

Joy Myers

# Digital Conversations: Taking Reader Response Into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century



## Abstract

This study focused on understanding the impact of incorporating digital reader response into a middle school literature class. Through interviews and the use of artifacts, a classroom teacher documented how altering the way students wrote about their readings shaped the quality and quantity of their writing. Outcomes reveal that blogging during class led to increased student confidence, multiple interpretations of text, and students taking a critical stance.

*Keywords:* digital literacies, reader response, blogging, adolescent literacy, critical thinking

There are many ways for educators to lead the way in today's schools. These acts of agency might inspire schoolwide change or perhaps they are quieter and occur only in the confines of one's classroom. Regardless of how big or small the action, students are positively affected every day by educators who strive to find new ways of teaching literacy. In this article I highlight an action research project examining my sixth graders' use of technology in authentic and organic ways and its impact on their engagement and critical thinking.

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I remember clearly the day my students rushed toward me excitedly clamoring with the same question, "Are we going to the computer lab?" They were eager to find out what question I posted on our class blog. We were deep in the middle of a unit on Greek mythology and most recently had been reading poems from *The Mighty Twelve: Superheroes of Greek Myth* by Charles R. Smith, Jr. (2009). For many students, this was their first experience with mythology and their enthusiasm was immense. What further added to their excitement was the opportunity to have digital conversations with their peers.

## Reader Response and Digital Literacy

Students have been responding in various ways to text for decades. Most reader response formats in school emphasize writing, usually in the form of journals (Spiegel, 1998). Discussion after the reading is also a valued piece of reader response, which provides a forum for students to raise additional questions, elaborate on arguments, share reflections and negotiate meaning (Noll, 1994). Some argue that conversations about text may even be more important than the private readings of them (Dressman, 2004).

Rosenblatt (2002) writes that each time students interact with text, they are not reading purely for an aesthetic or efferent experience; rather, the reader is always making choices about their thinking, focusing on both stances and sometimes more on one than the other. However, Lewis (2000) argues that much of reader response in schools takes a personal approach. Teachers

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Digital media allows everyone the opportunity to be both producers as well as consumers (Gee & Hayes, 2011). When reader response journals go digital, students produce their own responses, students consume what others post, and then students produce a response, thus continuing the cycle.

ask students to identify with a story and their students enjoy and gain pleasure, according to Lewis, from making connections between their reading and their own lives. She cautions, however, that students should be taught a broader view of what pleasurable aesthetic reading can mean, which in her view includes addressing the social and political dimension of texts. Lewis and other literacy researchers such as Bean and Moni (2003) believe students can learn to enjoy and participate in both personal and critical responses to text.

In addition to research on reader response, others in the field of literacy have focused their attention on researching the many aspects of digital literacy. Gee and Hayes (2011) state that digital media allows oral language and written language to coexist in a hybrid state. Digital literacies take the elements of “traditional” education and combine them with elements of technology education. New forms of literacy are emerging and changing at an unprecedented rate, and reading and writing can no longer be considered the only forms of literacy in the classroom context (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006).

Digital media allows everyone the opportunity to be both producers as well as consumers (Gee & Hayes, 2011). When reader response journals go digital, students produce their own responses, students consume what others post, and then students produce a response, thus continuing the cycle. As a result, Gee and Hayes believe that these types of interactions allow people to be strangers and intimates at the same time. In a classroom setting, this may be seen, for example, when students who normally don’t socialize—who certainly are not friends—post and respond to each other engaging in dialogue, perhaps for the first time. In addition, the interactive and collaborate features of digital reader response formats, such as blogs, support students in their writing (Sun & Chang, 2012).

Teachers’ roles are also changing. They are expected to teach students 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills, which are also literacy practices, such as collaboration, communication, creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, and innovation (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). These are essential in preparing children for the complex and diverse world outside the classroom. Glassman and Kang (2011) predict that the incorporation of digital tools into

teaching will impact student-student as well as student-teacher relationships.

There is a need to better understand how teachers can use digital media as a learning tool to foster reader response in middle schools. Reader response is a valuable way for students to connect to stories and make meaning. However, allowing students to do this activity online is even more sophisticated because it requires students to utilize 21<sup>st</sup> century skills such as collaboration and communication.

By systematically collecting data through action research, I was able to get an “insider perspective” (Borko, Whitcomb, & Byrnes, 2008) into my sixth graders’ thinking as they used the classroom blog to post their reader responses. This study draws from the theoretical and sociocultural perspective of activity theory (Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999; Roth & Lee, 2007) which supports the notion that participants learn within an activity driven by the need to achieve a certain object or outcome (Beach, 2000). The activity theory lens also suggests ways of looking at how readers link their experiences to the experiences they read about in literature (Beach & Phinney, 1998). I believe that this theory provides a new way to examine how readers make meaning and respond to text, which are embedded within the activity of digital conversations.

