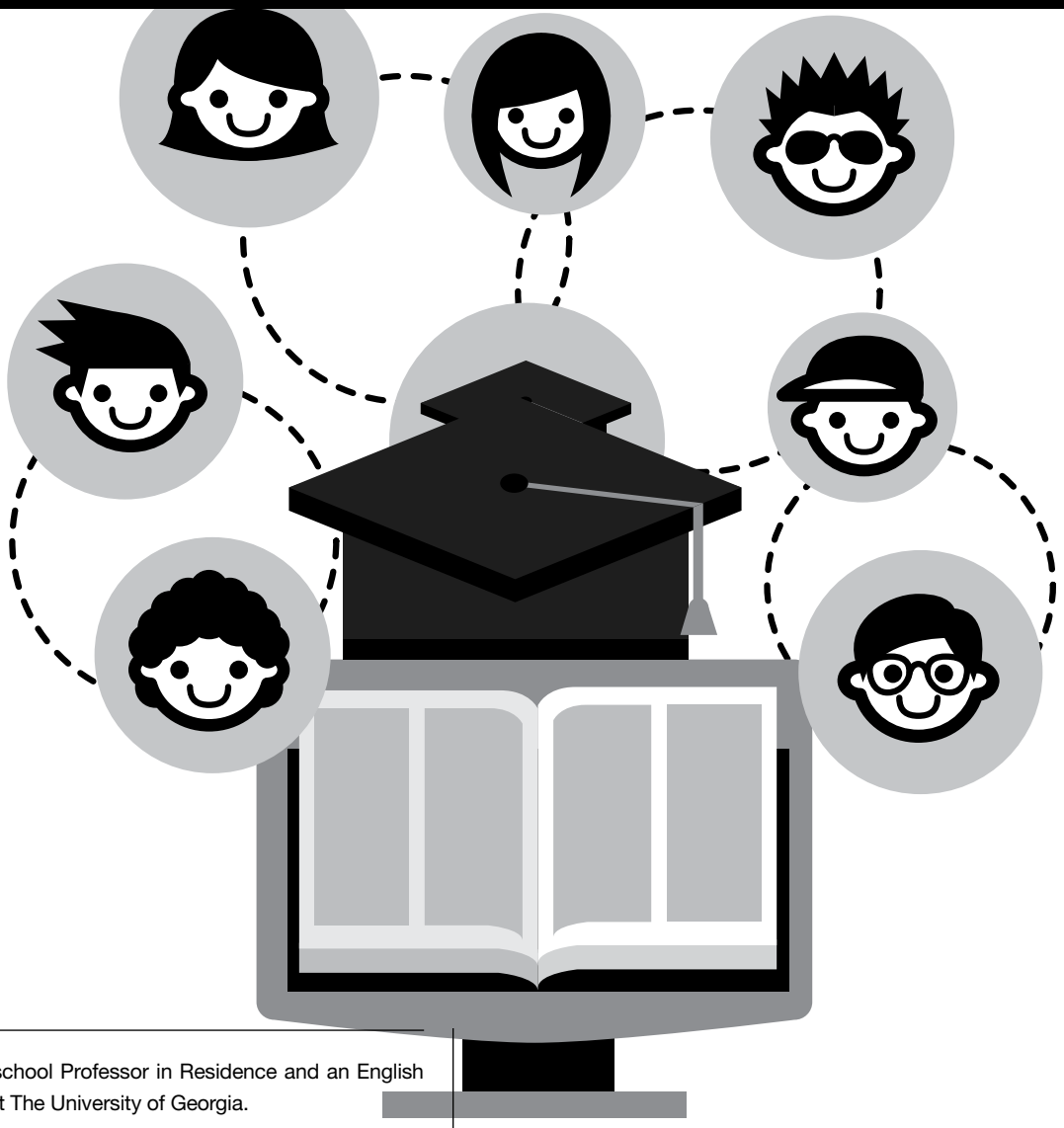
ARE WE "READING RIGHT?": Bringing Connected Reading Practices to the Classroom

By Sara Kajder, Kristen Hawley Turner, and Troy Hicks



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Abstract

Students used to reading digital texts can be supported in reading both those and print-based texts critically through a variety of strategies and applications. Connected reading, or the idea that our reading is networked both physically and digitally to create a shared construction of meaning, involves readers working with text in both recursive and discursive ways.

