Making Literacy Relevant to Adolescent Learners

Lisa Clark

Abstract

Adolescent learners will engage in literacy learning if they understand its relevance to both academic pursuits and future success. Exploring the literacy skills that are embedded in the technology that saturates adolescents' lives helps to establish the relevance of literacy education. Educators who design lessons around collaboration, inquiry, choice, and authenticity increase the chances that students will judge the activity to be relevant and choose to engage. Additionally, explicit literacy instruction is essential to ensure that comprehension deepens as content becomes more complex. Those educators who emphasize the relevance of literacy skills provide adolescent learners with a solid foundation for future success.

When adolescent learners recognize the foundational role that literacy plays in their success, both as students and as productive citizens, they are more likely to engage in literacy learning as a relevant pursuit. While the call for literacy skills that accommodate an ever-broadening understanding of text has increased in the digital age, not all learners are responding to that call. Exploring the literacy connected to real-world technology applications reveals the deep relevance that comes from infusing learning with digital forms of text. The nature of literacy continues to evolve as technology expands the existing modes and the pace of modern communication. In response, literacy skills must be supported by deeper comprehension to support the selection, storage, and retrieval of vast quantities of information. Increased engagement is fundamental to support the skill development essential to successful literacy instruction. Student engagement increases when educators design lessons that incorporate collaboration, inquiry, choice, and authenticity. Once engagement is established, explicit instruction can take place to equip adolescents to tackle the challenge of more specialized content. Adolescents invest their energy in what they perceive to be relevant, so educators must help them to recognize the undeniable power that literacy has to shape their lives.

Literacy for the Future

Strong literacy skills, including digital literacy linked to the technology that has become ubiquitous, are essential to every phase of life: post-secondary education, career, and even productive citizenship (North Central Regional Education Laboratory [NCREL], 2005). Nearly 60% of today's jobs require a post-secondary education (Haynes, 2014, p. 1). The global economy is fueled by workers who possess advanced literacy skills. Conversely, 40% of employers say that today's high school graduates do not possess the level of literacy necessary to compete. The current generation of learners is preparing to work in a knowledge economy, confronting vast quantities of information, which must be mined for the data relevant to each application (Jacobsen, 2010). This glut of digital information demands the ability to read and understand a variety of texts and to communicate digitally, with both speed and accuracy. Targeted inquiry, collaboration, and innovation are the essential skills of the 21st century worker. These lifelong capacities are built on a foundation of strong literacy skills.

Today's adolescent learners are digital natives, who are more likely to see the relevance of literacy within the context of an online application. Members of the net generation, including all those born after 1982, possess strong visual skills but are weak textual learners, with a preference for experiential learning (Roos, 2007). This generation finds creativity and connection through social media and gaming. If schools fail to incorporate some aspects of the digital experience, engagement is less likely. Today's learner thinks with a hypertext mind,

connecting and reconnecting snippets of sound, images, and text to make meaning. Speed is paramount. Individuals practise attention economics, filtering high volumes of digital information, while discarding anything that is deemed boring or irrelevant, but rarely reflecting on those selections (Sanford & Madill, 2007). Literacy learning that embraces the digital world is the key to convincing the net generation to buy in, as demonstrated through several technology-based learning projects.

Innovative literacy learning projects are exploring the integration of technology to build relevance and, thereby, engagement for adolescent learners. The Borderzone project explored the convergence of school-based literacy learning and out-of-school literacies (Skerrett & Bomer, 2007). This experimental program involved teachers and students collaborating to connect out-of-school literacies with curriculum-based, in-school, literacy learning. Students were challenged to explore the forms of literacy that they engaged in outside of school and to find ways to connect those experiences with learning outcomes. “Invitation” activities included student-led research into the nature of literacy, interest inventories, and the collection of “literacy memories.” By identifying and validating real-world literacies, learners began to identify themselves as readers and writers, capable of expanding their literacy skills. Another program studied the design and application of video games to expand the definition of literacy in the digital age (Sanford & Madill, 2007). Participants demonstrated operational literacy as they applied their skills within the context of gaming by writing instructions, using semiotic systems, and conducting research. Cultural literacy increased as gamers learned to function within the social norms, both spoken and unspoken, which exist in their digital community. Researchers pointed to the opportunity for critical literacy, which has yet to be explored in the context of the video game world. Bias, value, and social justice issues are inherent to this medium, but are rarely explored (Sanford & Madill, 2007). Educators should find ways to utilize this medium, which is so appealing to the adolescent learner, to encourage the development of critical literacy skills. The potential to connect literacy learning to relevant, technology-infused lessons as a means of increasing engagement is undeniable.

