

At the Intersection of Critical Digital Literacies, Young Adult Literature, and Literature Circles

This article explores the impact on adolescents' learning when they are given opportunities to create digital texts for a wider audience and engage with social justice issues on a global scale. Students participated in literature circles based on important social issues such as the impact of war on children, the influence of media on body image, and bullying/cyberbullying. The work we have been doing in classrooms in Ontario, Canada, positions adolescents as agents of change as they produce digital texts to create awareness about these issues by sharing them with wider audiences.

Critical digital literacies (CDL) exist at the intersection of critical literacies and digital literacies, and we define CDL as the ability to read and create digital texts in a reflective way to identify and ameliorate the power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships. In order to encourage adolescents to become agents of change in their local and global communities, we used a variety of young adult literature, literature circles, and digital media.

Young adult (YA) literature has the potential to engage students through the writing style, high-interest content, and overall appeal to young readers. Furthermore, as the definition of literacy has changed to include that which is multimodal and digital (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008), it is necessary to include a technology element in many literacy activities—not only to engage the students, as these are part of their out-of-school practices, but also to refine their

skills and teach them how to critically navigate their increasingly digital worlds.

Finally, since research points to the efficacy of literature circles (Mills & Jennings, 2011), the quality of discussions they generate, and how they help students enter texts, identify with them, and make meaning, we used a combination of face-to-face and online literature circles. We wanted the students to engage in meaningful, reflective discussion and to benefit from the performative, collaborative, and multimodal affordances of online discussions. The classroom social networking site, Ning, connected the students and transformed their discussions and interactions, taking them beyond the classroom walls and hours and allowing the students to communicate with each other through a variety of textual, verbal, and semiotic tools.

We were specifically interested in exploring the following questions: 1) What is the relationship between digital media and adolescents' understanding of various issues while immersed in using digital media? 2) How does a critical digital literacies approach shape what students learn and how they view themselves and their roles in their community? 3) How do the public performances of students' digital texts reshape the relationship between educational stakeholders (students, teachers, parents, schools) and the wider community (both locally and globally)?

The role of community and the public sharing of knowledge and understanding is a key component of

the research. Although creating awareness of problems in the world around us is an important first step, it is not enough. As O’Neil (2010) asserts, “At the heart of social justice is the realization that things do not have to continue as they are but can be changed, and that this change occurs only when individuals act

to create it” (p. 48). The performative potential of digital media (Hughes & John, 2009; Hughes, 2009) facilitates the exploration and creation of digital texts, lending voice to the local and global issues that adolescents are most concerned about. These texts can, in turn, be shared with others as a way of engendering social change. Emancipatory actions can encourage students to write, read, and re-write the world and the word,

linking literacy to human agency and the power to “effect social transformation” (Janks, 2010, p. 161).

The goal of the research was to give students voice and agency in the context of community and thus provide opportunities for students not only to explore relevant issues in their lives through the kind of book talk generated through literature circles, but also to explore ways they might effect change in their own lives and communities. The research project extended the use of digital media beyond the classroom and immersed students in the act of producing digital media texts on critical issues in their local and global communities. When students gain understanding of others using contemporary media texts, they are afforded the opportunity for agency and change in their own lives within school, the community, and beyond. Creating digital texts for a wider audience encourages students to become leaders on the world stage. The target audience of their text production shifts from an audience of one (their teacher) or a few (their classmates) to a great many.

Using Young Adult Literature and Literature Circles

The field of young adult literature has been flourishing over the past few years despite a slumping economy,

and this growing collection of books offers adolescents vehicles through which they can explore important societal issues and themes of social justice (Glenn, 2008; Groenke, Maples & Henderson, 2010; Wolk, 2009). Between the covers of much young adult literature exist stories that can create awareness, stir emotions, and provoke change. Wolk (2009) suggests, “Teaching for social responsibility with good books does far more than encourage civic participation; it redefines the purpose of school and empowers all of us—students, teachers, administrators, parents—to be better people and live more fulfilling lives” (p. 672). As Mills and Jennings (2011) point out, literature circles can be a powerful way for students to both reflect on what they are reading and become reflexive about their own personal growth.

