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Voices from the Classroom:

Young Adult Literature in the 21st Century

Teaching initiatives and paradigms shift, but the integration of technology in schools continues to be a focal point. As a high school English teacher, I have always worked to introduce my students to the latest information and technologies because, like most teachers, I am in the profession to best prepare my students for the future—to help them become better readers, writers, speakers, and thinkers. Typically, reading is imagined to be a very solitary act, but the Internet allows readers to connect with each other. I wanted my students to reach out of the classroom and make these connections.

Attewell & Battle (1999) researched the achievement of students who have access to a computer at home. They found that, "[H]aving a home computer remains positively associated with higher reading and math scores, and with higher school grades, even after controlling for the various measures of family economic and cultural resources" (p. 6). While I could not control my students' computer use at home, I felt it was imperative to give them more access to computers in the classroom. Yu, Tian, Vogel, and Kwok (2010) state, "Without the problem of 'fear of embarrassment' in face-to-face interaction (Leary & Kowalski, 1990), online social networking allows university students to feel more comfortable in expressing themselves and interacting with peers and professors" (p. 1500). I hypothesized that my students were, in relevant ways, comparable to these university students, and adding technology to our curricular tools would allow them to become more engaged in the classroom content and more comfortable in conversations about reading.

Over the past two years, over 100 students have taken my technologically integrated Young Adult Literature (YAL) elective. Some are avid readers, others hope to rediscover their love of reading, and a few are just looking for elective credit. The reading levels in each class range from students who read far below grade level to others who surpass most adults. The students don't reflect those in a typical English classroom where, often, a number of students are reluctant to read because most of their classmates already have a passion for reading. Upon completion of the elective, students have the opportunity to enroll in my Advanced Young Adult Literature course. Both of the courses are a semester long.

My dream design for the course went beyond my traditional classroom activities that allowed for groups of students to read and discuss books in literature circles. I envisioned my students better connecting with the literature through technology—author chats, blogs, book reviews, and book trailers. As I teach in a low-income community, many of my students don't have access to computers at home, and our library computer lab is in high demand and not available for the continual connectivity I desired. As a result, I had minimal success with many of the technology-driven activities in my course; there simply weren't enough technological tools to implement the lessons.

My research posed the hypothesis that incorporating technology would boost students' reading habits

and increase their self-efficacy in regards to their reading abilities. Through the funding of the ALAN Foundation Grant, I was able to provide my students with a computer, a projector, and a webcam—tools that would allow them to have easy access to technology.

To research the impact of the new technology, I surveyed the students at the beginning, middle, and end of the course with open-ended questions about how the technology impacted their reading habits. In the survey on the first day of school, students ranked their reading habits as poor, fair, good, or excellent. Interestingly, more than half of the students ranked their reading habits as "fair." The open-ended questions revealed that several of the students wanted to learn about different genres of literature and expand their book interests. It was quite surprising to me that these students, who signed up for a reading elective in addition to their required English grade-level course, did not identify as strong readers, but I was pleased that they wanted to strengthen their reading interests and habits. Because most were requesting more exposure, I was determined to surround them with books and improve their reader confidence.

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Engaging Readers through Technology

GoodReads

I created flexible lesson plans that allowed students to use the class computer for GoodReads (www.good reads.com) during their Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) time. GoodReads is a social-networking website dedicated to connecting readers. Students benefit from this website because they can review books; keep track of books they have read, want to read, and are currently reading; form book clubs; post in private or public discussion groups; access free book giveaways; answer book trivia; vote on book lists; participate in author interviews; message authors; and access other book-related activities. GoodReads was more familiar to me than comparable websites like Shelfari or LibraryThing, and many of my colleagues are active contributors to that website.

GoodReads has many capabilities and, as an added bonus, it allows my students to connect with other students and teachers within our school and read their book reviews. In this particular class, we used the first 50 minutes of our 84-minute period to discuss books, genres, and other book-related topics, after which students were given 34 minutes to read silently or access GoodReads. At times, I used the projector to share aspects of the website, but students used it primarily to personalize their experience in the class based on their interests. In addition to the class time provided for students to access GoodReads, I set up a workstation where they could utilize the computer before and after school and during study hall periods. I also made my own computer available during class time, so there were always two computers available to the students.