### Action Research Project

Action research is a way for teachers to make sense of their teaching. “In its simplest sense, research helps us gain control of our world. When we understand the patterns underlying the language we use or the interactions we have with others, we have a better sense of how to adjust our behaviors and expectations” (Hubbard & Power, 1999, p. 2). This methodology was best suited for my study since it allowed me to contribute to the extant body of knowledge about digital literacies and reader response while providing me with targeted feedback to understand and enhance my instruction.

One of my colleagues suggested we try Nicenet ([www.nicenet.org](http://www.nicenet.org)), a nonprofit virtual classroom that allows schools with modest resources to have access to technology tools. This free website supports a blog entry format, allowing students to engage in conversations, digitally, with each other. Working with the technology teacher, I found one day a week that both of my sixth-grade literature classes could visit the computer lab during class time. With the logistics set, it was time to focus on my research question: How does using digital literacy tools impact the quality of students’ reader responses and their engagement in the task?

### Research Site and Participants

This action research project focused specifically on the time that my students spent in the computer lab during the second half of the 2011-2012 school year. Forty students participated in this study,

all sixth graders enrolled in a parochial school with approximately 300 students in grades PreK-8. Most of the students at the school are white, but there is socioeconomic diversity. This was reflected in students' access to technology at home and familiarity with various forms of digital media. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Data sources for the study included a reading/writing inventory, which the students completed at the beginning of the year; student work samples collected from Nicenet (including their original posts and responses they received from and gave to their peers); teacher fieldnotes/observation logs recorded during the study; and structured written interviews with students at the end of the third semester.

Vasudevan, DeJaynes, and Schmier (2010) write about a three-year study of the online habits of teens, which found that youth frequently navigate various forms of digital media including social networking sites, online games, and video sharing sites. A close examination of my students' reading/writing inventories revealed that 35 percent of students in my classes frequently participated in "chatting" online and 65 percent frequently communicated via email. As a point of comparison, 35 percent of students listed reading novels as a frequent activity. It was clear that the students in my classes not only use various forms of digital media, but they spend more of their time doing so than reading traditional print texts. In the next section, I provide a brief snapshot of three months of the study and students' responses on our class blog.

## January

Just like at the beginning of the year, classroom routines had to be established for this new learning space. It took about two class sessions for the students to set up their accounts and get a feel for the website, which included where and how to post their responses to the weekly question I posed.

For the first assignment, I asked students to post about their favorite Greek god based on our shared mythology reading. Once they had completed the task of answering the question, the students could view what others had written. Jack wrote, "My favorite Greek god is Zeus because he is in charge and I think it would be cool to rule over all of the other gods." Sarah posted, "Even though he is a boy, I think that my favorite god is Poseidon because he is the god of water and I am a swimmer so I think that is my favorite." Sam wrote, "I don't have a favorite. Hope that is ok. This whole Greek god thing is new to me. I never watched the Percy Jackson movies. Maybe I will now."

For this first assignment I did not let them respond to each other's posts. I felt that additional instruction was needed in order for the students to respond in a positive and supportive manner to their classmates. I could tell immediately that the students were frustrated that they could not respond to each other. John spoke out, "What is the point if we can't write back to our friends?" Typical of middle school students, soon others joined in John's

rally to change my mind. "Come on, Mrs. Myers. We can handle this," said Beth. John and Beth clearly saw that this new way of responding to text was meant to be a conversation, which that day I was preventing. Further reflection revealed that fear was driving my hesitancy about letting them respond to each other. I worried about the possibility that they might post negative things about each other's responses, feelings would be hurt, thus resulting in students not wanting to post at all. One of the main reasons I decided to initiate digital literacies in my classroom was to increase engagement. If I let them respond to each other, I was fostering that engagement; yet if it backfired, I could negatively impact their levels of engagement. I also worried that if my principal heard anything negative about this project; he would pull the plug. I was the first to trying blogging with students at the school and I feared that if it did not go well, I would be the last.

As I examined their initial posts, I saw a range of responses both in length and depth. I was concerned that students were just spitting back information they had learned about Greek gods. Was it due to the questions I was asking or the content? Why were they not making stronger connections to the text?

## February

We finished the unit on mythology and were "in between" texts when I posed a different type of question: Who are you as a reader? I then compared these responses to how they answered a similar question on the initial reading/writing inventory. The following are example responses from the same students to both questions:

Jack's post: "My favorite type of book is suspense and fantasy. One of my favorite book series is the *Inheritance* series, which is about a boy and a dragon. I also like the *Harry Potter* series, which is about witches and wizards."

Jack's Reading/Writing Inventory: "I like to read but I don't read a lot."

