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Jianna Taylor

Selling Literacy: A Young Teacher's Tale of Getting (and Keeping) Her Students Excited about Text

Aw, man. We really have to read another class novel? We're probably going to have to do some boring book report about it, too."

As a young teacher who has always loved reading, I was surprised to hear this type of complaint from my middle school students when introducing a novel unit. I immediately knew that my students needed some other way to connect to the texts we were reading and writing in class. Knowing how much my students enjoyed socializing and using computers, I decided that I would try to incorporate as much technology into my classes as I could, even if it meant going outside of my comfort zone. Although I consider myself pretty tech savvy and took an educational technology class in college, I hadn't really had a chance to incorporate these skills into classroom teaching, and I didn't know anyone else who had the same vision as me about how technology could be used to improve students' literacy skills. This isn't always easy, and some days the technology malfunctions in my school make me want to throw in the towel on using technology altogether, but when I see the products my students produce and that they are actually excited to read, I know all of the headaches are worth it.

The older, more traditional ways of helping students develop their literacy skills, like book reports, prompted essays, and tests, may not meet the needs of today's students and the skills they will need to succeed in the future. Students instead need to read and write using texts that are not only found in traditional print form, but also in nonlinear texts, like those found online. As we become a more technologically-inclined and globally-connected society, our way of thinking and producing text is changing, and as teachers, we need to help our students develop skills they can adapt to any situation.

What the Experts are Doing

While doing worksheets and traditional book reports still permeates many classrooms, there are many teachers out there doing things differently. Rozema (2007) writes of ditching the traditional book report for podcasts about books instead, which have yielded great results and much excitement from his students. A podcast is kind of like an audio version of a blog. Rozema's students write scripts about books they have read, think about audience, create mood through music, and work on performance speaking—all are skills that most state standards require and that his students learn through a project to which they can relate and that is real to them, for these podcasts were uploaded to Rozema's blogs and some of them even to iTunes.

Miller (2009) also has moved away from the traditional book report onto informal "book commercials" that her students voluntarily share with the class when they are done with a book. Not only does this allow Miller to learn about what students are reading and how well they understand a book, book commercials get other students excited about books their classmates

are reading. Reading is no longer an isolated activity when students can talk about it with other students. Many middle school students are turned off by reading because it is done independently, but that isn't how reading is in real life: we talk to friends, family, and colleagues about what to read next, we read book reviews online, or we listen to them on the radio. If we read a good book, we want to talk about it, not write a book report or do a worksheet. Miller (2009) also has her students analyze features of book reviews, then write their own book reviews, which they post on their class blogs, giving them the chance to have more people than just their classmates hear their thoughts. Helping students learn to collaborate around texts, both while creating them and reading the final product, is a skill that will translate well not only later in their academic career but also in the workplace since collaboration is an almost daily occurrence in many careers.

While Miller (2009) uses book commercials to get students interested in books to read, others take a different approach. Dopke-Wilson (2009) writes about modeling book trailers after the movie trailers you see at the theater before a movie begins. These book trailers can be created by teachers, media specialists, and students. The media specialists to whom Dopke-Wilson spoke noted that students became more engaged with the books they were reading and were more likely to finish them so that they could create a quality book trailer. They also suggest using these book trailers with future students to get them excited about particular books and help increase circulation.

While traditional print texts are still important and necessary, we are moving away from linear types of text to more nontraditional, non-linear texts that incorporate a variety of media. Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, and Morris (2008) call this "out of school" literacies, defined as the literacy practices students participate in outside of school, like playing video games, watching and reading content online, composing various texts online, reading graphic novels and comics, etc. There are many different ways to incorporate students' interests and nontraditional literacies into the classroom, but first we as teachers need to step out of our comfort zone and try these nontraditional texts. We are not always going to be successful: the network can go down, computers crash, or we won't know the answer to a student's question about how to navigate a piece of software. I've found, though, that despite these setbacks, students will keep coming back to these types of projects because they have so much meaning and interest.

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My Journey

The following chronicles my successes and difficulties with promoting literacy with my middle school students as I tried different methods.

As a master's degree student in a school of education, many of our classes are focused on strategies and theory, but I had the opportunity to take a class on media for children and young adults in another department, allowing me to get a different perspective on reading and to put into my classroom practice some of the theory I had learned previously. Since becoming a middle school teacher, I have enjoyed reading young adult literature, but found my time for it limited. This semester, I was required to read and review 50 pieces of media for children and young adults, exposing me to a ton of texts that I hadn't been aware of before. I also participated in my local ISD's training about implementing reader's workshop with the recently adopted Common Core standards. These experiences culminated in my efforts to be a bigger advocate of reading in my classroom and trying harder to get interesting books into kids' hands, while also trying to create authentic assessment opportunities that were engaging and required skills that students would find useful in the future.

