

**DIGITAL BACKCHANNELING:  
A STRATEGY FOR MAXIMIZING ENGAGEMENT  
DURING A PERFORMANCE-BASED LESSON  
ON SHAKESPEARE'S *MACBETH***

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**Abstract**

Engaging students during the reading of a complex text is a difficult task for any educator. Digital backchanneling, a Web 2.0 technology, is one tool that can promote: student engagement, low risk participation, learning community development, digital citizenship, an opportunity for formative assessment, and timely response to students' questions. The purpose of observing the effect of digital backchanneling in an English 11 classroom was to measure the level of students' engagement with the reading of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Student engagement increased to 100% when digital backchanneling was introduced during a performance-based lesson.

**1. Digital Backchanneling- general features and theoretical support**

Digital backchannels are defined as "collaboration tools by people sharing physical spaces in real time" (McCarthy, 2005, p. 1641). This tool enables multiple users to connect and dialogue in a digital space using internet-enabled mobile devices. BackChannel Chat, proprietary online software (<http://www.backchannelchat.com>), can be accessed using web browsers such as Chrome, Firefox IE10, Safari, or older versions. The written dialogue (Chat) can be projected onto a screen or through an interactive whiteboard for individuals in an auditorium or classroom to view. The BackChannel Chat sidebar is commonly used during large college lectures or professional presentations, where the audience poses questions, provides fact checking, or offers clarification in real-time. Professors, teachers, and other chat participants can contribute to this collaborative learning experience without interrupting a presentation.

Social Constructivism posits that learners actively create meaning when interacting with one another (Vygotsky, 1978). Online environments can be one medium where this collaborative learning can take place. Digital backchanneling can be used in the secondary

English classroom to engage all students in meaningful, higher order thinking and discussion during any lecture, socratic seminar, presentation, performance, or collaborative activity. While side conversations in the form of whispering, notepassing and text messaging continue to frustrate educators, Web 2.0 technologies, including digital backchanneling, provide opportunities to bring these dialogues to the forefront. By welcoming the ubiquitous digital environment that defines the lives of digital natives, educators can meet their learning community in a familiar space instead of being bound to a traditional model of education that does not acknowledge that digital natives think, communicate, and learn differently than previous generations (Prensky, 2001; Prensky, 2006).

The use of digital backchanneling in the secondary English classroom reflects an innovative pedagogy that accommodates the specific learning needs of digital natives. This tool can get all students engaged using the technology that is an integral part of their lives. It provides students an equal voice and allows for “substantive conversations, eliciting more thoughtful feedback, and inspiring higher-order thinking skills” (Jarrett & Devine, 2012, p. 44). As Sugato Chakravarty states, “it’s clear to me (...) that absent this kind of social media interaction, there are things students think about that normally they’d never say” (cited after Gabriel, 2011, p. A1). Social media, via digital backchanneling, provides digital natives the tools to communicate in a safe and inventive manner within the English classroom. This tool can engage 100% of students in a discussion regarding complex texts that may not occur during a traditional lecture format.

The specific features of *Backchannel Chat* can be characterized as follows:

- filtering profanity
- removing unwanted comments
- determining user participation rates
- saving and searching for discussion feeds
- voting on the importance/validity of posts
- directly embedding videos, images, and tweets
- projecting discussion feed via interactive whiteboard

Other real-time discussion tools include: TinyChat (<http://tinychat.com/>), Chatzy (<http://www.chatzy.com/>), TodaysMeet (<http://todaysmeet.com/>), and Edmodo (<https://www.edmodo.com/>) (Byrne, 2010). As a disclaimer, the writer has exclusively used www.backchannelchat.com for actual class discussion and therefore hesitates to endorse any other product as reliable in real-world situations. Whatever tool is used, it is imperative to

utilize the control features at the secondary level sense it ensures that discussions remain inoffensive and school appropriate. During musical concerts, theatrical performances, lectures, seminars, or student presentations, real-time discussion via BackChannel Chat can engage users in low risk participation irrespective of personality type, learning style, or interest level.

