to follow, but many of the films leave out important bits.
Best thing I have done was to allow them to play around with the language of the time period BEFORE we begin reading. They had such a blast making up their own insults and wooing words. Really excellent practice - and they could recall most of the words when they saw them in the play.
[Reply](#)

 [Reply](#) by [Gary Anderson](#) on July 12, 2011 at 1:28pm
"Play" is a key word. The first few lines of Taming of the Shrew have several archaic words. We guess at their meanings and then just go ahead! Comes out fine. Then we nail it down later. Play before work ... my life philosophy.
[Reply](#) [Message](#)

 [Reply](#) by [Cindy Minnich](#) on July 12, 2011 at 1:31pm
How much of language do we really catch on the first go through of a movie? Some really excellent lines might stick to be shared later, but most...not so much. If we hear a word we don't know, we don't stress too much as long as we get the gist of what's going on the scene, right?
I'm definitely with you on the need for play. :)
[Reply](#)


 [Reply](#) by [Gary Anderson](#) on July 12, 2011 at 1:33pm
So much of the content is delivered through ... delivery. When the text stays flat on the page, we miss a lot. To use your comparison, it's like reading a script instead of watching the movie.
[Reply](#) [Message](#)

Figure 5. A screenshot of an excerpt from a synchronous exchange in a discussion forum featured in the 2011 ECN Summer Webststitute.

With the above issues in mind, I hope you will join me on Monday, January 9, from 7:00-8:00 p.m. (EST) as I host an #engchat to discuss how to elevate student writing. Some questions for consideration:

- In this age of excessive testing and overwhelming standards, how do you ensure your students get enough writing practice?
- How do you get your students excited/motivated about writing? What writing activities excite your students?
- What specific strategies have you found to be effective in elevating your students' writing?
- What particular modeling strategies/techniques have you found that work well in your classroom?
- How do you move away from traditional school writing and give your students the kind of writing practice they may utilize long after graduation?

Figure 6. A screenshot of an excerpt from a guest post on the [#engchat](#) blog.

With the complementary pairing of weekly chat sessions and weekly blog posts, Meenoo leveraged the a/synchronous flexibility of teacher-generated online contexts, using asynchronous blog posts and the time for reflection they afford to support synchronous Twitter chats.

The dialogicality of guest posts on the [#engchat](#) blog became evident as ideas presented in those posts and responses to those ideas surfaced in corresponding Twitter chats. Though perhaps delayed, what was understood in the asynchronous blog posts often found response in the synchronous sessions of #engchat, the Twitter chat.

Across cases, a/synchronous flexibility contextualized interactions within teacher-generated online environments. A/synchronous flexibility was a notable contextual feature that teachers participating in this study leveraged to advance their own and others' experiences online in exploration of teaching, learning, and literacy.

Weave Features

The surround view of context is complemented by the weaving view (Cole, 1996; Lindfors, 1999). As the surround view focuses on the resources available where interactions are situated, the weaving view sees context being actively constructed as individuals draw upon the experiences and understandings they bring to an event and tap the resources available to them (i.e., the surround features) in the moment. Context is complex and fluid. Thus, rather than attempting to define the contexts in which the selected teachers participated, I identified and described meaningful contextual features that emerged across cases and considered how those features may have informed the selected teachers' online exploration of teaching, learning, and literacy. Cutting across cases, I present in this section the weave features, those contextual features that, whether brought in from outside the online environment or shared with others online, informed engagement for the teachers featured in this study: (a) classroom teaching experiences, (b) connections among teachers online, and (c) a touch of levity.

Classroom Teaching Experiences. For each of the participants in this study, the weaving of classroom teaching experiences into the contexts of their interactions online appeared routine. Reflecting Lindfors's (1999) contention that "each moment remembers places you *have* been, experiences you *have* had" (p. 232, italics in original), a thread of participating teachers' experiences in their respective brick-and-mortar classrooms was woven into their posts and interactions with other teachers online. The shape and content of teachers' blogs, for example, was often informed by their recent teaching experiences. Brian's blog, [Walk the Walk](#), is illustrative of this feature.

