The Research Base for

Glencoe Literature: Reading with Purpose

White Paper
Connecting to Digital Technologies to Promote Literacy in School
Education journals and popular trade publications are full of references to the identities of adolescents in this age of rapidly emerging technologies. They have been called cyberkids (Sefton-Green, 1998), “screenagers” (Rushkoff, 1999), and the digital generation (Crump & Stanley, 2000). Marc Prensky (2001, 2006) has called our current generation of adolescents digital natives. He notes that digital natives are “fluent in the digital language of computers, video games, and the Internet” (p. 9, 2006). As for teachers who were not born into this digital age, he reserves the title of digital immigrants. These teachers are trying to adopt the new language and skills of their pupils, but they always seem to slip, letting a bit of an accent come through. They are always a few steps behind their students. This lag has produced some sense of inadequacy among teachers and even some fear and anxiety about the technologies that students use so effortlessly.

Despite this disparity, teachers can still lead the way by connecting digital media and literacy in the classroom. They need not try to master these new technologies; many digital immigrants will never catch up with students. However, teachers can continue to facilitate their students’ learning by being cognizant of the following key issues while trying to connect students’ literacy practices with their lives outside of school:

- Many students are already fluent with “new literacies” based in digital technologies. For example, youth are increasingly using the following: instant messaging (IMing) and cell phone text messaging, both of which they use a new abbreviated language to keep in touch with peers; Weblogs — blogging, for short, in which they post their opinions and ongoing commentaries — and even diaries — online to share with others; multimedia presentations and online texts in which they use a range of media authoring and Web page authoring tools; and wikis, collaborative, cumulative texts in which multiple authors can read and edit an existing text — see Wikipedia, for example. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page
- Children and adolescents are spending an increasing amount of time not only using media (on average, about 6 hours per day), including the Internet, but multimediating; that is, they are “multitasking” using several forms of media at the same time (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005).
• An increasing number of young people consult the Internet as their primary reference text, especially for school assignments; and one-third of young people report that they use multiple media simultaneously (surf the Web, talk on the phone, instant message, watch TV) even while they do homework, see multimediating above.

• The digital divide, which has long been a reason for not using more technology-based learning and assignments in school, is gradually closing, with more students from all socioeconomic levels gaining access to technology at home, in the community, and at school. The gap is still evident in terms of access to computers at home and in schools in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods.

• Due to the appeal of both the technologies and the “popular” media that these technologies make available (Beach & O’Brien, in press), and the comfort even struggling students feel with using them, digital technologies are providing opportunities to motivate and engage students in reading, writing, and other literacies, including more traditional school-based literacies and multiple, rather than single, texts (O’Brien, 2001, 2003).

Dubbed “screenagers” for a reason, students show no signs of losing interest in these new digital literacies. Conventional wisdom prompts us to believe that the more time children and adolescents spend with these media, the less time they will devote to reading. Research, however, does not clearly bear out that inverse relationship. Some of the biggest media users are also the most avid readers. A more forward-thinking perspective is to look at students’ interest in these new media and their associated literacies as a way to connect to their practices in school. Here are some ways teachers can accomplish this:

**Connecting Print Text to Digital Media Text**

Perform systematic searches for Web sites that support kids’ reading. There is an emerging body of research showing that digital media texts can be used to motivate and engage struggling readers with print texts (O’Brien, 2001; 2003, in press).

The Literature Online feature in Reading With Purpose encourages readers to find out more about topics and authors by linking to the Glencoe Web site. These sorts of intertextual links
are key to motivating struggling, disengaged readers who are often tired of typical textbook formats, despite interesting and accessible texts.

Careful and critical searches of Web sites on topics related to the topics, skills, and strategies targeted in a particular unit may provide a range of media to support reading in school. For example, the selection in Reading with Purpose on Tony Hawk (Unit 2: Tony Hawk: Chairman of the Board) can be augmented by using print and media texts from Tony Hawk’s official Web site. For example, his road journal catalogues his competitions around the world and provides a great example of the genre of the journal/diary—or blog—that can be compared with the unit genre focus on biography. Hawk’s writing can be discussed in relation to students’ writing in their journals. Each digital text you link to can provide ways to extend skills, strategies, and additional examples of literary elements; the possibilities are limitless when you draw on these media texts.

**Connecting Print to Other Print Media**

In some cases texts from popular genres such as cartoons and illustrations, are included in the reading and writing workshop sections. These serve important functions: they motivate students who are learning skills and strategies and engage struggling learners whose attention cannot be captivated by traditional print media.

**Reading with a Purpose**

Typical reading assignments are implicit in that students are reading what teachers want them to read or what they must read to fulfill prescribed curricular goals. With this typical prescription, less motivated or struggling readers are unlikely to engage in reading and build fluency and comprehension.

Increasingly, students read texts outside of school for their own purposes. For example, boys read less in school than girls, but they readily consult the Internet to accomplish goals, learn more about a particular topic of interest, or get information on products they want to buy. Girls are online to connect with broader communities of other girls. As their attitudes toward reading in school become increasingly negative, their attitudes toward reading digital texts and using media is increasingly positive.

When students can respond as members of various activity systems — like book clubs, social groups of friends, chat rooms, and work — to understand people they read about as part of
activity systems portrayed in texts (Beach, 2000), they are more engaged. Simply stated, when students read to engage in some broader activity, for their own purposes, rather than engaging in reading in and of itself, they tend to connect with a broader purpose.

To achieve this connection, we must model how real-life readers use literacy to accomplish goals. For example, in the selection *Kids in Action: Dalie Jimenez*, the characters—or kids—engage in a community and political action project to stop cuts in Head Start. Students reading this selection will see reading and other literacy practices as something that leads to personally relevant goals.

The section in *Getting Reading to Read* entitled *Set Purposes for Reading* is an acknowledgement of the fact that students who live in the mediasphere are reading more for purposes they construct both inside and outside of school. Constructing their own purposes for reading is very important.

**Genre Focus and Multiple Texts**

Research on youth reading habits reveals that they read across an increasing number of genres, ranging from common genres as seen in *Reading With Purpose*, to more “hybrid” genres, such as cartoons, e-zines, and blogs. These young readers are increasingly adept at reading multimodal texts—that is, reading print, reading print with pictures, or “reading” visual media, like video clips, instead of print. In addition, these readers are also adept at linking texts to one another via hypertext links on the Web.

Research supports the reading of multiple genres of texts on a topic and the use of genre-specific skills and strategies in order to read those texts critically. As noted, the genre focus of the texts in the units can be augmented with additional genres or hybrid genres. For example, the text from *Rosa Parks: My Story* can be augmented with newspaper stories about the bus boycott that followed her nonviolent protest, a speech given by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., supporting nonviolent protest following the beginning of the boycott, and the Supreme Court ruling, one year following Parks’ refusal to give up her seat, which deemed segregation unconstitutional. All of these texts are available in digital form on the Web.

The notion of connecting digital text to reading in school is just that: connection. Incorporating digital media into your classroom levels the playing field between the natives and the
immigrants, giving some sure footing to both parties. You do not have to displace print texts with media texts, but you must be aware of the increasing use of a range of media by middle-school students. Further, you need to understand that these digital media already motivate and engage readers who are mostly disengaged from typical reading tasks in school. Digital immigrants who are learning about technologies can capitalize on what they know about reading and sound instructional practice to lead the digital native students into some new “learning subcultures,” in which traditional print and digital media complement one another.

References