## 2. Using Backchannelchat.com

To begin a BackChannel Chat, educators must create a free chat room by entering an email address, a username, and a title so it can be identified at a later date. Lastly, click *Create a FREE Chat Room NOW*. Educators may be interested in purchasing the premium user option that is priced at \$15 for one subscription. It offers the educator several additional options including: advanced security controls, private messages, full transcripts, custom user avatars, unlimited usage and storage, file sharing, consolidated views of chats, and advanced searching.

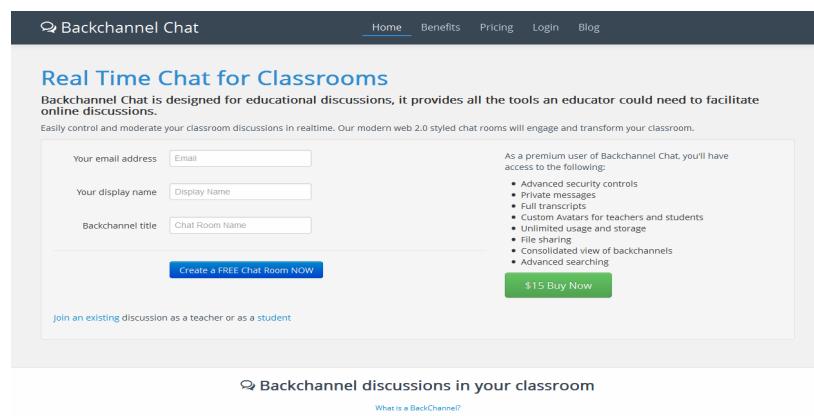


Figure 1- Screenshot of the BackChannel Chat Home page.

Paid subscribers can use the Login page (<https://backchannelchat.com/Login>) and enter the email address and password associated with the account to access each BackChannel Chat created using the account. Although the paid subscription offers the aforementioned tools and features, the frame of reference for this inquiry will be the free chat version.

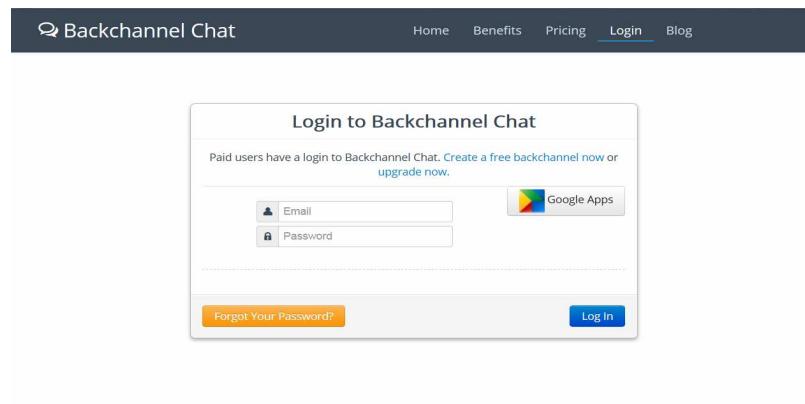


Figure 2- Screenshot of the Login page that can be accessed by paid subscribers.

Once the Chat has been created, the *Welcome to BackChannel Chat* large message screen will be presented with the basic instructions for use. The current users are listed in the right sidebar. Users highlighted in green indicate the educator or the individual who created the free chat room. Users highlighted in red indicate the user is in read-only mode. To ensure that all users can contribute to the Chat, the educator can click on the User Settings option to the right of the name. The educator must provide this specific Chat's URL (web address) to each student who will be contributing to the chat. The link can be posted on a class website, sent via email, shared using classroom sync technology, or students can simply type this web address manually into their internet browser.

