Title of Session: WriteTalk - Shmoop
Moderator: Sandra Shattuck
Guest Speaker: Brady Wood
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Room: WriteTalk Group

SandraS: Brady, what's your role with Shmoop?

BradyW: I'm vp of marketing and business dev at Shmoop

SandraS: cool!

BradyW: maybe I can start by telling you a bit more about Shmoop

BJB2 nods...sounds good to me

BJB2 . o O (have you done anything in your group room, Brady?)

BradyW: The company started almost 3 years ago. Our founder, Dave, was reading Call of the Wild with his daughter. He studied Lit at Oxford, so he takes this stuff seriously. And he realized there were not any great online resources to help him teach his daughter to understand and love literature and writing.

BJB2 . o O (maybe we can look there later. Sandy has a featured passageway in this room to the Shmoop room)

BJB2 listens attentively

SandraS: How old was Dave's daughter at the time?

BradyW: I think she was about 7... very smart young lady. She is now reading Shakespeare at 9.

SandraS: That's actually one of my questions....the age range y'all see as audience for Shmoop

BradyW: Our core is High School, but we cover a lot of college-level material

SandraS: and junior high?

BradyW: and we are beginning to expand our middle school (young adult) titles because there has been a great deal of interest

SandraS: OK

BJB2: great

SandraS keeps mouth closed and listens to Brady

BradyW: lol

BJB2 . o O (those middle schoolers are often at-risk readers)

SandraS nods

BradyW: So writing was always at the core of what we wanted to teach.

SandraS applauds

BradyW: We realized, that, in order to help a student write a good Gatsby essay, we needed to help the student through the "thinking" stage of writing, which is 80% of the work

SandraS nods

BradyW: So we invested almost 2 years in having Ph.D. and Masters students from top universities write very thoughtful, thought-provoking, and fun analyses

BradyW: We try to present multiple perspectives, rather than say "this is the answer"

BradyW: And we inject a lot of fun into the experience... we crack jokes, we write in a conversational tone, we make pop culture references

BradyW: "Fun" is an overall theme for Shmoop

JeffC joined the room.

BradyW: In fact, it is in our mission statement

SandraS: Are you explicitly trying to distinguish yourselves from something like SparkNotes?

BJB2 waves hi to Jeff

SandraS: Hi, Jeff.

BradyW: "To make learning more fun and relevant for students in the digital age"

BradyW: hi Jeff!

BradyW: just sharing some background on Shmoop

JeffC: Sorry... been dealing with kids.

SandraS: Hey, Jeff...It's just us chickens!

BradyW: Yes, we want to be a resource that teachers embrace and use in the classroom.

JeffC used Shmoop two days ago while subbing for a U.S History class that was doing posters on WWI.

BradyW: Unlike some sites that came before us

SandraS: If you can help students write, I think getting teachers to use it might be possible.

BradyW: Ah, cool! How did that go?

JeffC: it went well... gave them the "in a nutshell" and my own expanded "why you should care."

BradyW: Teaching writing, as I'm sure you know better than I, is a difficult challenge!

BradyW: We have a *very* early version of our Shmoop Essay Lab available now

SandraS: One of the most difficult...and rewarding...

JeffC: also did an expansion of the Zimmerman Telegram (excellent book by Barbara Tuchman btw)... kids have to get beyond the textbook.

BradyW: I can share a link with a test account here (although will the chat archive be public?

SandraS: Yes.

BradyW: Or you could check it out and create an account for yourself

JeffC: it can be edited out

SandraS: I would LOVE to try it out.

BradyW: http://www.shmoop.com/intro/literature/f-scott-fitzgerald/the-great-gatsby.html

SandraS: I've got a Shmoop account.

JeffC: can I use my own account? or do I have to do another.

BradyW: Is our Great Gatsby topic page

BradyW: You can use your own

BradyW: When you get to the Great Gatsby page, look for the orange "Blank Sheet of Paper?" button on the right

SandraS has seen that icon

JeffC: it's loading

BradyW: let me reiterate - this is "barely beta" :-)

BradyW: we are releasing the next version fairly soon...

JeffC: it's also still loading... so might not come up.

JeffC is using Firefox.

SandraS: mine loaded

BradyW: should be fine on Firefox

SandraS: I'm on Flock

SandraS: nice interface

SandraS: the mindmapping stuff looks a bit like bubbl.us

BradyW: We're really just scratching the surface. I'm glad you mentioned mind mapping.

BradyW: So this first iteration of the Essay Lab was really focused on the "plumbing" of the essay, if you will - the thesis statement, providing evidence for your arguments, writing concluding and intro sentences

BradyW: sure - I'm happy to pause if that makes sense, or I can keep going. lmk :)

JeffC: and you have ways to prompt students to create those?

