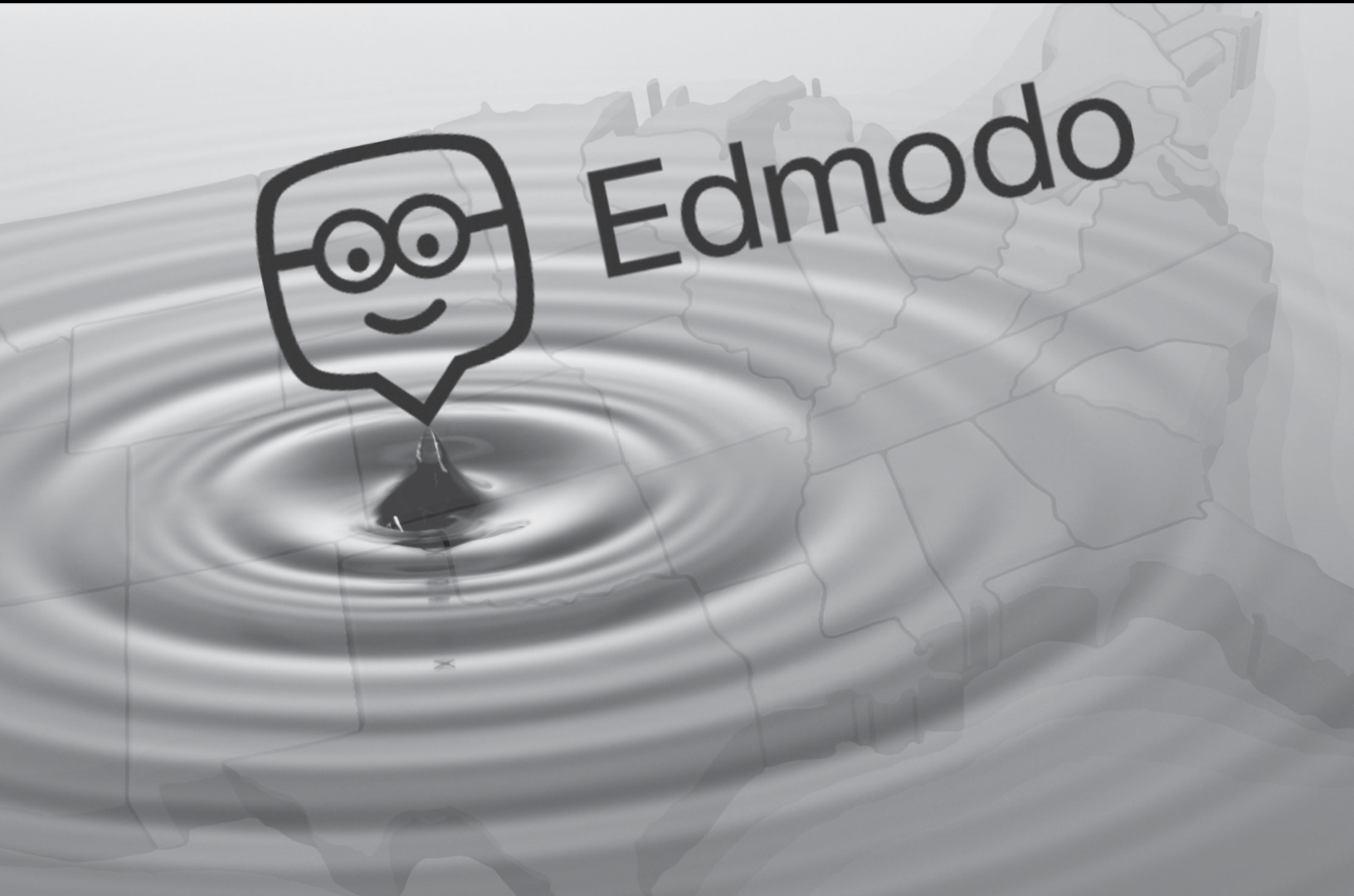


We've Cast a Pebble!