Features of the Study

Methodology

Our study examines how literacy activities such as the ones described below might enhance global consciousness of adolescents and help them to develop a greater awareness of social justice issues. This three-year qualitative case study involved five classes of middle school students (grades 6–8) and their teachers in an elementary school (Year 1: 3 classes; Years 2 & 3: 1 class) located in a relatively affluent area near Toronto, Ontario. In each year of the study, the students used a variety of hardware (e.g., iPod Touch technology, iPads, and Smart Phones) and software to read, write, view, and represent a number of digital texts beginning with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. They engaged in literature circles as they read young adult literature related to one of the issues of concern: Year 1: Children & War; Year 2: Body Image & the Media; Year 3: Bullying & Cyberbullying. They engaged with their peers in this book talk both during face-to-face meetings and through an online social networking site, Ning. Finally, they created their own digital and multimodal texts, which were shared with their wider community as a way of taking action.

Prior to the introduction of the project activities, the research team met with the teachers of the classes to: 1) discuss and clarify the research project’s goals and methods and 2) assist with the planning of the activities. The work was inquiry-based and the adolescents in the study were given the challenge of creating their own digital texts using digital software such as

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PhotoStory, MovieMaker, ComicLife, Frames 4, Glogster, and Scrapblog to represent their learning. The research team also met with the teachers after the unit to: 1) review and discuss the digital texts produced by the students and 2) reflect on the activities used with the adolescents. Throughout the implementation of each research phase, teaching methodologies were tracked and reflected upon at the end of each week to help determine best practices in teaching using a CDL pedagogy.

Data sources included our detailed field notes based on classroom observations, open-ended focus groups and interviews with students and teachers, and the digital texts students produced. These data were coded for various themes that emerged. The multi-modal texts created by the students were analysed within a framework of semiotic meta-functions (Burn, 2008; Jewitt, 2008; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001) using a digital visual literacy analysis method of developing a “pictorial and textual representation of [the] elements” (Hull & Katz, 2006, p.41). The analysis focused on the various modes of expression (i.e. visual image, gesture, movement) that students used and how these worked in concert to create meaning. We were particularly interested in moments that might be interpreted as “turning points” (Bruner, 1994) in the representation of their conceptual understandings of social justice and equity issues.

Year 1: Children & War

Our Year 1 theme was chosen in consultation with the teacher and students, who were surveyed about the global issues that concerned them most. At the time, Kony 2012, a documentary about a Ugandan warlord, had just gone viral, and many of the students had questions about child soldiers. Eighteen million children worldwide have been forced to flee their homes because of war, while 300,000 children have been conscripted into armed forces around the world (<http://www.warchild.ca/>). We, therefore, felt this was a pressing and relevant social justice issue to bring into the classroom, especially as the students were of a similar age to those about whom they were reading.

The students were involved in literature circles with four to five peers in each group. After the teacher gave a brief book talk on each text, the students selected their first, second, and third choices. In order to

expose the students to a variety of writing styles and genres, the texts consisted of both fiction and nonfiction titles. Some of the more challenging texts in terms of mature content and/or writing style included: *A Long Way Gone* (2007) by Ishmael Beah, *They Fight Like Soldiers, They Die Like Children* (2010) by Roméo Dallaire, *Chanda's Wars* (2008) by Allan Stratton, and *Children of War* (2010) and *Off to War* (2008) by Deborah Ellis. Some of the more easily accessible texts included *The Shepherd's Granddaughter* (2008) by Anne Laurel Carter, *Breadwinner* (2000) by Deborah Ellis, *Shattered* (2006) by Eric Walters, *Shooting Kabul* (2010) by N. H. Senzai, and *The Photographer* (2009) by Emmanuel Guibert.

The students engaged in regular literature circle meetings, both face-to-face and on a Ning, where they were assigned rotating roles that included: advice columnist, news reporter, summarizer, dream weaver, and illustrator. The literature circles were an important way for the students to engage deeply with the texts, not only on their own, but also with their peers who brought their own perspectives, experiences, and ideas. The students' engagement with the texts and the subsequent conversations meant that these meetings were highly active, creative, and collaborative. As a result, the students appeared to identify deeply with these YA texts and their content, and they took ownership of their learning.