SandraS: Wow -- that is a lot of work behind all those sections....

SandraS: I can't wait to play with this some more.

BradyW: this isn't a perfect analogy - but it's a bit like turbotax -- you have a process that you need to work through - we won't tell you what info to write, but we'll help explain each step along the way

BradyW: and hopefully we teach a clear, repeatable process to writing a good essay

JeffC: sounds great

SandraS: with the idea that students will translate from Shmoop to their own laptop....

SandraS: interiorize the process...ouch -- that's a painful verb

JeffC: and you're right Sandra... all the Shmoop sections have excellent research (and a lot more).

JeffC . o O (better than exteriorize!)

BradyW: we actually save your outline or paper as you go

SandraS: lol

JeffC: is it then exportable to Word?

BradyW: you can see a preview of it by clicking the "preview" button in the upper right

SandraS: OK

JeffC: or text only?

BradyW: yes! when you reach the final step, we allow you to download as .doc .pdf or .txt

BradyW: or email it to yourself

SandraS: excellent

SandraS: are you keeping to the 5-paragraph essay?

SandraS: that seems to be the outline format...

SandraS wonders if Brady feels bombarded by questions

BradyW: we realized fairly early on that we needed to stay focused on the 5-paragraph essay for our early versions... it becomes a very complex engineering challenge very quickly as we add more types of essays

BradyW: no, keep 'em coming!!

SandraS: do you want to stay here or go to the Shmoop room?

BradyW: so, we're hoping that we'll come close to nailing the 5-paragraph essay in the next version

SandraS: whatever works best for you, Brady

BradyW: whatever works better for you - are there more features in the room?

SandraS: dunno - Jeff?

SandraS: did you do any more decorating?

SandraS: if you haven't set up anything, Brady, then we probably can just stay here

BradyW: but, to finish the earlier question - we will add many other essay types over time

SandraS: OK

JeffC: I've put some specific Shmoop stuff in there... trying out the site now.

SandraS: intriguing

JeffC: I hadn't put up a direct link to the essay page though.

BradyW left the room.

SandraS left the room.

JeffC left the room.

BJB2 left the room.

Room: Shmoop Group

BJB2 joined the room.

BradyW: ok, we have everyone?

SandraS: Brady, your transcript you get emailed to you will still record the entire conversation

SandraS: Yup! All here.

BradyW: we take a strong stance against plagiarism. shmoop is all about inspiring passion and original thought

BradyW: in the next version of our essay lab, we will be replacing all of that "food for thought" with more generic content

JeffC: cool

BradyW: e.g. we will walk through the stories of Luke Skywalker and Moses and treat them as archetypical protagonists... helps make it a bit more fun and relatable for students (which, again, is our mission)

JeffC: I know you're against plagiarism, as we all are... just wanted to raise its specter... because I know a lot of teachers will be concerned about the same thing.

BradyW: absolutely... we share the concern

BradyW: we have a page on our Shmoop Teachers site that speaks to our stance on plagiarism and how we broach the subject with students (we try not to lecture at them, but rather, spell out in plain terms why it's a bad idea)

BradyW: http://www.shmoop.com/teachers/stand-against-plagiarism.html

BradyW: I'm interested in hearing from the group - at first glance, what do you think of our Essay Lab?

SandraS: So if you get a request from Turnitin.com, you provide the essays to them?

BradyW: yes, we will

JeffC: I'm loving it Brady (working on Reason 1 now for support of my thesis.)

BradyW: wait, let me make sure I answered the correct question -

SandraS: I'd need to play with the lab some more, but at first glance, it focuses clearly on the PROCESS of writing, which I think is critical.

BradyW: we will provide shmoop content to TurnItIn or any other anti-plagiarism service for them to compare against student papers

DianneA joined the room.

SandraS: Got it.

BradyW: Hi Dianne :)

SandraS waves to Dianne.

DianneA: Hi Brady, Sandra

BradyW: Any other initial reactions - what you like or don't like? big gaping holes? seen anything else out there that is similar or better?

SandraS: Brady, I've actually been making some Stickie notes on different content for some of the texts.

JeffC: I'm not saying gaping holes... but I will see people argue that you provide TMI!

BradyW: well, again, hopefully the "generic" examples in our next version will alleviate that concern

JeffC: when I am going for my reasons, quotes pop up based on my themes... so really... Shmoop does the research for the students (who may or may not have read the book).

BradyW: we're removing that feature :-)

JeffC: personally... I like it... but I can see a lot of teachers balking... will you be removing quotes altogether?

