Digital Booktalk: Pairing books with potential readers

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Literacy defined

Since the early 1900s, teaching literacy has always been like trying to hit a moving target. The only consistency has been that society has tended to group individuals into two broad categories of being *literate* or being *illiterate* based solely on whether or not they could read or write (NCREL & Metri Group, 2003). The ability to read, write, listen, and speak have always been a corner-stone in these literacy efforts in an attempt to broadly serve the interests of formal education. Because of outside pressures to increase literacy under these terms, educators have generally focused their literacy education efforts on teaching children how to code and decode words. But over time, the focus of literacy instruction has morphed to reflect changing economic times, social developments, and historical events (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Tyner, 1998). By 1970, the definition of literacy extended beyond merely decoding and encoding printed words to include the ability to reflect on and analyze the world (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). A further major expansion of the term *literate* took place in the 1990s. In 1991, the National Literacy Act was passed that was designed to ensure that adults have all the skills necessary to function effectively in the work place and at home. Congress (Sec. 3) defined the term literacy as "…an individual's ability to read, write, and speak in English, and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential". However, in 2002, President George W. Bush, in an effort to re-focus literacy back to reading and writing, included a Reading First initiative in the *No Child Left Behind Act*. Reading First is designed to ensure that children receive effective reading instruction in grades K-3 by providing additional help to state and local school districts and to establish high-quality comprehensive reading instruction programs that include the five so-called major components of reading: phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.

However, due to the realities of the world we live in, the real definition of literacy has yet again swung away from a very narrow definition and has begun to reflect the technological age in which today's students live. The digital age has thrust our nation's youth into a highly advanced, technological, global society. With these advances have also come increased demands on what and how students are expected to learn. In addition to basic literacy, students are expected to attain proficiency in scientific, economic, technological, visual, informational, and multicultural literacy (NCREL & Metri Group, 2003). Unfortunately, all these re-focusing initiatives and increases in funding appear to have come up short and have yet to realize any significant positive outcomes. The National Assessment of Education Progress' (NAEP) reading report card has not only shown very little change in the reading performance of fourth graders since 1992, but also a decrease in performance of eighth graders. The 2003 report showed that 37% of fourth graders were reading below the basic level as compared to 38% in 1992. With regards to eighth graders, the report indicated that in 1992, 31% were below the basic level and in 2003 the percentage dropped to 26%. More recent reports show that fourth grade reading gains have been sustained while eighth grade performance has been inconsistent. In 2002, the amount of eighth grade students below the basic reading level was 25% which slightly increased in 2003 to 26% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004).

Regardless of the definition of literacy that is in mode at the time, there has also always been a negative stigma associated with being illiterate (Withrow, 2004). Educators have somehow misguidedly assumed that literacy is tied to intelligence. While some narrow definitions of literacy might corroborate this assumption, a holistic view of intelligence reveals that tying literacy to intelligence can result in a mischaracterization of a person's abilities. Pointing out that everyone has their strengths and weaknesses, Corcoran (1981) defined *intelligence* as a skill in a particular medium, suggesting that the symbolic codes used in any medium that serves a communication purpose are internalized by those knowledgeable in that medium and, therefore, become authentic tools of thought. In other words if one can communicate well in one medium but not another, s/he shouldn't be generally classified as unintelligent, but, rather, just unskilled in that medium. S/he might be very bright or clever in another medium if that medium is one that s/he uses most of the time.

Corcoran's ideas generally concur with McLuhan's *the medium is the message concepts* (1964), as well as more recent educators like Mitchell Stephens (1996) and Marc Prensky (2002) who believe today's youth are developing a literacy of their own kind based on new forms of communicative media. What this means is that perhaps we are selling today's youth short with broad-brush labels like 'stupid' or 'ignorant' simply because they don't interact well with text-based media. The problem with such an incorrect diagnosis is that educators may be applying the wrong specific treatments for the wrong problems, or they are simply relying on broad spectrum antidotes that are hit-or-miss because we simply don't understand the environment in which our children live. The disappointing results of NAEP report card certainly bears this out. While these results are certainly substandard as they relate to what they are saying about our children's abilities to read and write, perhaps everyone is overreacting and making some incorrect assumptions about the general overall intelligence of our youth. If McLuhan was correct in saying that the media people use not only define the message but often also define those using that media, then we should be able to learn what it is different about how our children communicate with one another. Perhaps it is time to take the time to understand the communicative skills they might actually possess and use them in our instructional methods and strategies.

