#### Title

Teaching Literature in Postsecondary Education (CEGEP) and Knowledge Forum: Metacognition, Creativity and Deep Understanding

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### Abstract

Our research examines the potential of Knowledge Forum (KF) in a problem-based learning (PBL) approach in literature classes at college level ( $c\acute{e}gep^1$ ) to promote the development of reading competencies.

Our design-experiment research analyzed the metacognition, creativity and depth of thought in the 628 notes shared by 80 first semester students of an experimental group on KF, which were encoded by two coders. Two judges graded the papers of those students with a descriptive grid, and then compared them with the ones of a control group of 42 students, as a means to measure the impact of KF participation. Comments on a perceptual questionnaire answered in the last week of the course were also analyzed to see the emergence and the development of metacognitive awareness. Our results show that students' discussions and knowledge building on KF got them to use metacognitive strategies to read differently than in their habitual way. It also encouraged them to ask divergent questions and try innovative reading hypotheses. In the end, students of the experimental group performed better than those of the control group when writing their final essay, showing their reading comprehension and interpretation, especially when they re-used ideas developed in KF.

### Introduction

Our research stemmed from a very simple observation: students who move on to their first college-level literature classes (called *Écriture et littérature* or *Writing and literature*) most certainly have developed reading strategies throughout their previous schooling years, but those strategies are not necessarily adapted to the analytical exercise required of them at this level. Worse: fully confident in their reading abilities, the students do not seem to question their reading approach, even when the literary nature of a text would imply a slightly different method than the habitual pragmatic or leisure reading<sup>2</sup>.

To address this issue, we have adopted a class management method inspired by socioconstructivist and learning community principles<sup>3</sup>, and we attempted to establish an educational practice based on discussions<sup>4</sup> and the problem-based learning approach (PBL)<sup>5</sup>. In order to allow students to reap all the advantages of such a pedagogical approach and to render their interrogative process visible (to identify their actual difficulties as well as to try to guide the reflection exercise expected of them), we also have introduced Knowledge Forum<sup>®</sup> (KF) in our class.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> In Québec, college comes right after high school, where students spend two years if they wish to go on to university or three years if they choose a technical program.

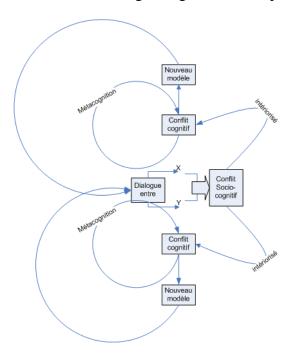
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> For further information on the difference between pragmatic reading (*lecture pragmatique*) and literary reading (*lecture littéraire*), see Dufays, Gemenne & Ledur, 2005; Rouxel, 1996; Reuter 1995.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> See Jonnaert & Masciotra, 2004; Brown & Campione, 1995.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> On the relevance of this pedagogical practice, see Bereiter (1994) for more information on the concept of progressive discourse; see also Christensen *et al.*, 1994; Martineau & Simard, 2001.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> A teaching strategy best described by Guilbert & Ouellet (2002), Poirier Proulx (1997) and Lavoie (2005), not to be mistaken for the traditional practical classroom teaching exercises used to facilitate students' grasp of disciplinary content.

As shown in the figure below, we thought that the dialog between two students (X and Y) would spark a sociocognitive conflict which, internalized, would become a cognitive conflict; this conflict would generate a metacognition loop, inducing student to formulate a new model of their understanding, which would be fed back in the dialog to begin the whole process anew.



# **Objectives**

Our design-experiment research examines the potential use of Knowledge Forum (KF) linked to socioconstructivist pedagogy. Our research is rooted in a problem-based learning approach in college level classes to promote the development of reading competencies, that is to say a deeper comprehension of literary texts, and, perhaps, to lead students to produce original interpretations of the compulsory works. Thus, we aimed to document the metacognitive strategies used by the students and their creativity while engaged in knowledge building work (KB) on KF.

Our research hypothesis was that KF use in literature class would promote a deeper understanding (explanation) of literary works, by a better metacognitive awareness and by internalization (appropriation) and re-use of collective knowledge (KB).

### Method

In order to document our exploratory objectives and test our research hypothesis, two groups were created: an experimental group (around 80 students) and a control group (42 students). Three types of data were collected for analysis in the fall semester of 2004. For students in the experimental group, we have the comments exchanged on KF. This corpus consists of 628 notes (which represent 62 pages in Times 11), mostly distributed in two views (one for each of the books to read). We also have in our possession the essays of these students as well as their perceptions of their work, which were collected through a questionnaire, consisting mostly of open questions, administered at the end of the semester. In the case of the control group, only the written productions were collected in order to compare them with the essays of the experimental group.