Book Commercials

As a result of these new experiences, I have been booktalking more, but more than that, I've been more intentional about it. In the past, I would recommend books to students, and they wouldn't have been very likely to check them out. This year, instead of just quickly saying that a particular book was good, I've dedicated actual time every so often to recommending different types of books to kids, trying to use some of Miller's (2009) "book commercial" techniques to hook my students into the book I'm showing them. Because I have been more successful with my booktalking, many of my students are actually interested in reading the books I've recommended, leading to the problem of who gets what book when. I decided to create a running checkout lottery for each new book I recommend, and students who haven't been picked keep asking when the books will be back in the hopes that they will be next in line to check them out.

While I am pleased with how my booktalks are helping my students to be more excited about their reading, I also know that the recommendations they get from each other can be more powerful. This year, I decided to change up how I introduced our first book club novel unit of the year. Traditionally, I booktalk the four book club choices, then send students off to "novel shop" for the one they'd like to read. Despite my best efforts, my biases about the books come out as I try to "sell" them to the class.

So, I decided to turn the booktalking over to the students. First we brainstormed what people do to choose a book. The students came up with this list:

- See what genre it is
- Read the back/inside cover
- See if you know the author
- Look at cover art
- Figure out reading level using five finger test
- Ask a friend
- Look at awards and reviews

I then divided students into groups of four or five and instructed them to use all that we had just talked about to create a commercial for the book I had given the group. The students' goal was to convey as best they could the basic plot of the book and convince their classmates to choose this particular novel to read. The best book commercials would be lively and creative in their description of the novel. As they worked, I circulated the room, giving students some hints about the books to make sure they were on the right track. The students then performed their commercials for the class, doing their best to make the other students in the class want to read the book.

Introducing the books this way had mixed results, though I won't know for sure until students are further into their books, if this helped them choose the best one for them. On the positive side, students heard how their classmates would interpret the information about a book to decide whether or not to read it, and they heard the opinions of someone their own age who will be making the same decisions as them about what book to choose. On the negative side, students had no prior knowledge of the books, so they could only go on what was printed on the back and what they could glean from a quick skim of the pages. Because of this, I had to add some pertinent information about the books at the end of each group's performance to make sure students had adequate information about the books. After the performances, students took copies of each of the four books, looked them over, and chose the one they thought they would enjoy the most. In the past, I have had quite a few students ask to change books a few days after choosing the initial one, but this year that has been minimal.

Due to the limitations of creating book commercials for books the students hadn't yet read, I also wanted to give students a forum for discussing books they had read, so I created accounts for all of my students using my Weebly for Education license. These accounts allowed each student to have a customizable website on which they could blog, add media, and comment on other students' work. Prior to going to the computer lab, we reviewed how people choose books, focusing on book reviews. We then analyzed a published review for the book *Nomansland* from Library Media Collection and noticed features in the review that we would like to replicate. We decided that each review should have an interesting hook, description/summary of the book, and a recommendation or discussion of its usefulness. Next, students chose a book they had read this year and wrote a review for it. Later that week, we had the opportunity to go to the computer lab to create our websites, and despite the technology problems and malfunctions, students were excited to share their sites with classmates and read others' reviews. In reflection, what may be most interesting is that many students who typically choose not to do most traditional school work at home worked on creating these sites, typing their book reviews, and commenting on other students' reviews.

To gauge whether students were actually more excited about new books because of these sites or were just excited to be making their own websites, I created a short survey using the online survey-maker, SurveyMonkey. This site lets users create questions, send the survey to people or embed it in a website, and will then analyze the results. I embedded the link to my survey on my class website and asked students to take it after having read some classmates' reviews. Of the students who responded,

an overwhelming majority hoped their classmates would read their reviews and make decisions about books based on them, reiterating the fact that students, despite how they might act, do want others to read their writing, especially if they've written something for an authentic audience. Most students also noted that they were interested in reading one of the books they read about, showing the power of a peer-to-peer recommendation. Had students simply written a book report about a book they had read this year, they might not have experienced the peer collaboration, written for an audience other than the teacher, and gained website creation skills with blogging their book reviews.

Podcasting/Digital Recording

In addition to allowing students a voice in reviewing the books they read, I wanted to give them a way to be a part of the books they read. One of the first genres we teach in seventh grade is memoir. Paul Fleischman's 2004 *Seedfolks*, while not a memoir because it's fiction, is written like a memoir, with each of the chapters narrated by a different person. As a class, we looked at how each chapter can be seen as a mini-memoir about the character's experience with the community garden.