Growing up digital

Most would agree that they probably have noticed that today's youth use computers and other visual media a lot. However, the actual statistics reveal some astonishing results. As many as sixty-five percent of children in the United States are already online prior to their teen years –many even as young as two years of age. The U.S. Department of Commerce estimates the current growth rate for Internet use at 2 million new users per month; the majority of which are children and teens (NCREL & Metri Group, 2003). Today's youth are being inundated with technologies that are allowing them to actively participate and communicate in a world of their own with a variety of new forms of media (Serim, 2003). It is most revealing to note that, while we label these advances as *technology* and *new* media, children view these new forms as neither being *technological*, nor new. As Alan Kay once said, technology is only considered to be 'technology' if it was invented after you were born (Tapscott, 1998).

The use of computers, videos, DVDs, and television are popular forms of digital media that have long become a part of education. They have been found to be effective because they combine moving pictures and audio, and have the ability to appeal to a variety of learning styles (Honey, Pasnik, Saltrick, 2004). What is different today than with previous generations of technology integration is that the democratization of the technology has advanced to the point that there is an ever-increasing use of digital media in leisure time activities. This ever-increasing daily use has drastically changed the way children think, learn, and how they give and receive information (Dresang & McClelland, 1999). Before students enter kindergarten, they are becoming well-accustomed to non-linear technologies such as CDs, DVDs, and the Internet that allow them to choose their learning paths. Students entering school today do not know of a world that does not include the Internet. In a study conducted by the Kaiser Foundation researchers reported that children ages zero to six spend an average of two hours per day using screen media which includes television, videos/DVD, computers, and video games. On the other hand, they only spend an average of 39 minutes a day reading or being read to by others. Among that same age group (0-6), 36% of children have televisions in their bedroom, 27% have a VCR/DVD player, 7% have a computer, and 3% have Internet access in their bedrooms (Rideout, Vandewater, & Wartella 2003). Studies have supported researchers' claims that children spend an average of four thousand hours over their teenaged years in front of video or computer screens (Greenfield, 1984; Healy, 1998; Tapscott, 1998; Prensky, 2001).

Some have attempted to tie computer usage to increases in ADD/ADHD and/or violent behaviors (Emes, 1997). While no causal effect has been shown between computer usage and shortened attention spans, this disparity in how much time teens spend on digital versus traditional media has to be doing something with their brains. Trying to determine a direct causal relationship between apparent shortened attention spans and television viewing is a perfect example of the so-called "chicken and egg" dilemma. Have the shorter segments become more prominent because of viewer preferences, or have the shorter segments actually re-wired our children's brains? Several cognitive scientists have opted for the latter. Several studies have supported claims that today's teenagers' brains have been, somehow, rewired by this increased exposure to computerized media (Tapscott, 1998; Fiore, 1997; Diamond, 1988; Goode, 2000; Healy, 1998; Moore, 1997). Whether or not everyone can agree to the extent this has happened, there is no question that today's media-centric youths somehow perceive and learn differently than previous generations (Prensky, 2001). Further, Prensky and others like Mitch Stephens (Stephens 1996) make the

case that today's "games generation" has such familiarity in the digital domain that 'digital' has become so ingrained into their being that it has become their native and primary form of communication. The so-called generation gap is more likely one of differences in the choice of preferred communication modes rather than one of age: media centric youths speak digital. Others who travel outside of this domain are mere digital 'immigrants' (Rushkoff, 1997; Prensky, 2002).

