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Social Interactions for Academic Purposes in Literature Classes for Non English Speakers

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Abstract: Problem statement: This study reports how Learning Communities (LCs) and Online Learning Communities (OLCs) can improve Taiwanese EFL students' lack of Social Interactions (SIs) and acdemic skills in literature classes (Y1, N = 40) by involving freshmen in a social process that encourages student-student and student-instructor discussion, interpretation, production and negotiation. **Approach:** The data collected from the database of the university learning management system in National Dong Hwa University, Taiwan indicates the level of collaborative learning expected by a student completing a literature class. The researcher used a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire designed by the university to assess students' learning performance and satisfaction levels. **Results:** The use of LCs enhanced students' social interactions which, in turn, helped to motivate students' interactions in OLCs. Moreover, the use of both communities satisfied students' learning needs, all of which contributed to developing their critical thinking. **Conclusion:** The study concludes with a discussion of the relative contribution of SIs that satisfies students' learning needs for their academic skills.

Key words: Learning Communities (LCs), Social Interactions (SIs), Learning Management System (LMS), Carleton Hotline for Administration and Teaching (CHAT)

INTRODUCTION

With the intention of overcoming the problems and difficulties of collaborative learning in ELF literature classes, the researcher set about implementing an alternate "social interaction model" for teaching literature to English majors at National Dong Hwa University, Taiwan (NDHU, Y1, N = 40 out of 45/42, 2 semesters) by organizing Learning Communities (LCs) and online Learning Communities (OLCs) embedded in the university Learning Management System (LMS). To address the proposed aims to the participants (freshmen), the researcher introduced the collaborative learning method in the context of literature pedagogy. The researcher involved the students in learning-oriented "social interactions," which can be viewed as a set of processes that establish effective group work and social interaction skills. Apart from the learning problems mentioned above, another essential problem that must be solved is the students' teamwork skills. The overall objectives were to improve the students' ability in language problem-solving and to shift the students' sense of responsibility for their own learning from an individual model to a collaborative one. Towards these objectives, the students were required to develop collaborative approaches to solving problems and implementing solutions, which are approaches that would result in the production of concrete knowledge in language, literature and critical thinking.

Literature review:

Social Interactions (SIs): Dewey's (1897) belief in the power of social interactions in learning still influences many contemporary educational approaches. He explained:

I believe that knowledge of social conditions, of the present state of civilization, is necessary in order properly to interpret the child's powers. The child has his own instincts and tendencies, but we do not know what these mean until we can translate them into their social equivalents. We must be able to carry them back into a social past and see them as the inheritance of previous race activities. We must also be able to project them into the future to see what their outcome and end will be (pp. 77-78).

However, due to the vast changes that communication technology engendered in the educational environment, this theory of social interactions leads to the question of whether students can grow personally and learn academically without face-to-face interactions with instructors and peers. Slevin (2008) indicates that e-Learning and the transformation of social interactions in higher education brought challenges for educators. Fujikawa (2010) studies show that learning attitudes and behaviors will be altered if the learning takes place in a technology-based environment. Despite the difference in

pedagogical media, the interactive component and the differences in interaction between the traditional and Web-based pedagogical platforms, a vital need exists to assess the effectiveness of interactivity in a web-based course. An important concern is that the interactions between learners and instructors, learners and their peers as well as learners and the course content possess different characteristics. Students who feel a sense of connectedness and psychological closeness more often than they feel isolation are better prepared to become more actively involved with online learning and are more likely to achieve the resulting higher-order thinking and knowledge-building (Baker, 2010; Engstrom *et al*., 2008).

Learning Communities (LCs): Lave and Wenger (1991) explain that learning is a social practice, because a learner makes stronger connections between information in social settings and through social interaction, which underpins Dewey's (1998) recognition of the social nature of learning. Schools' growing interest in LCs has been accredited to the findings of research conducted in the 1970s and 1980s and then implemented into "effective schools," which shaped the "concept of school as community" (Larrivee, 2000). A learning community not only facilitates the sharing of information or knowledge, but also has the potential to create new knowledge that can benefit the community as a whole. Emerging research in cognitive science suggests the importance of the learning context and of developing schema to permit new learning through making connections with what was previously determined to be valid under specific conditions and contexts. The increased opportunities afforded by learning communities for peer learning and interaction allow for the development of richer, more complex ways of thinking and knowing so that students learn at a deeper level (Bransford *et al*., 2000).

