

Teacherless Talk:

Impressions from Electronic Literary Conversations

by

ELAINE WARE AND KAREN MURAR



Dear Dave, Mary, Melissa, and anyone else who might be watching over your shoulder (unbeknownst to you, of course.)

*Well, we were all just sitting around here twiddling our thumbs, and we realized that we all had this uncontrollable urge to email each and every one of you! At present, we don't feel like delving deep into August Wilson's *Fences* ... so we won't. What we will do is tell you a little bit about ourselves, do a little dance, and make a little noise. Can you feel the beat? OK, well, I guess as I'm typing all these ramblings at present, I will go first. My name is Barry, and I am 16 years old (ain't life grand?) and I am 5 foot 9, have brown hair, and have no visible scars. I enjoy playing chess, basketball, and street hockey (even though that particular sport has drawn more of my blood than any hospital will do prior to my death.) I can't think of too much else to tell you right now, so I will now turn the keyboard over to John, mad accomplice that he is ...*

*Hello, I'm John. Aren't these icebreakers strange? Well, I'm older than Barry (though not by much) and taller (by a lot). I have some small visible scars. I like *Star Wars* and *Jack Kerouac* and oh yeah, comics too. Also of interest, Barry and I both work on a fanzine. It's pretty cool.*

Well, folks (hey, it's Barry again . . .) that's about all there is for now, so I suppose we shall retire for the evening. You folks take care, and drive safely...

— Barry and John

Hi Barry and John! I'm Melissa, but I'm sure that came up across the top of this email. I'm an art major here at IUP. Specifically, my major is Graphic Design. Sorry I didn't get back to you sooner, but this is a very busy week for me. I have a Humanities Lit test at 8 am tomorrow. Then, I have a huge Geography test on Friday. I studied for about three hours tonight. Well, I'm 5'6" (the last time I looked at my driver's license anyway) and I enjoy, well that's a tough thing to say. I work 2 jobs. Between classes, I work at Housing and Residence Life here on campus; then I work at the Ice Center on the weekends. And with being an art major, I don't have much free time. Well, I'd better go, it's 12:09 am and I have a long day tomorrow on campus. Feel free to email me whenever you want. I check my email everyday, except I slack a little on the weekends with it. Talk to you later.

—Melissa

With voices as distinctive as these, juniors at Gateway High School and introductory literature sophomores at Indiana University of Pennsylvania began an email collaboration to discuss August Wilson's *Fences*, a play set in Pittsburgh in the late 1950s that focuses on the social and familial barriers experienced by the African-American protagonist, Troy Maxson. We met while participating in the Western Pennsylvania Writing Project, where we developed the idea for bridging the two schools to make students feel that they were part of a wider community of readers and writers. email empowered students to analyze literature through cooperative peer dialogues.

The Cast

Gateway High School Juniors

Barry, Carol, Danielle, Derek, Faith, Jan, Jane, Jarad, Jeff, Jessica, John, Jordan, Kathy, Kelly, , Megan, Patsy, Rochelle, Roxann, Sandra, Tricia, Selma, Surinder, Vincent

Indiana University of Pennsylvania Sophomores

Amy, April, Beverly, Brad, Candace, Celia, Dave, Jason, Julie, Linda, Mary, Melissa, Michelle, Nadine, Pete, Samuel, Sharri, Susan, Sylvia

Comparing curricula before the start of the new school year, we found both of us planned to teach the August Wilson play. We incorporated specific dates for the project into each of our academic calendars.

Other details needed to be worked out. The high school students did not have school access to email; therefore, students who lived in the same area formed teams, receiving parental permission to use home computers. College students had email access at four campus computer labs. A master list of email addresses was then compiled. (We suggest that teachers initially test the email addresses to ensure that connections can be made.) Our project established that a minimum of three exchanges of email correspondence take place within two weeks. Rather than the typical teacher-led discussion, the project fostered student-generated conversation minus teacher facilitation. Students analyzed other literary pieces in class while they independently worked outside of class on the email project. Formal class discussion of the play did not occur until after students completed all email correspondence. However, as teachers we functioned as troubleshooters when students made us aware of any problems they encountered with technology. Although we established the literary and technological framework, the literary conversations centered on student ideas rather than teacher instruction. Students were encouraged to write about anything they found interesting in the play.