We educators need to take heed. If we properly analyze the effects these new participation and communication paradigms, we should soon realize that the so-called digital media revolution even further extends what it means to be literate. More importantly, a proper perspective can lead to revolutionary thinking as to how children can be motivated to acquire the traditional *letteracy* skills (i.e., skills in text-based media) that haven't gone out of style because of their importance in the world they will move into as they grow older. We simply need to realize that our children speak 'digital' and, to them, text-based communication is like learning a second language. The difficulties we face in motivating them towards the text-based world are similar to those we used to have in motivating students to speak foreign languages. (Recall your own school days when you questioned the need to learn another language when everyone around you spoke English). On the other hand, perhaps we could learn a lot about how to go about teaching traditional literacy skills if we utilized some of the powerful teaching and learning techniques s found in today's ESOL classes.

Digital media for reluctant readers

We could also make tremendous advances if we combine what we know about teaching second languages and also take lessons from the skills being developed in *digital media* movement found in programs being developed in major universities all across this country and internationally. These programs are growing exponentially due to the demand placed on them by the younger media-centric generation. Many of the digital media courses center on various forms of art, music, graphic design, television, and entertainment. The constant thread in all of these concentrations is that, regardless of the media used, at its core is the idea of story. The most concise definition of the term digital media, as it is currently being used, includes the concept of convergence of arts and technology for the purposes of creating multiple forms of human expression and communication. If one accepts that definition, then the term *literacy* would again change to include skills communicating via these new digitally mediated channels. Because story is at the core of both traditional literacy and digital media, using it as a focus should be very attractive to our digital media-centric youths. Interestingly enough, many of the techniques taught in digital story-telling include things like immersion and total physical response –some of the same successful techniques found in second language learning classes.

These changes in perceptual, cognitive, and communicative styles bring up several interesting questions with regards to the kinds of mediated instructional strategies that might motivate reluctant readers in today's media-centric society. According Diana Kimpton (2004), there are two different types of reluctant readers –those who can read but don't enjoy it and those who find reading so difficult that they avoid it whenever they can. Both groups think reading is hard work and is anathema to members of a media-centric culture who often feel like immigrants in a literate society. Motivating reluctant readers in this new digital age can be a challenging task. Students are motivated by different types of inputs and supplemental activities. There is considerable research that links motivation to the effect on the person his or her past learning experiences, one's assessment of self-efficacy, attitudes and perceptions (Keller 1983). Knowledge of the fact that 'digital' is the preferred natural language of the media culture may be of some help leading the way to possible solutions to the literacy problem. Using the theory of teaching to one's strengths and remediating the differences (Doman 1984), a properly constructed multimedia tool could be a way to attract the attention of otherwise reluctant readers. Given that one agrees with those who believe that most personal experiences for today's "games generation" are more than likely digitally mediated in one form or another, then it is not too difficult to also believe that digital mediation should have a positive affect on literacy skills development, including attracting reluctant readers.

Matching books with potential readers

There have already been several instances of successes using mediated tools in teaching and learning in which students have been shown to improve word recognition, reading comprehension, and spelling skills and to boost reading scores and self-esteem (Taylor, Hasselbring, & Williams, 2001). In recent years, computerized reading incentive programs have increasingly become apart of school literacy

curricula despite some debate over their validity. Opponents of these programs argue that the external motivation to read created by the system of rewards will fade once rewards are withdrawn (Biggers, 2001). But program sponsors like Scholastic (*Reading Counts!*) and Renaissance Learning (*Accelerated Reader*) claim that they have had successes in motivating students to read by using this system of rewards (Engwall, 1999). Regardless if one agrees with the alleged positive effect of these reward programs, classroom teachers have begun to recognize what librarians and media specialists have known for years –if you properly match potential readers to an author or genre, even the most reluctant will be more likely to complete the book and to read others from that favorite author or genre (Eriksson 2002). Even though the bulk of his findings actually discredited much of these claims, Stephen Krashen (2002) in his comparative analysis to determine what aspects of reading incentive programs accounted for their reported success, noted that increased availability of high interest books and opportunity for sustained reading that were provided to students with access to the programs accounted for the lion's share of increased learning achievement. Playing match-maker is harder than it would seem. Other than the design and/or limited contents found on book jackets, there is very little that potential readers can use to identify books that they might want to read. Media specialists and teachers often find themselves being asked by students to make book selections for them. Better educators have resorted to creating a series of questions to ask the students in order to identify their interests. The questionnaires include such things as favorite movies, hobbies and things to do, reading level, etc. Even the most probing of questions and not infallible and there is also the risk that incorrect recommendations result in students not liking the suggested books and, therefore, not completely reading them. Several wrong selections can result in even more readers becoming reluctant and being turned off to reading.