Online Learning Communities (OLCs): Rovai (2002) and Carlen and Jobring (2005) suggest that an online community is based on what groups of people share and do with one another, not how or where they interact. Therefore, an OLC reflects the community's shared interests and knowledge. Engestrom (1993) illustrates that an OLC can be seen as a developed activity system in which a group of learners, unified by a common cause and empowered by a virtual environment, engage in collaborative learning within an atmosphere of trust and commitment. Despite an increasing interest in the promise of implementing OLCs, a study by Bagherian and Thorngate (2000) shows the failure of OLCs at Carleton University the Carleton Hotline for Administration and Teaching, or (CHAT). Results showed that the majority of students never posted messages, nor did their instructors, because they could not recognise any educational value in CHAT. Between the extremes are several contingent possibilities that different features of the Internet might be pedagogically useful for different combinations of students, course topics and learning objectives. The Challenge that educators face when implementing an OLC is how to best enable students to communicate, collaborate and coordinate so as to facilitate knowledge acquisition and use. The second challenge that educators need to consider carefully when they are looking forward to maximizing technology integration in education is to encourage social interactions. OLCs are not networks focused on social relationships, but on social interactions.

Context, methods, data, measures and discussion:

Context: The research first deals with the student responses to LCs and OLCs, which comprised an exploratory stage that aimed to investigate insights of possible development of social interaction within the LCs and OLCs. The second stage of the research is a confirmatory stage in which the researcher identified the students' behaviors and performance in collaborative learning, which tests (1) if the use of LCs enhances students' social interactions; (2) if the use of LCs helps to motivate students' interactions in OLCs; and (3) if the use of LCs and OLCs satisfies students' learning needs. To answer these research questions, the research proceeded inductively by generating patterns related to the social interaction attributes defined by Manski (1993): Endogenous, exogenous and correlated social effects. Learners may exogenously change their learning behaviors as a result of redefining themselves as part of a group. Endogenously, success-seeking learners may try to study hard to gain better grades. That is, if an individual cares not only about his outcomes but also about his peers' outcomes, he is under the influence of endogenous social effects or interactions, because he often relies on others' decisions in the same social milieu. If the behavior of an individual varies with the exogenous peer characteristics (called exogenous social effects), then his achievement is related to the background of the reference group. However, if an individual in the same reference group tends to behave similarly because the individual is akin to the group members, then he is under the influence of correlated effects. Manski (1993) concludes that endogenous effects generate social multipliers, while exogenous effects or correlated effects do not.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Meyers's (2008) emphasizes the need for instructors to validate all student perspectives as well as acknowledge differing beliefs and biases to create a welcoming community that helps students to become "more engaged and feel more interconnected" (p. 220). In the case of this research, the students learned together and at the same time "were forced" to form LCs for "Socratic seminars" and "literature circles". They were also "forced" to form OLCs for discussion forums in order to engage themselves in both LCs and OLCs. An initial introductory class was held to familiarize students with the university LMS, LCs and OLCs in which the teacher-researcher analyzed their academic performance and behaviors by utilizing classroom monitoring, "think-aloud" sessions with individuals and the LMS database.

Data source and instrument: The researcher conducted a series of data collections from the university LMS to investigate students' behaviors while they were engaging in LCs and OLCs and to investigate their perspectives on the LCs and OLCs' relevance to literature classes. Data from the LMS were statistically collected for all participants who replied to at least one message or received at least one reply over the research period. Emphasis was placed on social effect categories. From the raw data, the researcher constructed behavioral visualizations and network data sets based on reply relationships. Another data source was a 5-point Likert scale annual student survey designed by NDHU, Taiwan. It was used to assess students' learning performance and learning satisfaction levels, respectively. Since the questionnaire result details are classified, this study offers a general discussion instead of a statistical discussion.

RESULTS

Finding 1: LC and OLC bridging and bonding: Due to the lack of sophistication in the university LMS, students were free to organize their LCs and OLCs for different classes' tasks. High-activity participants used the forum both to interact with others (synchronously and asynchronously) and to act as mediators and problem solvers for the OLCs, thus establishing a collaborative learning relationship. It was evident that at the end of the project, all of the participants contributed to their LCs and OLCs more than they had during the first semester (Table 1 and Fig. 1). Moreover, most participants were very positive toward interacting and making bonds with other members.

