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Gary Crew - Live Online: a Virtual Interview in LC_MOO

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On the 14th November 2001, eighteen students from two schools in Tasmania and Victoria logged on to computers and laptops in their school libraries in preparation for an eagerly anticipated online author visit. At same time, but far away in distance, Gary Crew was connecting from his office desk in

Queensland, the star attraction for a virtual author interview. The online setting for this synchronous meeting was Learning Communities MOO (LC_MOO, 2000) hosted by Charles Sturt University. MOOs (multi-user object oriented domains) are accessed with client software and a telnet connection or via the World Wide Web. They provide a virtual environment that supports real time communication between players logged in to the same environment, creating a 'same time, same place' context for discourse. Virtual 'spaces' in a MOO consist of interconnected rooms and objects that participants can inhabit and interact with. Communication is achieved through the use of commands that present dialogue and emotive responses onto the screens of all people sharing a common 'space'.

Literature Circles in a Virtual Context

Primary students, in four schools located in different states of eastern Australia, have been participating in literature circle discussions in LC_MOO since 1998 when a research project conducted by the School of Information Studies, Charles Sturt University (Hay & Hanson, 1999) was implemented. The literature circles held in LC_MOO in 2001 have provided data for doctoral research by the author to further investigate how educational MOOs can support students' literary discussions. These students spent much of the year meeting on a regular basis to participate in literature circles. These discussions incorporate cooperative structures that facilitate shared participation, group accountability and encourage participants to explore literature from different cognitive perspectives. Daniels (1994) considers the literature circle model as a means to encourage independent reading and cooperative learning in a stimulating, social activity. He presents a range of roles that participants adopt to support

their literary discussions. These roles encourage readers to reflect on and interpret texts from a range of perspectives, which in combination lead to a collective interpretation of a text to support the social construction of shared understanding.

Daniels identifies a number of roles for application in a literature circle. Hay and Hanson (1999) explored the effectiveness of these roles with adult readers, and three have been found to be particularly valuable for young readers in developing understandings in an online context (Bales, 2001): the Discussion Director, the Connector and the Literary Luminary. A fourth role, the Graphic Illuminator, has been developed by the author in response to the environment and the graphic nature of the texts under discussion. For this interview, a fifth role, the Investigator was included.

- The **Discussion Director** is responsible for asking questions that help people talk over the big ideas in the text and to share their reactions. The Discussion Director also convenes the discussion. (The author, as the organiser of the event, undertook the responsibility of convening the interview)
- The **Literary Luminary** shares important or significant sections of the text and encourages readers' responses to these passages.
- The **Connector** is responsible for finding connections between the reading and their own and others' experiences.
- The **Graphic Illuminator** is responsible for raising discussion on the illustrator's contribution to the story and how this has been achieved.
- The **Investigator** is responsible for conducting research on some aspect of the book or the author, and sharing this information with the group to increase their understanding of the text.

During September and October these 11- and 12-year-old students worked in small groups to discuss Crew's works over several weeks. The titles they explored were: *Memorial* (1999), *Bright Star* (1996), *In My Father's Room* (2000), *Lucy's Bay* (1992) and *First Light* (1993). The author interview was a culmination of these discussions and was intended to answer questions raised during discussions, broaden

students' understandings and support their increased interest in Crew as an author. The application of the literature circle role model was adapted to provide a focus for the five groups to develop questions and reflections on one of the books discussed during a literature circle. Each group was assigned a role and a book. Their purpose was to develop a broad-based question and a specific focus question stemming from their responses to the book during previous discussions. Matching roles and books was achieved by reviewing transcripts of students' discussions and identifying questions or queries they brought to the text that Gary may be able to answer. For example, one group's discussion about *In My Father's Room* (Group 3, 2001) included the following dialogue:

Steve_DD [to TessC]: the illustrations are about the girl and they give you the view on what she thinks"

TessC says, "yes"

Michael_LL says, " i liked how the words were all about the dad and the pictures were all about the girl!"

Steve_DD [to Michael]: I thought that was interesting. I wonder if GC told the illustrator to do that."

It was planned for the students to develop their questions online prior to the author visit. However, unforeseen school commitments made this impossible, so these were done in 'real life', with pairs of students from each group working on either the broad-based or specific questions. These were then emailed between the schools and shared before the meeting.