A strategy that has had some successes in helping to match potential readers with books is the *booktalk*. Aidan Chambers, an author of children's books and a literature teacher, has published several works advising how to encourage children to verbalize their literary experiences. In 1985, he coined the term *booktalk* that identified the concept of talking about reading in reader-response contexts (Chambers, 1985). To Chambers (1993), talk about books is an essential part of a reading selection strategy, which includes book stock, availability, accessibility and presentation. Unknowingly, he, too, has borrowed from the total physical response and immersion concepts found in second language learning. Others have further extended their understanding of the language of their audience and have added new media metaphors to the mix. On her website, Nancy Keane (2004) explains that the purpose of a booktalk is to sell the book and to grab the audience's interest and make them want to read the book. She even goes so far as to liken a booktalk to a movie trailer. Others (Young, 2001) propose that actual movie trailers or short scene selections from the movies made from the books can be used as an aide.

Which comes first, the movie or the book?

As we have seen, our children live and communicate in a visual world. While some would argue that watching the movie first might ruin the intellectual experience found in exercising one's imagination while reading, there has been some experimental research that would support the notion that seeing the movie first might help the reader better understand and comprehend what s/he is reading (Gropper 1966; Nugent 1982). The question, then, is how to provide media-related visual pre-reading organizers without spoiling the reading experience. It would seem, therefore, that using digital versions of booktalks and trailers would be an interesting middle way in the pursuit of these match-making activities. Just as movie trailers have been very successful in influencing audiences in selecting the movies they watch, it would seem logical that trailers made specifically for the books would do the same for books. These trailers, in essence, might be considered an animated book jacket and need to be created in such a way to both attract potential readers and to crystallize the essence of the context of the books, using visualizations of the characters, themes, and metaphors, etc. Putting these trailers online so that they may be easily accessed via the Internet makes sense.

Digital Booktalk

Digital Booktalk (DBT) (http://www.digitalbooktalk.com) is an online portal on which several of the previously successful strategies are used to aide potential readers to evaluate whether they would like to read specific books. The trailers are one of a series of activities found on the website that aid in the book selection process. The number of titles of books on the site is growing and follows school recommended reading lists and those found on the rewards programs like *Accelerated Reader* and *Reading Counts*. Using

automated intelligence, the suggest-a-book feature replicates the 'interest questionnaires" that generally take place between prospective readers and librarians, media specialists, and teachers. DBT employs an avatar to posit several questions regarding a reader's interests in things like movie genres, previously read books, hobbies, and reading level (if known). A list of suggested trailer titles is then presented based on matched results from its database. Students can then browse through the suggested trailers that are prioritized according to matching percentages and then check off the books that they think they might be interested in as they review the list. A user profile keeps track of the results of the questionnaire (especially the question concerning previous books they may have read and movies they particularly like) so that in future sessions the system can remind them of their previous choices. In addition, utilizing a technique similar to what other commercial online booksellers use, visitors to the site are also reminded of similar books that others have selected with similar interests (people who have read so-and-so book also have read…).