For years, students have been encouraged to share their literary analyses in most literature classes, so the LC is something to which the students were accustomed. The teachers' process of holding LC discussion supports the ideas of social interactions and bonding for active learning. The participants felt a certain amount of unease with the openness of the OLC discussion forum due to reading literacy and language problems; therefore, they preferred to work in the LCs instead of the OLCs in the 1st semester, but the posts for OLC were incresed because they reckons they gained more academic knowledge if they involved in the OLCs.

Table 1: Total and average threads hit

	1st semester LC task hits	1st semester OLC posts	2nd semester LC task hits	2nd semester OLC posts
Total threads	1,056	679	1,434	1,206
AVG threads (per week)	20	13	28	23

Table 2: Average percentage of interaction behaviours

AVG % of	1st semester LC OLC endogenous	2nd semester LC endogenous	2nd semester OLC endogenous	1st semester OLC endogenous
interaction behaviours	46%	75%	27%	74%

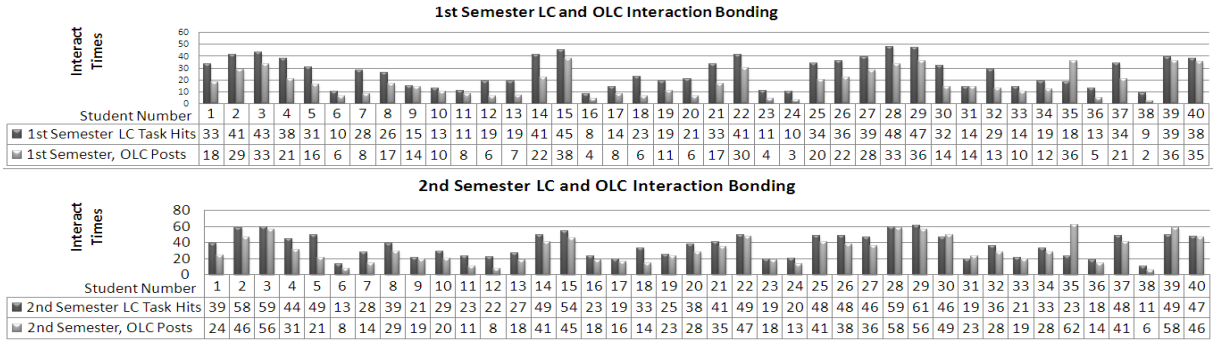


Fig. 1: LC and OLC interaction bonding, 2 semester

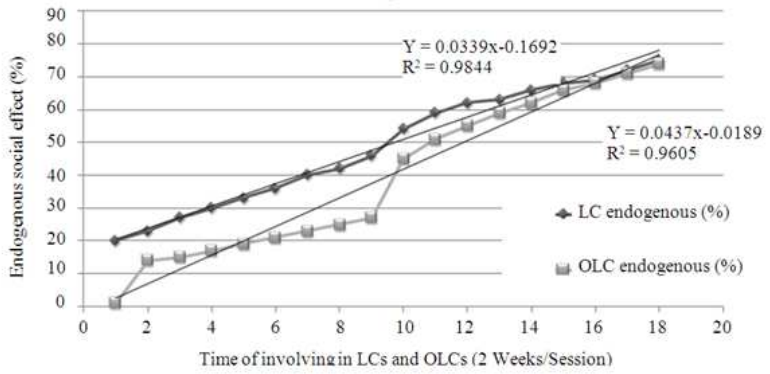
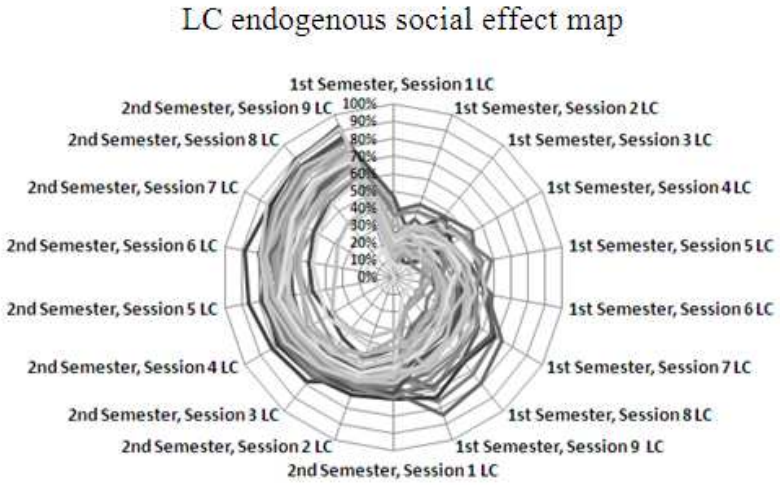
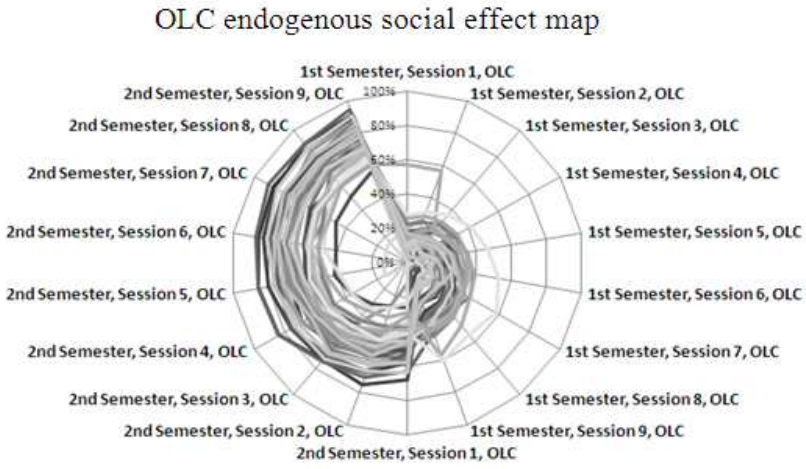


Fig. 2: Influence of Endogenous Social Effect on Time of Involving in LCs and OLCs



(a)



(b)

Fig. 3: LC and OLC Endogenous Social Effect Map

The researcher also found that participants who contributed at least one message/learning load to the discussions initiated by others were proportionately tied to the relative influence of endogenous social effect and time of involvement in LCs and OLCs (Table 2).

The R^2 values are 0.9844 and 0.9605, respectively (Fig. 2), which provide strongly predictive behaviors correlated with social interactions. Students' structural and behavioral patterns associated with endogenous social effects showed significant influence from their LCs and OLCs. Exogenous and correlated effects did not vary in this research, so the study identifies the endogenous effects. Participants were more confident when working within the community and receiving peer corrections either for literary or language purposes or due to the psychological sense of community.

