to express themselves more eloquently,” Scholes urges us “to reconstruct our efforts as students and teachers” around the study of texts. “Under this sign,” he maintains, “there is no difference between the theory of composition and the theory of literature … and this theory itself rests upon the shared stance of students and teachers as practitioners of reading and writing textuality.”

The word text, Scholes explains, comes from the Latin words texere, which means to weave, and textum, “that which is woven.” He goes on to urge that we consider the idea of text broadly to include electronic and visual as well as print texts and explains further that “text refers to the fabric of culture itself, in which we and our students find ourselves already woven.” Seeing as central to our jobs that we “try to learn and teach how to weave or reweave those garments,” Scholes explains, “What I am suggesting is that we stop thinking of ourselves as if we had a subject matter and start thinking of ourselves as having a discipline which we can offer our students as part of the cultural equipment that they are going to need when they leave us.”

How does a teacher inspire students to reveal their deepest emotions, their most honest thoughts, their most authentic unvarnished character? It sounds like an unattainable fantasy (especially if we are talking about 8th graders), but Scott Christian was able to do just that as he demonstrates in his new book, Exchanging Lives: Middle School Writers Online.

Christian’s book beckons us to witness an intense online experiment created by The Bread Loaf Rural Teachers Network (BLRTN), a teacher support system which has as its goal to counter the well-known deficiencies of rural schools in technology and funding.

Once BLRTN teachers began to dialogue “online” using the newly-formed BreadNet, the idea for creating an online student literary conference emerged. This was an innovation enthusiastically supported by the BreadNet correspondents. Within a short time, schools in Alaska, Mississippi, Vermont and New Mexico had developed a plan which allowed students to engage in electronic responses to the novel: Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl. This work was chosen because the teachers were familiar with it, because it challenges 8th graders and because it contains issues which are pertinent to today’s adolescents.

On an agreed upon day, each of the five classrooms involved began reading the novel. The schools took turns posting three questions related to the text. These questions usually grew out of classroom discussions. Christian points out, “When kids are trying so desperately to figure out

Exchanging Lives:
Middle School Writers Online

by SCOTT CHRISTIAN
$15.95; 147 pages

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who they are, questions that allow them to explore their own perceptions, opinions, and experiences are most effective" (p. 39).

One message which comes through in this book is the amount of time and dedication given by the teachers in order to make the Anne Frank Conference (AFC) successful. Each of them worked with a limited number of computers which meant that someone, usually the teacher, had to type in the responses of the students. Once the responses were received, they were copied off and either given to the individual students to whom they were addressed, or discussed as a class using the overhead projector. The process was laborious and tedious, but the results seem to have been worth it.

After three years of the AFC, with some 800 students having participated, Christian enrolled in a class at Bread Loaf called "Writing for Publication." He decided to take on the task of unraveling over 120 pages of transcript from the conferences, analyzing the writing to see what patterns emerged and how the writing generated from the conference differed from writing normally produced when students read this novel. Christian observed differences in voice, tone, flavor and content when students responded to the online questions. The typical non-conference responses to the book were most often focused on the questions at hand with little or no elaboration, personal information or personal opinions. The online response, on the other hand, was characterized by a diversity of topics and variety of issues discussed. The responses were models of individual expression packed with personal voice and real concerns. This was the type of writing he and the other teachers had longed for 8th graders to produce!

The responses were models of individual expression packed with personal voice and real concerns. This was the type of writing Christian and the other teachers had longed for 8th graders to produce!

Read Scott Christian's book to learn about the many uses of modern telecommunications, to be inspired to help develop an online conference in your area and to be encouraged and reminded that middle school students have minds of their own and will use them if given the right opportunity.