Chapter 15
The Use of Digital Story Expressions with Adolescents to Promote Content Area Literacy

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ABSTRACT

The meaning of literacy has evolved to include digital, electronic, and visual expressions. Students enter classrooms possessing a level of proficiency with these new literacy skills, yet they encounter predominantly traditional print formats. Research suggested incorporating digital technologies into instruction has the potential to enhance reading comprehension, as well as foster the development of critical thinking. This chapter describes how two middle school teachers, a language arts teacher and a social studies teacher, incorporate digital story expressions into their curriculum as a way to address both students' and teachers' digital knowledge, skills, and behaviors. This process, detailed in this chapter, includes taking an initial assessment of students' skills levels, developing cross-curricular connections, drafting an assessment plan, and maintaining collaborative efforts during the instructional sequence.

INTRODUCTION

Advancements in technologies have led educational stakeholders to revise the definition of literacy to include digital, electronic, and visual expressions (Hobbs, 2006). Literacy previously was limited to the ability to successfully navigate traditional print materials, such as books and newspapers (Baker, 2010). However, being literate in the 21st century requires the ability to understand moving and still images, (e.g., television and photographs), as well as emerging digital technologies (e.g., wikis and blogs).

Unfortunately, educators often do not acknowledge or utilize these newer literacy practices of today's students (Considine, Horton, & Moorman, 2009). Today's learners have experienced digital literacies their entire lives and are labeled as digital

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natives (Prensky, 2001). Digital natives come to school skilled in uploading and downloading music and video files, messaging with electronic communication devices, communicating through social media outlets, operating digital video recording devices, editing and posting still and moving media, creating digital productions, and participating in virtual platforms (Baker, 2010). However, most literacy instruction within the school still occurs predominantly in traditional print formats, such as through the use of pencil and paper. In order to best meet the needs of digital natives, educators must "build a bridge" connecting knowledge and skills students already possess to the academic content and skills required for success (Considine, Horton, & Moorman, 2009, p. 471).

On the other hand, not all learners possess the digital proficiency inferred on them by terms like *digital natives*. Technological inequities still exist among the current generation of learners, as evidenced in Project Tomorrow's (2012) report that states nearly half of 9th-12th grade students in the United States own a smartphone device, and approximately 21% owned a personal tablet. While access to technology is rapidly growing, educators need to be aware that students' technological knowledge and skills are diverse. In this same manner, proficiency with digital technologies does not necessarily translate to greater academic performance. Furthermore, according to Walsh, Fielder, Carey, and Carey (2013), greater amounts of daily media use (i.e., social networking, Internet browsing, and texting) were negatively associated with academic performance among female college freshman.

BACKGROUND

Adolescent Literacy and Digital Technology

Biancarosa and Snow (2004) clarified that while adolescent students can "read," many fail to comprehend what they read. As adolescent students enter the middle grades, the instructional focus shifts from *learning to read* to *reading to learn* (Chall, 1983). Dougherty Stahl (2011) described finite skills associated with learning to read that learners must master by third grade in order to experience success with reading. These skills include concepts about print, phonemic awareness, phones, alphabetic skills, and word analysis strategies. Once learners develop proficiency with these foundational reading skills, instruction should shift to develop lifelong reading to learn skills, such as comprehension skills (i.e., acquisition and strategy development), fluency, automaticity with word recognition, and vocabulary development. Kamil (2003) attributed this phenomenon to the self-perceptions of content area teachers; they perceive themselves as specialists within their content area, not teachers of reading. Therefore, academic success may be unattainable for many adolescents due to the fact they are unable to comprehend material within their content area textbooks (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Joftus, 2002).

Gee (2008) purported the importance of educators capitalizing on adolescent students' proficiency with digital technologies to enhance content area comprehension. Leu (1996) pointed out that the rise of multimedia in classrooms requires educators to understand the importance of social communication with use of digital tools to assist with development of meaning. Moreover, Leu emphasized that educators must be wary to avoid superficial experiences with technology and focus on creating learning experience that "support students' learning about literacy, critical thinking, or content" (p. 163). With this in mind, Gee (2008) suggested that rather than focusing on reading to learn during content area instruction, educators must view reading as a means to "discover and innovate" (p. 10).

The dramatic rise of digital tools into daily life has shifted people to become producers, rather than consumers, of media (Gee, 2010). According to Gee, more than half of all adolescents have