Since the teachers were not the primary audience, students adapted their language and use of email technology to suit peers. Once the icebreakers established personal connections, students entered a language comfort zone, one much more akin to spoken

conversation than to standard academic writing. Many students actually referred to their online communication as “talk.” The college students tended to be spontaneous communicators, composing online while the high school students first wrote individual reactions to the play in a dialectical journal and then further developed the interpretations in their emails. The student literary conversations that resulted—without teacher intervention—displayed the reading strategies teachers strive to achieve in the classroom, namely, predicting, questioning, clarifying, connecting, interpreting, and evaluating.

Predicting

Our students’ predictions of the outcomes of Wilson’s play were the result of close reading rather than haphazard guessing. Their predictions also revealed our students’ knowledge of plot patterns, consistent characterizations, and social dynamics. Jason, for instance, in his first email forecasted an important role for the character Troy:

I believe that in Fences Troy will be the character that we will want to follow and pay attention to. He sees the world as it was when he played baseball. He still has an open wound about how he was cheated out of money and how he was viewed as lower class because he is black. We see his inability to deal with the reality that the world is changing and that the black man is now starting to have equal rights and opportunities. We see this attitude when Troy and Rose discuss the future of Cory. Cory has Troy’s athletic ability and has the potential of becoming a great ball player . . . Troy’s attitude is something that I believe we will want to trace and keep track of. He might change and let Cory try out for football or choose to not see the world as an ever changing and evolving place.

Predictions, a component of problem-solving, also served to motivate student reading, as illustrated in Amy’s email: “The character that will really get hurt in the play is Cory. He has a chance to become something and Troy is trying to stop him. There seems to be resentment between Troy and Cory due to the fact that Cory has a chance that Troy never had. I am interested in getting right on to the next act so that I can see the continuation of this little saga.” Not all students clearly articulated the evidence upon which they based their predictions as did Jason and Amy, but others were quite adept at internalizing clues that might foreshadow later events in the play as did

Jessica, Rochelle, and Jane when they closed an email by asking, "Is something going on between Troy and that Alberta chick? Just wondering. Adios!"

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Questioning

Most students believe that asking questions suggests a vulnerability or lack of intelligence. In most classrooms, the teachers ask the questions, usually not a recipe for a real conversation. Student email questions, however, circumvent the need for teacher-centered questioning. Students engage in honest question-and-answer dialogue with a small group in a supportive social milieu. Email promotes risk-taking as students experience the metamorphic process of shaping ideas through dialogue. Megan and her team experienced freedom to admit a lack of understanding when they asked Julie and Brad:

What do you think Gabe symbolizes in the play? We can't seem to figure out the purpose of him being there. He says all those weird things like blowing the horn when it's time for judgment, and Lyons king of the jungle. We know it's important, but we don't know why or how.

The freedom to question also frees students to explore alternative answers. At first students seemed cautious about their own insights, but confidence grew as they explored each others' ideas. They were liberated to dig deeply, without thinking they must have all the answers. Real learning is, after all, the posing of a question and the search for an answer.

In our email collaboration, students employed questioning as an invitation. As Celia wrote to Kathy and Faith: "How do you feel about Troy and the way he treats his family? Do you think he treats Rose with respect? Is he a loving father and husband? What are your thoughts on Lyons and how he is always borrowing money from Troy?" Such questioning promoted the conversational quality of dialogue where it is flattering to be asked "What do YOU think?"