Edmodo Projects Ripple Across the Nation

By James Garner and Rachel Stokes
with Adrianna Brumbaugh and Nicole Vriens



AP English teachers **James Garner**, of Decatur High School in Decatur, AR, and **Rachel Stokes**, of Greenville Senior High Academy in Greenville, SC, have been conducting a long-distance, collaborative project for five years. They have provided their model for collaboration to Adriana Brumbaugh and Nicole Vriens of Mechanicsburg Area Senior High School, in Mechanicsburg, PA, who have taken the model for their own use to demonstrate how it can be successfully replicated in other school environments. For more information, contact Rachel Stokes at rstokes@greenville.k12.sc.us.

Abstract

Using the educational social media platform Edmodo, teachers at multiple sites developed and implemented instruction that gave their high school students a chance to talk to students across the nation about the texts they were reading and to work collaboratively to develop writing related to their understanding.

Keywords digital literacy, social media, Edmodo, secondary schools, high school

Casting the Pebble

Innovation in teaching practices has never been the primary goal of our projects. Our goal has always been to provide our students with the greatest possible access to the tools and environments we imagine as their future working conditions so that they will leave our classrooms with the skills and confidence to compete with students from any part of the United States, whether they are entering colleges, universities, the military, or the work force. That goal, to provide equity in access to modern technology, and to provide the skills to use that technology effectively and responsibly, has changed everything about our teaching practices and the way we view student learning. (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

As high school English teachers and AP Readers for the Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition test administered by The College Board, we teach a variety of grade levels and English classes besides AP, but it was through our association as AP Readers that, six years ago, we began a conversation about collaboration that not only profoundly changed our professional practices, but also helped reform an entire school district and is changing the practices of other teachers across the nation.

Initially, we just started talking about the kinds of writing we had seen during the College Board Reading and our conversation, of course, moved to our own students and some of the challenges we face. We discovered that while our populations were very different—Stokes teaches in a large, urban school, and Garner teaches in a small, rural school—many of our challenges in teaching student writing were the same. We were both grappling with getting students to provide textual evidence for their assertions, explain how that evidence proved those claims, create meaningful, cohesive paragraphs, and generate productive essays from their reading assignments (Graham & Perin, 2007). We even bemoaned how difficult it was to get them to read outside of class at all.

In the context of this conversation, we talked about how it might be interesting to “get our kids together, somehow,” but we had no idea how to make it happen. We originally thought we would have our classes Skype and discuss a common text, face-to-face, in real time because we had no idea what could be done with the technology we had. Thankfully, a veteran teacher in Greenville had been successfully conducting a distance-learning project with a teacher in Alberta, Canada. She said, from her experience, that it was not enough to have students read a book together and discuss it over Skype. “It just doesn’t work,” she said. Instead, she suggested that students read a common text and use an Internet Learning Platform to respond to one another online. She also generously shared some of her materials and encouraged our collaboration. Then, the current Greenville Media Specialist suggested that we use Edmodo for an educational platform online, and we took her advice.

Per their model, our first students read the novel *1984* by George Orwell (1949). We put all of them into the Edmodo platform, in one large, combined group, and then created nine small groups of five to six students each to receive assignments and to work on those assignments collaboratively. We spent a considerable amount of time talking about how to compose the small groups, and considered several factors—a balance of proficiency levels, gender, ethnic identifiers, and socioeconomic status—to create the most diverse groups possible. We even put students in groups together who, even though they were in the same classroom, typically did not sit beside one another or talk to each other. Choosing groups that way really reflected the social engineering the students were reading about in the novel and lent itself to the themes of manipulation and control.

Initially, the students were given a chance to learn about the Edmodo platform and understand the purpose of Internet-based educational platforms, like Moodle, Blackboard, and others that colleges and universities had adopted. We created accounts, taught them how to access the site, demonstrated how they could post messages to each other, reply to each other, turn in assignments, and create their own profiles—like some had already done on Facebook. In fact, familiarity with Facebook was a benefit because many of the students were immediately comfortable with the platform. They quickly understood how to post messages, set up their profiles, and assist other students who were not familiar with that social-networking tool. Those who had experience in social networking already were very prepared for the technical aspects of the site, but it was not long before their social-networking experiences proved problematic as well.