Many posts on the [Walk the Walk](#) blog appeared to be the product of Brian weaving his classroom teaching experiences with the site's multimodal affordances. With the majority of his blog posts tied to his practice as a middle-school writing instructor, Brian leveraged the multimodal affordances of the site to open virtual windows into his classroom as he embedded mentor texts, images of classroom exhibits, and videos of authors and poets discussing with middle-school students the craft of writing.

For example, in the blog post "[Wordsalve: Poet Sunita Jain & My Class](#)," Brian reported on a class period in which Indian poet Sunita Jain visited with students in his classroom via [Skype](#), a videoconferencing software application. Brian brought the experience to life for his audience by threading together his own reflections on the experience of helping eighth graders discuss the craft of writing with a published poet in India, short pieces written by the poet, and a 20-minute video of the poet's visit in its entirety. Adhering to the old writing adage, "Show, don't tell," Brian helped his audience see what hosting a published author via Skype might look like in the middle-school writing classroom and the value it may hold for students and for teachers.

The contextual thread of classroom teaching experiences is also evident in the interactions with others the selected teachers wove via Twitter. Across cases, the teachers in this study often drew upon their classroom experiences as they tweeted, commonly sparking exchanges with their online peers. Consider the following tweet Sarah composed: "Does anyone else have those random moments when you realize a book from your library has been missing for a while? So random." (7:36 PM - 21 Mar 12)

Sarah's tweet was not addressed to anyone in particular; that is, she did not identify any users by their Twitter handle. Understanding that all utterances have addressivity, as Bakhtin (1986) asserted, Sarah's addressees come into focus with a closer look at her message.

In particular, the phrase "your library" indicates that Sarah was addressing her followers (and others reading the tweet) who have a library of some sort. By the word *library* was she referring to a public library? A classroom library? Understanding Sarah's sense of the word library was essential. "A word acquires its sense from the context in which it appears; in different contexts, it changes its sense" (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 245). Because it is dynamic, a word's sense is distinct from its meaning, which is fixed, as both Vygotsky and Bakhtin asserted.

In the context of Sarah's tweet, a context woven with her classroom teaching experiences, recognizing that she is a classroom teacher and not a librarian suggests that she was referring to a collection of books supplied by a teacher and made available for students to borrow for independent reading. Accordingly, Sarah's tweet found responses from a number of classroom teachers, sparking two threads of discussion: one an exchange of titles popular with students, the other an exchange of methods for managing a classroom library.

In the first discussion thread, teachers noted the books that students like to keep for themselves, turning the thread into an exchange of titles that are popular with students. The exchange was somewhat typical in that, among the data collected, posts about the books students are reading appeared in an extended form on the blog Cindy facilitated, [Nerdy Book Club](#); on Sarah's blog, [Y.A. Love](#); and on [What's Not Wrong?](#), Gary's blog.

Drawing upon her experience maintaining a classroom library, Sarah shared titles such as *Don't Expect Magic* (McCullough, 2011), *Catching Fire* (Collins, 2009), and *Anna Dressed in Blood* (Blake, 2011). Others chimed in with titles such as *The Fault in Our Stars* (Green, 2012), *Anna and the French Kiss* (Perkins, 2010), and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky, 1999), among others. Though many of those titles are well known, the exchange may have given some teachers new ideas regarding books that might appeal to students in their respective classrooms.

One teacher offered a title that has gone missing from her library on multiple occasions, *Breathing Underwater* (Flinn, 2001), but she then turned her attention to solving the problem of missing classroom library books. The classroom-library-management thread began with a response from a high-school humanities teacher, identified here with the pseudonym "Humanities Teacher" and the corresponding @[humanitiesteacher] Twitter handle: "**Humanities Teacher:** @yaloveblog This happens all the time. While I'm glad they found a book to love, I've replaced Breathing Underwater 4x. What do you do?" (8:00 PM - 21 Mar 12)

Affirming that they share a classroom-library-management problem, the humanities teacher inquired as to how Sarah tracks books in her classroom library. Her inquiry sparked the following exchange, an illustration of what Jenkins (2006a) described as "collaborative problem-solving" (p. 3):

Sarah: @[humanitiesteacher] That's a really good book. I teach it in my Y.A. Lit class. I have a check out book to keep track of who has what. (8:21 PM - 21 Mar 12)

Humanities Teacher: @yaloveblog We use a public Google spreadsheet for signouts. Books just see[m] to wander away w/o being signed out. It's a cost I don't mind. (8:34 PM - 21 Mar 12)