Clarifying

As students conversed, they engaged in many clarifying strategies. Specific textual references and quotations often supported and illuminated their assertions. While many students realized the need to explain and support their statements, others learned this lesson from their email partners who requested clarification, such as Nadine who wrote to Jan and Selma, "I didn't understand what you were getting at with Troy's fight against discrimination. In your next response, could you go into further detail?" When the students replied to Nadine, they explained, "You mentioned that you didn't understand Troy's fight against discrimination at his level. Basically, we mean that Troy is not a Civil Rights activist or anything, but attempts to fight against the discrimination in the society around him that affect him, like his workplace and baseball." In the classroom students might become defensive when asked to clarify their statements, but in the context of email, students accepted such requests as a normal part of interpersonal communication.

Connecting

Email provided students opportunities to connect literature to their lives, knowledge, and opinions as they might in ordinary conversation. Dave wrote to Roxann and Danielle that "Fences is starting out to be a very interesting play because of the native setting in Pittsburgh. That got my interest right off the bat." Wilson's references to specific places that students knew firsthand energized their attitude toward the entire project.

The baseball references in Wilson's play inspired historical connections as students discussed prejudice issues. Beverly shared with Patsy and Jarad that she

thought there was a deep-rooted prejudice towards white people and vice versa throughout the play. . . . There is also much bitterness between Troy and the baseball league. I don't really know much about the negro baseball league so if you have any information you could pass down I would really appreciate it.

Elements of the play motivated students to research the time period. Shared information about Satchel Page, Jackie Robinson, and Negro League teams like the local Homestead Grays expanded their understanding of points of conflict in the play. Vincent and Surinder commented:

...if blacks ever tried to challenge the inequities in sports, as well as all other aspects of African American life, they would greatly suffer. This brings up an important concept in the story: sports truly represented all aspects of life. The conflict in this story is not simply Cory's desire to play sports versus Troy's desire for him to acquire a secure job. Cory wants to challenge the discrimination prevalent in the time, whereas Troy truly cares for and wants to protect him from any danger that he may face in challenging that authority.

Jessica, Rochelle and Jane connected the microcosm of the play to the macrocosm of society with:

We felt that this also symbolized the slow progression of blacks through the 1950's and 60's. They didn't just all of a sudden break free of the cycle of prejudice and segregation, but made small improvements one step at a time over the generations.

Kelly, Carol, and Jordan reflected on the importance of such sharing:

Samuel, thanks for telling us some historical information about the time period the play was written in. It gave us a broader view of the play by helping us look at the events of the play in connection with the events going on in the world at the time.

The students also vicariously related to characters and contemplated their own values, peppering the correspondence with gender connections. One young man, Pete, empathized:

The story was really good I thought. I felt bad for Cory . . . I am sort of like him in athletics and I would have wanted the chance to go on and further my education and do what I have fun doing too.

The women reacted strongly to Rose's actions as a 1950's woman and the sexual stereotyping regarding her role. Sylvia believed that "Troy was way out of line when he expected Rose to handle the 'other woman' thing just fine and be rational about it . . . I know that I wouldn't be." Tricia's enthusiastic sanction "Go Rose!" resulted in Melissa's response:

I agree with Tricia . . . I'd be so disgusted . . . I couldn't bring myself to talk to him either . . . I was shocked when Troy asked Rose to raise the baby with him. . . .

I don't get the impression men ever even thought about helping with a baby back in those days.

Kathy and Faith also reacted to the gender issue:

He treats his wife like a possession. Although it coincides with the attitudes of the time, it should not be an excuse. He cares about her but thinks of her as an inferior. He calls her 'my woman,' a very sexual comment. Similar sexual comments demonstrated a lack of respect for her.

Student email included literary connections as well. Sandra, whose first language is Spanish, compared Troy's friend, Bono, to "Don Quixote's Sancho Panza, his . . . sidekick who supports Troy's drinking and laughs at Troy's stupid jokes." Brad made another parallel: "The father-son relationship in *Fences* is almost exactly the same as the father-son relationship in *Death of a Salesman* because both sons are unemployed, lazy, and immature for their ages." Understanding family relationships in *Death of a Salesman* also served Dave in understanding family relationships in *Fences* when he proposed:

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In *Death* the boys were raised full of hot air, to think they were perfect and better than anyone else, that they were always going to be top dogs. In *Fences*, it is clearly the opposite. Troy tries to teach his boys a hard work ethic . . . he discourages Lyons constantly for playing music and tells him to get a REAL job . . . Troy also discourages Cory...