By exploring the expanding definition of text, the need for a broader range of literacy skills becomes evident. At its most essential level, literacy is reading for comprehension and writing with clarity (NCREL, 2005). However, as subject areas become more specialized in higher grades, so, too, do the form and function of the literacy skills required to manage that information (Wendt, 2013). As technology advances, the definition of text expands. Images, sounds, and language have merged to produce the multiple literacies of the 21st century (Hill, n.d.). Video games, movies, blogs, wikis, and social media all depend on these literacies. Literacy skills have thus become synonymous with technological savvy (Roos, 2007). After all, technology is no longer defined by the specific device or software, but rather by the activity it enables. Much of today’s technology exists to facilitate communication, collaboration, and connection. Educators must respond by teaching the skills necessary to manage these multiple literacies today, and in the future.

Comprehension is inexorably linked to literacy. The more complex the mental model created, the more information can be stored and retrieved for later (Kirby, 2012). When literacy is low, the brain stores only isolated ideas and is unable to make meaningful connections. Without connections, little will be remembered. When literacy improves, the brain organizes information into main ideas supported by a few details. More information is stored. When literacy levels are high, the brain is able to add structure, interpret abstract concepts, and make implications, thereby maximizing the storage and retrieval of information. Deeper learning builds intrinsic motivation (Kirby, 2012). Activating prior knowledge also deepens comprehension by providing for meaningful connections between new learning and established understandings (“Make Room,” 2013). This complex mental model means stronger connections, deeper relevance, and increased engagement. Targeted instruction of literacy skills that support deeper comprehension helps to develop real-world literacy, which is constantly constructing meaning (Wendt, 2013).

Student Engagement

For adolescent students, engagement deepens when they see the topic of study as relevant, so building engagement is the key to literacy development. Engagement is the intersection of motivation with purpose (NCREL, 2005). Motivation plays a crucial role in literacy development among adolescent readers (Marchand-Martella, Martella, Modderman, Petersen, & Pan, 2013). Students first need to identify themselves as learners who possess the confidence that comes from self-efficacy or a belief in their own power to affect change (NCREL, 2005). Educators who structure a learning environment that incorporates collaboration, inquiry, choice, and authenticity foster deeper levels of engagement in their students (Hill, n.d.). These components correlate with the adolescent learners' desire for belonging, autonomy and control, while supporting the engagement necessary to support skill development.

Adolescent learners value social connectedness, so collaborative learning opportunities build relevance into literacy learning. Teachers who value the young adolescents' need to talk about their learning facilitate measureable gains in student literacy (Fletcher, 2014). Collaboration is a form of networking, akin to the social media that dominates the lives of the 21st century learner (Roos, 2007). Teens are used to being perpetually connected, thereby craving interaction. Social media is used by adolescents to define their evolving identity and to connect with others who share similar characteristics, in order to build a sense of belonging (Skerrett & Bomer, 2011). This drive can be incorporated into the classroom by encouraging students to engage in meaningful dialogue, both within the room and across the globe, by using the internet (Wendt, 2013). The distance and anonymity afforded by online communication may even promote positive risk-taking, helping shy students to share their ideas. The social literacy of collaborative learning increases the meaningful context for students, thereby attaching greater relevance to the experience.