Sarah: @[humanitiesteacher] How do you use the spreadsheet in your class? (8:36 PM - 21 Mar 12)

Humanities Teacher: @yaloveblog The kids track their check-ins and -outs themselves. The class student librarians maintain the cleanup of the spreadsheet. (8:40 PM - 21 Mar 12)

Sarah: @[humanitiesteacher] That's an interesting idea. Is there a computer in the room where they do this? Do they originally sign out books on paper? (8:42 PM - 21 Mar 12)

Humanities Teacher: @yaloveblog We're lucky to have 1:1 netbooks...but you could still do it online with 1 class computer. (8:45 PM - 21 Mar 12)

Given the challenge of tracking books Sarah had experienced, she appeared intrigued by the online spreadsheet the humanities teacher used, despite the humanities teacher's admission of similar challenges. At this point in the exchange between Sarah and the humanities teacher, an elementary teacher responded to each of them: "**Elementary Teacher:** @yaloveblog @[humanitiesteacher] Classroom organizer has an app. Free. Student librarians have login codes. Can print slips." (8:45 PM - 21 Mar 12)

Sarah and the humanities teacher continued their exchange, addressing the elementary teacher by name in each response:

Sarah: @[elementaryteacher] @[humanitiesteacher] I really like this idea, but I only have one computer in my classroom (mine). We don't have wi-fi either. (8:47 PM - 21 Mar 12)

Elementary Teacher: @yaloveblog @[humanitiesteacher] No wi fi for us either. They enter in the isbn on the desktop. Maybe certain kids could maintain the comp? (8:49 PM - 21 Mar 12)

Sarah: @[elementaryteacher] @[humanitiesteacher] My kids are signing books in and out so often during every class that I would never get a chance to use comp (8:57 PM - 21 Mar 12)

Humanities Teacher: @yaloveblog @[elementaryteacher] That's why I had to drop the binder sign-out. Kids had a hard time finding their sign-in. Do you use 1 page/kid? (9:06 PM - 21 Mar 12)

Sarah: @[elementaryteacher] @[humanitiesteacher] What do you mean 1 page/kid? I have 5 entries per page and they're divided according to class. (9:09 PM - 21 Mar 12)

Humanities Teacher: @yaloveblog @[elementaryteacher] I've heard of each student having his/her own page in the binder to make sign-outs easy and record data of reads. (9:41 PM - 21 Mar 12)

Sarah: @[elementaryteacher] @[humanitiesteacher] Maybe I'll try that with my Y.A. class first and see how it goes. It's a smart idea. (10:03 PM - 21 Mar 12)

This exchange, in which Sarah drew extensively upon her classroom experience, reflects Jenkins's (2006a) notion of collaborative problem-solving. Identifying a shared problem, Sarah and the humanities teacher exchanged methods of library management in an effort to resolve the issue. Together, and with the support of a third party, they considered multiple methods, including a pencil-and-paper checkout system, a student-run Google spreadsheet checkout system, and free applications designed specifically for classroom libraries. Together they mulled the pros and cons of each method based on the affordances and limitations of their unique teaching contexts.

Ultimately, though the humanities teacher seemed to get no further in improving upon her checkout system, Sarah ended the exchange weighing the idea of tweaking her current pencil-and-paper checkout system by assigning to each student a page in the binder to improve the ease and efficiency of signing out books.

Across contexts and across cases, classroom teaching experiences were woven through the selected teachers' professionally oriented participation online, as those experiences provided the content that fueled many of their posts, their contributions to the dialogic chain of utterances related to teaching, learning, and literacy.

Connections Among Teachers Online. The connections teachers in this study formed with others through interactions in online environments appeared to offer another contextual feature that shaped their participation. Generally, participants seemed to draw upon supportive, collegial relationships formed through extensive interactions with others online, giving themselves people to whom they could turn with questions and concerns, personal or professional.