GoodReads offers a cell phone application, so I allowed the students to use their phones during class. Our district's cell phone policy relies on teacher discretion, and I found that a brief discussion about responsible cell phone use during class was helpful. There were only a few instances when I had to speak with students privately about using their cell phones for GoodReads only. As students recommended books in class, many others would immediately add these books to their "to-read" lists using their phones or one of the two computers.

We rotated which students used the computers, and I reserved the computer lab each month so the whole class could access GoodReads at once. I was surprised that many students preferred to access GoodReads at home or with their cell phones, so during the majority of our classes, neither computer in the classroom was being used. Overall, about 25% of the students accessed the website daily, 60% accessed it weekly, and 15% only used it when we went to the computer lab or during class. Not all students enjoyed using the website, so I offered writing assignments as an alternative to the students' book review and discussion board participation grades. None of the students elected to do the alternative assignments, but many commented in their post-surveys that they appreciated having the option.

As a way to understand the impact of the integration of technology on the students' reading habits and confidence, I created discussion threads where students could share their thoughts about the various

forms of technology. When student Shayla (all names are pseudonyms) was asked how GoodReads benefitted her classroom experience, she said, "It made me look forward to logging on every day to update my progress on each book I read." I found that several students wanted to constantly log into GoodReads to update their lists. My room seemed to have a revolving door with students stopping in at all times of the school day to update their GoodReads accounts and search for more books to read.

I was pleased with the way students connected to each other on the discussion forums. A few created their own public discussion groups specific to their interests. Gina said, "It also helped me to learn how to interact with other people who are also book lovers." While the requirement was to log on to GoodReads weekly, several students reviewed and posted daily. After some time, I stopped creating the topic ideas in our classroom forum and let students take over, so they could generate discussion threads about topics that interested them. A few student-generated topics were: The Horror Genre, When and Where Do You Like to Read?, Fast-Paced or Gradual Swoop?, Books vs. Movies, Unicorns vs. Zombies (my personal favorite), and various threads addressing individual books they wanted to discuss with others in the class. In her research regarding GoodReads, Walker (2010) reflects, "The fact that students have some freedom of choice and an opportunity to articulate group understandings in a nonthreatening (face-to-face and virtual) manner would seem to be the key to success" (p. 6). Student Telah states, "The discussions were interesting because everyone had such different opinions about books, authors, and genres."

Students were required to complete a minimum of two book reviews per quarter. As a class, we critically examined various book reviews online. When we read the reviews together, we discussed the good and bad qualities of each example. After several of these discussions, I decided not to set specific requirements for students' own reviews. As a reviewer myself, I shift between informal and formal book reviews. I felt that providing specific requirements for students' book reviews would restrict their creative freedom.

By the end of the semester, some students reviewed over 50 books. Aaliyah stated, "It also was helpful that you could see a multitude of other people's feelings towards a book so you don't get hung up if someone [in class] says it was bad." Writing the book reviews forced the students to think deeply about the books they were reading. Many complained that they had to work very hard to convince others that their favorite books were truly special. Diana stated, "Being able to put my reviews to the test really helped my writing skills overall." Writing the book reviews enabled the students not only to examine the literary merit of the books they reviewed but also to craft their writing to make a convincing case.

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GoodReads allowed my students to explore books beyond my classroom or library. Repeatedly, students expressed that the website was a great tool to access information about new and interesting titles. Gina, an avid paranormal fiction reader, stated, "If it weren't for GoodReads, I wouldn't have learned to broaden my selection of books I enjoy." Another student, Danielle, acknowledged that she hadn't had much success at the library. She added, "With GoodReads, I can search the books I am looking for and can find [them] immediately without being disappointed, like when I search in the library." GoodReads allowed students to see millions of new, unknown books. Sam shared, "I had read all the YA Lit books I wanted in my public library by the time I was eleven. GoodReads helped me realize there were so many more books out there."