The Virtual Interview

Before the meeting took place, Gary volunteered some time to be introduced to LC_MOO, visit the virtual room where the interview would take place and practice some basic communication and movement commands. Aply assisted by a colleague at his university in Queensland, we finally overcame connection problems twenty-four hours before the scheduled event. With different time zones and timetables to factor in, students, author and teacher-librarians connected and we moved to the virtual world of ...

Crew's Campus

You enter the world of Gary Crew, an Australian author, who writes for children and young adults. The picture books you see here have a range of characters who each have an interesting story to share. The intriguing covers have been produced by a number of illustrators and each is unique, begging further exploration. Which book would

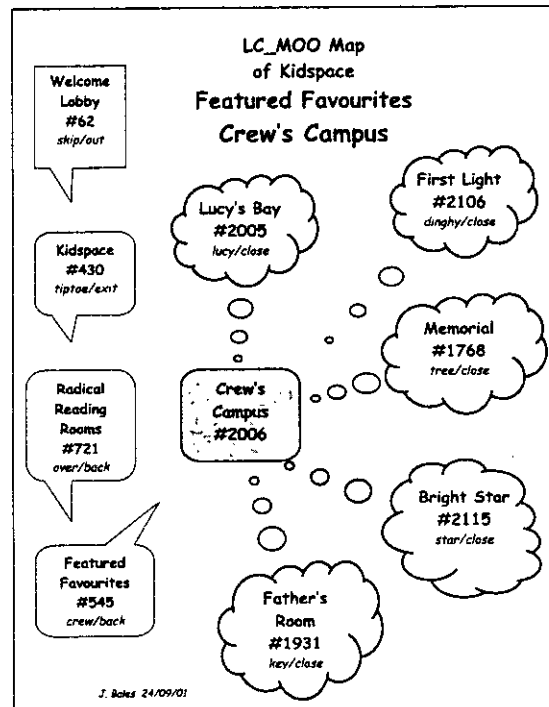
you like to open? Whose story do you want to unravel?

You see kraken here.

You see SarahA, Tess, GraceB, ParisC, AdamM, Caileb, Rani, Paige, Genevieve, AnnelieseC, Sophie, Nicole, Tess, Alister, Michael, EmmaH, Travis, SteveP, MrsD, MrsN, MissB

Obvious exits: [lucy] to Lucy's Bay, [dinghy] to First Light, [tree] to

Memorial, [star] to Bright Star, [key] to Father's Room, [back] to Featured Favourites



The following excerpts present the significant dialogue shared between Gary and the students during their hour online together. To help unify the questions and responses, the dialogue is organised by the roles each group were responsible for, and some social conversation has been omitted. MOO environments encourage social interaction and these students were experienced in creating dialogue and sharing feelings and actions. A sense of camaraderie quickly developed as the group began to interact.

The interview started informally:

GaryC arrives.

ParisC says, "Hi Gary"

GaryC says, "Hi I have just had a chicken and lettuce sandwich"

Caileb says, "Hello Gary"

AnnelieseC says, " Holly Did too"

GraceB [to GaryC]: I just a had a piece of chicken from the canteen

MissB wolfed down a salami and salad roll

GaryC laughs

EmmaH says, "Hi Gary"

GraceB laughs

GaryC says, "Miss B must have bad breath"

ParisC laughs

Mrs_D smiles because our girls are all eating lunch

GraceB [to GaryC]: I think she does, only kidding.

Nicole [to Gary]: Hi how are you today?

GraceB laughs

Caileb [to GaryC]: How are you?

GaryC says, "I am fine and is laughing too"

GaryC says, "What questions do you have for me?"

The Discussion Directors

Group 4 (2001) had the task of developing questions that related to broad issues in Crew's writing, such as themes, character or plot development. Their focus text was *Lucy's Bay*.

Nicole [to GaryC]: "Why do you write about a totally different theme for each story, for example doing things you don't want to do, feeling bad about things you are sorry for and being expected to be something your not?"

GaryC says, "I write about totally different things for each story to keep myself interested. I like exploring different concepts in each story. Only occasionally have I used experiences from my own life for example as in *Lucy's Bay* and in *First light*, both of those books were based on childhood experiences in Moreton Bay which is near Brisbane where I spent my Christmas holidays. I tend not to write about my own life as it is pretty ordinary which is why I explore other issues."

