New Literacies Books: Technology-Based Formats for Motivating Tech-Savvy Middle Graders

In The Case for Literature (Atwell, 2010), noted literacy expert Nancie Atwell argues that by reading numerous young adult titles each year, her seventh and eighth graders “find their interests, needs, struggles, and dreams spoken for in the crafted stories that fill their library . . . . But most importantly, . . . my students become strong readers” (p. 32).

The role of the middle school teacher is pivotal in creating a community of readers who read—whether reading traditional books or other text formats—and inspire each other to read. In this column, we focus on ways that texts can connect today’s teachers and students with New Literacies. New Literacies engage students in reading and creating a multiplicity of emerging text formats, including websites, glogs, book trailers, stories told through digital communication formats, digital graphic novels, and more.

Online resources provide rich opportunities for creating communities of readers of books. Scholastic’s You Are What You Read (http://youarewhatyouread.scholastic.com/kids/) invites readers to share their “bookprint”—five books that made an indelible mark on their lives. Readers can search on celebrities and “age mates” to learn what books they love; they can build online relationships with peers by discussing particular books they have read in common. A class website based on this format could create rich opportunities for sharing favorite books or electronic texts.

Book trailers and Glogsters are great alternatives to book reports and another way to share student reading. Trailers provide “teasers” that give readers a sneak preview of a text, much like an electronic book talk. YouTube.com offers dozens of trailers about classic and current books created by both publishers and students. Glogster (www.glogster.com) is an online interactive site that makes it easy to create posters with texts, images, music, and video. There you will find simple directions and lots of examples. (See http://misslejeune.edu.glogster.com/hatchet/ for a Glogster on Gary Paulsen’s Hatchet.) By creating book trailers and Glogsters, students develop creativity, synthesize information, and share their favorite books and authors through formats that promote student engagement.

Many authors of traditional books are incorporating digital communication formats into their storytelling. Click Here (to Find Out How I Survived Seventh Grade) (Vega, 2005) details seventh-grader Erin Swift’s Year of Humiliating Events (YOHE). Erin, a tech-savvy girl, struggles to find her place during her first year in middle school, and, like many middle graders, she records the dramas and traumas of her school year on her personal blog and website. The blog is accidentally posted on the school Intranet, and Erin suffers the humiliation of having the entire school know her deepest secrets. The sequel to this title, Access Denied (and Other Eighth Grade Error Messages) (Vega, 2009), features excerpts from her new, private webpage and more hilarious accounts of her misadventures.

Other titles using these formats include the Raisin Rodriguez series (Goldschmidt) and Doing Time Online (Sebold, 2002), a story told through emails. In this story, a middle grade boy is sen-
tenced to regularly email a woman in a nursing home after playing a dangerous prank on an elderly neighbor. After reading stories told through these formats, teachers could ask students to think about the following: How is writing a story through a blog, text message, or email different from writing a traditional story? Why is it different? How can authors reveal characters’ personalities through blogs or emails? Following these discussions, students could use one of these formats to write a sequel, change a scene from a traditional text into this format, or write their own story in this way.

Multiplatform books combine traditional books with computer applications, such as games, chat forums, and so on. These pioneering books, mainly mysteries at this point, incorporate technology in unique ways and are especially suited to reluctant readers. The Skeleton Creek series, for example, integrates Web-based video into the actual plot of the story. Skeleton Creek: Ryan’s Journal (Corman, 2009), the first of the series, features two middle graders involved in a mystery about a mechanical dredge. Communication between the protagonists Ryan and Sarah takes place primarily via email because they have been forbidden to see one another. Approximately every 20 pages, the reader is directed to a password-protected website showing mysterious video footage shot by Sarah at the dredge.

For older middle grade readers, The Amanda Project series (Kantor) focuses on a compelling mystery story about missing teen Amanda Valentino, whose friends are searching for her aided by cryptic messages from Amanda herself. The social networking site for the project (http://www.theamandaproject.com/) engages readers by posting clues about Amanda and lets readers discuss how and why Amanda disappeared. A different type of multiplatform book, the 39 Clues series (http://www.the39clues.com/) from Scholastic, features the adventures of Amy and Dan Cahill, a brother–sister team who must find 39 clues to learn the source of their family’s power. The books in the series are written by different authors; the settings are worldwide and involve a number of historical figures. Some clues to the mystery are found within the books, but most come through cards accompanying each book and completion of online missions at the website.

For younger middle schoolers, the Spaceheadz books by Jon Scieszka reflect his typically zany style, along with great cartoon-like illustrations by Shane Prigmore. The first book, SPHDZ Book #1! (Scieszka, 2010), is about a fifth grader whose new classmates are Spaceheadz, aliens who must change earthling kids into Spaceheadz or the earth will be turned off. The aliens’ knowledge of earth comes exclusively from advertisements, and they constantly spout advertising slogans, which provide teaching opportunities for discussing the impact of advertising on our lives. The main website (http://www.sphdz.com) gives additional information about the characters, along with jokes, games, stickers, and more.

Nonfiction books are also going multiplatform. Vicki Cobb’s (2009) We Dare You: Hundreds of Fun Science Experiments, Tricks, and Games You Can Try at Home contains 200 science experiments that will intrigue and entertain. Her Kid’s Science webpage (http://www.vickicobb.com/) explains a video project that is designed to spark student interest in science; she invites students to submit two-minute videos for posting online that show them completing the experiments in the book. Dorling Kindersley’s 3-D Dinosaurs (DK Publishing, 2011) and 3-D Human Body (DK Publishing, 2011) incorporate a more innovative use of technology called augmented reality. Both books use the reference format that has made this company famous, but each contains boxes that, when held up to a webcam, create 3-D animation on the screen; the animations are superimposed on the book, making it appear that the dinosaur, for example, is actually in the room with the reader.

Graphic texts captivate many middle grade readers. Increasingly, graphic texts are going digital as applications for the iPad, the iPod, the iPhone, and other devices. Free and inexpensive digital graphic novels are available online at WOWIO (http://www.wowio.com/); please note...
that they do contain advertising. For-fee digital graphic novels, like *Star Trek Movie Adaptation* (Orci, Kurtzman, Johnson, & Jones, 2011), are available for the iPad as are adaptations of traditional books into a digital graphic novel format, like *Be Confident in Who You Are: A Middle School Confidential Graphic Novel* (Fox, 2010), which features sound effects, music, and interactivity. Marvel Digital Comics (http://marvel.com/digital_comics) has comics available for online viewing as well as apps for the iPad and iPod available on iTunes.

Teachers could invite students to read these multiplatform books or digital graphic texts in small groups. Classroom discussions might focus on evaluative questions like these: How is reading these types of books different from reading traditional books? What are the challenges for the author in creating these texts? How successful was the author’s use of the multiple platforms or digital comics? If you were the author, what are other ways you might incorporate technology? What advice might you give the author for making the reading experience better or more interesting? Students might create writing projects that combine uses of technology with their own writing using tools like video, websites, iComic, and others to mimic these formats.

### References


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