At the end of the semester, Josie, one of the most active contributors to the class discussion board, posted, "I really hope I'm not the only nerd who will still be on [GoodReads] after the class is over because you guys read and recommend some reallly [sic] good books and this would be the only place I can figure out what to read!" Laura commented her favorite part about GoodReads was, "I never had any idea that so many people share the common interest of reading and could be connected in a large way." After the class ended, students continued to post on the website. Six of the 20 students in the pilot course (from two years ago) still continue to post on the website weekly.

Author Skype™ Session

Skype™ is just one of many video conferencing tools that can be easily utilized by teachers. Young adult literature is unique in that the authors in this field are accessible to their audience. Author Kate Messner (2010) states, "I log onto my computer, open Skype,

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and within minutes after the bell rings, I'm connected to students on the other side of the country for a 20-minute chat" (p. 43). I wanted my students to connect to the authors of the titles they were reading in order to boost their reading habits.

As the students enjoyed reading Julie Halpern's *Get Well Soon* (2007), I organized a Skype™ session with her. I chose Skype over other video conferencing tools simply because my school has a username and password that I could easily access. Word spread, and over 50 students squeezed into a conference room to chat with her. The Skype session was very easy to set up—I connected the projector to the computer and exchanged login names with Halpern. The author chat energized the students—several asked questions about the creative writing process or sought suggestions for pursuing a writing career.

Following the session, a student, Laura, created a discussion thread on GoodReads because she wanted to discuss the experience. Tina replied to Laura's post with, "It was enjoyable to listen to her tell us that [the book] was based on her life and what she's gone through. I applaud her for being so open and honest about it." Sam, who read the book nine times before the author Skype session, said, "I always think that when someone is famous, they automatically stop being a normal person and start being some super-cool famous person with no need for non-famous people. But Julie Halpern was nothing like that. //Squeal of excitement!//" And Diana replied, "Julie Halpern was an inspiration. She really gave us a better look into writing and publishing." More than anything, the Skype session helped the students understand that the authors of the books they read are real people, and it encouraged them to email and tweet their favorite authors.

Blogging

A more advanced reader, Leila, took the Young Adult Literature course as an independent study with me to further challenge herself. As she was already active in the GoodReads community, Leila decided to create a blog to advance her study of the field. We chose this website together because it was not blocked by our Internet firewall, and she liked the user-friendliness of the website. Her blog posts recommend and review books, reflect on life events, and explore how reading has contributed to her life. One of her posts was reprinted in our town's online newspaper. When asked how blogging benefitted her classroom experience, she stated, "Being able to blog gave me time to think about what it was that I had read and reflect on what I really thought of the books. It's something completely different from a discussion because the entire time you're having a debate within yourself over what you really thought."

Blog websites like www.blogger.com are free, and based on Leila's work, I plan to incorporate them into my Advanced Young Adult Literature course. Blogging appears to be a strong tool of differentiation for readers who would like more of a challenge or want to become more active in the reading community. Students are able to write about any reading-related topic of interest, and blogging forces them to truly think and elaborate to create cohesive posts.

Book Trailers

As another way to engage my students in new and interesting young adult literature, I used the projector to show book trailers. They enjoyed the trailers so much that they asked me to show a new book trailer every day. These trailers are posted on author and publisher websites, YouTube, Amazon, and GoodReads. Each day, students shared book recommendations with their peers, and I kept the projector ready to play the book trailers after each recommendation. Book-talking has always been an effective way for me to familiarize my students with new titles, but book trailers seemed to be even more valuable. Therefore, I tried to mix book talks and book trailers throughout the semester.

The students' final group project was to create their own book trailers toward the end of the first quarter in the semester-long course. Students worked together in our school's computer lab and found

the process to be very easy overall. Using Windows Movie Maker (PCs) or iMovie (Apple), which are both very user-friendly, students can fuse pictures, movies, and text to generate very professional-looking book trailers. A few students enjoyed the process so much that they created additional book trailers later in the semester as they finished reading other books. Jenna stated, "I absolutely loved that assignment. Being able to come up with a trailer for a book—it was definitely an exciting experience, especially after reading the book and seeing how well the trailer fit the book." The book trailer project was successful overall, and only 3 out of 19 groups responded in their post-surveys that they disliked the assignment. Most of the issues revolved around the group dynamics and personalities, though two of the groups struggled because none of the group members was technologically savvy. Overall, the students enjoyed the assignment, and several students were so excited about their videos that they posted them on YouTube to show their friends and the public.