Rani says, "As we read *Lucy's Bay*, it unfolds what has happened to Lucy and how Sam feels about this. It is very effective and we feel for Sam as we learn more about his venture to *Lucy's Bay*. How did you manage to tell us so much about Sam and his character without actually describing him?"

GaryC says, "I have to rely on the illustrator to show you what Sam looks like and also by his facial expression how he feels and sometimes what he is thinking. Its good to remember that the illustrator is also an author in his or her own right. That is they compose the other half of the story that I don't."

MissB nods to Gary and thinks we will return to the illustrator in a minute.

Nicole [to GaryC]: What makes you choose these lifelike experiences to base your stories on?

GaryC says, "I tend not to choose experiences from my own life but all stories have to have a life of their own for people to relate to them"

Nicole [to GaryC]: thanks for answering my questions

The Graphic Illuminators

Group 3 used their role focus to ask Gary about how he worked with illustrators and his feelings about how they interpreted his texts. *In My Father's Room* was the title they used to exemplify and expand on their ideas.

SarahA [to GaryC]: Gary, how closely do you work with an illustrator? Do you tell them before they start if you want the text shown in a particular way or can they illustrate the way they see it?

Tess_LL says, "Do you ever get a surprise when they have finished and have you ever had to rewrite text to fit the illustrations"

GaryC says, "I usually have an idea in my head of what the illustrations will look like and quite often send the illustrator visual reference material of what I think the book would look like. However the illustrator is free to interpret my words in pictures according to what they see. Very often the illustrator will use what I send but there have been times when the illustrator comes up with a whole new idea which always makes me very happy. No illustrator has let me down yet in coming up with fresh and original ideas. After all it is their book too."

SteveP [to GaryC]: "We thought that in the book *In my Fathers Room* the pictures told a different point of view than your words. For example the bust is not mentioned in your words only the pictures yet it is very important to show the girl's feelings.

GaryC says, "Yes I have rewritten my text to fit illustrations and that is the way it should be because the illustrated book is a combination of the illustrator's work and the authors work. It's not just my ideas that are important I must respect the illustrators ideas too."

Michael says, "Did you know that Annemarie Scott was going to add extra details to the story before she drew the pictures. If not, were you surprised and what was your reaction? "

GaryC says, "SteveP and Michael, a good illustrator should extend the story in the print text not just represent in pictures what is shown

in the words. For this reason Annemarie Scott came up with the idea of the character Too Good making the bust of her father as a surprise which is shown in the pictures while Too Goods father is writing her a book which is only shown in the print text. Therefore you have two separate stories that come together in the climax of the book. So no I was not surprised at Annemarie's ideas and thought they were very valuable."

MissB [to GaryC]: that is a great answer about Scott, we were all wondering if it was her idea.

Other dialogue

One aspect of synchronous communication that can cause frustration is the time it takes for long pieces of dialogue to appear on the screen. These students were used to maintaining several threads of conversation at one time. Because students' individual responsibilities for participating in the interview were limited, and to maintain a sense of action during the typing of Gary's responses, the students were given opportunities to share some personal opinions.

MissB wonders which illustrator each group or person preferred.

Nicole [to MissB]: my favourite illustrator is Peter Gouldthorpe (First Light)

AdamM thought that Mark Mcbride's work on the Kraken really helped in the description of the Kraken

EmmaH [to Adam] I agree

MissB likes Shaun Tan's illustrations a lot.

EmmaH says, "So do I."

GraceB [to MissB]: me too, they have lots of little important details"

SteveP [to MissB]: I liked Marc Mcbride's illustration"

Caileb [to GaryC]: I liked Mark McBride the best because he draws unusual things

GraceB [to Caileb]: Same

SteveP [to Caileb]: that was my reason

SteveP [to MissB]: I thought the book was illustrated really well and that helped me understand it"

MissB [to GaryC]: is there a favourite for you to work with?

GaryC says, "No I don't have a favourite I am lucky to be able to choose my own illustrators and do so because different illustrators styles suit different stories. I get along with all of them very well and feel very comfortable working with each one of them. They have all become very firm friends and we relate very easily"

The Literary Luminaries

This role involves looking at an author's use of language to convey meaning and Group 1 focused their questions on how Gary develops his prose. The book they expanded on was *Memorial*, and this extract shows how other students who had studied the book added spontaneous thoughts to the discussion.