Subject	KF notes	Students' essays	Final questionnaire
Analysis			
Metacognition	<ul> <li>Content &amp; depth of the questions (Hmelo-Silver, 2003; Graesser &amp; Person, 1994)</li> <li>Statements showing metacognitive activity (depth: Hmelo-Silver, 2003)</li> <li>Scaffolds use (depth: Hmelo-Silver, 2003)</li> <li>Quantitative data (ATK)</li> </ul>		Open-ended questions about KF's usefulness:  • Awareness & interrogation  • Link with real improvement
Creativity	<ul> <li>Ideation on a 4 point         Likert scale (Lubart, 2003;         Amabile, 1982, 1996; Lubart         &amp; Sternberg, 1995)</li> <li>Approval of ideas (Finke         &amp; al., 1992)</li> <li>Quantitative data (ATK)</li> </ul>		
Comprehension & explanation	<ul> <li>KB – Discourse type (Hmelo-Silver, 2002)</li> <li>Explanation &amp; justification depth (adapted from Hakkarainen, 2003)</li> <li>Quantitative data (ATK)</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Interjudge grading</li> <li>Comparison         between the         explanations         (experimental vs         control group)</li> <li>Comparison of         experimental         group's explanations         &amp; quantitative data</li> </ul>	

## Results

When *documenting metacognition*, ATK showed that students wrote on average 7.1 notes and read 23% of others' discourse. In fact, these reading and writing patterns cover a wide range of behaviors on the students' part. Scaffolds were used in 90% of the notes written on KF, and were more often perceived by the two coders as high level than low level ones. When analyzing the content of the notes, the two coders judged that questions (mostly about the text itself and the theory) and statements about others' and one's own comprehension were mostly high level (see table below).

Judgment	High level	Low level
Subject		
Questions	145	142
Statements	161	91
Scaffolds	452	115

For example, questions such as: *How can a horse travel that distance in three days?* or *Is this a metaphor or a personification?* or *Do you think I'm right?* were deemed low level, while questions

such as: If she really loved him, why does she allow him to leave for the tournament? or We know that Louis XIV was the Roi-Soleil, but did the King really intervene in every quarrel between nobles? were considered high level. In the same way, statements showing metacognition were considered low level if they conveyed little information: I think you cannot say that (a statement not sustained by any justification of why the student thinks so), but the following was considered high level: After reading your post, I re-read the passage to see how we could support that the character's companion, the lion, is in fact God helping him on his quest.

It should be noted, however, that the table above does not reflect the difference between the two views in which the students wrote. In fact, there were significant discrepancies in their work in the two views, the second one showing not only less activity in general, but a lower level in self-questioning statements by the students.

Finally, students' answers of the questionnaire showed their perception of important gains due to KB work on KF. Globally, they said that even though it was a lot of work, they felt they read more attentively excerpts first thought more or less important because of the commentaries others made about it on KF. Most of them also said they were more frequently questioning themselves – if only to respond to colleagues. Some said they found it more difficult to procrastinate in reading... More importantly, the answers to the questionnaire show an important realization in literary analysis: the possibility of multiple interpretations, which however must be grounded in the text. In brief, our analysis of their notes on the forum and of the platform's functionalities they used (scaffolds) actually shows that students will hold a discourse that could be described as being rather reflexive. Evidence supports students having developed better literary reading techniques due to this metacognitive reflection, in part because they have asked each other more questions about the work, which is also apparent in the students' comments in the perceptual questionnaire.

When *documenting creativity*, ATK showed that of the 7.1 notes they wrote, 1.7 was a new note and 5.4, a response to someone. That being said, some new notes (new threads) should have been answers in an existing thread – because students didn't read before they wrote that new note. In the same way, some of the answers should have been new notes (starting a new thread). When analyzing the notes content (see table below), the two coders judged that they were, in majority, of high-level creativity (divergent from what had been seen in class or in KF itself before).