Melissa explored the same link:

I also think Lyons is a lot like Biff in *Death*. Did you guys ever read that? Well, in case you didn't Biff is a man in his late 20s, early 30s, who doesn't know what to do with his life. He bounces from job to job, never

really amounting to anything. Lyons reminds me of this because his only job seems to be playing in that band at the bars.

Other students related their knowledge of television genres to their reading of the play. Three female high school students wrote:

The second act of Fences seemed like a soap opera. Troy was having a child with another woman while still living with Rose. Cory gets into a fight with Troy and leaves home. Troy dies.

Two other high school juniors wrote, "Act I seemed very tranquil to the almost soap-opera like Act 2." Making such connections resulted in the students' own valuable contributions to the dynamic literary conversation.

Interpreting

Students' freedom to choose their topics for discussion led to rather fluent and creative interpretations of Wilson's characters, symbols, and theme rather than the sometimes mechanical and stilted literary analyses students produce in formal papers. Whereas students in the traditional classroom feel the need to prove that they have read the selection and understand the terminology by regaling the teacher with plot summaries and technical definitions, email frees them to share their interpretations and naturally apply literary terms as they communicate. The following exchanges illustrate student focus on characterization in *Fences*—in this case an analysis of a particularly enigmatic Gabriel who has a metal plate in his head as a result of a World War II injury:

Hi guys! It's us again. We're ready to start our second analysis of Fences. Let's start with an overview of Gabriel's character. We think it would be safe to assume that Gabe is comic relief. For example, when Troy told Rose about his affair, Gabe entered the scene. The scene was extremely tense, but Gabe added a distraction that allowed the reader to have an aesthetic distance from that very serious conversation. Gabe asked silly questions such as, 'Are you mad at me Troy?' These questions seemed so out of place in the midst of the conversation taking place. ... We can't believe what Troy did to Gabe!!! How far will Troy go for Gabe's money?

—Danielle and Roxann

*Dear Danielle and Roxann,
Hi again. . . . I agree with what you said about Gabe. Troy committed him for the money. The way he treated him was wrong. I think Gabe needed Troy's love and Troy ends up contradicting himself. He says he needs to be free but Gabe ends up locked up. That was wrong...*

—Candace

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Most students discussed the motivations and psychological problems of the main characters. In addition, without being given specific instructions to apply critical theories, students experimented with feminist readings of the husband and wife relationship, Marxist inquiries into the economics of the manual labor force, New Critical interpretations of theme and imagery, New Historical investigations into the Negro and National Baseball Leagues, as well as other approaches, thus bringing multiple perspectives to the play.

Building on the literary concepts learned in the classroom, students quite willingly took risks when presenting their ideas. Only occasionally did a student indicate insecurity about an interpretation with a statement such as Michelle's, "Boy, did I have to dig deep for that one. I hope you have not lost all faith in my intelligence." More often students saw their exchanges as chances to work together, to interpret together, as Linda expressed when she wrote:

If either of you have more questions, feel free to email me anytime. You don't have to wait until you have your whole response. By doing this it might help all of us to better understand this play.

Collaboration was evident as our students socially constructed the meanings of the text during the give and take of email interpretations.

Students not only eagerly shared their analyses, but frequently requested feedback about the plausibility of their interpretations when they asked, "Do you agree with the points I have made?" or remarked, "Well, let me know what you think of my response." Inviting constructive criticism revealed that students were willing to consider the opinions and evidence of other students in their ongoing analysis of Wilson's play. Jeff and Derek illustrated this when they commented to Sharri:

Jeff and I will look at what you've said and add it to our insight of Fences. You have some pretty interesting stuff written down and I'll take it into consideration.

