



## LAYERED LITERACIES

Susan L. **Groenke**  
and Judson **Laughter**



# Tech Tools for Reader Response, Communal Engagement, and Effective Writing

*This article is also available in an online format that allows direct access to all links included. We encourage you to access it on the ALAN website at <http://www.alan-ya.org/page/the-alan-review-columns>.*

**R**ecently, Susan visited a middle school classroom with a well-stocked library of young adult novels, graphic novels, and other books—the kinds we know young people read when given opportunities to choose (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2012). Students were encouraged and expected to self-select books and read independently for the first 20 minutes of class. We know choice, access to high-interest/multilevel books, and time to read are factors that increase students' reading motivation and achievement (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Kittle, 2012), so Susan was happy to see these factors (and motivated readers!) at play.

But Susan grew disappointed at the end of the 20-minute reading time when she saw students heading to computers to take Accelerated Reader (AR) tests. When asked about her thoughts on AR, the teacher responded that the tests “prove the students are reading” and “assess their comprehension.” The teacher further commented, “AR is helpful—how else will I know the kids are reading the books?”

We think there are more engaging, authentic, and respectful ways to know whether our students are reading the books, and computers can certainly assist in this process in ways that don't include test taking. In what follows, we introduce you to three guest columnists, all long-time teachers and teacher educators,

who spend significant time looking for and testing out digital tools to help students engage deeply with—and write their own—texts. In the current data-driven context, we know accountability is important. The tech tools provided below can help teachers hold students accountable for reading and writing in ways that aren't test-based and don't feel competitive or punitive but rather authentic, personal, and meaningful.

First, English teacher educators Jennifer Shettel and Lesley Colabucci share 21st-century tools for enhancing student responses to reading. Then, Brooke Cunningham, a high school English teacher, describes tools she uses to facilitate communal learning around texts. Finally, Jennifer Kilpatrick, a doctoral candidate in deaf education, lists tools for effective writing instruction. We can't wait to try these tools and hope you'll be inspired to explore them, too!

## **(Re)Imagining Reader Response with 21st-Century Tools**

Jennifer W. Shettel & Lesley Colabucci, Millersville University of Pennsylvania

With 21st-century classrooms come 21st-century challenges, such as increasing competition for students' attention with mobile devices, social media, and texting. As 21st-century teachers, we wonder: How can we harness technology while ensuring students have rich and rewarding reading lives? One solution we use is tech-based book responses. Using technology to facilitate reader response illuminates reading as both a critical and communal practice (Park, 2012).

While nothing can replace the dynamics of a rich book discussion, a variety of digital tools are available to help students capture their experiences as readers in new and innovative ways. In addition, digital tools may enable teachers to incorporate art and music more easily. The tools featured below are truly multimodal, allowing for a great deal of creativity and collaboration in the spirit of 21st-century learning. Here are our top digital tools for tech-based book responses:

**Thinglink** (<https://www.thinglink.com>)

This tool offers a way to tell stories using interactive

components. Functioning somewhat like a bulletin board, Thinglink allows users to choose images and then “tag” them by uploading links. Viewers click on the images and follow related links. Videos are particularly easy to embed. Thinglink allows students to track interests and reflections as they read. Readers can find videos or articles with answers to enduring

questions and then build in links to share their discoveries. This tool is similar to **Glogster** (<http://edu.glogster.com/>), which is fee-based.

**Easel.ly** (<http://www.easel.ly>)

Easel.ly allows those of us without a degree in graphic arts to create eye-catching infographics using thousands of free templates and tools. In order to create infographics related to the content of a book, readers do additional research or delve into their understanding of why and how the story unfolded. As a bonus, students become more skilled in reading, interpreting, and analyzing infographics when they have an opportunity to create their own.

**Tagxedo** (<http://www.tagxedo.com>)

Great for fans of **Wordle** (<http://www.wordle.net>), Tagxedo takes word clouds to a new level of awesome. Students can utilize the provided graphics to create a word picture (or upload their own image), and Tagxedo’s word-generating software fills it in with the words the student types. These images are stun-

ning in terms of composition and color effect. This tool lends itself particularly well to character studies with portraiture-style Tagxedos or theme studies with an appropriate symbol used to create the word cloud.

