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Resources for Teachers: Relevance--What Matters Today? What Matters Tomorrow?

Julie King
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We are at a critical time in which new information and new communication technologies are increasing exponentially. The literacy competencies students will need in the future are likely beyond even the scope of our imaginations. Today, students are faced with more varied, complicated, and diverse texts than ever before in a time when they seem to be reading less and less. As educators and adults, we are able to look forward and see the future benefit of what we require of students, even if students have a difficult time seeing the relevance today.

So, we do our best to make language arts instruction palatable and convince students that "it's good for them" to acquire the skills we teach. This stance is no longer good enough. If we take a critical look at the world, we quickly realize that most of the jobs our school-aged children will pursue once they enter the work force do not even exist yet. In many ways, we cannot even begin to imagine for what we are preparing our students.

It is through a forward-thinking lens that I view the idea of "relevance" for this column. The resources included here were selected based on the following questions: What do students consider "relevant"? What constitutes "relevant" in light of rapidly changing communication technologies. What competencies will students *really* need to function as "literate" individuals in the future?

What do students consider "relevant"?

Teachers who strive toward relevant, authentic, student-centered classrooms continually struggle with choosing topics and designing motivating and relevant instruction. Smith and Wilhelm indicate that, at least for young men, the question of what motivates students is perhaps more elusive than we'd like to imagine. Still, we do embrace some topics and approaches that we think will at the least provide for authentic, meaningful engagement in literacy. The resources below provide for "relevant" texts that are related to current events and communities, student publishing venues, as well as service learning opportunities.

Reading Don't Fix No Chevys: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men
Michael W. Smith and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm
Heinemann 2002

Michael Smith and Jeffrey Wilhelm delve into the heart of the issue of relevance as it applies to adolescent boys in *Reading Don't Fix No Chevies*. This in-depth study of a heterogeneous mix of numerous young men begins with questions about what boys *do* find relevant and engaging, and what those implications are for classroom instruction. The book is both theoretical and practical; engaging vignettes and portraits of the young men involved in the study help us to see our own students, and perhaps at times, ourselves. Wilhelm and Smith reflect on their learning with a teacherly lens, always circling back to "What this makes us think about" and ultimately pose these essential questions: "Why do we teach? " "What do we teach?" and "How do we teach?"

Teen Ink: A Magazine Written by Teens for Teens
Monthly print magazine, website, and book series.
http://teenink.com

Teen Ink contains many features including literary publications, interviews, reviews, college essays, community service, and artwork created by teens. There is something of interest to almost any young adult. Plus, it is an excellent source for student publication. *Teen Ink's* web site features online publication of the print magazine that is searchable by issue, genre, and topic. In addition, the site sponsors a bulletin board that enables teens to

communicate through threaded messages. Teens post original pieces and response, opinions, reviews, and have ongoing conversations about real issues in their lives. The bulletin board is monitored with the intent of keeping objectionable material off the forum, with a disclaimer that it might not be possible to monitor all of the content. The site administrators require parent permission via fax or mailed permission form for users under age 13. These features, while not guaranteed, do provide for well-maintained, appropriate content.

Contact Information:
Teen Ink – PO box 30, Newton, MA 02461 – 617.964.6800 – editor@teenink.com
A free sample issue is available through the web site. (http://teenink.com)

Poetry Zone
http://www.poetryzone.ndirect.co.uk/content.htm

"The Poetry Zone" is facilitated by author Roger Stevens. Students aged 4-18 can publish their poetry on this site. The site also offers a wide variety of resources including interviews with professional poets, lesson, and for student poetry. In addition, Stevens includes an excellent list of teaching links.

Detroit Newspapers in Education
http://nieonline.com

The Detroit News and *Detroit Free Press* sponsor Newspapers in Education, which offers grants for free or reduced price newspaper subscriptions, lesson plans and other resources to eligible. The DNIE web site includes weekly current events articles with suggested activities. In addition, lesson plans and themed units developed around current events include background information and specify grade level, skills, and objectives aligned with the Michigan Curriculum Framework. Using the DNIE resources, students can work with current information and issues that are relevant to their lives and communities.

Subscription pricing and eligibility for free newspapers and program materials vary depending on desired quantity and delivery schedule. Generally, partial and full subscription sponsorship plans are available for classrooms ordering sets of 10 or more papers for at least two weeks. Detailed information is available on the web site http://nieonline.com. The sponsorships are available on a first-come first serve basis.