In the first of the semistructured interviews, Gary explained the value he had found in the connections he made through repeated interactions with other teachers online and how those bonds were forged. What he described reflects experiences reported by other teachers in this study:

I think one of the most meaningful things...is when those little squares become real people. And there are people who I've met [online] who are extremely important colleagues to me. I've [since] met them in person, and we've spent

probably a grand total of six or eight hours in actual physical proximity, but they're extremely valuable colleagues to me, lifelines....On that [ECN] Webstutute stuff, [my colleagues and I] worked really hard together on those things. When you build something like that with people it tends to stick with you.... [W]e spent a lot of time on camera, you know, on screen, working together. And when you work together in true collaboration and build things, you know, that's relationship forming....And then when a couple of those people have gone through rough times—and I have, too—and we sent messages of support that have nothing really to do with English-y stuff at all, then the relationships, I think, kind of get warmer and more significant.

In Gary's experience, through extensive interactions and collaboration of a professional nature over time, the small square images that appear with comments on a blog, with tweets in a Twitter feed, and with responses to a discussion forum can spring to life, gaining meaning where there was none before and offering sentiments that pertain more to traversing the obstacles of life than to teaching students of literature.

The relationships Gary described, those warm and significant relationships that have seen people at a distance offering support and encouragement to those facing difficult times, were evident in "[Plate = Full](#)," a blog post Sarah wrote on the [Y.A. Love](#) blog. Written out of a sense of obligation to those who have been steady readers of her blog, the post and the responses it elicited from those readers illustrated the ways relationships among teachers online may support their continued participation. The post served as Sarah's attempt to explain what she noticed to be a recent shortage of book reviews and posts on her blog. Sarah cited her workload as an English teacher as a factor in her perceived blogging rut:

This current trimester....we've taught three new units, most of which we've been working on as we go. As you can imagine, it's been tough....Right now my classes are finishing their memoir unit which has been fun, but it needs tweaking. I'm overwhelmed at the moment because we assigned compare/contrast essays for [*Of Mice and Men*] and [*The Pull of Gravity*] which the kids wrote, turned in, and then we handed back with comments and collected again to grade again. Phew! Those took a while to get through, but my kids really improved the second time around. Right after I finished grading those I collected their memoirs. I have 90 freshmen right now. I have 90 memoirs to grade. The trimester ends on Tuesday. I'll have final exams to grade. Plus, I have my Young Adult Lit class to think about as well. I still have book reviews and responses to grade, plus their final projects. Yep, I'm feeling the pressure.

Sarah's struggles with her teaching workload put a face to the contention that "heavy workloads spread [high-quality teachers] too thinly" (Burns, 2007, p. 129). Considering that, for the sake of students and teachers, the NCTE (1990) encouraged districts "to limit each language arts teacher's workload to not more than 80 students," it is easy to see why Sarah might have felt overwhelmed. Still, as Sarah continued the post, she acknowledged that the workload came with the job and that participating online, though beneficial for her, was another task she needed to balance:

I don't want anyone to think that I'm looking for sympathy because I'm an English teacher, and I know this is part of the job. I always feel the push to get the grading done in a timely manner. The difference right now is that I've been an active blogger for a year and a half, which adds to the balancing act. It's tough keeping up with the reading, writing my reviews, commenting on other blogs, staying active on Twitter, and doing my actual job. But I love all of it, so I continue everything. Blogging has become a fantastic hobby and way of

connecting with wonderful people. Twitter is often a place of sanity for me when I feel the way I do right now. I'm not giving any of this up.

Despite the incredible demands of teaching and the added work that comes with staying active professionally online, Sarah steadfastly refused to quit. Citing her passions for teaching, reading, and writing, as well as her appreciation for the connections she forged with others online, Sarah explained that relenting and walking away was not an option.

Moving outside of the professional realm, Sarah continued the post by identifying health issues as the second major factor in her self-perceived blogging dry spell. Describing struggles with her immune system, Sarah explained that fatigue and sluggishness hindered her reading stamina, resulting in fewer books read and, accordingly, fewer blog posts written. As Sarah explained in the post's opening line, she does not often delve into personal issues on her blog. However, by opening up about matters of personal health, Sarah demonstrated the level of comfort she established with loyal readers of the [Y.A. Love](#) blog.