The more they worked in the LCs, the more they wanted to post their polished threads to the OLC discussion forum. When participants were asked to consider OLCs in terms of the "third place" (face-to-face classroom being the first place and LC the second) to gain specific knowledge, they attempted to find significant "sameness" and "differences" for certain threads.

The differential effect along two semesters was slightly larger for LCs (point estimate 0.9844, significant at 98 percent confidence) than for OLCs (point estimate 0.9605, significant at 98 percent confidence) (Fig. 2). Similarly, it is also evident that the willingness to work in the OLCs gradually increased ever since the end of the first semester. Thus, research questions 1 and 2 were answered.

Finding 2: Endogenous social effects: The Socratic seminars and literature circles used for LCs encouraged students' dialogic exchange and engaged them in intellectual discussion whereby they responded to questions with questions. Students helped one another to examine issues and principles related to particular content and to produce different points of view. Most of the time, participants were weaving their learning attitudes among endogenous, exogenous or correlated effects. By their willingness to join OLC discussion, participants showed their endogenous social effects when dealing with posts. Even so, endogenous effects influenced the participants even more when they were working with their LCs and OLCs (Fig. 3), because the course was a core class for English majors that could determine their social status in the department. Besides, substantially larger endogenous effects were found during the second semester, mainly because the participants realised that the university LMS documented all learning processes and journal entries.