The third aspect of the DBT site is a supplemental section in which interactive activities act to provide further background on the context of the books and generally aide in helping students make their selection. For example this section includes a digital version of one or more of the activities suggested by widely publicized 'booktalkers' like Nancy Keane (2004), including word searches and brain teasers to help build pre-reading vocabulary. Another activity is a "who am I" game in which visitors are asked to guess the main characters in books whose identities are progressively revealed as interact with things like taking the visitor on a tour of the geographic settings that are contained in the book. The intent of these character development games is similar to recent marketing tie-ins between Pixar studios and marketers like Proctor and Gamble, McDonalds and others (Howard, 2004) in which characters from the animated film *The Incredibles* are introduced to the public before the movie is even released. Viewers already have a sense of identity with the characters when they attend the movie, and their enjoyment of the storyline has been preserved. In similar fashion, these pre-reading activities provide the same modicum of familiarity and readiness for the reading activity developed through the limited back-story information that is revealed while playing the games. Character identification is limited in that it only reveals enough memorable information about the characters so that the reader will become familiar with them but not so much that it spoils the discovery process that takes place while reading the books. The characters are identified only to the extent that helps to set the scene and to provide a small preview of the background or point of view of the storyline, similar to what is done in story circles and live booktalks.

UB the director

Given the nature of today's students, it isn't surprising that watching a movie is often preferred to reading a book. Teachers are often faced with the inevitable question as to why they need to read the book rather than watching the movie made from it. Most teachers would rather provide class time to watch the movie as a reward for reading the book in spite of the fact that there is some research that seems to indicate that many students might actually do better to watch the movie first (Gropper, 1966; Nugent, 1982). In spite of their strong opinions on whether watching the movie first ruins the opportunity to stimulate reader's imaginations, teachers struggle with how to construct a believable and appropriate answer to the question. One way to answer this question in a positive manner is to reply by reminding the students that a movie is the result of someone else deciding what goes in it. Not all movies remain true to the book, and besides wouldn't they like to be the director of their own movie about the book? The planting the idea with students of reading the book as if they are going to make a movie out of it is a potentially positive way to motivate and reinforce the concepts of visualizing while reading so important to teaching literacy skills. The problem is that there isn't enough time in the classroom for each student to make a full-length motion picture from the books the students read. Acting like a booktalk that has already been shown to enhance perception through personal actions ((Neuman 1990), a two minute movie (book) trailer about the book is a much easier final product. In this case, the student producer has to know enough of the details about the setting and context and needs to make some particularly insightful decisions as to which scenes need to be put into the trailer, providing a reason for him or her to be reading the book critically for content and context.

A *UB the Director* section of the DBT portal is reserved for these student-produced trailers. The submitted trailers are peer-reviewed by volunteer teachers and student groups. This section also contains a lesson plan with references on how to produce the trailer, and suggestions for the students and teachers as to what to look for in the books they read. Student-produced trailers are co-mingled on the resulting lists along with the professionally produced trailers but are notated as such.

Future research -collecting empirical data

There is enough anecdotal evidence to suggest that the DBT portal has resulted in students becoming familiar with the books before they read them. However, because it is to be used in an educational environment, actual empirical data needs to be studied. It isn't enough to help students become familiar with the titles, a determination will be done in the upcoming months to find out if increased knowledge translates into interest in the books and, therefore, results in actual increases in reading and completing the books they are matched with. The study will focus on the two levels. First, on a practical level, a determination will be made to find out if the portal actually helps students select books and in such a way that increases the number of books they actually complete. Secondly, from a pedagogical standpoint, do the activities and trailers encourage students to critically analyze, reflect upon, and write about their selected book throughout reading In other words, does the portal effectively increase the values associated with the traditional concepts of *literacy*?

Besides these educational issues, there is the further question of which books need to be represented on DBT. The ultimate domain of books that need to be included on any reading list is extensive, to include a number somewhere between one book and the total number catalogued by the Library of Congress. In reality, the initial implementation will be aimed at two groups in particular: those in the fourth grade and those in the eighth and ninth grades. It is these two groups that were studied by the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) report card. It is also these two groups that are the focus of most statewide efforts are being exerted to improve standardized test scores. Using Reading Counts! and Accelerated Reader as well as school-suggested reading lists as the starting point, the number of candidates for the trailers totals somewhere between one and three thousand. Prioritizing the list from a large number of sources will reveal that some books show up more often than others. It is these commonly used books (like To Kill a Mockingbird, or Animal Farm, among others) that will be the first trailers to be developed. The studies will be constructed in such a way that the power of the data analyses will be derived by the construct of the comparisons and the number of students who participate, rather than the volume of books represented.