Adolescents question everything, so literacy learning based on the inquiry model is more likely to be judged as relevant. Explicit instruction is necessary to scaffold students as they build their inquiry skills (Wilhelm, 2007). Using guiding questions, adolescent learners direct their energy to answering questions of their own design. This problem-solving model enhances motivation and engagement, encourages deeper understanding, and increases positive attitudes toward the learning, regardless of the subject. A variety of modes, including print and digital, text and images, still and video, etc., is essential to accommodate students' interests (Wendt, 2013). Incorporating technology to access audio, video, software, and online connections also creates a learning environment capable of meeting the widest variety of learning styles and needs. Inquiry learning that involves posing, and then answering, questions ensures literacy learning that is relevant and engaging.

Adolescent learners strive for autonomy, so the more opportunities they have to make choices and control their own learning, the more personally relevant the learning experiences become. Choice greatly influences engagement, which consequently improves comprehension and retention (Skerrett & Bomer, 2011). Students need opportunities to choose their own reading material from a wide variety of high-interest, accessible texts, in multiple modes, in order to ensure that they can practise their literacy skills in a context that is personally relevant (Morrow, 2014). Adolescent learners need to be aware of the reason for, and scope of, the activities that they are asked to do. Quality literacy instruction is based on lessons whose purpose is clear to both the teacher in their creation, and to the student in their implementation (Fletcher, 2014). Learning goals need to be clear and feedback should be timely and frank, acknowledging the positive and suggesting improvements. The opportunity to make choices, based on personal interest, while striving to meet clear objectives, contributes to a sense of control, and thereby encourages engagement.

Finally, if literacy learning is made authentic through connections to real-life scenarios, it is infinitely more appealing to adolescents who are figuring out the role that they will play as

productive global citizens. Students want to know whether the learning activity parallels what someone in a real-life situation would do (Tovani, 2004). Adolescents believe that they have the power to change the world. They see themselves as global citizens, committed to social justice (Roos, 2007). Learning by design speaks to this commitment by connecting real-life skills to in-school learning (Skerrett & Bomer, 2011). Literacy learning that is connected to authentic, real-life applications becomes more meaningful. We use language not in isolation, but to understand and analyze the world around us. Similarly, reading should be linked to a purpose (Tovani, 2000). In the upper grades, literacy instruction needs to occur within the context of the course material being studied. Vocabulary acquisition, skills and process, and data collection and analysis all require advanced literacy skills (Tovani, 2004). Understanding the practical application of literacy, especially connected to future career aspirations, increases the chance that students will engage to master a skill set that will support their long-term goals.

With engagement established, explicit instruction of the comprehension strategies can take place. To build 21st century literacy skills, today's learner should continue to receive explicit reading instruction through adolescence (Marchand-Martella et al., 2013). Educators who use modeling, mentoring, and monitoring to scaffold learning experiences empower students to construct their own understanding (Wilhelm, 2007). Students benefit the most when expert teachers deliver responsive lessons, as opposed to pre-packaged programs (Ivey & Fisher, 2006). Reading needs to go beyond decoding by building comprehension within the context of relevant texts, rather than through isolated vocabulary exercises. To improve reading and writing skills, students must spend time engaged with text in meaningful ways. In the higher grades, teachers need to shift the focus of their reading instruction away from teaching literacy and focus more on using literacy to teach (Marchand-Martella et al., 2013). Gains in literacy for adolescent learners hinge on explicit instruction that focuses on building comprehension within the context of more specialized content areas.

Conclusion

All learning is enhanced when students are willing to engage in a process that they see as relevant and meaningful, and literacy learning is no different. Technology has increased the pace and the scope of the information that must be processed to function successfully, both on the job and off. Literacy, including digital literacy, is the means through which one interprets and responds to the world. Therefore, literacy learning, built on a solid foundation of comprehension skills, is essential. Several key components of planning and instruction have been proven to support the engagement necessary to support strong literacy learning. Adolescents strive for independence, so choice and authenticity are key elements to build relevance. They strive to belong, making collaboration, a natural fit. Finally, inquiry-based learning, supported by explicit instruction, provides the strategies necessary to tackle literacy in the new millennium. It remains the responsibility of educators to prepare our youth for the future by helping them to recognize the critical significance of literacy in everything they do.