Edmodo is unlike Facebook because the only users students can “see” or communicate with are the ones in their own classes. They also cannot search for people or access advertising. According to the Edmodo website (Edmodo.com), Edmodo is the “safest and easiest” way for teachers to collaborate with students. It is free for all students, teachers, and parents. It provides access to a broad assortment of educational applications, both free and paid, and it provides “Snapshot” Common Core evaluation tools, quiz makers, unlimited storage for teachers and students, and school/district subdomain options to allow all of the student and teacher information to be locally controlled. For those districts wishing to invest more in the system, administrative tools can also provide a wide variety of statistical tools for research and evaluating student progress on a large scale.

In addition to its ease of access and automated “help” functions, Edmodo also has an amazing support team of paid professionals and volunteer “ambassadors” who take pride in responding to teachers’ questions almost immediately. This network of knowledgeable professionals, many of whom are classroom teachers themselves, is an incredibly valuable resource. In this sense, joining Edmodo is different from using other educational platforms because it is like joining an ever-expanding community of collaborating teachers and information professionals who share a common goal.

What we found about our students was startling. Offline, they could all pick up social cues. They knew about dialects and sub-languages to use with their friends, and they knew when to use appropriate formal speech with parents and teachers. But online, they needed specific instructions for differing environments. They did not know how to choose appropriate levels of communication for the social and professional areas of the Internet they were required to use.

With all of these possibilities in mind, when the students all seemed to know the basics, we gave them a variety of questions we called “Getting to Know You,” and began modeling academic discussion by answering some of the questions ourselves in the open timeline so that they would see that our expectations were going to be very different from the writing they were doing on Facebook. We wanted them to understand that sentence fragments, texting language, flippant responses, or other unpleasant communication habits were not acceptable in an academic setting. After completing the “Getting to Know You” assignment, each group then had to respond to a different discussion question about the novel. For example, one group received the following question: “Information in the ‘Ingsoc’ can be manipulated and even destroyed, as Winston sends information down the ‘Memory Hole.’ Online, none of your digital information is ever really gone, yet it is manipulated as it is taken out of context. What are the advantages and/or disadvantages of each process?” Each student was required to post at least two original, thoughtful responses to the question in their small group timeline and also reply to at least two other group members’ posts in a meaningful, deliberate, and respectful way. We provided the whole group with specific instructions and rubrics so that students would know exactly how their posts and replies would be assessed.

Ultimately, each group was required to use their discussion to write a group consensus statement for their individual group question and then turn it in as their final answer and post it to the entire class’s group timeline so that all of the members of both classes could see the complete answer to each question answered by each group. This meant that each student was contributing to a piece of writing that could be seen by every person in the entire combined class. No grades could be seen by the students, but the work of each group could. This was limited but authentic publication, and it made a significant difference in the way the students perceived the assignment.

Technological skills were, of course, a focus for our students who had been deprived of modern Internet connections, especially in areas like Decatur, where many students still live on outlying farms, and in both of our communities where high percentages are still living in households below the poverty level with little opportunity to work with the most modern Internet-connected tools. We also helped students develop the kinds of appropriate interpersonal skills they needed to become successful online business collaborators. We knew that appropriate communication training had become more complicated than just writing practice business letters and making fliers. The world of communication had already expanded to give every person with a mobile phone or a computer the ability to contact nearly every other person on the planet individually or en masse. Individual students suddenly had the power of mass media in their pockets, and they needed to know how to use it responsibly.

What struck us most profoundly during the early part of our project was realizing the importance of social context using digital media. We knew students needed to learn how to handle themselves in a wide variety of online environments. Just because it looks like Facebook does not mean it is Facebook, and students need to understand that there are different standards of language expected for different online activities, just as in classes or work environments. This unexpected development, early in the project, was revolutionary for us as teachers because we, for the first time, had evidence that the character of the “digital native” did not fully fit our students.