**Padlet** (<http://padlet.com>)

Padlet is an excellent tool for group collaboration. A teacher poses a question, and students use virtual sticky notes to respond on a group board. Students can also use Padlet individually to create a virtual “sticky note wall” in response to a book they have read. Images and Web links can be added to the wall, as well. This is a convenient way to track student thinking about a book.

**Voki** (<http://www.voki.com>)

With Voki, students create a “talking head” of a character, historical figure, animal, or avatar. Students are limited in the amount of text, so this is an excellent tool for teaching summarization skills. In addition, this tool could be used for booktalks or persuasive arguments in the voice of a character.

**Fakebook** (<http://www.classtools.net/FB/home-page>) and **iFakeText** (<http://ifaketext.com>)

Both of these tools make it possible for students to create “mock” versions of two favorite social media tools: Facebook and texting. Analysis takes on a new dimension when students create Fakebook pages that mirror what a character’s Facebook page would look like. Understanding character motivation goes to a deeper level when students create dialogue between characters using texting language.

**Google Drive** (<https://www.google.com/drive/>)

The powerhouse of all collaborative Web tools, Google Drive has just about everything you could ask for. Consider using **Google Slides** to create a collaborative presentation or **Google Drawing** to work together on a concept map. Harness the power of Google’s translation technology within a **Google Doc** by selecting *Tools* and then *Translate document*. Use **Google StoryBuilder** to have students converse about a book in real time and then capture the exchange.

**Smore** (<https://www.smores.com/>)

This tool for online flyers features sophisticated design elements. Geared toward advertising and promoting

an event, Smore flyers are visually appealing with easy access to the embedded components. Students can use Smore as a way of building background knowledge. For instance, while reading historical fiction, students can create flyers with embedded links to relevant information related to the time period. Part of the appeal of this tool is the ease of usability; videos, photos, and links are simply dragged into place with ease and with an end product that looks very professional.

### **Leveraging the “Know-How” of Tech-Savvy Students to Communally Engage with Texts**

Brooke Cunningham, Hardin Valley Academy, Knoxville, Tennessee

Far too often, teachers see the incorporation of technology as, at best, a gimmick and, at worst, a concession to short attention spans. In truth, many of us are trying to compensate for an apparent flaw in the next generation as we grumble about their emoji-infused writing skills and obsession with instant gratification. We use technology in a desperate attempt to capture students’ attention for a fleeting moment, hoping to somehow reverse the effects of 24/7 screen exposure. However, we will never be able to maintain student attention with a specific technology because the evolution process happens too quickly; my students no longer use Facebook, and Twitter is quickly being replaced by Instagram. Our objective as educators should instead be to leverage students’ technology “know-how” to help them interact with texts in new and profound ways.

By understanding how technology functions on a cultural level, we will be able to sustain student engagement and develop lifelong readers. Perhaps most important to our endeavors as teachers is that millennials are interested in community, and technology can certainly be used to create and foster social, collaborative interactions around a text. This requires a skillful, intentional, and ever-evolving use of technology, but the rewards are well worth it. Below are several tools I use to engage my students in tech-supported communal learning around texts:

**LibriVox** (<https://www.librivox.org>)

LibriVox brings people together from around the

world to create free audiobook podcasts of books in the public domain. Sometimes a reader volunteers to read an entire work, but more often, people from all over the world volunteer for different sections or chapters. Students are afforded a new way to interact with a text and also experience interacting and working with people from diverse places and backgrounds. Teachers can use this tool to have a class create its own audio version of a work to share with the world and publish in iTunes. It’s a great way to connect interpretation, fluency, and an audience for reading.

**Goodreads** (<https://www.goodreads.com>)

Similar to LibriVox, an obvious choice to get students to interact in a community devoted to literature is

Goodreads, a social media site centered on books. I

ask students to use this site to keep track of the books they read independently, to set yearly reading goals, to analyze data on reading patterns, and to share this information with others.

Students can post status updates on their progress through a book and even send and receive book recommendations. Goodreads also works a bit like Netflix

for books, recommending titles one may like based on ratings and reviews, and users can get together to vote on or create searchable lists of books. Goodreads often hosts author Q & A sessions where students can interact with their favorite writers. This is a great opportunity to use technology to interact with a community around a book.

