

Digital Texts and Student Engagement:

What Teachers Need to Know When Planning for Effective Literacy Instruction

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the past year, one instructional practice that has gained traction is the use of online children's picture books or digital texts. Teachers use these (often free) online resources in various ways during literacy instruction. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how preservice teachers and inservice teachers can plan for the effective use of digital texts in their literacy instruction. This chapter provides a conceptual framework for teachers to apply when using digital texts as read alouds in their classrooms. Further, this chapter describes how teachers can actively engage their students when using this text type with their students. Often, a main concern of teachers when using digital texts is how to actively engage students with this text type. Teachers want to plan meaningful literacy instruction that includes digital texts, which means they want their students to engage with the texts they are reading. This chapter demonstrates how using a conceptual framework while planning for early literacy instruction can guide student engagement while using digital texts.

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of education continues to evolve and that was never more obvious than during the two previous school years impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the overnight transition to online teaching, teachers quickly implemented a variety of technology tools they may not have purposefully vetted. Now that teachers have had more than a year to incorporate these various technology tools into their instructional practices, they will be more willing to continue using these during fully online, hybrid, or in-school instruction.

As teacher educators, we have all worked with graduate and undergraduate students at our universities in elementary literacy education. In this work, we noticed the need for teachers to use different technology tools and understand how and why they are using said tools to engage the students they teach. Through this lens, we began thinking about how to be more strategic in our instruction when we present these online tools in our literacy courses by providing more modeling and support to effectively engage our students with these technology tools in a meaningful way.

One area that has gained traction is the use of online children's picture books or digital texts. We have seen teachers use these (often free) online resources in various ways during literacy instruction. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how preservice teachers (PST) and inservice teachers (IST) can plan for the effective use of digital texts in their literacy instruction. This chapter provides a conceptual framework for teachers to apply when using digital texts as read alouds in their classrooms. Further, we suggest how teachers can actively engage their students when using this text type with their students. A main concern of teachers when using digital texts is how to actively engage students with this text type. Teachers want to plan meaningful literacy instruction that includes digital texts, which means they want their students to engage with the texts they are reading. This chapter demonstrates how using a conceptual framework while planning for early literacy instruction can guide student engagement while using digital texts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early Literacy

Before children even enter the world, they make sense of language and develop ways to communicate with those around them (Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2000). This growth continues rapidly throughout their early childhood years from developing spoken language, to recognizing environmental labels and print, to communicating messages through shapes scribbled on a piece of paper (Prior, 2009). Supporting this progression early in life directly affects children's ability to grow into skilled readers, writers, and citizens of the world. "Early childhood literacy is regarded as the single best investment for enabling children to develop skills that will likely benefit them for a lifetime" (Dickinson & Neuman, 2007, p. 1). Even though it may seem as if children develop these skills naturally or on their own, research has demonstrated that thoughtful, playful, and intentional guidance from adults cultivates an environment in which these skills are developed (ILA, 2018a).

Through intentional early literacy instruction, children establish both verbal and written communication practices, which promote orthographic knowledge and are the best predictors of children's later reading success (National Early Learning Panel [NELP], 2008). Thoughtful early literacy teaching allows young

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