As part of the literature circle activities, the students read selected websites and viewed various video clips related to children and war and discussed how these informed their literature circle books. Each week, they focused on one of the following topics: Sharing stories: Life as a refugee; Conventions on the rights of the child; Child labour: Rights forgotten; Global issues: A call to answer; Working against poverty; Human rights: Respecting others; Rights of children in Afghanistan; and Global citizens: Responding to need. For each of these topics, the students were required to draw on their reading, writing,

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viewing, representing, speaking, and listening skills as they explored digital and print texts (e.g., articles, books, websites, video clips related to the topic). For each topic, they also had to engage in a critical reading of the texts as well as produce a digital text of their own in response to the topic. These included creating word clouds summarizing the main ideas, digital collages representing the big ideas of the topic, sequential art panels (or comics) using Bitstrips or Comic Life, and more.

As a way of synthesizing and consolidating all of their learning, the students had the option to create a digital story or visual essay using MovieMaker or Photostory; a digital children's story on the Rights of the Child; a digital poetry anthology; a graphic novella using ComicLife, Frames4, or Bitstrips, or a scrapblog based on war art or another topic (see Fig. 1).

They also had the option to deconstruct a war video game (using Jing if the game was hosted online, or with a handheld video camera if the game was hosted elsewhere); create lyrics/music and make a music video to accompany it; or create a video-recorded docudrama. They shared their digital texts at two large assemblies at the school, and the community was invited in to listen to them share their experiences. As part of the project, the students also had organized fundraising events at the school (e.g., gum day, hat day) and raised over \$500, which they donated to War Child Canada to assist with the rehabilitation of child soldiers.

They also shared their new learning with their reading buddies in grade two by reading a number of

picturebooks that reflected the theme of the impact of war on children. These books included: *Give a Goat* (2013) by Jan West Schrock and Aileen Darragh, *Why War Is Never a Good Idea* (2007) by Alice Walker and Stefano Vitale, *Four Feet, Two Sandals* (2007) by Karen Lynn Williams and Khadra Mohammad, and *Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan* (2005) by Mary Williams and R. Gregory Christie.

Year 2: Body Image & the Media

Body image and the media is an important topic in general, especially for adolescents who are undergoing an intense period of psychological, emotional, and physical development. They are susceptible to underlying and often unrealistic messages of what it means to be attractive, and they are exposed to stereotypical notions about the roles of males and females in society. In Year 2 of this study, the students themselves chose to focus on the influences of the media on body image for adolescents, culminating in the creation of a digital poem based on their personal experiences with media messages and the impact these have on their own body images.

In literature circles, the students read a range of YA novels that dealt with themes of body image and the media such as *Speak* (1999) by Laurie Halse Anderson, *Stargirl* (2000) by Jerry Spinelli, the *Uglies/Pretties/Specials/Extras* series (2005–2007) by Scott Westerfield, and the wildly popular *Divergent* series (2011–2013) by Veronica Roth. In addition to traditional literature circle discussions, the students also completed a wide range of digital activities. They created original digital poetry, remixed song lyrics and added images, and created a mock broadcast of a TV talk show containing song performances, advertisements, and interviews on the effects of media. They developed online magazines, deconstructed advertisements and articles, and created online posters using Glogster and Tagxedo. In addition, the students were engaged in blogging and posted their work and feedback to peers on the class Ning.

The students represented their learning by creating digital poems about the media messages in their lives and how they try to resist them. The poems were from the students' perspectives, which positioned them as media consumers who are negatively affected by the messages they receive.

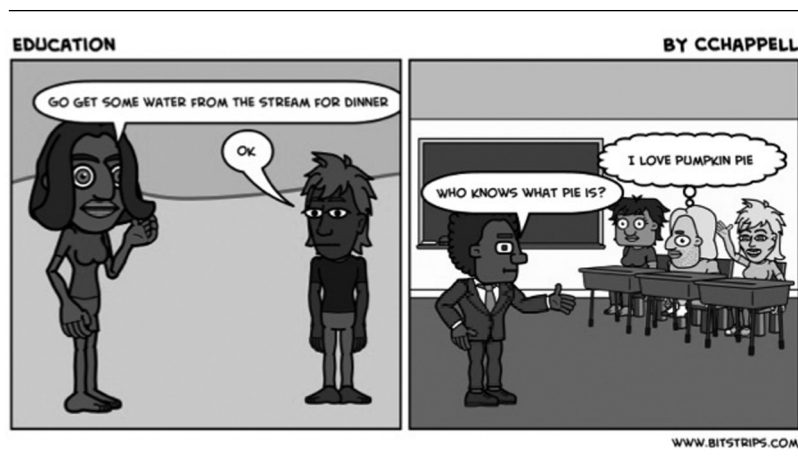


Figure 1. Bitstrips comparison between Afghanistan and Canada

However, the project simultaneously challenged the students to respond as critical producers of media, not only reflecting on the messages, but also identifying their purpose and effect and, with agency, exposing them in a digital poem to minimize their power.