Summary

Educators, have focused their literacy education efforts on teaching children to code and decode words. In spite of all the various efforts to teach literacy to our children; the various report cards indicate that, perhaps, a new way of doing teaching literacy should be investigated. Today's media-centric youths would benefit from using mediated programs to help motivated and talk to them in their own language. Several instances of successes using mediated tools for teaching and learning in which students have been shown to improve word recognition, reading comprehension, and spelling skills and to boost reading scores and self-esteem.

Digital Booktalk is a web portal that uses mediation to extend the techniques that have already proven successful in increasing children's interest in reading and understanding books. In its four sections, students are given the opportunity to match their interests with book titles, see trailers that help them visually organize the contexts from the books, and participate in learning activities that provide initial insights to vocabulary, characters, and themes. In addition, students are given the opportunity to create book trailers on their own with the possibility of having them published on the portal. It is believed that these types of activities will encourage students to correctly select books to read for completion and also find it easier to make future selections. Research on the effectiveness of this portal are planned to collect and analyze empirical data. Future enhancements can be made to the project based on the results of this research.

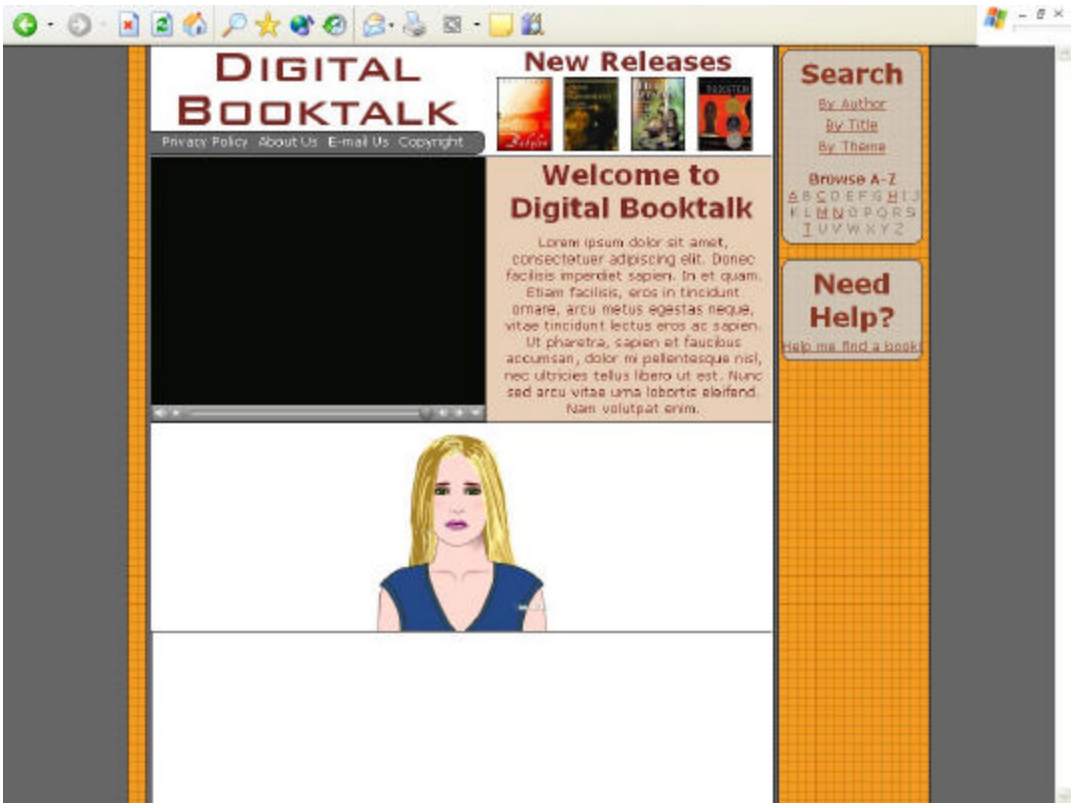

Figure 1.1 Home Page for Digital Booktalk.com

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