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Extending the Reading Experience with Web 2.0 Book Groups

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One student seems bored and unmotivated during class and spends after-school time sitting passively in front of the computer watching online videos. Another is friendly and sociable but struggles with reading comprehension and devotes every spare minute to keeping up with friends on Facebook. These images, though stereotypical, encapsulate the fears many parents and teachers have when they see how much time teenagers are spending online. Indeed, reports such as “Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy” paint an alarming picture of declining literacy rates and writing ability among adolescents (Biancarosa and Snow 7-8). At the same time, teens are enthusiastic users of blogs, photo and video sharing applications, and social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace (Lenhart et al. 7).

Is online activity displacing reading in students’ lives? Or is the use of these Web 2.0 applications, which allow students to create content as well as consume it, a literacy practice in its own right? Could students’ intrinsic interest in online communication be harnessed to support traditional literacy practices? One recent study showed that adolescents use the Internet to look for books by a favorite author, look at the author’s Web page, join fan pages or chat rooms related to a book they are reading, and engage in other similar activities that extend their reading experience (Scholastic 33). Teens like to connect with other readers and find out what other people their age think of the books they are reading. A Web site that tapped into this interest could be used by teachers to support and extend the work they do in the classroom.

There are several Web sites centered on books that have the potential to capitalize on

students’ intrinsic interest in online social interaction in order to get them reading and talking to each other about what they read. These sites include *Shelfari* (<http://www.shelfari.com>), *LibraryThing* (<http://www.librarything.com>), and *Goodreads* (<http://www.goodreads.com>). These sites are similar in their basic design to the social networking sites that adolescents are already using in their leisure time, but are focused on books and reading. I wondered if teachers were using these sites with their students, and if so, whether the students were learning more or reading more as a result.

After not finding any published research on the use of these online book groups for middle school and high school students, I decided to begin with a survey of the teachers who appeared to be pioneers in this area. I focused on teachers using *Goodreads* because this site is the most similar in its structure to popular social networking sites such as Facebook. This structure provides support for social interaction, which is important for learning and for tapping into the interests of middle and high school students. What follows is a description of the features of the *Goodreads* site, a brief summary of my survey and its findings, a discussion of how the teachers’ comments link to what is known about book discussion groups and independent reading, and finally some tips for starting a *Goodreads* group with your own students.

The *Goodreads* Site

Goodreads is a place where people from all over the world can “meet” asynchronously online to talk about books. It combines two popular Web 2.0 technologies—the Weblog (“blog”) and the social networking site—to provide a space for conversation focused on reading. Members can set up their profiles, blog about their favorite books, and discuss books with other readers through blog comments and organized discussion groups. Similar to other social networking sites, *Goodreads* allows members to establish “friend” relationships with other members. When users log on to *Goodreads*, they see their friends’ most recent book selections and reviews displayed on their home pages.

A large and growing group of secondary school teachers is using *Goodreads* to supplement traditional language arts classes. On the site in the spring of 2008 there were about 200 groups classified as “school groups,” and presently there are over 1,200. Curious about what the teachers and their students were actually doing with *Goodreads*, I conducted an online survey of middle school and high school teachers who were listed as moderators of school groups. I hoped to learn about how and why teachers were using *Goodreads* and how satisfied they were with their efforts to incorporate this new technology into their teaching.

The Teacher Survey

Using the personal message feature on *Goodreads*, I contacted all of the seventy teachers who had accessible profiles on the site and invited them to participate in my online survey. I received twenty-three responses. The survey included nineteen closed-ended questions asking teachers to report how long they had used *Goodreads*, what age group they taught, how they were using *Goodreads* (e.g., for large group, small group, or independent reading), what educational goals had prompted their use of the site (e.g., “getting quieter students to participate,” “getting students to write more,” etc.), and how useful and enjoyable they found the site to be. There was also one open-ended question inviting the teachers to share any thoughts about their experiences with *Goodreads* not already addressed in the survey.