The comments readers offered in response to the post seemed to reward Sarah for her openness, her willingness to write about trying times and the pressure she was feeling as an English teacher. Sarah's heartfelt, almost-apologetic blog post elicited warm, encouraging responses from teachers with whom she connected online. One teacher offered a brief word of encouragement before empathizing with Sarah, drawing a parallel between Sarah's active professional and personal lives and those of her own:

You're doing GREAT and as a fellow English teacher who's trying to teach, grade, read for fun, blog, Tweet, *and* live her life I mostly understand! You're allowed to take time for you or cut back (and I think sometimes teachers are ones who have the most difficult time doing so). [Smiling face emoticon included by author.]

Similarly, another teacher responded by stating her belief that English teachers have a unique challenge in balancing their personal and professional lives, due in part, presumably, to the singular workload of an English teacher:

I still contend only an English teacher could understand the battle for balance that we have to fight for every year. Add in health issues and it just becomes that much more stressful to manage. Just remember, blogging started as a way to share and have fun, so we need to make sure we don't feel overly obligated. Everyone reading our blogs knows we're teachers – I hope they can be understanding of our stretches of limited posts (especially at the end of grading periods), and enjoy our summers of abundance in our blogging lives. Glad to hear things might be getting back on the right track for you. And, hey, it's your blog and you can write what you want to! [Emoticon with smile and wink included by author.]

This commenting teacher's word choice projected an empathetic stance. For example, use of the pronouns *we* and *our* in the comments, "We need to make sure we don't feel overly obligated," and "Everyone reading our blogs knows we're teachers," positioned the commenting teacher firmly alongside Sarah. The teacher provided a reminder that Sarah was not alone in facing the daunting task of meeting the demands assumed by English teachers who participate online, exploring teaching, learning, and literacy. Such responses seemed to reaffirm Sarah's refusal to relent, her determination to continue in her pursuits despite the extensive work they required.

A Touch of Levity. Another notable feature evident in the contexts participants created online was a touch of levity. “Everything that is truly great must include an element of laughter. Otherwise it becomes threatening, terrible, or pompous,” said Bakhtin (1986, p. 135). As though the participants in this study had read Bakhtin’s words for themselves—and perhaps they had—an element of laughter, or at least a playful attempt at humor and other jovial touches, appeared to be woven into the online contexts the selected teachers constructed.

Attempts at humor were evident as participants contributed to memes involving wordplay on Twitter, such as #lessambitiousbooks. A meme that could appeal to nearly any English teacher, #lessambitiousbooks challenged users to demonstrate their wit by reducing the titles of classic and contemporary literature to something less ambitious with a subtle turn of phrase. Gary, for example, made the following contributions:

- The Things They Asked Someone Else to Carry #lessambitiousbooks (6:49 AM - 3 Jan 12)
- All the Pretty Jackasses #lessambitiousbooks (7:47 PM - 2 Jan 12)
- Slaughterhouse Three or Maybe Four at the Most #lessambitiousbooks (6:46 PM - 2 Jan 12)
- Atlas Twitched #lessambitiousbooks (6:37 PM - 2 Jan 12)
- The I-Could-Stand-To-Eat-A-Little-Something Games #lessambitiousbooks (6:20 PM - 2 Jan 12)

Deviating from the norm of sharing the day’s creative writing prompt, providing hyperlinks to student writing, and offering updates on classroom activities, Gary offered a touch of levity with his #lessambitiousbooks tweets, likely prompting a chuckle or two from his followers, many of whom are fellow English teachers.

Other teachers lightened the mood with images they shared online. For example, Brian personalized his blog, [Walk the Walk](#), with a sidebar plug-in that streamed a series of images capturing his lighter side. While tackling some rather heady topics on his blog (e.g., teaching students to conduct research, conferring with student writers, and accounting for the Common Core State Standards), Brian struck a balance by offering levity through personal photos. These included shots of himself in oversized hats and in costume, including that of a character from the *Peanuts* gang (Figure 7); images of his dogs; and playful shots in which his face had been superimposed, among other images. Including such photos seemed to be humanizing in a way, serving to remind his audience of the humane work of writing, teaching, and learning.

Given the intensification of teacher work in the current climate of public education (Apple, 1988; Easthope & Easthope, 2010; Hargreaves, 1994), participants may have found humor helpful, be it through a tweeted punch line or a lighthearted image. The participants extended their professional lives by exploring complicated issues related to teaching, learning, and literacy well beyond the hours of the school day, during weekends, and over scheduled breaks during the summer, spring, and winter months. They may have found the need to interject some levity into the proceedings from time to time for the very reasons Bakhtin (1986) cited. Accordingly, participants in this study wove threads of humor and jovial thoughts into the online contexts they constructed with their online peers.