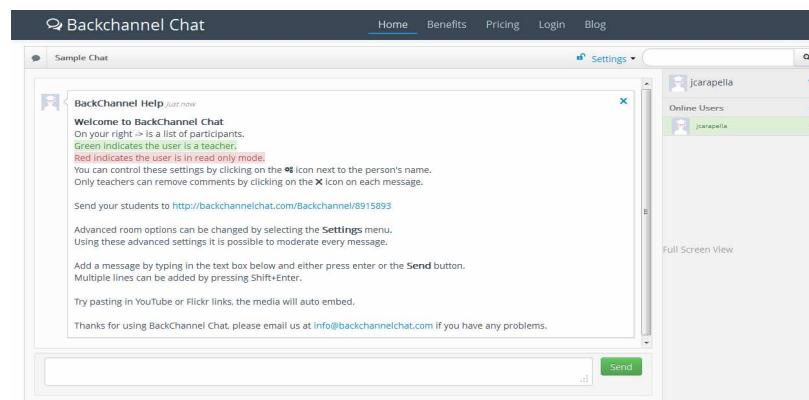


Figure 3- Screenshot of the Welcome to BackChannel Chat page. The right sidebar features which users are currently online or offline. The large message box indicates each post. Posts are typed in the textbox at the bottom.

The educator can add a message by typing it in the bottom text box, and then by clicking *Send*. Within seconds this message will appear at the top of the large message screen. As users join the chat, a message appears in the large message screen in green. The user name will also appear in the right sidebar and their posts will be added to the feed in the order in

which they are sent. Older posts will disappear from the large message screen but can be viewed again by using the scroll bar at the right of the large message screen. The search box in the upper right corner can be used to search the BackChannel Chat for a specific word, phrase, or username. By clicking the pushpin icon on a user's post, the educator can pin the item. This highlights its importance to the rest of the users. Users can click the thumbs-up icon to the right of the user's name in the large message screen, to vote on the comment. This function allows important, insightful, or meaningful posts to be amplified.

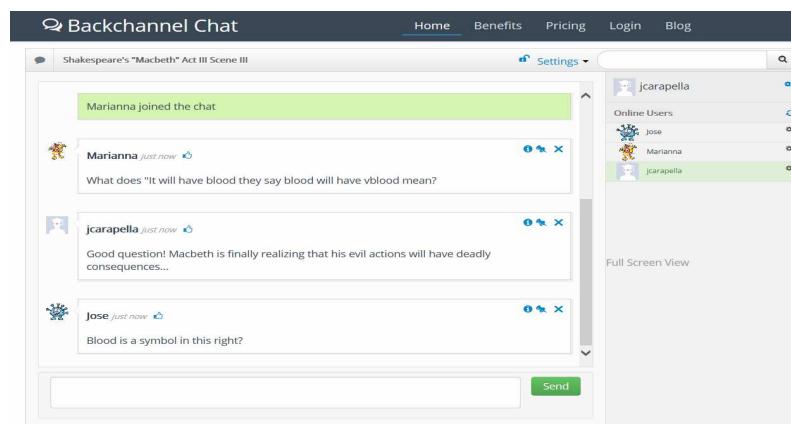


Figure 4- Screenshot of the large message screen featuring a facilitated discussion on the presence of symbolism in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

BackChannel Chat provides controlled, paperless communication between students and educators. The educator may remove a message from the feed by clicking the blue X to the right of the post. This function prevents students from posting inappropriate comments or engaging in bullying behavior. Educators can set the hours in which this chat can occur as well. Student users are only able to add posts when the educator is an active, online member of the BackChannel Chat. By clicking the Setting option in the right corner, educators can toggle the room status to either locked or unlocked. This allows educators to manage whether users can add new posts. When the feed is locked, a user's text box will be removed. This will let users know that the educator is moderating the discussion or that it is no longer the time to engage in the online discussion. Backchannelchat.com provides a profanity control that will remove inappropriate words from the post before it appears in real-time. This Web 2.0 tool works with Google Apps as well as Edmodo.