Holly_Anneliese says, "Gary, you create wonderful word pictures and moods with how you use words and sentences. Is there a special way that you do this, or do you have to rewrite a paragraph many times to get it right?"

GaryC says, "Thanks for the compliment. Yes I have to write many, many drafts to arrive at exactly what I want to say"

Alister says, "In Memorial we liked the page with the zebra crossing. Was it your intention to make the reader read in a particular way, or did Shaun Tan decide this for himself when he did the art?"

GaryC says, "Yes it was my intention to make this part of the story broken up. Shaun helped this along in his design of the book by putting those words across the white strips of the pedestrian crossing"

Caileb says, "We really liked the way you used words and sentences to get the message across in Memorial. How did you plan this?"

GaryC says, "I thought that since it was a young boy speaking or telling the story in Memorial that his language should be very clear and simple. For this reason there are no long speeches or paragraphs and the book reads like a simple conversation between the boys family members"

AdamM says, "I thought it had strong messages about how you should try to do what was right and also how memories will live on forever"

MissB wonders if the Moreton bay fig where Gary grew up was chopped down.

Nicole [to MissB]: I thought it was rather sad about the council wanting to move the tree. It was a memory that meant lots to the family and it would have been sad to see it go.

GaryC says, "AdamM thanks. Yes so far as I saw in the book while the father, grandfather and great grandfather had all fought military wars the boys struggle, or war if you like, was against the council who wanted to cut the tree down. So there are lots of different levels of the message"

GaryC says, "MissB there wasn't one particular Moreton Bay fig but in Qld they were commonly planted as street trees about the turn of the

century and now they are so huge that they have become nuisances lifting the bitumen etc"

The Connectors

In a literature circle, this role involves making 'connections' with events in a story and personal experiences. The students in Group 5 were interested in discovering if Gary made these sort of connections when developing his stories, in particular, *First Light*.

Travis says, "So did you write First Light from direct experience, someone else's story or did you just make it up?"

GaryC says, "Thanks Travis, yes First Light was based on an actual childhood experience when I was out fishing with my father in Moreton bay. It was so early in the morning that it was still dark and something huge (maybe a whale maybe a turtle) came up under out dinghy and lifted it clear out of the water. My dad and I both pooped our pants and we never went fishing again"

GraceB laughs at Gary pooing his pants

Genevieve laughs too

Paige says, "Do you feel it is more effective to use issues in each of your Stories. Which issues have chosen which you think are really important to raise and why?"

AdamM [to GaryC]: When we read the book First Light we made a connection with the boy being told to do something he didn't want to do. "

GaryC says, "I don't really set out to choose issues that are the meaning of life for my stories. Sometimes the illustrated books are just based on fantasy as in the case of the Watertower. I think that telling a good story is more important than coming up with some meaning of life issue"

Genevieve says, "I agree with Gary"

Caileb [to GaryC]: I think that as well

The Investigators

This role was adapted to focus on the types of investigations and research that Gary undertakes with his writing. Group 2 had been particularly intrigued by the historical detail reflected in *Bright Star*.

EmmaH says, "What kinds of research do you need to do, to prepare for writing your books. Which books did you spend the most time researching?"

GaryC says, "I research using libraries mostly rather than the net as I am old fashioned and mean. I research mostly for my novels rather

than the picture books although in cases like Memorial I sent Shaun Tan so many photographs of Moreton bay fig trees that he thought I was a treeophile and a nut case. So I stopped"

Genevieve says, "We think that the embroidered sampler on page 11 is very important to the story. How did you find out about the things from that era that were in the story? Lots of things in the illustrations weren't written about in the story. Did you tell Ann Spudvilas what you wanted to portray through the illustrations or did she do her own research?"

Genevieve says, "You must have researched John Tebbutt the astronomer."

MissB chuckles at Gary being too mean to pay for his internet connections.

GaryC says, "Genevieve and Grace are right I did the research on the astronomer but Anne Spudvilas the illustrator actually went to Sovereign Hill historical site to make sure that all the artefacts in the school room were historically accurate and then used that reference in the book"

Mrs_D [to GaryC]: Mrs D thinks you are clever going to the library

MissB thinks we could visit the Bright Star room and look at Gary's research in there.

