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Framing Literary Text Worlds through Real-World Social Negotiations

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In responding to literature or in constructing literary texts, students are constructing text worlds based on their real-world social experiences. For example, in interpreting the conflicts between characters in a literary text, they draw on their experiences with social conflicts. Research on linking real-world and text-world contexts has typically focused on individual students' use of prior experiences in constructing text worlds (Beach, 1993). Less attention has focused on how the very experience itself of framing social interactions within discussions provides students with ways of constructing text worlds (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993).

Take, for example, a group of four female seventh graders, each sitting in front of a computer in different corners of a computer lab, who are simultaneously exchanging messages to each other on a computer chat exchange (Beach & Lundell, 1998). They are reading and interpreting each others' messages as texts in order to participate in the social dialogue. They are doing more than simply inferring the point or gist of these messages. They are also framing these messages within the context of an emerging social agenda of verbal teasing, ridicule, gossip, and talk about assigned topics associated with establishing their social identities and relationships. In ascertaining whether or not to reply, what they will say, and how they wanted to present themselves through their response, they frame (Tannen, 1993) these texts in terms of their overall social agenda. While one student interprets a message as a "put-down," another may perceive the same message as a "friendly gesture." Or consider a group of four five- and six-year-old kindergarten girls huddled around the corner of the writing table during choice time,

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