Prezis

All of the students in our school are familiar with PowerPoint, and many of them have fully mastered all of the capabilities of the program. While this is an effective presentation tool, I wanted my students to step outside of their comfort zones and utilize unfamiliar technologies for their independent theme projects— the final project at the end of the second quarter. Each student selected a theme in literature or an author to study and researched the topic in the computer laboratory. I signed up for three consecutive days in the computer lab so students could research their topics and create a presentation. They then presented their projects in the classroom using the class computer and projector.

Prezi (www.prezi.com) is a cloud-based software that allows students to create more dynamic presentations. I chose it because I saw a colleague use it successfully in a meeting, and after experimenting with it, I found it to be user-friendly. At first, the website was overwhelming to students, and many asked if they could use PowerPoint instead. Because of this, I had to model its capabilities using the projector and allot more time in the library so students could become more comfortable with the software.

The majority of the students grew to enjoy the software, but there were certainly a number of students who disliked the requirement. When I asked the students whether they enjoyed watching the presentations, every student agreed that the Prezi presentations were much more engaging than the presentations they were accustomed to. Alandra, a student who doesn't enjoy using technology, stated, "It took me some time, but I grew to absolutely love it. I am definitely going to use this for presentations next year in college. My prezi looks so professional!"

Conclusion

With these new tools in the classroom, it was very easy to include technology in every lesson. I worked to include a website or video each day to increase student engagement. The students were truly excited about reading, and the integration of technology seemed to play a large role in this attitude.

In the final class survey, I asked students to share how the technology and course helped their reading habits and confidence. Only one student still ranked her reading ability as "fair." Every other student circled

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"good" or "excellent." While I feel that the technology boosted students' confidence in their reading abilities, I believe it was also influenced by several other factors, including group discussions, teacher conferences, and the achievement of reading goals. Eliza, who enjoyed reading in middle school but lost her passion for reading in high school, stated, "I'm glad I've finally learned to love reading again and am now open to so many different genres and writing styles."

Almost all of the students who weren't confident in their reading skills shared that the course helped boost their confidence. Amber, a struggling reader, wrote, "Now I'm reading better than I ever have, and I have books after books waiting for me to read! I never thought I would really be able to read well, but now I know I can read better and am interested in it. It just

shows how practice makes perfect." Many of the students did not realize how much they enjoyed reading, and Sam reflected, "It helped me see what a big reader I am." In response to the number of books the course and technology exposed her to, Joanna shared, "In this class, you can't help but read a lot!" and Ana enthused, "My adoration for reading has become an obsession."

One result that I hadn't anticipated was the feeling of true accomplishment that so many students felt about the number of pages they had read. They continually posted their reading goals in discussion threads and then gushed when they surpassed them. Several wrote that their reading increased when they discovered that it brought them comfort. For instance, Jayla wrote that she was "more able to understand books that are higher than my reading level," and "When I read, my problems get smaller. Books are my own form of therapy. [They] aren't just therapeutic to me, but they can make me smarter, too."

At times, I worried that I spent too much of the class time teaching and modeling these new technological tools instead of discussing books, but the advantage was that students became comfortable with unfamiliar technologies that they can use productively in the future. Students' reading may have increased without the technology, of course, but I can confidently say that its incorporation effectively enhanced their abilities to access, review, and discuss titles.

Even students who were avid readers before

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the course began acknowledged that the technology helped introduce them to many more books. In fact, they often complained that they did not have time to read all of the books on their to-read lists. Alicia felt GoodReads helped her the most because it gave her "motivation to start reading a lot of different books" to add to her "lengthy to-read list." The last line of Diana's final exam expresses it best: "I will read any book thrown at me. YA Lit has really broadened my horizon and I can't wait to read more." Alicia concludes, "I look forward to learning more about the struggles of different people [through reading]. I want to understand the world so I can make it a better place."

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