Nevertheless, social interaction is defined as one's participation in social networks, so higher levels of network participation can be labelled as higher levels of a social multiplier. 46% and 27% of all participants (Table 1) showed that they were under influence of endogenous social effects. The small magnitude of this effect is important both for the policy and for the psychological perspective, given the importance of educational attainment for individuals in these marginalized, literature-based communities. Weak instruments were not a main concern in the estimation of the endogenous social interaction effects. There was a strong partial correlation amongst the face-to-face LC with Socratic seminar, the literature circle indicator and the potentially endogenous regressor, which is the OLC discussion confidence rate.

The university LMS discussion forum presented similar opportunities and characters to the participants for the first time in an informal setting, which required them to use what literary knowledge they have to discuss the topics with other students. OLCs via LMS offered an environment in which participants could take control of their own learning. Through the process of negotiation or mediation, participants were able to find partners that would help their personal development both in language and literary knowledge. As well as examining the ways in which OLCs could transform learning, it is equally important to consider how the technologies were also transformed by the participants through social interactions.

The use of LCs will enhance students' social interactions and the use of LCs can also help to motivate students' interactions in OLCs.

Finding 3: Student performance and satisfactions: This preliminary research was carried out in the computer lab for a content-rich literature course with the students and the teacher-researcher making use of the Web. The teacher-researcher was evaluated by the students at the end of both semesters, as required by the university and was scored 4.60 and 4.83, respectively (Table 3). Besides, the results in Table 3 indicate that students who devoted in their learning community and online learning community are associated with higher levels of academic effort, academic integration and active and collaborative learning (see Questions 17 and 18). Similarly, learning communities are positively linked into online learning communities, with students more frequently interacting with community members, engaging in diversity-related activities and gaining academic achievement that emphasizes higher-order thinking skills in two semesters, comprehensive skill enhanced, CO = 36/40 (90%) and analytical skill enhanced, AN = 28/40 (70%) and 33/40 (82.5%) respectively (see Question 20.)

Table 3: Survey designed and collected by NDHU, TW translated by the researcher

Intro to western lit, annual survey NDHU, TW (at most 0.04 bonus points will be awarded if the class size is over 40)

Measure 1: Teaching and learning satisfaction Strongly Agree = SA (5), Agree = A N(3), (4), Neutral = N Disagree = D (2), Strongly Disagree = SD (1)	1st semester					2nd semester				
	SA	A	N	D	SD	SA	A	N	D	SD
1. Provides detailed sequences and scopes of the class.	31	9	3	2	0	34	7	1	0	0
2. Is expert in the subject area and has a cutting-edge grasp of academic development and how students learn.	32	8	4	1	0	36	4	2	0	0
3. Uses materials and displays to maximize student learning of all materials.	29	11	4	1	0	31	6	4	1	0
4. Orchestrates highly. materials to motivate students.	33	8	31	0	3	6	4	2	0	0
5. Uses coherence and silky-smooth transitions to get the most out of every minute.	24	13	6	2	0	29	10	2	1	0
6. Designs lessons with clear,. measurable goals aligned with unit outcomes.	25	14	4	2	0	33	6	3	0	0
7. Designs lessons that break down tasks and addresses learning needs and interests.	20	11	8	6	0	26	7	8	1	0
8. Clear and consistent evidence that various assessments is used during instruction.	24	13	6	2	0	28	10	3	1	0
9. Designs lessons involving an appropriate mix of top- notch, multicultural materials.	24	13	7	1	0	29	9	4	0	0
10. Has perfect or near-perfect attendance and routines are orderly and efficient and result in minimal time off-task.	27	12	5	1	0	34	6	2	0	0
11. Shows ongoing enthusiasm about teaching and shows a commitment to supporting the development of students.	31	10	3	1	0	35	6	1	0	0
12. Prepares diagnostic and summative assessments to monitor student learning.	27	13	3	2	0	33	6	3	0	0
13. Shows warmth, respect and fairness for students and builds strong relationships.	27	12	5	1	0	32	5	4	0	0
14. Presents as a consummate professional and observes appropriate boundaries.	28	13	3	1	0	34	6	2	0	0
15. Designs lessons that will motivate students and sweep them up in active learning.	24	14	4	2	1	28	6	4	1	1
	Average Score: 4.60					**Average Score: 4.83**				