**Nerdfightaria** (<http://nerdfightaria.com>)

The gold standard of an authentic learning and reading community is Nerdfightaria, the online community created by John and Hank Green. At this site, we can access the Green brothers’ “Crash Course” series—YouTube videos providing introductions and overviews of popular school subjects and topics. I often use their videos on literary texts and US and World History because they provide entertaining, insightful, and informative introductions to historical periods or

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literature. Users can ask questions, get answers, and engage in debate in the comments section provided for each video, offering an excellent way to show students the kind of engagement we want with texts and how that engagement can be something relevant far beyond the classroom. The Green brothers have created other places where students can find examples of active, social engagement with texts. Their **Vlog-brothers** channel often features conversations about John Green's own novels, and **Pemberley Digital**, a fictitious company, produces "documentaries" that are actually modern YouTube adaptations of classic works.

**YouTube** (<https://www.youtube.com>)

With Nerdfightaria as a model, it is easy to see how YouTube can be used as more than an example of how authentic learning communities interact with text; it can also serve as a tool to foster this same type of community in our own classrooms. Students can use YouTube to retell classic stories from various perspectives, creatively

transforming the work into something new. Or students can use this format to tell their own stories, scripting out and planning a vlog or other YouTube format. We can take social engagement and interaction a step further when students interact with each other's videos or see outsiders interact and react to their videos. Their schoolwork is no longer something shared only with the teacher; it is now something they publish and share with the world.

**Edmodo** (<https://www.edmodo.com>)

What if teachers and students are not comfortable sharing their work with the world? There are different sites with various levels of privacy in which we can have our students interact. There are many blogging sites where students can respond to one another; Edmodo is one that is safe for creating an isolated learning community with whatever content one has in mind (video, text, links, images). The simplest way to describe Edmodo is "Facebook for school." This site allows teachers to create a class page that students

can join using a code. Students have individual profiles but cannot interact except within the class page. This creates a safe environment for students to have discussions about a text or even each other's work.

## Using Technology to Support Effective Writing Instruction in the ELA Classroom

Jennifer Kilpatrick, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Technology has become an integral part of community and personal literacies (Kist, 2009; Leu & Kinzer, 2000), but the use of technology during writing instruction is still limited and infrequent (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Harris, 2011). Integrating digital tools into the ELA classroom has the potential to support effective writing instruction by bridging the gap between home and school writing practices, influencing the development of ideas, and providing authentic purposes and audiences. The affordances provided by digital tools can influence both *what* and *why* students write. The apps described below could be used at various stages of the writing process during guided, shared, and independent writing with all students:

**Evernote** (<https://www.evernote.com>)

Evernote is a collaborative digital workspace where users can compile notes, ideas, images, and tasks. By using several Evernote apps together, students can research, plan, and organize their ideas all in one place. They can use **Clipper** to clip and save resources from the Web, **Skitch** to mark up images and PDFs, and **Penultimate** to draw or write with a stylus. Resources can be organized into notebooks by class and topic, making them easy to locate. I love using Evernote for everything because students can easily access their notes and find the same website they were using yesterday without searching their backpacks, lockers, and desks. It is a huge time (and paper!) saver. This is a free app for the iPhone, iPad, Android, and Web.

**iBrainstorm** (<http://www.ibrainstormapp.com>)

This is a digital corkboard where users compile free-hand drawings and typed notes. iBrainstorm is a great tool for planning and organizing. Users can type individual sticky notes, change the colors of those notes, and rearrange them to organize and group their ideas. Collaborators in a local setting can share their ideas by "flicking" notes to one another. This app is

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an easy way to do the same thing I've been doing with sticky notes on chart paper for years. Students can brainstorm first and organize second. Only now, they can continue to work on their plans and collaborate outside of class, and there is no fear of lost stickies! This is a free app available for the iPhone and iPad.

**Popplet** (<http://www.popplet.com>)

Popplet is a platform for ideas where users can compile pictures and typed notes and connect them with lines to create charts or webs. Popplet is a great tool for organizing ideas into planning webs. Students can collaborate in "real time" when working from their own devices in any location. Finished popplets can be exported as PDFs or JPGs. I like using Popplet with my struggling writers because they can search for pictures on the Internet and make a plan before having to think about the language they need to use. This app costs \$4.99 and is available for the iPhone, iPad, and Web.