The poems showed great complexity based on the images, text, and music the students chose to complement their messages. When the poems were complete, each student presented his/her poem and explained all of its design features, including why each of the images, text, sound/music, transitions, colors, and types of fonts were selected on each slide. The poems very clearly demonstrated the students' ability to deconstruct the media's messages, and as a result of the process, they began to explore how they might resist the influence of media on their perceptions of themselves. The poem in Figure 2 was rich with complexity, as shown in the images chosen, the text, and the music, all of which complement the message of feeling pressure from the media to fit a narrowly defined mold of perfection.

Year 3: Bullying & Cyberbullying

A class of 24 seventh and eighth graders were provided with a selection of novels, all of which centered on bullying/cyberbullying themes, and which were downloaded to tablets. As in the previous two years, the theme was chosen based on student feedback about the issues that concern them most.

The books we chose were *Freak* (2007) by Marcella Pixley, *Bystander* (2009) by James Preller, *The Reluctant Journal of Henry K. Larsen* (2012) by Susin Nielsen, and *The Bully Book* (2011) by Eric Kahn Gale. These novels were selected because the characters are relatable to students of middle school age, they have strong literary merit, they are relatively current, and they examine the phenomenon of bullying or cyberbullying from varying perspectives. Giving the students an opportunity to read some or all of these books allowed them to analyze a variety of bullying situations and discuss in detail the positive and negative ways in which the characters dealt with their situations.



Figure 2. Sample body image digital poem

In addition to a traditional literature circle structure, the students used a variety of digital tools to address the topic of bullying and bullying prevention as a way of providing common ground among the books for whole-class discussion. For example, using Web-based multimodal tools such as Glogster, Tagxedo and Wordle, students created and presented their own online posters to describe their feelings towards bullying based on their own experiences and made connections to the book they had chosen to read (see one example in Fig. 3). In the ensuing class discussion, they deconstructed their work to illustrate their impressions about bullying and its effects as well as how they have been impacted by bullying in their own lives.

As the literature circle activities concluded, the students created their own original multimodal digital stories from the viewpoint of the bully, the bullied, or the bystander, which they presented and deconstructed with their classmates. As part of the process, students viewed the viral video “To This Day,” a poem by Canadian spoken-word artist Shane Koyczan, which is available on YouTube and as an iPad app. The piece is a highly creative, emotionally charged, and visually impactful digital poem based on the author’s experiences with bullying and how it affected his life and the lives of others. Watching this video had a noticeable impact on many of the students and led to a conversation about the powerful messages that can be embedded and delivered through digital media.

The final task of the unit was the planning, construction, performance, and discussion of student-

generated digital stories. Each story was told from the perspective of the bully, the bullied, or the bystander and was meant to evoke emotion, empathy, and understanding in both the performers and the audience. Through the narrative power of digital storytelling, students were able to both identify the emotional effects of bullying and reflect upon their consequences (Tsai, Tseng, & Weng, 2011), which could ultimately lead to a reduction in or prevention of future bullying events. The performance of the digital stories was followed by an in-depth deconstruction process during which the creators explained their choices of storyline, character, music, image, and other multimodal components of their stories. Then, as a class, we discussed the effectiveness of each element of the stories in conveying the desired message.

Understanding Local and Global Issues through Digital Media

In all cases, the students’ engagement with the print and digital texts—as both consumers and producers—encouraged a more critical understanding of local and global issues. The students were able to enter texts and connect with them in new and exciting ways, and they were able to take ownership of their learning by making meaning through creation. All of this helped the students get to deeper, critical levels with the content and make personal connections. After deconstructing their own ads and listening to their peers explain the media messages in their ads as well, one of the students in the Year 2 Body Image & Media project noted that she could no longer look at anything the “same way,” and even outside of school, she viewed everything with a “more critical eye than average consumers, even my parents.”