The responses I received indicated that the majority of these teachers (thirteen out of twenty-three) had more than five years of teaching experience, nine had between one and five years of experience, and one was a new teacher with less than one year of experience. Fifteen of the twenty-three respondents used *Goodreads* for an English class, while the remaining eight described their groups as after-school clubs, advisory groups, or groups associated with the school library. Eight of the groups were created for middle school or junior high school students and thirteen were for high school students. The teachers working with the two library groups did not report the age range of their students. Thirteen respondents reported using *Goodreads* for less than six months, and ten reported using their group for up to one academic year. None of the respondents had used their group longer than one academic year.

The detailed questions regarding how teachers were using *Goodreads* with their classes showed variability rather than convergence. When teachers were asked to rank a list of educational goals in order of importance or to rate how well their *Goodreads* group met each of these goals, for example, there were no statistically significant differences between the possible responses. The one significant finding is that the majority of these teachers were using *Goodreads* to promote independent reading. Twenty out of the twenty-three respondents listed “students reading independently and writing about their books” as their primary use of *Goodreads*, while only three were using it for a formal large or small group discussion of a common book.

Overall the teachers reported satisfaction with their *Goodreads* experience. Seventeen of the twenty-

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three respondents said they either “liked” or “loved” using *Goodreads* with their students, and twenty-one thought that it was “somewhat valuable” or “valuable” for helping their students learn, though only one teacher rated it as “highly valuable.” The responses to the open-ended question proved to be the most interesting source of data. These brief comments revealed a picture of twenty-three adventurous teachers experimenting with a new technology, thoughtfully monitoring the small successes and challenges along the way, and planning improvements to the process for the following year. The teachers’ reports about their experiences with this new Web 2.0 technology can be linked to what is already known about book discussion groups and the importance of independent reading.

Taking Book Discussion Groups Online

Book discussion groups, of course, are not new inventions of the Web 2.0 era. Face-to-face book discussions have been part of literacy and literature classrooms for many years. Engaging in conversation about books provides an opportunity for students to guide and scaffold each other to a deeper understanding of what they read. Two of the most widely known programs for

in-class book discussions are McMahon and Raphael's *Book Club* and the *literature circles* popularized by Harvey Daniels. Deborah Appleman also explored the advantages of out-of-class book clubs to help nurture a lifelong love of reading (6). These programs (as well as other less formalized book discussion activities) provide an opportunity for young readers to practice and then internalize the "literate thinking" modeled by their teachers and peers (McMahon and Raphael 10).

Goodreads has the potential to extend the benefits of book discussions beyond the regular school day by supporting online conversation about books. Although only three of the teachers who responded to my survey had used *Goodreads* for large or small group discussion of a common book, these teachers expressed satisfaction with their experiences. One teacher commented that it was a way to "encourage additional discussion and questions that we did not get to in class and to provide more avenues for discussion." One teacher who surveyed her students about the experience reported that "overall, my students thought that their book discussion on *Goodreads* improved their reading comprehension." Another teacher noted, "Students who normally don't speak up in class feel more comfortable in an online discussion and contribute greatly to those discussions." These teachers found their online conversation to be a valuable extension of their in-class discussion of a common book.

***Goodreads* for Independent Reading**

Reading for pleasure helps children develop literacy skills that carry over into their other school work (Krashen, qtd. in Strommen and Mates 189). Perhaps this is the reason that the majority of teachers who responded to my survey said they used *Goodreads* primarily to encourage and support independent reading, and that they made this choice because independent reading was a high priority, rather than because of any skepticism about the value of online group discussion.

Goodreads can help encourage and support independent reading in adolescents by helping them find books that interest them. The Scholastic survey showed that friends and the Internet were important resources in helping adolescents find books they liked (20). Seeing friends' book lists and book reviews on a site like *Goodreads* gives teens a readily available online source of

book suggestions. My survey did not include a question specifically addressing the use of *Goodreads* for student-to-student book recommendations, but two of the teachers used the open-ended question to explain that this was an important feature of their students' online activity.