Judgment	High level (3-4)	Low level (1-2)
Subject		
Ideation	626	576
Approval of ideas	151	121

To judge the innovation or creativity of an "idea" (which could be a question, a reading hypothesis, points raised to defend an idea, links between various previously unrelated elements or something else), KF notes were encoded on a four point Likert scale to show their degree of divergence from what was said in the classroom and on KF. For example, ideas such as: *How did they know it had been a year?* They didn't have watches or calendars... or He is probably accepting the duel because he has to defend his father's honor (that's all we ever spoke about in class...) were deemed low level (1 or 2), while ideas such as: Why do they use beer to preserve dead bodies? I know it's good to drink, but... or Maybe she's marrying him because she hates him so much that she wants him to suffer the same fate as her previous dead husband or When we saw the play, the actor, in that part, wore a samurai costume... this must emphasize the honor he has to maintain were judged high level (3 or 4).

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> In French, *une bière* usually is a beer, but it also means a coffin.

As was the case with metacognition documentation, this table does not reflect the difference between the two views. For example, hypotheses were deemed of a lower creativity level in the first view than in the second one, but generated much more disapproval (thus more discussion). In the second view, students' hypotheses were considered of a higher level of creativity and generated more approval. In short, our analysis of their activity on the forum shows that students have used this opportunity to venture into the unknown since, through the forum, both individually and collectively, they have explored paths that often diverged from what was taught in class. For students, KF proved to be a good platform to test their reading hypotheses: In the forum, they had the right to be wrong before their answers counted, and they could learn from their mistakes because they received comments from their peers. They thus stressed the importance of participation in the forum, to validate their understanding of the text as much as control the insecurity inherent to the possibility of divergent thinking in the classroom.

Our *research hypothesis* was that the use of KF, integrated with a pedagogy rooted in problem-based learning in literature, would promote a better explanation of literary texts through knowledge built collectively using the forum.

ATK data and the encoding of the notes in the two views show that students engaged in KB work achieve a better understanding of literary works. The notes were spread in 142 threads, 113 small ones and 29 medium ones. Most importantly, of all the notes written, 84% were deemed as co-elaborative in the first view and 79% in the second one. However, there is a significant difference in KB work depending on the first note of the thread: a basic comprehension question would lead to a small thread, showing not much depth in the ideas exchanged, whereas an interpretation question or a hypothesis (followed by a motivational question such as: Am I right?) would initiate a real discussion. The table below shows how the two coders judged the depth of the ideas on KF. What it does not reflect, though, is how there is an interesting improvement from the first view to the second one: with the exception of the *agreement*, the ideas in that view were considered mostly of high level – contrary to the first view.

Judg: Subject	ment Depth: high level (3-4)	Depth: low level (1-2)
New idea	196	209
Modif. idea	95	81
Agreement	25	73
Disagreement	50	51

One of the confirmations of our research hypothesis is the striking difference between students' score on the essays. The two judges graded all the essays in regard to deep understanding and explanation of the literary works. In fact, as showed in the table below, if there is no significant difference in the first one, there is a 10% gap for the second essay in favor of the experimental group students.

Control group		Difference between graders	Essays with important disagreement
Average essay 1	74,17	0,48	4
Average explanations 1	25,36	0,71	3
Average essay 2	70,23	8,83	3
Average explanations 2	21,61	2,5	0
Global improvement	-3,94	Standard deviation	13,28
Explanation improv.	-3,75	Standard deviation	9,1
Experimental group		Difference between graders	Essays with important disagreement
Average essay 1	74,45	7,52	5
Average explanations 1	25,71	3,64	2
Average essay 2	80,42	2,69	5
Average explanations 2	29,55	1,43	2
Global improvement	5,97	Standard deviation	15,89
Explanation improv.	3,84	Standard deviation	9,07

Interestingly enough, the students who re-used KB work on KF performed even better (even though the number of students is not sufficient to call it statistically significant). As shown in the table below, for the same question, they systematically scored better if they re-used ideas developed by the community on KF.

First essay		Second essay	
Question 1 (35 stud.)	74,69%	Question 1 (40 stud.)	84,5%
Re-use of KF ideas	80,9%	Re-use of KF ideas	87,3%
No KF idea re-used	69,39%	No KF idea re-used	82,6%
Question 2 (42 stud.)	74,25%	Question 3 (32 stud.)	75,84%
Re-use of KF ideas	76,77%	Re-use of KF ideas	80,33%
No KF idea re-used	70,16%	No KF idea re-used	73,2%

So, the analysis of the data collected tends to confirm our hypothesis in several ways. There is a statistically significant difference between the results of the control group and the experimental group in their essays. In fact, our research shows a significant correlation between activity on the forum and the experimental group students' score on their second summative essay of the semester. It seems to be the KF, specifically designed for the purpose of KB, which has made a difference in the performance between both groups, an assertion supported by the analysis of the activity on the forum itself. Indeed, we find that the vast majority of notes on the forum appear to be an attempt at knowledge building and reflect a spirit of collaboration as students seem willing to seek and offer help in the forum's different views. This willingness to provide mutual aid is supported by their reflections on the perceptual questionnaire.