In his 2001 article “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants,” Mark Prensky, among many other valuable observations, wrote, “Our students today are all ‘native speakers’ of the digital language of computers, video games, and the Internet” (para. 5). While Prensky discusses the reasons for changes in learning styles and brain development, as they are related to technology, we realized that being born into a technological world and speaking that language does not guarantee true fluency in that language any more than being born in an English-speaking country guarantees fluency in English composition. These same students who used a variety of technology in their daily lives, who had never lived in a world without cell phones, and had all handled iPads, iPods, and laptops, still had some serious limitations in their understanding of what the technology could be used to do. It was not really a problem with their understanding of the technology itself. It was a limitation of their experience (Morrell, 2012).

As we worked with the students, we also found that many of them were missing some of the skills we considered very basic for success in college and the workforce. Simple things like uploading documents or photographs and manipulating them to be used in presentations were serious stumbling blocks for many of our students. We recognized that these relatively minor lapses in their technical abilities could throw them far behind when they were expected to perform in an online setting in college or on the job.

We knew that many of our students had taken computer classes and were proficient at running an array of programs to create

specific end products inside those programs, but we were asking them to use a variety of skills to collaborate with people they did not know and would never see to produce products that required multiple crossover skills. They had to make decisions themselves about the programs they used to fulfill the assignments and find ways to make their final products work within the Edmodo platform we had chosen. Sometimes we thought it was unfair to them and sometimes it was very difficult for us because of skills and information we lacked, but we realized that we had to do it in a forgiving high school environment before they faced something similar in an unforgiving college or work environment.

Both of us had used Blackboard for online college courses, and we knew that it could be very intimidating for someone with limited online skills or, worse yet, one or more college instructors with poor online organization, so we wanted our students to be prepared for both possibilities, even if we could not actually give them direct experience with such an expensive subscription platform. In fact, we had both presented at the Quality Matters in Online Education National Conference in Nashville, Tennessee, and remembered attending a session featuring a college professor listing the technological reasons why incoming freshmen students were failing classes (Geiger, 2013). Surprisingly, the reasons were not complex. Most of them had to do with students simply not understanding how to store files in multiple locations, manipulate files in different formats, use educational platforms for submitting work, access online databases, or generate original digital work through multiple programs or platforms. The presenter even complained that many students did not even know how to copy and paste information from one file to another.

What we found about our students was startling. Offline, they could all pick up social cues. They knew about dialects and sub-languages to use with their friends, and they knew when to use appropriate formal speech with parents and teachers. But online, they needed specific instructions for differing environments. They did not know how to choose appropriate levels of communication for the social and professional areas of the Internet they were required to use.

Despite our specific instructions to the contrary, our Advanced Placement students continued to ignore standard written English and replied to one another using emoticons, all lower-case letters, missing punctuation, and excessively familiar slang or colloquial phrases. These were very grade-conscious students and they were well aware that they were being evaluated qualitatively for their posts and replies, yet they were not writing as well, with the best technological tools available, as they did on paper in our regular classrooms. It did not make sense to either of us that we should have to remind the students continually to use standard English and regular punctuation, capital letters for proper nouns, and no texting shortcuts.

That was when we realized that somehow they had not learned, or considered, that the Internet was really a whole host of different communication environments with different standards of discourse, just as in the real world. They had to be explicitly

taught that different levels of communication would be expected in different areas of the Internet. They had to be convinced that communication expectations were different in different digital environments, just like they knew they could use slang at the mall but had to keep it out of their research papers. Once they learned this, they did not want to use the wrong words in an academic online class any more than they wanted to be embarrassed in, say, church by choosing the wrong level of discourse.