Keywords: digital literacy, critical literacy, middle grades, connected reading, literacy instruction

As she asked students to tell her what they found difficult about annotating texts, a student challenged her instruction by saying, "We're marking a reading with paper—in a book made of paper—when we have computers. It doesn't feel like we're reading right." Struck that he noticed the disconnect between her teaching and his own personal reading habits, Sara reflected on the tools available on her students' desks.

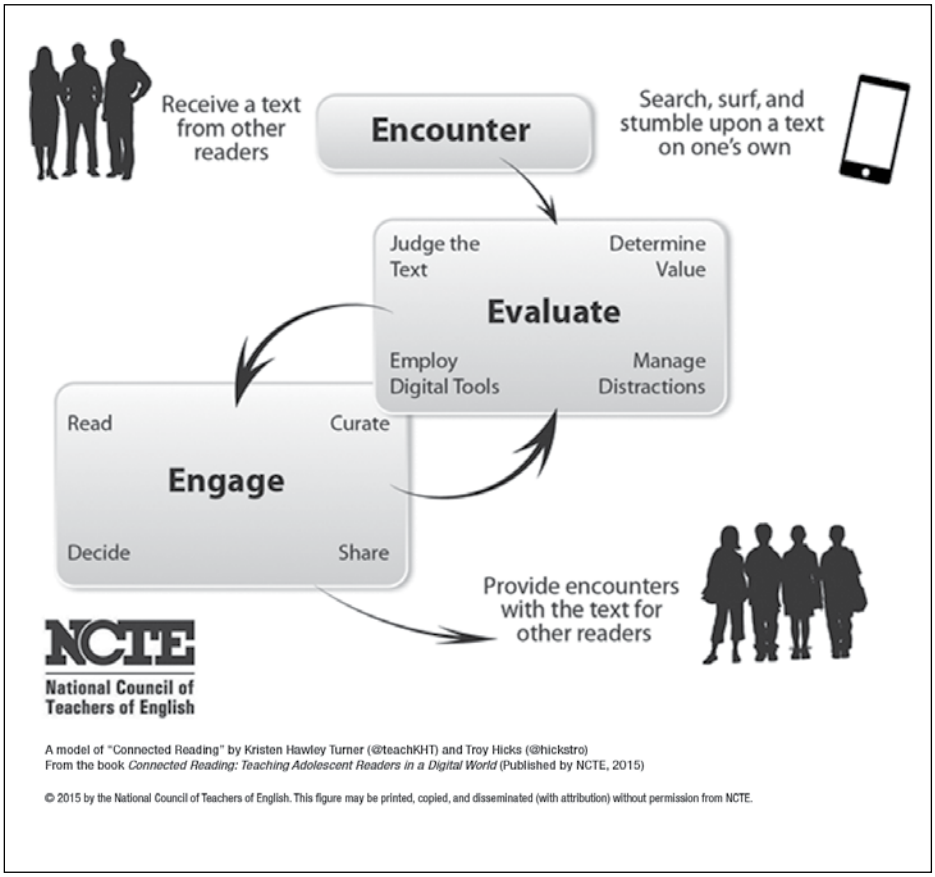

Figure 1. A model of "connected reading."

A project of the Harvard Innovation Lab, *Evolution of the Desk* chronicles advancements in technology over the last several decades (Georgiev, 2014). As shown in this video, in 1980 a desk was covered with items: books, newspapers, magazines; a fax, phone, stapler, and tape dispenser; a rolodex, clock, globe, calendar, and bulletin board; and a computer and phone. As time moves, one by one the items on the desk evolve—and disappear—becoming an app on the computer. By current day, only a computer full of apps and a smartphone remain on the desk.

The video represents the possibilities of a digital world. We can, if we choose to do so, conduct our professional and personal lives entirely on, with, and through devices, and a recent Pew Internet study suggests that more and more teenagers and adults are making the choice to *go digital* (Lenhart, 2015). Yet, the question remains: Are we teaching reading in a manner that accounts for these drastic changes?