Figure 7. *A touch of levity in the form of a photo of teachers dressed as characters from the Peanuts gang that appeared on the [Walk the Walk](#) blog. Photo courtesy of Stacy Remphrey.*

Discussion and Implications

This thread of research provided insight into the contexts selected secondary English teachers wove as they engaged in professionally oriented participation online. After collecting participant-generated online artifacts (e.g., blog posts, microblog posts, and posts in social network sites), conducting a subsequent ethnographic content analysis, and triangulating data, I identified and described the five notable contextual features that emerged across cases: (a) multimodal affordances and (b) a/synchronous flexibility, as seen from a surround view, and (c) classroom teaching experiences, (d) connections among teachers online, and (e) a touch of levity, as seen from a weaving view.

Each of the five contextual features that emerged from the data analysis appeared to support the selected teachers' participation online. For example, participants leveraged the multimodal affordances of new media technologies to adhere to the old "Show, don't tell" composition principle as they shared their classroom teaching experiences and communicated ideas with others in real time. In doing so, the participating teachers invoked dialogic interactions (Bakhtin, 1986) with their peers online, capitalizing on the bidirectionality (Kress, 2003) afforded by the tools mediating their interactions to find immediate response from their colleagues at a distance.

In other instances, participants found and provided affective support by drawing upon their connections with others online and by interjecting a touch of levity. Such moves seemed to offer a brief respite from the challenging work of teaching and learning.

Opportunities in Teacher Education

Though the findings of this qualitative study are not generalizable, they stand to help English teacher educators build a more nuanced understanding of the contexts secondary English teachers weave as they engage in professionally oriented participation online. Rather than charging teachers blindly with the task of participating online, teacher educators might use these findings to illustrate the ways teachers—despite obstacles that reduce the time available for face-to-face professional learning—are connecting with their peers at a distance to explore teaching, learning, and literacy. Scholars have encouraged teacher educators to do their part in helping teachers find their way online in support of career-long learning (e.g., Rodesiler & Tripp, 2012b). Delineating the features teachers weave to construct online contexts and to support their participation online may move teacher educators toward that end.

The findings of this study may help practicing and prospective teachers see the possibilities for constructing their own contexts as they take up the charge of engaging in professionally oriented participation online. Through the data excerpts provided, teachers can see the advantages of manipulating a/synchronous flexibility to meet their needs, whether they aim to crowdsource ideas from others asynchronously or to chat with others in real time. Teachers can see the benefits of leveraging multimodal affordances, of echoing the “Show, don’t tell” principle, to invoke dialogic exchanges about instructional activities or to share newly available resources.

Teachers can also see the value of drawing upon their respective classroom experiences as they explore pedagogical challenges. They may also recognize the refuge that comes from tapping relationships forged with others online when in need of support, be it affective or cognitive. Finally, teachers can also recognize the uplifting potential of humor injected into the serious work of professional learning.

Teacher educators might consider the following recommendations for familiarizing prospective teachers with the contexts of teacher-generated online environments.

- *Provide opportunities for prospective teachers to engage in professionally oriented participation online.* As prospective teachers participate online to support their professional growth, they will begin to see firsthand the ways practicing teachers are, for example, leveraging multimodal affordances, manipulating a/synchronous flexibility, and drawing upon their classroom teaching experiences. Scholars have pointed out the flaws in assuming that students of a certain age have sophisticated knowledge about using new media technologies in meaningful ways (e.g., Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008). Thus, teacher educators must provide opportunities for prospective teachers to blog, microblog, and contribute to social network sites in intentional and purposeful ways as they explore teaching, learning, and literacy.
- *Promote multimodal composition, as appropriate.* Multimodal affordances emerged as a notable feature of participating teachers’ online contexts. They allow users to extend their capacities as writers. Teacher educators can help prospective teachers make the most of the multimodal affordances at their disposal by promoting the intentional use of alphabetic text, embedded videos, static images, and hypertext to convey meaning.