### Discussion

About metacognition.

Students held a discourse we could qualify as reflexive. It appeared so in ideas exchanged and developed on KF. They asked numerous high level questions, especially concerning text and theory – their reflection showed an effort to use adequately the new knowledge they were building together in a different way of reading. All the important excerpts were systematically scrutinized by students... but few authentic questions (in relation to the discipline) really emerged from KB work on KF. This shows that teachers must absolutely supervise question formulation by students so that they become more and more authentic. They also made many statements showing sociocognitive conflicts that brought forth better and better justifications. It appeared as well as in the scaffolds they used, even though they did not always use them correctly. This shows teachers must not only put emphasis on using the scaffolds, but at the same time on using the right ones – which holds three implications: 1) a necessity to revisit scaffold differences (to prevent confusion) in the case of the ones designed for literature analysis; 2) a tighter connection between scaffolds and work done in the actual classroom; 3) a sort of a second level metacognition analysis by the students, while choosing a scaffold, that has to be brought to their attention.

Even though they experienced a persistent insecurity before literary reading (we discovered that low level questions served in fact as a metacognitive control strategy), students emphasized the value of peer support (both intellectual and emotional) and of their personal reflections (KB) on reading and literary analysis work. They also expressed reservations about the quantity of notes in KF and their relative redundancy, as well as the necessity for regular participation. That probably explains the difference in participation in the two views. However, they report two important realizations in their answers to the questionnaire: 1) it is possible to interpret a literary text in many different ways, but all interpretations must be rooted in the text and theory; and 2) that you have to question yourself while reading.

As was mentioned earlier, there is a significant difference in KB work depending on the first note of the thread; it is true also of the moment it has been posted. While showing interesting KB work during the semester, the discussions flipped around by the time the essays had to be written. The students' questions would then focus back on more basic knowledge (*e.g.*: Is this a metaphor? If so, how do I explain it?). This shows we still have important work to do to promote sustained questioning: students must see the link between KB work on KF and what is graded – in our case, the essays. They did not stress that out at all in the questionnaires, as if questioning, knowledge building and writing the essay were completely different and separated things. Worse: a lot of students wrote in the questionnaire that they wished the teacher had answered more to their questions on KF. This shows that even though the teacher explains KB principles and emphasizes the importance of epistemic agency, students are not used to KB work... They always want to give the *right* answer – *even when they understand that there is no such thing in literary interpretation* (they said themselves that they knew now, at the end of the semester, that it was possible to interpret the same passage in different ways).

## About *creativity*

Students asked numerous high level questions (level 3-4 on the divergence scale), proposed high level justifications and links... but, honestly, their novelty is no depth guarantee. In fact, the interest of divergent thinking (and that was what we wished for to begin with) is the discussion it generates – because it is that KB discussion that lead students to metacognition and a better understanding. It is probably in that sense that we have to see a strong difference between the two views: in the first one,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> The participation was mandatory and graded (10% of the semester), because on our first iteration, when we tried a "free" approach, only 6 of the 80 students actually went on KF.

students were more innovative, but got less idea approval; in the second one, they were less innovative, but their ideas were better from the start (because they had already integrated literature theory, like links with the socio-historical context or the author's rhetoric), got more approval, and finished off more refined. It seems like the first view, in which they worked earlier on, sparked a lot of discussions that permitted students to understand how to use literary theory.

In the questionnaire, students stressed that working on KF provided an interesting peer validation, which gave them the right to be wrong – and thus learn from their colleagues. Though it did not really seem to diminish insecurity generated by the promotion of divergent thinking (*viz.* the quantity of notes deemed of low level in the second view, asking confirmations of their interpretations), the group's work was in fact useful to "screen out" "weird" ideas, and to monitor itself for the second part of the semester.