Take, for instance, Sara's eighth grade classroom, where students are issued Chromebooks at the start of each academic year. Alongside the printed texts of the classroom library and the anthologies and novels used for whole-class study of a particular literary work, students have access to a tool that allows them to read across various forms of media—including blogs and websites, online books and magazines, and academic journals to interact with readers across the globe and to share ideas that create tangible change in our communities. Reading in Sara's classroom cannot ignore any of these texts, print or digital.

This lesson hit home for Sara early in the year, as she guided her students in using reading notebooks and post-it notes to respond to print texts. As she asked students to tell her what they found difficult about annotating texts, a student challenged her instruction by saying, "We're marking a reading with paper—in a book made of paper—when we have computers. It doesn't feel like we're reading right." Struck that he noticed the disconnect between her teaching and his own personal reading habits, Sara reflected on the tools available on her students' desks.

As teachers of reading and writing, we recognize that our own desks—and those of our students—are markedly different than they were even just a decade ago. We accept that, as the National Writing Project asserts, "digital *is*" (National Writing Project, DeVoss, Eidman-Aadahl, & Hicks, 2010, p. 7), and we wonder how we can help adolescents become critical readers in a world where they encounter short-, mid-, and long-form texts (Thompson, 2010) through their devices on a daily—and even hourly—basis. Sara's student invites all of to consider the relationship between print and digital reading and to go beyond the surface to engage students in what we call "connected reading."

Short-form	Mid-form	Long-form
Public social network posts Short snippets or summaries Search engine results "Headlines" in an RSS reader Messages and digitalk	Online journalism Blog posts Short fiction	"Longform" journalism Academic articles eBooks Transmedia stories
Texts to be skimmed or scanned. Often conversational.	Texts to be read and comprehended in one sitting.	Texts requiring deep cognitive engagement or extended reading time, usually more than one sitting.

Figure 2. Example genres of digital texts.

What Do We Mean by "Connected Reading?"

For us, reading is not an isolating activity. Digital tools allow individual readers to connect to a network of readers; texts of all kinds can be shared quickly and widely. Digital tools also allow readers to share their reading experiences—before, during, and after the actual act of reading—with others. In a digital world, reading is visibly social.

In their book *Connected Reading: Teaching Adolescent Readers in a Digital World* (Turner & Hicks, 2015), Kristen and Troy describe a model of reading that takes into account the networked, social nature of reading today. (See Figure 1.)

This model suggests that readers encounter texts in a variety of ways. They may receive them from others, somewhat passively, or they may actively seek out new reading material by surfing the web without much intention, stumbling through sites with some purpose to find information on a particular topic, or searching the web with focused attention, using active search strategies and critical thinking.

Of course, digital texts come in various forms and formats. They may be short-form, like tweets and text messages; mid-form, like blog posts and news articles; or long-form, like eBooks. They may be linear texts that are intended to be read from start to finish, hyperlinked texts that allow for non-linear reading, or multimedia texts that embed audio or visual content that enhance or drive the text (Dalton & Proctor, 2008). (See Figure 2.)

Once a reader encounters a text, she can engage with it. The first point of engagement comes when she *decides* whether to read the text now, to read it later, or to discard it without reading. A decision to read the text—either in that moment or a future one—allows for deeper engagement with the text, both through the act of reading and then possibly sharing the text with her network, or curating the text (essentially, saving the link via social bookmarking or social media).

Throughout this process of engagement, connected readers make evaluative decisions. They determine the value of the text to their own reading purposes; they judge the quality and substance of the text; they determine the value of the text for others in their networks; and they use digital tools to read, share, and manage distractions. These decisions allow a reader to make connections with others and, in turn, to be connected to additional texts that she might find interesting, entertaining, or useful.

All of these connected reading practices require rethinking of reading instruction. How do we help students develop their comprehension skills as they encounter and engage with Kindles and tablets, RSS feeds and Twitter, hypertext fiction, and digital textbooks? How do we help them to read critically in a world where information flows constantly? And perhaps most importantly, how do we help them to leverage the possibilities within a network of readers?

As we consider these questions, we turn to Sara's classroom, where she and her eighth-graders explore what it means to be connected readers.