### **3. Purpose, in-class implementation, and results**

The purpose of observing the effect of digital backchanneling during this lesson was to measure the level of students' engagement with the text. Student engagement was operationally defined as classroom participation in the form of reading the text aloud or contributing to the discussion feed. Once this activity was introduced, students had the opportunity to choose between performing, participating as an audience member through a digital backchanneling discussion regarding the text. Student engagement increased to 100% for all sections on English 11 once this tool was utilized as a strategy for maximizing student engagement.

Prior to the beginning of the class, this writer created a free Chat room and posted the BackChannel Chat URL on the class website for ease of access. The chat participants were instructed to each create a username. Subsequently, a list of general guidelines was established through a guided discussion. Students used their prior knowledge of effective classroom discussion etiquette along with their understanding of chat room decorum to create their own guidelines for what they believed to be important rules for this digital backchanneling discussion. Students were able to abide by these guidelines during the digital backchanneling activity and regulated one another when guidelines were not followed.

#### ***BackChannel Chat Discussion Guidelines***

##### **Everyone must:**

- participate,
- post thoughts that pertain to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*,
- ask questions,
- make important connections,
- respond to others' conscientiously,
- avoid dominating the discussion,
- avoid using internet slang,
- consider the task, audience, and purpose when posting.

Digital backchanneling was introduced by this writer to a class of English 11 students studying Shakespeare's *Macbeth* through a performance-based unit. In previous years, performance-based units would only actively engage those students willing to read the text aloud in front of their peers, an example of high-risk participation in which some students are not willing to engage. It was imperative that a different teaching strategy be coupled with the

performance aspect of this unit in order to increase student engagement during the reading of this complex text.

While students were performing the text, this writer facilitated a text-based discussion by posting insights and making important connections that enrich the learning experience for the chat participants in each section of English 11. This anonymous discussion elicited low-risk participation from even the most reluctant students; these students included those who were unwilling to participate in traditional classroom lectures and discussions yet were willing to participate through this anonymous digital tool. When chat participants were unable to respond to formative assessments of their understanding, the researcher reacted quickly with alternate discussion questions and clarification statements. Chat participants were so willing to contribute to the feed that an absence of posts provided clear evidence as to when this writer needed to provide clarification on aspects of the text. This quick reaction time is valuable because students' questions were answered when they were still relevant without interrupting the performance. Various portions of the feed were shared with the entire class at the end of the scene. Important insights and students' questions were highlighted and discussed as a whole group to ensure that all students benefitted from the chat discussion.

Perhaps most importantly, 100% of the students in each section of English 11 were engaged in the lesson that was differentiated according to personality and ability. Some students chose to perform the play in front of their peers while others decided to collaborate in an online environment where important insights on the text were shared and questions were quickly answered. The development of this online community provided an opportunity for students to practice digital citizenship skills that other online activities, which are not monitored, do not require.

One negative aspect of Backchannel Chat was observed during this lesson that is of relevance to this discussion. During the digital backchanneling activity, the profanity blocking security feature was activated. Attempting to make a connection to previously taught information on symbolism, this writer asked what blood symbolized in the text. The security measure that prohibits profane language was then activated by the word 'blood'. Instead of this flagged word being visible on the Chat, *b\*\*\*d* was presented. A second attempt to post this word resulted in the same safe, aforementioned abbreviation. Thus, this security measure interfered in the effective communication regarding a school appropriate, albeit sensitive, topic.

#### 4. Conclusion

While <http://www.backchannelchat.com> is not the only option available, it may be ideal for budget-sensitive contexts and for those educators who want to provide digital natives with an opportunity to communicate and collaborate online while reading a complex text. Web 2.0 teaching tools, like digital backchanneling, can engage 100% of students through low-risk participation when reading a complex text in the secondary English classroom. In order to accommodate students' individual learning abilities and learning styles, educators must find new ways to engage all students in the reading of complex texts, and digital backchanneling is one method in which to do so.