References

Fletcher, J. (2014). A review of "effective" reading literacy practices for young adolescent 11 to 13 year old students. *Educational Review*, *66*(3), 293-310. doi:10. 1080/00131911. 2013. 772126

Haynes, M. (2014, June 19). Fact sheet: Adolescent literacy. *Alliance for Excellent Education*. Retrieved February 2, 2015, from http://all4ed. org/reports-factsheets/fact-sheet-adolescent-literacy/

Hill, C. (n.d.). *Literacy blocks: Student engagement and student learning in grade 7 and 8 classrooms*. Retrieved February 8, 2015, from http://umanitoba. ca/faculties/education/media/Hill-09. pdf

Ivey, G., & Fisher, D. (2006). *Creating literacy-rich schools for adolescents*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Retrieved from eBook Education Collection database.
Jacobsen, M. (2010). Work, learning, and citizenship in the 21st century. *Education Canada 49*(4), 69. Retrieved from http://www. cea-ace. ca/education-canada/article/work-learning-and-citizenship-21st-century
Kirby, J. R. (2012). They just don't understand: Sources of poor reading comprehension [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved March 2, 2015, from http://aari. educ. ualberta. ca/sites/aari-dev. educ. ualberta. ca/files/u1/AARI%20Lecture%20-%20Feb-2. %202012%20%20%28Dr. %20J. %20Kirby%29. pdf
Make room for building background knowledge. (2013, Spring). *Literacy gains*. Retrieved from http://www. edugains. ca/resourcesLIT/AdolescentLiteracy/AL_Resources/BackgroundKnowledgeALERT_8X11. pdf
Marchand-Martella, N. E. , Martella, R. C. , Modderman, S. L. , Petersen, H. M. , & Pan, S. (2013). Key areas of effective adolescent literacy programs. *Education and Treatment of Children, 36*(1), 161-184.
Morrow, B. (2014, September 16). Seven considerations for developing adolescent literacy. *ASCD in service.* Retrieved January 30, 2015, from http://inservice. ascd. org/seven-considerations-when-developing-adolescent-literacy/
North Central Regional Education Laboratory. (2005). *Using student engagement to improve adolescent literacy*. Retrieved from http://education. ucf. edu/mirc/Research/Using%20Student%20Engagement%20to%20Improve%20Adolescent%20Literacy. pdf
Roos, D. (2007, August 27). How net generation students work. *HowStuffWorks*. Retrieved March 13, 2015, from http://people. howstuffworks. com/how-net-generation-students-work. htm
Sanford, K., & Madill, L. (2007). Understanding the power of new literacies through video game play and design. *Canadian Journal of Education 30*(2), 432-455.
Skerrett, A., & Bomer, R. (2011). Borderzones in adolescent literacy practices: Connecting out-of-school literacies to the reading curriculum. *Urban Education, 46*(6), 1256-1279. doi:10. 1177/0042085911398920
Tovani, C. (2000). *I read it, but I don't get it: Comprehension strategies for adolescent readers*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
Tovani, C. (2004). *Do I really have to teach reading? Content comprehension, grades 6-12*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
Wendt, J. L. (2013). Combating the crisis in adolescent literacy: Exploring literacy in the secondary classroom. *American Secondary Education 41*(2), 38-48.
Wilhelm, J. D. (2007). *Engaging readers & writers with inquiry*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

About the Author

Lisa Clark is a middle school teacher at Mackenzie Middle School in Dauphin, Manitoba. Additionally, she leads an extra-curricular philanthropy group, empowering students to build leadership skills while tackling issues of social justice. She still finds time for yoga, musical theatre, and furthering her professional learning.