Into the Classroom

Teaching in a school where every student has been issued a Wi-Fi connected device led Sara to expect that by the start of eighth grade, her students should eagerly and skillfully inhabit the role of digital reader, but she has realized that she needs to help her students unpack digital texts with powerful comprehension strategies. She needs to help them leverage the unique affordances of digital texts and digital tools in order to become connected readers.

Because her primary goal is for a reader to interact with any text—print or digital—thoughtfully and actively, sometimes students read with Chromebooks and, at other times, they turn happily (and with agency) to print books. In Sara's classroom, connected reading is not a specific unit or set of activities. Instead, she folds teaching and learning about what it means to annotate and read socially into an exploration of how active readers make meaning in any text.

At the beginning of the year, Sara's students were just beginning to develop confidence in their identities as skilled readers. So when

one of the students challenged the class to be "reading right," which in his mind meant reading on a computer, Sara engaged the class in a discussion about digital texts. Together, they generated a list of opportunities that digital media provides: making an annotation through a voice or video post, making annotations responsive/social, reading with more than one person, using notes to talk together. Though most of the students in the class had not yet made these moves as readers of digital texts, they began to think about what they could do within a community of readers who were connected throughout their reading processes.

Their thinking lined up quite clearly with the model of connected reading. In the sections that follow, we will look at how Sara developed students' skills of locating, evaluating, and curating digital texts, annotating (as individuals and as a community of readers), and using those annotations to set goals and self-monitor their growth as readers.

In the identity-themed unit from Sara's class, the students read *Warriors Don't Cry* (Beals, 1995) as a whole-class, print text while also working in small groups to find and read supplemental digital texts that explored the stories of individual members of the Little Rock Nine. While Sara led discussion of and engagement with the novel as part of large group instruction, she tasked the small groups with the work of curating (i.e., locating, vetting, and sharing key texts within their group), annotating (through the use of web tools), and using what they learned from this work to teach the rest of the class about their assigned individual.

Locating, Evaluating, and Curating Digital Texts

In order to provide students with a starting place, Sara shared five websites that served dual purposes. First, she used texts from these sites to model for students a simple protocol meant to grow their thinking from evaluating the information on the site to questioning its usefulness and possible contribution to their curated collection. They examined "what" a text shared while also emphasizing "how" it shared a point of view, moment, or event that was critical to their growing understanding of the individuals of the Little Rock Nine.

Second, the websites became launch points for the small group work as Sara's students searched for supplemental texts. Sara assigned each student in a group a role: lead-researcher (charged with finding any mode of text and assisting the team), print text locator (charged with finding print resources), multimodal text locator (charged with finding audio or video resources), and manager (who along with pushing resources to his teammates, added vetted sources to the curated Reading List with a web-based tool, Ponder [described below]).

In these roles, student groups worked in three spaces. First, students drew either from the suggested collection of five websites or other sites located in their own search process. Second, they used a shared Google Doc that asked students to list the resources they located and considered in one column, and notes from their group discussion about what that text offered to their collection in a second column. And, third, they used Ponder (http://ponder.co/), a web-based annotation tool, to curate a "Reading List" from the collection.

These three spaces represented three "steps" in their research and reading, as students filtered, narrowed, and culled multimodal web content in an attempt to bring together a collection of resources that told a story through multiple modes, points of view, media, and texts. This work was tightly bounded by two class periods of searching and vetting, with very few students completing additional reading/searching outside of class.

After reviewing group logs at the end of the first day of searching, listing, and thinking, Sara realized that the students would need additional coaching to make the move from their Google Doc *collections* to their *curated* lists in Ponder. After quickly reviewing student logs at the close of the first day of searching, listing and thinking together, it became obvious to Sara that students needed additional coaching with the steps in between searching and curating. For example, in the case of a group researching Elizabeth Eckford's experiences, all but two resources had found their way into a Reading List that had already grown to include 33 texts. They had collected, not curated. Thus, more modeling and teaching were required.

Sara's lesson the next day began with a teacher-led minilesson, which modeled her own thinking processes and focused on the difference between locating and curating. During the minilesson, the class collaboratively created a checklist of steps required as they considered each text. The list started with known skills like vetting the authority of the found text. Later steps scaffolded how to move from thinking about a text to considering its role in the collection. Then, Sara modeled each of the listed steps in reading and vetting an example text.