The study also points to a notable increase in student engagement in the classroom with the use of the digital tools, the Ning, and YA fiction. This engagement was the result of ubiquitous access to current digital texts, which provided immediate and relevant content related to the topic of study. Another important benefit was the development of students’ research skills (due to this accessibility of information on the devices) and their digital literacy skills (through the use of such programs and platforms as Glogster, Ning and iMovie). Students also learned not only how to use various digital programs, but also how to critically understand digital media content and its applications



Figure 3. Student-generated bullying using Tagxedo

for specific purposes. The students learned about the various affordances and constraints of different digital tools and how to be both critical consumers and producers of digital texts.

Using a CDL Approach to Explore Personal and Community Identity

The shift to a critical digital literacies pedagogy improved collaboration among the students and increased the amount of inquiry-based learning in the classrooms; students shared resources and roles and became active agents in their own learning processes. As this happened, the teachers' role began to shift away from authoritative and toward facilitative. One of the teachers observed that the students began to take on the role of the expert when it came to technology: "If there was an issue, there was always someone to go to, maybe five or six people to go to, so that was really exciting to see them helping each other and coming up with great solutions to technological problems."

Students used the Ning, a closed, secure social networking platform, which enabled them to add profile pictures, update statuses, and upload photo and video files. They also embedded links to other websites, "friended" and chatted with other members, created special interest groups, maintained a blog, and/or conversed with other members using discussion threads. Ning-facilitated collaboration and knowledge construction among the students through the various communication tools, along with the discussion-thread feature, allowed the students to comment on each other's work and engage in online conversations, thus building classroom community. The similarity of the site to other social networking sites, such as Facebook, appealed to the students and increased their level of engagement and enthusiasm for learning the material by bringing an element of their digital culture into the school.

A CDL pedagogy responds to the capacity to effect change by embracing a collaborative learning and teaching community. This allows participants to recognize the pluralities in literacies and learning within our global and digital society. Furthermore, using mobile devices and social networking platforms can give students voice and agency in the context of their learning communities and thus provide opportunities

for them not only to learn subject matter but also to explore their world and issues meaningful to them. Our experiences suggest that the use of this pedagogical approach, with its emphasis on community engagement, helped educators to see how literacy instruction with young adult literature and digital tools, including a social networking site, could become a transformative practice for educators and students.

Taking Action through Public Performances

The students shared their work in a variety of venues including the class Ning, a community art gallery, schoolwide/community assemblies, the project website, and YouTube.

The publication of student work has a long history in the teaching of English language arts, but it has been only recently, with the advent of digital media and the Web 2.0 technologies, that adolescents have enjoyed the possibilities of sharing their writing with wider audiences.

We argue that the materiality and performative value of digital texts need to be understood as an intricate part of a critical digital literacies approach by the producer, viewer, and educator. Each year, the students shared their digital texts with a wider audience as a way of promoting awareness of the issues and taking action in their own local schools or communities. One of the teachers noted that her students were "more motivated by social activism as a result of this project," and another teacher noted, "It is amazing to me how engaged eleven-year-olds become . . . you think that those little bodies and minds won't get the big picture, and they always do. More so than some of the adults we know."

YA fiction, combined with a critical digital literacies approach, provides the vehicle for this kind of

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civic and community engagement, which goes beyond learning how to be a “good citizen.” Our students need to engage in the kind of critical and civic discourse that is made possible through well-developed literature circle activities and book clubs. These “rehearsals for social change” need to be developed early and often (O’Donnell-Allen, 2011, p. 17). Challenging our students to be “justice-oriented citizen[s]” (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008, p. 4) requires the development of a literacy community that focuses on open communication, the exchange of viewpoints, and the sharing of opinions, as well as the ability to listen attentively to others and demonstrate empathy. Understanding how positive choices contribute to a social consciousness and how negative choices lead to misunderstandings and conflict, we can help adolescents to embrace our global society.

Dr. Hughes is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology. Her research focuses on the role digital literacies play in adolescent identity development and civic engagement. She is the recipient of the Ontario Ministry of Research and Innovation’s Early Researchers Award (2011–2012), the UOIT Excellence in Research Award (2012–2013), and the National Technology Leadership Initiative Fellowship (2013–2014). Dr. Hughes’s work has been published in a variety of prestigious journals, including the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* and *English in Education*. She has presented her research at conferences around the world. She is the recent coauthor of *The Digital Principal*, a book to support school leaders in technology innovation in schools. This research is generously funded by the Ontario Ministry of Research and Innovation—Early Researcher Award.

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