Jill's post: "As a reader, on a scale of 1-10, I would put myself as an 8. I like to read fiction books with like magic and fantasy and dragons, stuff like that. I don't really like to read nonfiction books, unless it is required for a school project or something like that. I like have read the series *The Inheritance Cycle*, the *Harry Potter* series, *Fablehaven*, and *The Secrets of the Immortal Nicholas Flamel* series. But I think my favorite book is *Inheritance*, the fourth book in the *Inheritance Cycle*."

Jill's Reading/Writing Inventory: "I like reading books that are interesting to me."

Beth's post: "When are we supposed to read? Between homework and practice who has time? I read what I have to read because there is a lot we have to read. Summer is the best time to read."

By reading their peers' posts, the students had an opportunity to see a variety of perspectives, which challenged them to expand their thinking and discover different understanding (Dressman, 2004). I saw that students made meaning as they read and responded to each other, learning to value multiple interpretations of the text. Their digital conversations fell on a continuum ranging from supportive to argumentative as the students either agreed or disagreed with each other.

Beth's Reading/Writing Inventory: "I don't have a lot of time to read."

John's post: "What do you like to read, Mrs. Myers? Teachers never talk about what they read but I bet you read all the time. I like to read online. You can find anything online. It is so much faster than reading a book."

John's Reading/Writing Inventory: "I don't really read that much."

The students particularly enjoyed responding to each other's posts for this question. Beth got a lot of responses from fellow athletes and others with busy afterschool schedules. They reaffirmed each other by posting comments like this: "I agree. Completely. How long until summer?" When I asked Beth about this later, she said, "Everyone is busy I guess. I just don't think teachers understand how busy we are." The blog provided a place for students to unify together and share their mutual frustration, a developmentally appropriate response for this age of students.

## March

As the year progressed, I began to ask the students to respond to more critical thinking questions. One assignment was inspired by an impromptu debate after we read "The Emperor's New Clothes." Jackie posed this question: "Why do none of the Emperor's helpers tell him the truth?" Hank responded, "Because if they told the truth, they would lose their jobs." That week, I asked the students to take a stance on telling a lie and defend their position.

Anna wrote: "I think it was a bad idea to lie like the emperor did. I think that because it would be better to go down in history as a truth teller than to go down as a liar. Also if you were a liar and someone were to find out than you would probably lose your job. Another reason is that if you were telling the truth while others weren't then that would prove them wrong. If I were in that stance then I would tell the truth because I would not like people to think of me as a liar."

Tom posted: "I think it is ok to lie to keep a job especially if you have a family. When you have a family to take care of, to feed, you have to make money. If you lose your job, you can't feed your family or own a house. But it also isn't ok to lie about your job because lying is the wrong thing to do. But lying is probably what you should do, but you would probably get caught, and you would probably end up having to lie over and over again. The lies would stack up and you would most likely end up getting caught and getting fired."

The students passionately responded to each other by posting support of their peers' opinions or their disagreement. All I heard that day in the computer lab was fast typing and an occasional gasp or laugh. Tyrone responded to Anna: "You might be a truth teller but it doesn't matter if you die because you can't eat." Anna's response to Tyrone was, "Really? I would not die. I would just find another job where I wouldn't have to lie." Francis responded to Tom's post, writing: "I agree about the family thing but I think it would be ok to lie because I wouldn't get caught." Tom's responded to Francis with, "Yeah you probably wouldn't."

## Findings

The individual posts as well as all field notes, observations, and interviews were examined for emerging themes, coded, then grouped by themes and categories for analysis. Three categories emerged: increased student confidence, multiple interpretations of text, and taking a critical stance.

### Increased Student Confidence

The use of digital media allowed the students to connect in a way that had not been offered to them previously in the context of school. Students responded to numerous posts, not just to what their friends wrote and their comments promoted a collaborative learning environment (Ahmad & Lutters, 2011). By comparing feedback from the beginning of the project, I noticed a slight shift in students' confidence as readers and writers, which I had not seen prior to starting the digital literacies project. This was also seen in students' written responses to the interview questions. Jim wrote, "I liked that you could see what people thought about your post." Ella shared, "It made me not afraid to be myself and share my writing." Layla shared, "I liked it better because it made me want to write better knowing that people are reading it." Francis wrote, "I feel better typing my thoughts out than sharing them out loud." Tom

responded, "Class went much faster on the days we went to the computer lab because it was fun and it felt good."