Annotation and Sharing

Teaching students to intentionally annotate a text involves both helping them to think about how to annotate and why. Sara's eighth-graders had spent the first week of the year reading *Warriors Don't Cry* with "Notice and Note" strategies (Beers & Probst, 2012), creating an annotation system that helped them to identify key events in the text. Once students had developed some skills in using annotations to question and notice while reading a print text, Sara turned to using those same questioning and noticing skills within digital texts.

For the Little Rock Nine unit, Sara chose Ponder as a digital tool that would help students both share and annotate their curated multimodal text sets. Ponder allowed students to create a "Reading List" and then use a Google Chrome extension to annotate each text. (See Figure 3.) Ponder also featured a library of specific sentence starters and responses which students could use to begin or trigger their annotation (e.g., a student would select "Really?" as a start to a lengthier comment/annotation posting a question.)

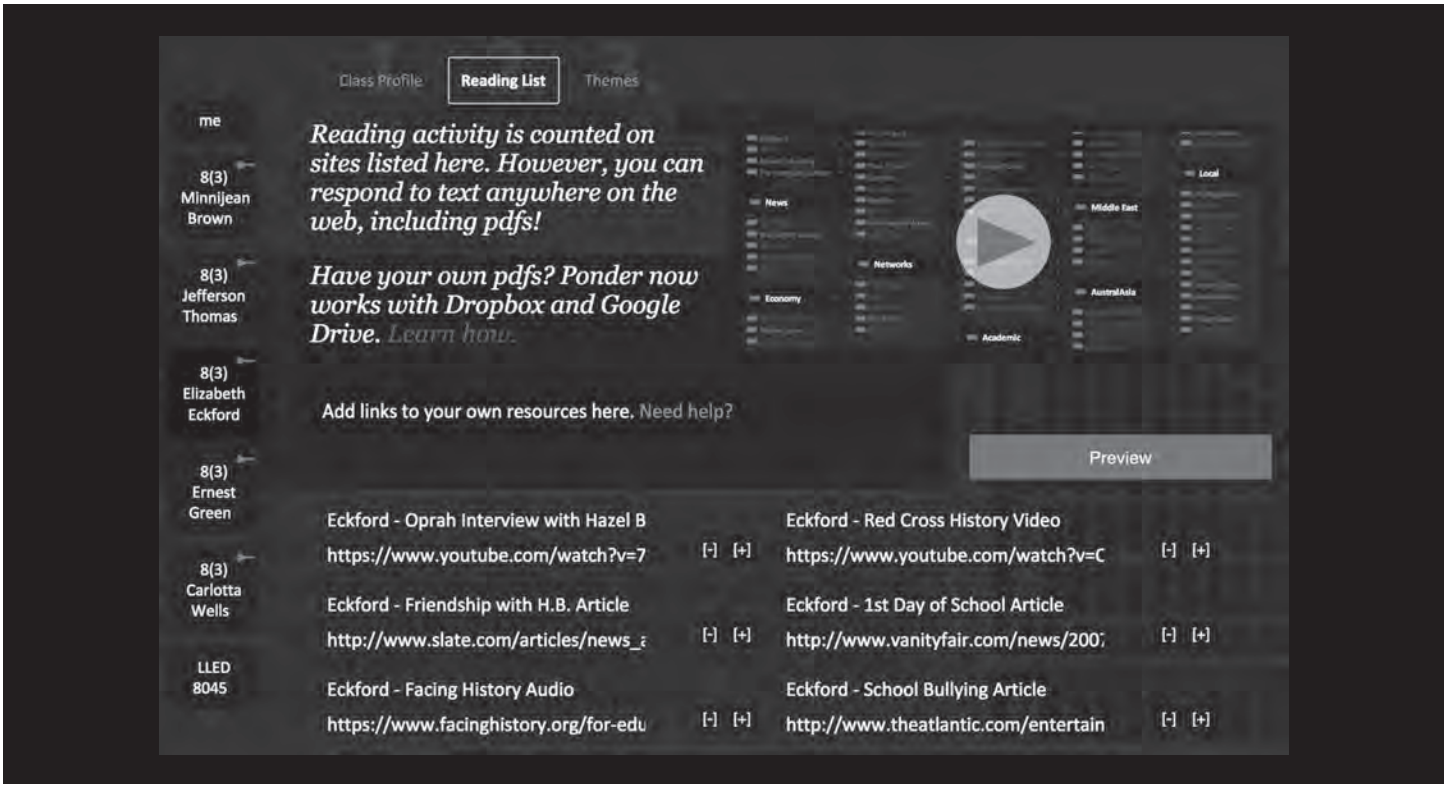

Figure 3. A screenshot of a student group's Ponder Reading List/Curated Texts about Elizabeth Eckford.