Measure 2: Self Evaluation (Academic Achievemen by % (Frequency/St Poll)												
	SA	A	N	D	SD	%	SA	A	N	D	SD	%
16. I'll hand in the assignments on time.	49	27	18	6	0	%	62	26	12	0	0	%
17. I always work and collaborate with my team/ community for academic achievement.	42	33	18	7	0	%	57	22	19	2	0	%
18. Hours spent to study for this class per week outside. The classroom for academic achievement	6+	4-5	2-3	0-1	X	%	6+	4-5	2-3	0-1	X	%
	10	31	45	14	X	%	5	24	49	22	X	%
19. Times absent from this class.	5+	3-4	1-2	0	X	%	5+	3-4	-12	0	X	%
	0	2	27	71	X	%	2	0	13	34	X	%
Rote Memory = RM, Comprehensive = CO, Utilizable = U, Analytical = AN, Appraise= AP, Creative = CR, Analytical = AN, Appraise= AP, Creative = CR												
20. Skills learned in this class. (Multiple Responses)	RM	CO	UT	AN	AP	CR	RM	CO	UT	AN	AP	CR
	40	36	17	28	11	16	27	34	19	33	19	15

Apart from the assigned readings in the syllabus, some related open resources were also set as assigned reading materials. Students needed to read 10% more than the regular syllabus required and the workload was also higher than that of other literature classes, which worried the teacher-researcher initially. However, with the accomplishment of the weekly tasks for LCs and OLCs, students showed their potential to adapt their knowledge management to unfamiliar circumstances. Both the teacher-researcher and the participants were creating a rich social and literary interaction environment. 75% students in the 1st semester and 2% more in the 2nd semester agreed that they worked and collaborated with their team/community for the academic purposes (see Question 20). Therefore, the course evolved as the teacher-researcher added new technical

aspects over time to meet the needs of the participants. The more they worked collaboratively, the less they needed to study on their own (see Question 18) or to memorize the class contents (see Question 20). The annual survey confirms that the possibilities offered by the e-medium are changing exponentially, yet the nature of the medium itself, as well as its content, will profoundly improve any kind of pedagogical application only when the educators use the medium as a tool, not a burden, in assisting learning. how participants learn through those effects. Last, it provides a foundation for leveraging conceptual resistance and behavioral data to identify possibilities for other learning perspectives.

DISCUSSION

The present research lays the foundation for further discussion on literature teaching in terms of students' social interactions as well as of their academic potential. Based on the preliminary results, the LCs and OLCs clearly changed participants' learning attitudes. Item-specific or rote-memory learning outcomes could not satisfy their academic achievement any longer, even though these techniques are the foundation of academic knowledge. Therefore, if both teachers and fellow students can provide one another with timely and meaningful feedback on their academic progress as well as give advice to students who are in academic distress, appropriate social interactions can be initiated as a learning process in addition to knowledge-sharing. During the duration of the research, the teacher-researcher and students easily linked the work that they produced via LMS to learning outcomes and they evaluated linked items within the tool in which they were produced. To the extent that OLCs as well as LCs with Socratic seminars and literature circles could successfully motivate participants to learn both individually and collaboratively, the strategies could be used to evaluate the success of strategies intended to cultivate the desired academic learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Like most EFL learners, Taiwanese English majors' stumbling blocks in literature-related modules are language problems and the abstraction of literary knowledge from the reading assignments, both of which will influence their critical thinking performance. Major advances in research and practice in LCs and OLCs led to the realization that there is a need to shift the focus of educational pedagogy from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered one in order to improve the learning problems, language and critical thinking of students in literature-related classes. The study makes three types of contributions in the effort to decrease student's anxiety and resistance toward studying literature in Taiwan. First, it confirms that LCs can help students to read and think critically via the Socratic seminar and literature circle methods. Second, the specific attention to social interactions between LCs and OLCs distinguishes general discussion from the provisions of endogenous social effects and answers

The research concludes with two general claim (1) LC and OLC are a productive way to encourage social interactions toward learning; and (2) social interactions in LMS settings should be carefully managed through the intersection of multiple methods. Very little research has brought social interactions into literature classes. The current research might be a new direction that suggests a bridging of social knowledge, information knowledge, literary knowledge and computer science by transitioning from item-specific-oriented literary education to collaboration-oriented literary discussion and analysis-based learning. Leveraging the potential of that integration to reveal the hidden learning perspective of social interaction will require both educators and learners' aggressive attention to the academic community's needs.

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