BradyW: Teachers are critical to our success... we have a panel of teacher advisors... we go out and meet teachers at local schools... we collaborate with the Stanford School of Education

BradyW: yes, we are removing that "food for thought" section altogether

BradyW: and will be replacing it with the generic Luke Skywalker and Moses examples

JeffC: oh... too bad in a way... obviously there are many pluses to it.

BradyW: we know that students love it :-)

BradyW: but again, we want this to be a tool that teachers love, too. we would like to see teachers assign our Essay Lab in their classroom and use it as a teaching tool

BradyW: so a few words about our next version (although I can't go into great detail)

SandraS: I think that could happen.

BradyW -)

SandraS: Especially when you have a range of possibilities beyond the 5-par. essay.

BradyW: the biggest change is that we will greatly beef up the "thinking" section

SandraS nods

DianneA: that bit interests me Brady

BradyW: we'll ask a *lot* of questions

DianneA: can I ask what web page you all are focusing on at the moment?

BradyW: http://www.shmoop.com/WritePaper/StartHere/literature/f-scott-fitzgerald/the-great-gatsby.html

SandraS: http://www.shmoop.com/WritePaper//literature/f-scott-fitzgerald/the-great-gatsby.html

BradyW: there you go, Dianne

BradyW: this is Shmoop - an online teaching and learning tool for HS-College levels (also reaches into Middle School)

DianneA: Ok thanks ..

BradyW: and the specific part of the site we are checking out is the Essay Lab

SandraS listens for more detail about what is to come...

BradyW: which walks a student through the mechanics of writing an Essay - this is our early early version that you're seeing

DianneA nods and apologises for coming in late (otherwise committed)

BradyW: in our next version - as I was saying - we'll blow out the "think" portion. isn't that 80% of the task, anyway?

SandraS agrees

SandraS: that, and revision

BradyW: we'll ask questions - starting with personal reaction questions that are really easy for a student to answer.

JeffC: here's a redirect for the same site: http://sn.im/shmooplab

BradyW: then through questions about characters, themes, plot structure, etc.

BradyW: so that "think" portion of the Lab will become much more significant

BradyW: Sandy, great point about revision... you're 1 step ahead of us :-)

JeffC just changed it to: http://sn.im/shmooplabgatsby

BradyW: later this year (hopefully before next school year), we will build more revision exercises into the Lab

SandraS: very cool

SandraS is a heavy reviser...

BradyW: I'd be really interested in hearing your feedback on both the "think" and "revise" steps

BradyW: what exercises or questions work well for students?

SandraS: I'll be playing with this...

BradyW: please do! We'd love to hear ongoing feedback after you've had a chance to really get your hands on it.

SandraS: What are Shmoop's short-term and long-term goals? dreams?

SandraS: And...where did the name come from?

JeffC thinks it was the only six letter domain name left!

SandraS: lol

BradyW: the name came from our founder's grandmother's Yiddish slang for "giving something a nudge in the right direction."

BradyW: we want to shmoop students. and we want to shmoop education, as a whole.

SandraS: excellent!

SandraS: sounds like you've got some of the same goals as the National Writing Project!

BradyW: short-term, we want to get the word out as quickly as possible. if you have thoughts on how we can get the word out to teachers, librarians, and students, we're all ears

BradyW: Yes, we would love to collaborate with the NWP

SandraS: Do you have any contacts with them?

BradyW: Not yet

SandraS: That's how I usually start WriteTalk...by giving an intro. to the NWP

SandraS: I'll email and talk with you more...

BradyW: excellent

BradyW: I'm brady at shmoop

SandraS: excellent

BradyW: (everyone, please feel free to send me an email with any follow-up questions...

SandraS: We are pretty much at the end of the hour.

SandraS: I will send a follow-up announcement to the WriteTalk group.

BradyW: Well, thanks so much for having me here. It is always a lot of fun to chat with educators and people who are passionate about teaching writing.

BJB2: Thanks, Brady, for doing this discussion. And thanks, Jeff and Sandy for setting this up

SandraS: Thank you so much for taking the time to visit us.

BradyW: Please drop me a line at any time. I look forward to hearing more feedback!

SandraS nods to Jeff

SandraS: I'm going to go write an essay on Achebe's Things Fall Apart...

SandraS: see how it all works

JeffC: Sorry... browser froze...

SandraS: Thanks again, Brady -- and thanks Jeff and BJ!

JeffC: thanks again Brady... care to try again next month (with more advertising?)

DianneA waves bye for now thanks for the invite this looks like something I need to

follow up

SandraS: If you want to do another session with WriteTalk, just let me know, Brady. We can email about it.

SandraS waves bye to Dianne

BJB2 . o O (and let me know too so I can put it on the calendar)

SandraS nods to BJ

BJB2 waves goodnight.

SandraS: totally!

SandraS waves bye to BJ

SandraS: Thanks, BJ!