Figure 3 shows the curated collection about Elizabeth Eckford, which includes six texts of various kinds, ranging from photos to excerpts from an interview conducted in the mid-'70s for *Life* magazine, to a video of Oprah Winfrey's interview of Elizabeth Eckford and Hazel Bryan. The group needed to annotate at least four of the texts and to use their comments to make connections across texts, pose questions, and engage in discussion with the other readers in the group.

During their first pass at commenting within the digital texts, students were quick to open texts within Ponder and annotate. However, most comments simply connected the primary source material to the novel. Most even began with the same stem: "This connects to *WDC* ..." Responses were, initially, surface-level and flat.

However, the students' reading shifted as one member of the group wrestled with the Oprah interview. As a viewer and a reader, he took issue with what he saw as an interview which doubted the friendship between Elizabeth Eckford and Hazel Bryan (whose interactions at Central High School had been captured in a famous photo). He reacted emotionally, which added some heat and purpose to his annotations. He began to ask questions, and his comments drew response from his peers. And, in response, individual annotations shifted to discussions among readers. With this conversation about the text, there was a palpable shift from annotations that centered on observing "what?" to annotations that started to ask "why?"

By the time that the students came back together in class the next day, their annotated copy of the video had exploded into a flurry of responses and questions about whether the interview was judgmental in tone, whether the friendship between Hazel and Elizabeth could be real, and, as one student centered his focus, on what it meant to participate in hate through action *and* inaction. He connected personally to the text, writing, "I've jumped into things because it was what I heard and not what I felt. I am like Hazel but I don't have to be." He received response from across his group, two parents, and our principal. This particular student, who tested at the bottom of the reading performance indicators for his eighth grade class, told Sara that he finally saw himself as a reader—that the work he had done for this unit was "real reading." He saw the response to his comment on the text as reflective of his growing identity and legitimacy as a reader.

Thus, for Sara and her students, learning how to be connected readers is not a single objective, not just one item to check off on a list of standards or technology tools that they have used. Instead, teaching and learning through a framework of connected reading requires many of the same strategies that have always worked when teaching reading: modeling strategies for active engagement, metacognition and reflection, and conscious attention to the attitudes and needs of adolescent readers. Yet, connected reading also requires that we, as teachers, become more aware of and confident with the types of tools that students can, and should, be able to use when they encounter, evaluate, and engage with print and digital texts.

Teaching Connected Reading

Where we offer this segment of Sara's teaching as a glimpse into what connected reading might look like in a secondary classroom, we recognize that we all have different entrance points when it comes to bringing new or emerging practices into our classroom learning alongside students.

We present these ideas about teaching connected reading practices only as a starting point, ever mindful of the realities that our toolset and the texts it invites and evokes is in flux. It is an exciting time to teach English, especially as it challenges us, as Sara's student reminds us, to be "reading right," bringing together student readers with print and digital, linear and nonlinear, devices and books.

For some of us, integrating social networking and connected reading practices will be a natural extension of what we already do outside the classroom. We enjoy reading on our devices, both web-based texts and traditional print texts presented in a digital format. Our schools either provide or allow students' personal devices, our Wi-Fi network is strong, and parents are generally supportive of students engaging in online learning.

For others, however, this transition may be more difficult. As readers, some of us prefer print materials for use of access, comfort, and portability. Some of us may not have digital devices, and this problem certainly affects the lives of our students and their families as well. Moreover, the schools in which we work may not have the infrastructure or policies in place to support technology-rich, embedded literacy learning.