SteveP [to GaryC]: The internet is not as helpful as books because they [web sites] are more likely to give you false information "

The Grand Finale

With the students' questions answered, the conversation continued, with Gary asking a question of his own.

GaryC says, "How come none of you read the Watertower which is my favourite picturebook?"

MissB grins at Gary and almost agrees - we didn't have enough copies at the time, but plan to do something about it for next year.

MissB says, "But we have a new favourite I think at our school."

Mrs_D says, "Water tower is a fabulous book but it has been 'lost' from our library which is why we didn't choose it"

MissB says, "Hands up the SPS kids who vote the Kraken as their favourite."

AdamM rasies hand

SteveP raises his hand

Caileb raises his hand

Travis jumps and puts BOTH his hands in the air

EmmaH raises her hand

AdamM shudders at the memory of the cruel and heartless Kraken

Caileb gulps just at the thought of the Kraken

GraceB is so scared

GaryC says, "You are all whimps"

GaryC smiles

GraceB is not a wimp

MissB [to GaryC]: that was a very powerful book, where did you get that idea from?

Nicole [to GaryC]: how long did it take you to write the kraken?

SteveP [to GaryC]: How did you become aware of the idea of doubt and despair and why did you use a sea monster?"

Mrs_D [to GaryC]: Our girls haven't done the Kraken yet, but I'm sure they're totally inspired now

GaryC says, "I was looking at a book on sea monsters and saw a reference to the legendary Kraken. I then got hooked on research into Kraken but I wanted to give it a modern spin so the story came about. Marc McBride was the right choice because he does fantasy illustration in airbrush which really suited the book. Besides Marc is crazy"

GaryC says, "I worked on the Kraken for about 12 months, Marc for another 12 months the idea of the Kraken representing despair was just to put a modern spin on an ancient legend"

The Spontaneous Finale

MissB thinks we have run out of time.

Alister holds up a SIGN: Thanks for giving up your time to speak to us

Rani says, " Thankyou very much on behalf of Kilvington Gary Crew, for joining us in the Moo, it was a great experience to talk to an Author after we have read your inspiring books "

MissB says, "I think we have found out the answers to our questions and lots more as well."

SteveP [to GaryC]: you can say that again"

AdamM applauds

SarahA says, "thanks gary!"

Tess_LL says, "bye guys"

Anneliese says, "thank you Gary"

Paige says, "bye"

Caileb claps and cheers

GraceB says, "thanks gary see you later. " "

Sophie_C says, "Thankyou"

GraceB claps

Paris says "You were great Gary thankyou!"

Alister Claps and cheers too

Travis says, "thanks"

EmmaH claps loudly

SteveP claps and applauds Gary's efforts"

Rani waves goodbye

GaryC says, "Bye to all of you

MissB says, "Gary was that OK?"

GaryC says, "It went really well Gary is happy and is now signing off. Good luck with everything!"

MissB says, "Thankyou!"

Concluding Thoughts

For all involved, this virtual author visit was considered a resounding success.

The students were inspired by the experience, empowered by having their questions addressed seriously and thoughtfully by Gary and highly motivated throughout the session. It placed them in a position of responsibility and leadership in a context that was meaningful and significant to their identified learning needs.

For the two teacher-librarians involved in organising, planning and running the event, it was highly rewarding. The keen interest and focused responses maintained by the students for the hour-long session were testimony to the educational value of the event. The success of applying the literature circle role model to the development of the interview questions was evident in the range of ideas and perspectives that Gary presented. His detailed responses to the range of questions provide a valuable resource to support future Crew author studies in classrooms.

For the author, the session ran smoothly and was less stressful than his occasional previous synchronous experiences. His natural, and at times humorous, interactions with the group indicate his level of comfort and enjoyment of the event. This online author interview did more than elicit information from an author about his work. It offered a reader perspective to the author, shedding light on their individual interpretations and understandings.

A key factor in the success of this virtual author visit and interview was the harnessing of current technologies to overcome distance and space to bring diverse people together for a great learning experience in the unique and relevant virtual 'space' of Crew's Campus in LC_MOO.

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