### Multiple Interpretations of Text

By reading their peers' posts, the students had an opportunity to see a variety of perspectives, which challenged them to expand their thinking and discover different understanding (Dressman, 2004). I saw that students made meaning as they read and responded to each other, learning to value multiple interpretations of the text. Their digital conversations fell on a continuum ranging from supportive to argumentative as the students either agreed or disagreed with each other. Ramona wrote, "Posting our answers online allowed us to see what other people think and that other people may see a story from a different point of view." Kate wrote, "I like it because you get to see what your classmates think about it. Plus you can share what you thought. You can agree or disagree." Elizabeth added, "I like to see how different the answers are to the same question." John wrote, "Some people are smarter than they show in class." Beth shared, "I never thought I would agree with Francis but I did sometimes."

### Taking a Critical Stance

Allowing students to respond to each other shifted my role from authority to facilitator, if only for one class a week. Utilizing digital media also impacted the quality of their reader response journals as they moved from summaries of the text to thoughtful interpretations of the literature. Just as Berger (1996) detailed in her reflection of reader response, I also found that adolescents honestly shared their feelings and their process as writers when they were encouraged to share via the digital conversations. For example, Wyatt wrote, "I like to respond to my friends because it helps them get better at writing and they help me." Kate shared, "At first it was hard because we had never done it before but it got easier. I got better at it."

I also found that the students' responses became more critical. They appeared to be approaching the text in a different way and their reading appeared to be more strategic compared to the more opinion-oriented responses I saw at the beginning of the semester. McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) write that once teachers become critically aware, teaching their students to read from a critical stance is a natural process. Rick wrote, "Using Nicenet made me think about who I was writing to (my audience) so that made me change the way I wrote." Katrina wrote, "Using Nicenet strengthened my skills because I really had to put thought into my writing and I had to make sure people could understand me."

### Discussion

This action research project began as a small step towards an understanding of how students engage and participate in digital conversations within the context of school. Incorporating digital literacies into our weekly class sessions allowed me to show the students that I recognize and value their out of school literacies. Having students engage in digital conversations affirmed my belief that the quality of their written responses and their engagement was impacted by the use of digital tools. This supports findings by Chandler-Olcott and Lewis (2010) who, through an action research project on teachers' use of online literacies in a high school setting, found that students felt that the incorporation of online literacies into their English class was "more engaging than print-driven pedagogy" (p. 171).

The students' responses to the written interview questions showed that they found participation in the virtual classroom to be highly motivating. Using social media skills that many of the students already possessed fostered meaningfulness and productivity during class time (Dredger, Woods, Beach, & Sagstetter, 2010). It also provided all students, especially those who may not regularly participate in classroom discussions, an opportunity to share their voice (Kang, Bonk & Kim, 2011).

Research shows that students grow in several areas when they respond to literature. These include developing ownership of what they read, making personal connections, gaining an appreciation for multiple interactions, and becoming more reflective (Spiegel, 1998). The type of reflective writing used in blogs also helps deepen students' understanding of the subject matter they are studying because it allows them to explore multiple perspectives (Hall & Davison, 2007; Zhang, 2009).

My findings support this research and in addition, I found that using a class blog helped foster a community of learners. The computer lab, on Thursdays, became a space where students could work together to develop their writing skills and enjoy the advantages of an instant audience.

The digital conversations also provided excellent opportunities for students to read, write, and think from a critical perspective. They learned to question the text and ponder the author's intent. McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) call this comprehending with a critical edge. This was in part due to quality of my questions, which developed throughout the semester. At first, I asked more opinion questions, similar to what Lewis (2000) found in her work, and then slowly I moved towards more critical thinking questions as the project progressed.

### In Closing

All teachers want to provide their students with strong literacy instruction. Virtual classrooms have the capability to extend learning beyond the walls of school breaking what Chen (2010) describes as the time/place continuum that traditional schooling

mandates. Research shows that many students use blogs and wikis to support their writing outside of school; yet, there is still a disconnect between in- and out-of-school literacy experiences (Harklau & Pinnow, 2009; Weinstein, 2002).

I fostered this disconnect during my first attempt at incorporating digital literacies into my classroom because I constrained their posting and responses to “in class” only. In the future, I plan to research how the participation in digital conversations, outside of school, impacts students’ responses to literature.

As definitions of literacy continue to expand, teachers need time to experiment with different ways of using and adapting digital media in their classrooms (Sweeny, 2010). They will also need support and encouragement. One of the teachers in a study by Chandler-Olcott and Lewis (2010), mentioned previously, came to the realization that a new outlook was needed about the role of teachers and “how curriculum and instruction might be reorganized to take advantage of the expertise and habits of mind that tech-savvy students bring to the classroom” (p. 175). School-based action research, with assistance from university researchers, may be one way of helping teachers understand the value of (and offer support for) incorporating digital media in their classrooms. Serving the dual roles of teacher/researcher during this project helped me identify many aspects about my students as well as myself. I believe that the possibilities of digital literacies in classroom are endless; we just have to lead the way

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