Oftentimes in the online setting, just as in the classroom setting, there are teachable moments that happen serendipitously and simply cannot be accomplished by direct instruction. We encountered such a moment in our first year of the project, when our students were asked to respond to the following prompt for the novel *1984*: “How do you feel about the methods by which the government uses intimate and family relationships to control society? Does this apply to our society? Why or why not?” Even though we had told students to be careful regarding their diction, one of the students responded in a rather pointed, inflammatory way, using the shows “16 and Pregnant” and “Teen Mom” to make a point about how the media exploit such unfortunate circumstances, thereby possibly encouraging irresponsible behavior in teens. Without really thinking about the implications of her language, she used some inflammatory terms, like “stupid,” without knowing that another student in her small group 900 miles away, was, in fact, nine months pregnant.

The pregnant student responded to her rather matter-of-factly, informing her of her pregnancy and stating her opinion in such a way that it caused immediate uproar in both classes. Neither student intended to offend or to be insensitive; they were simply doing what we told them to do, which was to state their opinions and provide evidence to support it. Nevertheless, both girls were concerned that they had offended the other and immediately identified the inflammatory language, tone, and overall message as open to interpretation. Both classes learned a lesson about tone in writing that day, a profound effect that might not have been accomplished by a single teacher’s instruction. All students in the combined online class became more aware of their “loaded language” and began editing their responses and replies with far greater care, had other students proof them, and, miraculously, were actually seeking our approval ahead of time, with questions like, “Mr. Garner, would you please read this and let me know if it sounds okay? Because here’s what I want to say, and I want to make sure that’s what’s coming across in my writing.”

We cannot predict everything students will say or do when we turn them loose in an online environment, but we can help them shape responses and create products collaboratively that no single student could. It is amazing what individual students can and will accomplish when they find themselves in a truly rich writing environment for the first time. Successful online student collaboration requires thoughtful discrimination. Collaborative efforts should embrace complex tasks, and require multiple steps, research, and reasoning that must be supported with appropriate, logical evidence. These efforts should also create a product, revealing through its complexity, its extent, or its content

For the first time in our professional lives, without our prompting, students were reading publications like *The Wall Street Journal*, watching major network news, and even evaluating news sources to improve their arguments with their group members, 900 miles away, online. The results of this project continue to astound us as teachers and are extremely rewarding, year after year.

that it is beyond the typical effort of either group involved in its production. This difference, while partially planned, should be a quality of unexpected insight, effort, or proficiency found in the interaction of the students, the quantity of student output, or the unique character of the end product.

For example, in our first year, we provided specific instructions about what we wanted our students to accomplish early in the collaboration. They met these writing demands, per our rubrics, to satisfy the assignments we created and, of course, received good grades. But then, in our second year of revising and honing our directives, something unexpected happened: We had an exceptional student who came to Decatur in the middle of the school year and joined our combined Edmodo class. He provided a multiparagraph response with a clear thesis; specific, apt evidence from *Crime and Punishment* (Dostoyevsky, 2001); and a thorough explanation of how that evidence proved his assertions. His answer, since it was visible to all of the students in the timeline, prompted all students to respond in kind; that is, because he went above and beyond the parameters of the assignment we created, other students wanted to do so too. The level of academic discourse was raised immediately because of the students acting as a real audience for others' work (Kimmons, 2014). That discovery, which has since happened repeatedly, is one of the more remarkable and validating reasons for this kind of online collaboration. No longer are students simply submitting assignments for one person to read, or even sitting in groups, sharing their writing with peers for editing—their writing provided authentic publication of their ideas to a broad audience and spurred others in the class to raise their academic performance. When we started this project, neither of us had any idea what we were doing or what impact it would have on students, but we think we have found a way to structure an environment to promote open discussion, authentic publication, and truly beneficial peer review. In our experience, student writing progresses much more quickly when students are reading one another's writing, thoughtfully commenting on it, and striving to better their own writing by seeking out and consulting both teachers for help in doing so.

Rippling to Other Schools and Other Students

As a result of this project, we have shared our experiences with using social media in the classroom at a variety of national conferences. Sharing our experiences is how we met two teachers, Adrianna Brumbaugh and Nicole Vriens of Mechanicsburg Area Senior High School in Mechanicsburg, PA, who took our model for online collaboration and used it in their own classrooms, not across the nation, but across the hallway.