Evaluating

Responding to interpretations naturally led to peer evaluations. Students often saw their views mirrored back in different words, thus validating their original ideas. Such agreements often resulted in elaboration that strengthened an interpretation. Here, for example, is Nadine introducing her interpretation of fence as symbol:

I think that [fences] represents something different for each member of the family. Rose wants her husband and son to work together and build a fence around their house. Troy and Cory, on the other hand, are putting off building this fence. I believe that Troy doesn't want the fence because he will feel caged in like prison...

Jan and Selma reply to Nadine:

We agree with you about the symbolic title. In addition, we have found Fences to symbolize the way that Troy has built up barriers against expressing emotions and/or feeling the pain around him.

While agreement and elaboration were most common, students did feel free to interpret the text from multiple perspectives that sometimes led to disagreement. Disagreements developed students' critical thinking skills because they had to reconsider the text and pull out more persuasive evidence. Students also

developed tact and diplomacy, despite their opposing viewpoints, as Jason illustrated in his response to Jeff and Derek:

Now about the part of showing us social classes that I read in your last email, I find that if in fact the author wanted to give us a taste of social structure and classes, he would have done it differently. I am no analyst so don't take my words as law or what is right. I have been wrong before. I think though if he wanted to get across the social classes and how the different classes were treated he would of given us another family or neighborhood to compare the social conditions with. I just don't see this happening. He concentrates on this one family and their troubles which brings me to believe that the main theme is embedded within the family and how it operates or how it is dysfunctional. The conflict between Troy and his children support the idea of family related crisis and hardships.

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Conclusion

The email project socially liberated our students from constraints that tend to stifle individuals in usual class interactions. Students who might usually hesitate to be active discussion participants, experienced a lack of self-consciousness in email and a motivating comfort level. Some of our students, however, were novice email users who felt frustrated by the new writing experience as Susan explained:

I felt that the total atmosphere of trying to sort through my thoughts in a computer lab was very wrong for me. I would be thinking about what I wanted to write, and all of a sudden, something would go wrong with the system, or my screen would do something weird, or anything else that could possibly go wrong. I can't work with distractions, and when I'm forced to, my work suffers.

Certainly teachers as well as students are in a period of transition as they learn to use email to expand the classroom. Until computer classrooms

with email access are routinely available in all schools, teachers will receive mixed feedback about email projects as April illustrated:

In general, the whole email idea is good. It forces people to learn how to do it and it keeps communication lines open. The biggest problem was availability of computers. If you live off campus and don't have a hook up at home, it can be an annoying challenge.

While a few students expressed reluctance, others, like Brad, acknowledged the possibilities such technology now offers:

The mind-boggling innovation of email has gone far beyond what I had originally thought it would turn out to be. Here I am, now, giving my assessment of computer communications, when apparently it was yesterday that I sat in my grade school class learning how to 'load' on an old green screen Apple computer. I couldn't even imagine back then that technology would lead to this.

For most, bridging the two schools birthed an excitement for addressing a new audience, an audience that did not prejudge the writer. Most students responded enthusiastically:

These email sessions are very helpful in deeply delving into the story because they make us analyze not only our views on the play, but also the views of

three other people. It really feels like we know the characters because of all this analysis and we have such strong feelings towards them.

—Danielle and Roxann

Melissa seems to have opened up a good dialogue between the three of us and the students from IUP. She's brought up many good points from Fences and showed us a different way to think about some points from the story. It was interesting.

—Barry, John, Tricia

Imagination coupled with today's ever-expanding technology offers unlimited possibilities for improving our classrooms. Students can now converse without time and distance restraints. Networking students and teachers across states and even countries can make the classroom one of the most exciting places to be. As Barry, John and Tricia concluded, "Hoorah Hoorah for email!"

Elaine Ware has taught college writing and literature for twenty years. Currently teaching at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, Pennsylvania, she is a TC with the South Central Pennsylvania Writing Project.

Karen Murar has taught secondary English for twenty-five years at Gateway High School, Monroeville, Pennsylvania.

Both Elaine and Karen are TCs with the Western Pennsylvania Writing Project.