**A+ Writing Prompts** (<http://appcrawlr.com/ios/a-writing-prompts>)

This is a writing prompt generator that provides an endless supply of inspiration. This app includes five prompt generators: scenes, sketches, texts, words, and news. Scenes include a place, character, object, and smell to inspire a creative narrative. Text prompts include phrases, quotes, story starters, and more. News includes a headline and news source. There are billions of unique prompt possibilities. Students can no longer say, "I don't know what to write about." Writer's block happens, but after flipping through a few ideas, students find an idea that gets their creativity flowing. I like this app because it gives them ideas while still providing them with choice. This app costs \$4.99 and is available for the iPhone, iPad, Android, and Kindle.

**Strip Designer** ([http://www.vividapps.com/Strip\\_Designer/index.html](http://www.vividapps.com/Strip_Designer/index.html))

Strip Designer is a comic strip creator that allows users to tell a story with their own photographs. It is a unique and motivating way for students to publish a story. They can include dialogue with text balloons and add captions, drawings, and effect symbols/stickers. Finished strips can be exported as PDFs or JPGs or shared on a variety of social media sites. Students

can even create graphic novels by combining strip pages. My favorite thing about this app is that it motivates students who thought they didn't like to write. Suddenly their protests about writing stop, and they are bringing in comic strips about things they did on the weekend. They often don't even realize they are writing until I tell them! This app costs \$2.99 and is available for the iPhone and iPad.

**Shutterfly Photo Story** (<http://www.shutterfly.com/photostoryclassroom>)

This app is a digital and print book creator that authors can use to tell the story behind photographs. With Photo Story, young authors choose from a variety of layouts, import pictures, add doodles and text, and even record audio messages on each page. The finished product can be shared with the audience via email. After reading the full-screen digital version, audience members have the option to purchase a print book with prices starting at \$19.99. Shutterfly even has a database

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of CCSS aligned lesson plans for creating books of all genres with students in grades K-8. This app is so easy to use to share work with an audience. Students will be proud of the professional appearance of their work. This is a free app available for the iPhone and iPad.

**Book Creator** (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/book-creator-for-ipad/id442378070?mt=8>)

This app is a book creator that gives authors the option to share their books in a variety of digital and print formats. Like most e-book apps, Book Creator allows the user the opportunity to create personalized books using photographs, free-hand drawing/writing, and words. What makes this app unique is its ability to include not only music and recorded speech but also video clips on every page. When authors are finished with their books, they can publish them to iBooks or export them as movies or PDFs. As a deaf educator, I am always looking for apps that are accessible for students who are deaf and hard of hearing. This app is not only fully accessible, the video feature also makes it perfect for students who use American Sign Language to communicate. This feature affords

my students the unique opportunity to publish their writing in both English and ASL side-by-side. This helps bridge the two languages, expand their audience, and personalize their writing. This is a free app available for the iPad.

**HaikuDeck** (<https://www.haikudeck.com>)

HaikuDeck is presentation software that lets authors share their ideas in a simple and creative way. HaikuDeck is a quick and fun way to make a slideshow. Users can search millions of Creative Commons photographs using keywords. If students are stumped, the app provides a word bank for image searches. Taking or importing original photos is also an option. Changing the theme or layout and adding text is easy. This app is a great way for students to publish poetry. Simple. Easy. Fun. And the finished product always looks great. It helps students who tend to be overwhelmed by a blank screen by providing them with options that make the task much less daunting. This is a free app for the iPhone, iPad, and Web.

**Susan L. Groenke** is an associate professor of English Education at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and directs the Center for Children's and Young Adult Literature on the UTK campus. Dr. Groenke teaches courses on young adult literature and secondary English methods. Her research interests center on adolescent reading engagement and the motivation to read. When she is not reading young adult novels, she can be found walking her dog Bootleg or driving down the road with her husband in their 1978 VW bus.

**Judson Laughter** is an assistant professor of English Education at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. His research interests include multicultural teacher education, critical race theory, and the preparation of preservice teachers for diverse classrooms through dialogue and narrative. Dr. Laughter is currently the advisor for the Track I (non-licensure) English Education program. He teaches courses in English methods, action research, sociolinguistics, and trends in education. When not wearing his academic hat, Jud enjoys crossword puzzles, cycling, and traveling.

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