Not only is it important that students read complex texts, it is "at least as important as what they [can] do with what they read" (*Common Core*, 2012). The chat discussion feed provides tangible evidence of what students can and cannot do with the text (i.e., absence of posts regarding a discussion question may indicate that students require re-teaching or additional scaffolding). Not only can this crucial insight assist educators in meeting each student's individual needs, but students can assist each other in the meaning making that is at the crux of the collaborative learning experience. Digital backchanneling can help to develop an online learning community where all students are engaged during the reading of a complex text.

This online learning community, when monitored by an educator, provides all students with a structured opportunity to practice the skills which are needed to "communicate respectfully on public discussion forums," which is one aspect of digital citizenship (Richards, 2010, p. 518). Learning these skills at the secondary level can prepare students to communicate respectfully and responsibly with others in an online environment where posts are anonymous and not monitored.

Digital backchanneling also assists educators in formative assessment of students' understanding and timely responses to students' questions. The questions which students were unable to respond to during the digital backchanneling activity were addressed during a whole-group discussion at the end of the lesson. These formative assessments shed light on what this educator needed to clarify regarding various aspects of the text. Additionally, this tool allows educators to answer students' questions without interrupting the performance component of the unit.

The functionality of digital backchanneling in the secondary English classroom during a performance-based lesson regarding Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was described as beneficial to

both the educator and student. This tool fosters increased student engagement, low-risk student participation, learning community development, practicing digital citizenship skills necessary for respectful and responsible online communication, formative assessment of understanding, and a timely response to students' questions regarding the text (Mueller, 2009; Pohl, Gehlen-Baum, & Bry, 2011; Ugoretz, 2005; Yardi, 2008). Digital backchanneling, through the use of BackChannel Chat, is one strategy for maximizing student engagement during a performance-based lesson in the secondary English classroom.

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## **Appendix. Digital Backchanneling: A Strategy for Maximizing Engagement during a Performance-Based Lesson on Shakespeare's "Macbeth" - Lesson Plan**

**Level:** Secondary English

**Time:** 40 minutes

### **Aims:**

- Students will use a Web 2.0 styled chat room (i.e. [www.backchannelchat.com](http://www.backchannelchat.com)) to respond and ask questions in real-time during a performance-based lesson on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.
- Students will be engaged in the lesson through performance reading or digital backchanneling.
- Chat participants will practice digital citizenship skills

### **Resources/ materials:**

- Wireless, internet-capable mobile devices are needed for those students not performing Act III Scene IV of *Macbeth*
- One projector and a large screen or an interactive whiteboard
- Access to <http://www.backchannelchat.com>
- Playbooks for all students

### **Lesson requirements:**

- The classroom must be internet capable.
- The wireless, internet-capable mobile devices must have a strong internet connection.
- All audience members must be able to easily view the projected chat or have access to an internet capable device.

## **Procedure**

### **1. Pre-stage (5 min)**

- a) Create a free real-time chat for the classroom through <http://www.backchannelchat.com> using an email address, password, and username. Enter an appropriate title for the chat (i.e. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* Act III Scene IV).
- b) Communicate the chat's URL so it may be easily accessed by the student audience.
- c) Verify the strength and connection of the classroom's wireless internet.
- d) Set up backchannel guidelines using student input.

- e) Arrange classroom furniture to model a stage as well as area for audience.
- f) Students should come to class prepared to read their predetermined role in the scene (i.e. Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Banquo's Ghost, Murderer, Lennox, Ross, and three Lords).

**2. While-stage (40 min)**

- a) While students are performing this scene, the instructor and students can engage in real-time discussion using the backchannel about what is happening on stage and in the text. The instructor and students can provide valuable information to one another.
- b) View the backchannel feed at the end of student performance to highlight questions about the plot, characterization, symbolism as well as make to predictions about subsequent actions.

**3. Post-stage (15 min)**

- a) The previous day's backchannel can be reviewed as an anticipatory set in order to help students remember and evaluate the major points of Act III Scene IV.
- b) The previous day's backchannel may provide the educator with the necessary data to reteach as needed.
- c) The backchannel's URL may be posted online or emailed to absent students in order to assist them in connecting with that lesson's material.