A site like *Goodreads* may also help adolescents integrate reading into their developing identities. Kids sometimes view "reading" as an academic exercise different from their pleasure reading and Internet use, and therefore fail to see themselves as "readers" (Pitcher et al. 391). The social network feature of *Goodreads* creates a community for adolescents to connect with each other by talking about the books they've read and suggesting books for their friends to read. This feature supports the social aspect of literacy development even when independent reading is the primary goal, which might help students broaden their concept of literacy and begin to see themselves as literate people. Teachers who responded to my survey were well aware of this potential. When asked to explain the main educational goal for using *Goodreads*, one teacher said, "to form a community around literacy, which allows students to better understand themselves and others through reading."

Using *Goodreads* with Your Students

While there are always challenges to integrating a new technology into your teaching, a site like *Goodreads* has many potential benefits for learning and literacy development. In addition to the affordances already mentioned, it provides an opportunity for students to write for an authentic audience. Instead of writing a book report that will only be read by a teacher, they will be sharing their thoughts with their peers and perhaps (depending on their privacy settings) with the larger *Goodreads* community. In addition, their comments and conversations will be archived as a resource to use when completing more formal writing assignments. These features have the potential to make *Goodreads* a rich supplement to classroom literacy activities.

Getting Started

The insights provided by the teachers who responded to this survey, together with the features of *Goodreads* itself, provide some suggestion for how to get started if you want to use a *Goodreads* group with your students. First, you may want to start by signing up for a free account and exploring the site

yourself. As you post your thoughts on your own reading, read the comments of others, and interact with other teachers in one of the educator book groups, you will gain a “feel” for how the site works, which may help you identify ways that this kind of environment might help your students.

Exploring the site on your own can also give you the opportunity to learn about the privacy features that *Goodreads* offers. Although *Goodreads* has a friendly culture centered on reading, sensible precautions are important when using any social networking site. There are security and privacy features built into the site to help you provide a safe online environment for your students. For example, your profile and any groups you create can either be viewable by all *Goodreads* members or restricted and visible only to “friends.” Almost all of the student groups on *Goodreads* are set up as private so that only members of that group can see the comments the students post. You can decide on the level of privacy that is right for you and your class, and then help your students set up their accounts with the appropriate level of privacy.

Although you may need to make some decisions ahead of time (e.g., whether you will use it for group discussion or to support independent reading, whether to make posting to Goodreads required or voluntary, etc.), the teachers’ comments in this survey suggest that flexibility and openness to serendipity can also help ensure a good experience for you and your students. Many of the teachers said their first year was a “trial run.” They had learned lessons along the way and were thinking about ways to improve the process the following year. Nevertheless, they were generally satisfied with their use of Goodreads. They liked using it with their students, and thought their students were happy with it as well.

Finally, if you do use *Goodreads* with your students, you may want to publish an account of your experiences to share what you learned with other teachers. When I asked the teachers what, if anything, would encourage them to try using *Goodreads* for group discussion, most listed “hearing about the experiences of other teachers who’ve used it successfully” as their top motivator.

Thoughtful integration of social media into classroom learning and literacy development is one way to connect in-school learning with students’ highly connected online lives. A site such as *Goodreads* that is focused specifically on reading has more obvious educational

potential than other more general-purpose Web 2.0 applications, and may therefore be a good entry point for teachers wanting to introduce this type of 21st century technology into their classrooms.

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About the Author

Penny Thompson (thomp850@msu.edu) is a PhD student at Michigan State University’s College of Education, Department of Educational Psychology and Educational Technology. She is interested in how people learn from each other in specialized social networking sites (such as *Goodreads*) and how these online venues might be used to enhance learning both in school and in the workplace.