If you are in either case—or somewhere in between—we must recognize the challenges that are present for us, individually, as readers and teachers as well as for our students who participate in our schools and communities. Numerous factors including the cost of devices, network access, community norms and attitudes, family income, and broader perspectives on what it means to be literate will all affect how we teach connected reading.

It is with these ideas in mind that we offer three specific suggestions—and a brief list of apps and websites that can support your work—that may help as you work to create and curate your students' online literacy identities:

1. Focus on literacy practices, not particular technologies, but choose appropriate apps and websites

   Even with the multitude of new devices and reading platforms available, we must help students stay focused on the main goal: reading. As we consider different ways in which we might engage students in reading, there are certainly a number of apps and websites that we can use to help guide them. See Figure 4 for a short list of many potential tools.

2. Model (with technology) the types of close, critical, and creative responses that you expect of your students

   As we consider the varying definitions of "close reading" and related terms, we want to think carefully about exactly what it is that we are asking students to do during the reading process. One of the advantages of connected reading is that we can demonstrate a variety of strategies on screen. For instance, as you consider how you might model the process of reading a webpage, choosing which hyperlinks to click on, examining pictures and other visual components of the text, and ultimately summarizing and reflecting upon what you have read, you might consider creating a screencast or take screenshots of your own reading, or ask students to do this with their own reading, using tools including but not limited to Jing (https://www.techsmith.com/jing.html),

Mobile Apps for Reading New(s) Content	Mobile Apps for Curating Content	Web-Based Tools for Annotation	Web-Based Tools for Managing Distractions
Flipboard - an app which aggregates content and presents it in a visual, magazine-like format. *https://flipboard.com/* **Feedly** - an app and web-based tool which aggregates content and presents it in a linear timeline. *https://feedly.com/*	**Pocket** - an app and plug-in for creating and managing reading lists. *https://getpocket.com/* **Readability** - an app and web-based tool that allows for collecting texts for reading in a less-cluttered view/ presentation. *https://www.readability.com/*	**Now Comment** - a digital reading platform with layers of controls allowing for commenting, viewing of comments, sorting, etc. *https://nowcomment.com/* **Ponde**r - a digital reading platform that features both affective responses as well as thoughtful sentence stems. *http://ponder.co/*	**AdBlock** - a browser extension that allows for blocking and filtering of advertisements across devices. *https://getadblock.com/* **Clearly** - a browser extension that allows for simplifying page view, eliminating ads and presenting multipage docs in a single page. *https://evernote.com/clearly/*

Figure 4. A short guide to potential tools for the reading classroom.

Screenr (https://www.screenr.com/), Screencast-o-matic (http://www.screencast-o-matic.com/), or Skitch (https://evernote.com/skitch/). Such work is an extension of what we do when modeling our reading as a think-aloud in class while also creating an artifact that students can return to as a reference point throughout their learning.

3. Welcome family and friends into reading through sharing

   When we think about how we might connect our students with one another, we also want to think about the ways that they can discuss their reading with other important people in their lives. As evidenced in Sara's classroom, students are encouraged to think deeply about texts and to question them carefully, especially when they are in conversation with their classmates. These conversations occur both online and off, overlapping and happening recursively.

4. We have found two social networks for readers to be particularly useful: Goodreads (https://www.goodreads.com/) for secondary students, and Bookopolis (https://www.bookopolis.com/) for younger readers. Start first by creating your own digital identity as a reader, populating the "shelves" that either space offers with books you have read/recommend, books you hope to read, and books you are currently reading. Building your reading identity in this space allows you to examine the affordances of the tools firsthand and to create a model for what an intentional reader does in a social network for readers. Next, consider the ways that students can use the capacities of the tools/networks to grow their own reading identities: track books they are reading and want to read, offer reviews and recommendations to the community, connect with readers to recommend specific books, and/or analyze their progress to reflect on progress, set goals, etc.

Conclusion

Whether reading from the screen of a smartphone or the monitor of a school-distributed Chromebook, our students have access now to a tremendous range of texts, which require complex reading skills. We present these ideas about teaching connected reading practices only as a starting point, ever mindful of the realities that our toolset and the texts it invites and evokes is in flux. It is an exciting time to teach English, especially as it challenges us, as Sara's student reminds us, to be "reading right," bringing together student readers with print and digital, linear and nonlinear, devices and books.

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