- *Engage teachers in synchronous and asynchronous uses of new media technologies.* In this study, a/synchronous flexibility (e.g., using Twitter for synchronous organized chat sessions and for crowdsourcing ideas asynchronously) proved to be a notable feature of participating teachers' online contexts. Teacher educators can challenge teachers' schemata for new media technologies (e.g., the typical asynchronous use of discussion forums) by using the technologies in nontraditional ways. Doing so can help prospective teachers understand how purpose can inform context.
- *Use teacher-generated posts as mentor texts.* Teachers of writing advocate providing students with real-world models of the types of texts they aim to produce (e.g., Fletcher, 2011; Gallagher, 2011). Using that method, teacher educators can provide selected posts from blogs, microblogs, and social network sites as mentor texts to illustrate how practicing teachers capitalize on multimodal affordances, leverage a/synchronous flexibility, and weave their classroom experiences, connections with others, and other features as they participate online.

With a more nuanced understanding of the contextual features of teacher-generated online environments, prospective teachers can be better prepared to direct their professional growth and development as they advance in the teaching profession.

Challenges in Teacher Education

Despite the possibilities for enrichment, introducing prospective teachers to the contexts teachers weave online poses challenges. In this study, the teachers wove classroom teaching experiences into the contexts of their participation. Prospective teachers, by the nature of their status as preprofessionals, cannot draw upon experience as readily, nor would they necessarily have the need to do so. This challenge is significant, for information and ideas exchanged online become transformative when they are shared at the point of need (Swenson, 2003). Without practice-driven questions and extensive classroom teaching experiences with which to weave their contexts online, prospective teachers may not be moved to participate or may not find as much value in their participation as the teachers featured in this study (Rodesiler & Tripp, 2012a).

The matter of connections is a second challenge that emerges in light of the findings reported here. The teachers in this study also drew upon their connections with other teachers online to weave the contexts of their participation. Given their preprofessional status, prospective teachers are unlikely to have a wealth of professional connections. Thus, teacher educators should be prepared to help foster connections, perhaps by partnering with colleagues in house or at other colleges/universities or by leaning upon former students who are now working in the field and active online.

Finally, teacher educators must weigh whether expecting teachers to participate online as a means of advancing their practice is alleviating or contributing to the intensification of teacher work. Though perhaps intending to help teachers expand their opportunities for professional growth beyond the workday and develop a sense of belonging to the professional community, teacher educators ought to think carefully about how they introduce participating online as a self-directed form of professional development, lest it be dismissed as yet one more demand placed upon teachers.

Implications for Future Research

The strand of research presented here offered useful insights regarding the online contexts woven by selected secondary English teachers, yet it did so from a limited scope.

That is, data collected for this study came strictly from sources that were either public (e.g., open blogs) or semipublic (e.g., social network sites that require registration to protect against spam). Having no relationship—personal or professional—with the selected teachers prior to this study, I opted against exploring online environments that required me to join exclusive networks in order to access content. Future research into the online contexts teachers weave in exploration of teaching, learning, and literacy might expand the scope to include content that is not publicly accessible. Likewise, the intersection of the personal and the professional in online environments stands as an area of future study as well.

Additionally, although this study helps to illuminate the contexts secondary English teachers weave as they engage in professionally oriented participation online, questions still remain about the efficacy of such participation. That is, little is known about how a teacher's professionally oriented participation online may inform student achievement. As teachers and administrators look for alternatives to top-down professional development models, future studies that explore the efficacy of professionally oriented participation online may prove beneficial.

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Resources

#engchat - <http://www.engchat.org>

Digital Is - <http://digitalis.nwp.org/>

English Companion Ning - <http://englishcompanion.ning.com>

Goodreads - <http://www.goodreads.com>

Nerdy Book Club - <http://nerdybookclub.wordpress.com>

Plate = Full - <http://yaloveblog.com/2012/02/27/plate-full/>

Skype - <http://www.skype.com>

Twitter - <http://www.twitter.com>

Walk the Walk - <http://walkthewalkblog.blogspot.com>

What's Not Wrong? - <http://whatsnotwrong.wordpress.com>

Wordsalve: Poet Sunita Jain & My Class -
<http://walkthewalkblog.blogspot.com/2012/02/wordsalve-poet-sunita-jain-my-class.html>

Y.A. Love - <http://yaloveblog.com>

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