When students use social media platforms such as Facebook and Snapchat, they not only share their experiences and thoughts, but also color and shape them in order to control perception by an intended audience. Often, the communication is more of a monologue than a dialogue. Others can “like” or “retweet” or even engage in an exchange or two, but often the purpose of the initial post is not to grow through civil discourse or sincerely ask for another perspective for the purpose of critical thought. So how do educators enter this parallel world that our students live in and tap into the benefits of a digital platform without compromising academic intent?

At Mechanicsburg Area Senior High in Pennsylvania, we found that Edmodo was the answer for our eleventh grade students. After listening to an inspiring presentation at the NCTE National Conference in Washington D.C. last year, by James Garner and Rachel Stokes, Niki Vriens and I decided to use Edmodo as a platform for discussing Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). We painstakingly created questions that demanded critical examination of the text as well as multiple perspectives. Students from both of our classes were required to post their initial response using textual support, respond to the other students, and then try to come to a consensus. The results were fascinating. They not only dove into the text in order to support their thoughts, they also used passages that were not so obvious or surface-level. Additionally, an awareness of tone, style, and even vocabulary was evident. It was a joy to watch the students disagree with civility. We gave them phrases such as, “I can appreciate your point of view; however ...” They incorporated those types of phrases in a way that kept the emotions out of the disagreements, yet the discussions were engaging and grew perspectives.

We posed a variety of types of questions in order to elicit discussion. The Mechanicsburg Area School District Mission Statement speaks of the need to foster “critical and creative” thought, and our questions promoted this ideal. Primarily, we knew we had to ask questions that encouraged analytical thinking and at the same time, forced students back into the text. For example, one of the questions was, “How does Dimmesdale's character development in this section advance the theme of the destructive power of guilt?” This question allowed for multiple perspectives, but it could not be answered without a close reading. That was the goal. In addition, we periodically asked more subjective questions that spark debate via the polling feature of Edmodo.

These types of questions and interactions addressed the College and Career Standards by helping students “Initiate and participate

effectively in a range of collaborative discussions on grade-level topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively" (PA Common Core Standard CC1.5.11-12.A). As someone who has taught *The Scarlet Letter* for eight years, I had to ask myself: Why was this platform so successful in encouraging our students to think critically and communicate effectively? In the past, the antiquated language of this piece often became a barrier to rich classroom discussion. My observations of the students suggested that the students' communication changed because platforms such as Edmodo offer three important elements:

1. **Audience.** Students are comfortable having time to present their ideas in a controlled way. As we see in their use of other forms of social media, they want to control the perception of who they are, and if the rest of the class is engaged in rigorous academic dialogue on this platform, they will meet that challenge as well. Audience matters. The teacher's perception or even the almighty grade is not enough of a motivator for many students.
2. **Time.** Some students in our classes have the ability to engage in thoughtful discussions about a text, but they need time to collect their thoughts without the eyes of their peers upon them. They simply cannot perform in real time, and this platform gives them an opportunity to add their voice to the discussion in a way that would not happen during a real-time classroom discussion.
3. **Ownership.** This platform forced students to share ideas, disagree, find passages, and ask questions without the teacher's voice. We did not chime in and try to shape the discussion or correct their thoughts. Oh, it was tempting, but in the end, they owned the discourse. They made the meaning. It was sometimes painful to watch them try to come to a consensus, but seeing them come to their own understandings without my telling them what to understand was extremely rewarding.

Conclusion: Spreading the Ripples

The use of social media, in a safe, supervised, online environment, provides opportunities for rigor, growth, and ownership that many teachers struggle to produce in a traditional classroom setting. Five years into this project, adding an AP Language and Composition course, and having students create policy arguments collaboratively, we have replicated similar results with competitive, authentic publication, and we had students who, on their own, in efforts to excel, began to pay attention to and engage in conversations about current political events. For the first time in our professional lives, without our prompting, students were reading publications like *The Wall Street Journal*, watching major network news, and even evaluating news sources to improve their arguments with their group members, 900 miles away, online. The results of this project continue to astound us as teachers and are extremely rewarding, year after year.

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