Subscription and program Information:
For more information about programs contact Sharon Martin at 313.223.4460
Newspapers and Free Materials can be ordered online, by mail, by fax, or by phone.
http://nieonline.com

Mailing Address: DNIE, PO Box 310163, Detroit, MI 48231
Fax 313.223.4278
Phone 313.222.6411 or 1.800.678.0789

Scholastic
http://www.scholastic.com

The popular book publisher Scholastic offers many resources for parents, kids, and teachers though an interactive web site. This multi-layered site includes teaching and parent resources, online classroom activities and quality lesson plans, along with interactive activities for kids to pursue independently.

Kidsfun online features popular books such as *Dear America* and *Harry Potter* series. These sections include topical discussions where kids can answer thought-provoking questions related to the books, quizzes and games, word of the week, and a variety of contests.

Teachers will find numerous resources as well. Online activities and resources include research starters, student-published book reviews, author interviews and information, writing with writers workshops, online publishing, writing contests, and

lesson plans. Free registration enables teachers to utilize the class home page builder, receive teacher resource materials, and manage book clubs and book fairs. While Scholastic is a commercial site and does also feature products for sale, the depth of the materials and activities within the web site make this resource absolutely worth exploring.

In addition to all that the web site offers, Scholastic's incentives for book fairs and book orders are an excellent resource for developing classroom libraries and student collections. Scholastic has book and software order programs ranging from preschool through high school.

Do Some thing.org
http://dosomething.org

Do Some Thing sponsors student-led leadership and citizenship initiatives. The site offers detailed guides for starting service learning campaigns and programs. The publishers of the site emphasize the distinction between community service and service learning by noting that service learning is engagement with real world service-oriented work which is directly connected to required curriculum content. Service learning projects help students see the relevance of what they are learning in school.

Grants are available to support initiatives and the web site offers a wealth of information to help guide students and their mentors and coaches through student-selected projects. Community Coaches are adults who have met the organization's criteria and professional development training. Instructional materials are available to help coaches develop understanding of service learning, projects, and processes.

The program also offers youth a nationwide network that supports students in identifying what they want to do to make things better, then provides resources and support for making the community initiative a reality. Action guides on the site contain specific information, texts, and suggestions for almost any type of cause, along with nationwide awareness campaigns in which students can participate.

Corporation for National and Community Service
http://www.cns.gov
http://www.learnandserve.org

The Corporation for National and Community Service sponsors community service projects for seniors, adults, and school-aged participants. Specifically, the Learn and Serve in America program provides grants to schools, colleges and community organizations to design and implement programs that link classroom studies to community service projects. The site includes resources for organizing a program or campaign along with several awards and student scholarships.

For more information contact (202) 606-5000 or
http://www.nationalservice.org
Corporation for National and Community Service, 1201 New York Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C. 20525

What literacy competencies will students need in the future?

Illuminating Texts: How to Teach Students to Read the World. Jim Burke, Heinemann, 2001.

Illuminating Texts broadly addresses the reality of the complexity today's literacy demands. Burke inspires us to think deeply about the complex and rapidly changing textual media our students will encounter in the future. With a wide lens, Burke looks at the critical thinking skills students will need in order to "read their worlds" full of what can be an overwhelming variety of texts. While Burke brings to light information and strategies useful for dealing with web and other technologies, he does this within the context of a more full literacy spectrum. This is not a book about teaching students to read the Internet; this is a thought-provoking look at how to teach students to approach any text, from literature to visual images. Burke provides practical strategies

that help teach students specifics of a broad genre, as well as strategies that will be useful when encountering any type of text. *Illuminating Texts* is full of practical classroom strategies and applications, along with numerous web-based and other resources, including references to an accompanying web site, www.englishcompanion.com/illuminating>, that continues the dialogue and expands upon the resources available in the book.

What *will* students need in the future?

While the scripts of the future may be beyond imagination, we do know that web-based technologies now permeate even basic, daily communication. Unfortunately, schools are often behind the technology train for various reasons ranging from budgetary constraints to lack of time and teacher training. Demands on the education system are high, especially in light of increasing standards across subject areas. Still, as educators, we do have a responsibility to look toward the future and work toward integrating the skills unique to new texts and technologies into our curriculum. The following resources provide teacher and student tools, as well as teacher support for creating adaptable classrooms that meet students' needs, today and tomorrow.