Although they said peer approval was important, we noticed a number of broken threads and a polarisation of the debates after some time, leading to a redundancy feeling for several students. It looks like there is some kind of creativeness stagnation after a time (a short one when there are so many students working on KF). This stresses the important rise-above work that must be initiated with the students (which was a pedagogical weakness in the experiment presented here, the teacher wanting the students to initiate that work as a part of their epistemic agency – which proved to be insufficient: they have to be guided in that intellectual work with which they are not familiar). This work on riseabove notes could serve not only to summarize what has been said on a certain topic, but to spark new discussions as well – especially in conjunction with a tool as powerful as *promising ideas*. Interestingly, we found from our study that KB work also proved to be creative. Around a question posted on KF (not long after the beginning of the semester), students started trying to interpret the significance of a character (a lion) in the novel they were reading: they kept formulating hypotheses until one student posted a note entitled "The REAL significance of the lion". She had completed the games section at the end of the novel, where it is suggested that the lion could be interpreted as the presence of God, accompanying the knight. Most of the students in that conversation then started to go back and forth in the novel trying to find proof to sustain that interpretation. For us, they grasped the literary analysis process at that very moment, and they did so without being told to use reading strategies such as using the critical apparatus of the text as a basis. This shows one important thing: if we really want students to claim their epistemic agency, we have to keep KF interventions to a minimum as a teacher (low moderation), putting only the emphasis on the help and emotional security emerging from working with KF. And it also stresses an important thing: if we cannot necessarily link innovation with depth in understanding, the creativity showed in KB work in that thread of KF certainly produced most of the interpretations considered the deepest later on.

# About *deep understanding* and *explanation* of the texts

We saw an intense KB activity on KF. Students posted a lot ideas considered to be deep, but the level 4 (a *complete* explanation, linking excerpts, interpretation and theory and developed at length) was hardly reached. Our study shows that the length of the thread is not necessarily indicative of greater KB work (because of redundancy and broken threads we already talked about). There is a general attempt by the students to deepen their ideas: their explanations get better with time... but no rise-above were created in any of the view – which is, in our sense, as was mentioned, a pedagogical weakness to correct. At least, students noticed in the questionnaire a willingness to help one's peers which is evident in KF's notes: they really wanted to get to a deeper understanding together.

That being said, it seems important to notice again here the varying discussions depending on first note (hypothesis or question) and on the moment of the exchange: we have underlined it while discussing metacognition, but it has an important impact on the depth of the ideas worked with in KF, the ones exchanged just before the essay being a lot more shallow than the ones students *really* worked with while reading. So, again, we cannot stress strongly enough that we still have important work to do to

promote sustained questioning by the students, linking (and, more importantly, *showing* the link) between KB work done on KF and evaluation.

Really excitingly, our analysis shows a strong relation between the work done by students on KF and their essay performance. Not only did they perform (in the second essay) better than the control group (10% better!), but they performed even better if they re-use ideas developed in KF (even though the data cannot be said to be statistically significant because of the sample size). In fact, they then showed an explanation improvement by the re-use of KF ideas: their essays then presented deep ideas better organized due to KB.

Unfortunately, not all of the students worked in the two views – for some, it was just too much work, but for others, it was mostly because they found too much redundancy in the notes and were discouraged by all they had to read if they did not log on often enough (even if we wanted statistically significant data, we have to rethink a model where there are so many students on KF). That could have been prevented to a point if we had made better use of KF's possibilities, especially the rise-above. Still, this shows that there is an impact of the perseverance in working with KF – the students being the more active in the second view being, of course, the ones who re-used ideas and performed better in the second essay.

### Conclusion

Our results show that doing KB work on KF has a real and concrete benefit for students and teacher in a literary classroom. It is obvious that the settings have changed since the experiment design and since the data was analyzed: KF itself is "new and improved" and presents new interesting tools (such as promising ideas), and students may have changed a little... That being said, even though there is some design and pedagogical modifications to take into consideration, we think that the practices tested in this experiment in conjunction with meaningful technology like KF are promising avenues to ensure the development of reading competency (from a literary perspective) at college level and thus would be valuable if adopted by a growing number of college teachers of the cégep network. It would also be interesting to consider the exploration of a partnership with French (literature) didactics students as a way, maybe, to lighten the task of following that many students on KF and, even better, to introduce in an interesting way the pre-service teachers not only to the *working-with-ideas* reality of college students (which they forget, having been themselves scholars for so long – and literature scholars, which is not the case of all the students to whom they will have to teach literature), but to KB.

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http://catalogue.cdc.qc.ca/CDC/Pages/Main/Resultats/Page.fr.aspx?Prov=Sugg&PrmIdTexte=6285854

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