EnglishCompanion.com
http://englishcompanion.com

Jim Burke, author of *An English Teacher's Companion, Illuminating Texts, and Reading Reminders*, among other popular publications, maintains this complex and useful web site that is intended to support student and teacher growth in a wide variety of literacy competencies. Burke creates his publications, including this web site, with this thought in mind: What information might be helpful to me as an English teacher and/or student? Features of the site include a wide variety of strategic lesson plans along with classroom vignettes, student materials in downloadable pdf. files. In addition, Burke provides links to numerous professional resources that explore best practices in teaching English Language Arts.

For his students, Burke has created an online course, "Access" which is designed to help students gain relevant literacy competencies through online work. In addition, englishcompansion.com provides several links to web sites for homework help, research help, word of the day, poem of the day, and other useful learning tools.

The web site is geared toward teaching high school language arts; however, the materials and strategies would be useful and adaptable to earlier grade levels as well.

Noodletools
www.noodletools.com

Noodletools is an online research center that includes both free tools and subscription tools that are relevant, accessible, and useful for students in the middle and secondary grades. One of the most helpful features is "noodlebib", an online bibliography generator. This feature formats reference information in both MLA (5th edition) and APA (5th edition) format, guiding the student through the required pieces of information for any particular type of text, and finally generates a formatted references page that can be printed in a word processed, polished document, including annotations if desired. Noodlebib walks students through the process of creating a bibliography, deepening understanding of this process. In the meantime, it offers appropriate scaffolding for students who struggle.

Other features of this site include noodleboard, a message board where experts answer research questions ranging from how to reference a specific and unique type of text to identifying the best search engine for a particular topic. Noodlequest helps

students identify the best searching strategies for a given topic.

Contact Information:
FAX: 650.618.1991
MAIL: NoodleTools, Inc. P.O. Box 60214, Palo Alto, CA 94036-0214

KidsClick Worlds of Web Searching
http://www.rcls.org.wows/

Ramapo Catskill Library System
http://www.worldsofsearching.org

Worlds of Web Searching is a tutorial that guides students through 9 "Worlds", each about a topic related to searching on the web. The site offers detailed, student-friendly explanations of different types of Internet search skills such as using alphabetic lists, keywords, and multimedia in searches. The site is designed to be student-driven; students can work through the readings and activities at their own pace. Each section includes clearly written, student-friendly explanations, live links for practice, and activities students can complete and print on a hard copy if desired. After exploring and working through the activities on this site, students are better prepared to conduct effective searches independently.
Grade level - approximately 4-8; reading comprehension of site materials may be difficult for younger students, but the site's artwork and features begin to look "elementary" for middle school and older students.

MiddleWeb Writing/Reading Workshop Project
MiddleWeb: http://www.middleweb.com/ReadWrkshp/Rwindex.html

Juli Kendall, a veteran teacher in Long Beach, CA, opens her reading and writing workshop classroom to provide a model of relevant, integrated instruction in a workshop model. The web site includes Juli's weekly journal reflections on her workshop classroom, a discussion list serve for educators interested in reading and writing workshop, and details of professional development activities which guided Juli and her colleagues in their practice. The site offers curriculum mapping and planning information, professional resources, and a week-by-week view into a workshop classroom. Teachers who are just beginning to utilize workshop models will appreciate this detailed window to instructional planning.

The pedagogy of Juli's workshop classroom is based on current research in the teaching of reading and writing including professional development workshops affiliated with The Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, as well as study groups around current professional texts.

Cyber Guides (Literature Guides) from S.C.O.R.E. (Schools of California Online Resources for Educators)
http://www.sdcoe.k12.ca.us/score/cyberguide.html

S.C.O.R.E.'s language arts *Cyber Guides* are vastly useful and engaging supplementary web-based units centered around popular children's literature titles for grades K-12. Each "guide" contains an online student and teacher edition, articulated standards (aligned with California language arts content strands), clear instructions, live web links, and assessment rubrics for student activities.
Each *Cyber Guide* unit includes response to literature, comprehension, research, and critical thinking activities. Each activity includes web-based research, with live links to help teachers and students better navigate the lessons. Printable student materials and assessment tools are practical tools that make working with the web manageable. The units are supplementary; they do not constitute all that a classroom teacher would utilize in a unit of study around a text, yet they do offer deeply enriching activities which require students to engage in higher level tasks while increasing their web technology skills.