Because of the eclectic cast of characters, many of whom were not born in the United States, *Seedfolks* lends itself to be listened to as an audiobook while reading along. Each chapter begins with a short musical introduction that relates in some way to the character's heritage, and each character is spoken in a different voice, often with a different accent. In addition to being very listener-friendly, the short novel ends in such a way that leaves room for additional characters or story lines.

After we were finished with *Seedfolks*, students were tasked with writing their own *Seedfolks* chapter about themselves, a minor character who didn't have his/her own chapter, or a character they made up. We began by brainstorming what went into a good *Seedfolks* chapter, both the written and audiobook versions. One of the most interesting aspects of *Seedfolks* is how the characters relate to one another and make cameos in other chapters. So, once students chose their character and the plant that character would grow in the books' community garden, we listed this information on the board so that students could see what others were doing and incorporate these characters into their particular stories.

After writing their *Seedfolks* chapters, students had the opportunity to turn their written chapters into audiobook chapters. Using digital voice recorders borrowed from the computer teacher in my building, each student recorded his or her chapter. Some students chose to speak in a particular accent; others did not, depending on how they wanted their chapters to sound. Since I only had access to two voice recorders and have about 30 students per class, the recording aspect moved slowly, especially because I had to upload each student's audio file to my home computer to put it in the correct format to be edited later. Students who were not recording spent their time searching for the perfect music for the introduction to their chapter on the website SoundzAbound, a royalty free music library created especially for schools and to which my district has a paid subscription. Once students recorded their chapter and found the music for their introduction, they imported both of these

files into the audio editing software, Audacity (it's downloadable and free!). Audacity allows users to mix together audio files, add effects, and create many different types of projects.

This is the second year that I have had students create their own *Seedfolks* audiobook chapters, and it is turning into one of my favorite things to do all year. Students who struggle in other ways amaze me with their ability to imitate and expand upon Fleischman's novel, and

all students get a chance to feel like they are creating something real that is comparable in quality to a published piece. Other teachers in my building have students write their own *Seedfolks* chapter, and while they generally

enjoy that assignment, creating their own audiobook chapter adds elements that writing alone cannot replicate. To create a good audiobook chapter, students need to think about what music is appropriate to the mood and personality of their character, how to speak in a way that is natural and clear, and how to mix together the music and words, among other things.

Movie Trailers

In our district's middle school ELA curriculum, we do not have the flexibility of allowing students free choice for all of their reading; we have some novels that we teach whole class and in book clubs. These books do not always lend themselves to being what students want to read most, but I'm hopeful that through our book commercials and other activities, students will see the value in these books and learn to enjoy them. For one of the units, students have the choice of reading one of four books that fit under our theme for the quarter, "Letting Others In." Not only do we read these novels during this quarter, but we also read and discuss drama as a genre. We read a few plays and discuss things like text features and how drama is different from prose. Once students are finished with their book club novels and are sufficiently knowledgeable about drama, I introduce their unit ending project: to create a movie trailer about their book club novel. In making these movie trailers, the students must find a way to portray the book's plot, conflict, and theme to an audience that may or may not have read it, write a script using the elements of drama we discussed, and incorporate significant vocabulary words from the book.

To begin, we dissect real movie trailers to see what elements they have that make them interesting to viewers. Then students begin brainstorming with their book clubs what elements of their book they might include to create interest in the book. In the past, I have felt that students produced quality movie trailers, but I knew that the script-writing aspect of it was lacking. After reading Dopke-Wilson (2009) and taking her suggestion to check out the website, Digital Booktalk, I now have a clearer understanding of the process I need to help my students through to make even higher quality products. This website includes examples of book trailers, how-tos, and lesson plans for teachers. This year, prior to letting my students film their scenes, my plan is to analyze the plays and teleplays we read in

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class more carefully and have students model their scripts after those so that they engage in a meaningful writing experience as well. Last year, students were eager to get their hands on a camera, yet when I gave them one, they had no filming plan. This year, in addition to being more thorough with the script-writing, I will help students through the storyboard process, which should help the filming go more smoothly, also hopefully lessening my anxiety about having students all over the school filming without my supervision.

Once students write their scripts and the storyboarding is done, students take the time to film their scenes. Then, depending on the software available to them, students upload their video files to Windows MovieMaker or iMovie. Both pieces

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of software are easy to navigate and come loaded on their respective operating systems. Once uploaded, students have to edit the video and add music, narration, captions, and credits. This forces them to think about the mood created by music and what the audience would need in terms of voiceover and text to get a general understanding of the novel. After all of the movie trailers are done, we have a film festival, where we watch the trailers in class, much to everyone's amusement. To create a successful movie trailer, students need to decide what is most important for comprehension for someone who has not read the book and how to portray these important elements in a short period of time using a limited number of actors and props. Students must also figure out how to write authentic sounding dialogue and what camera angles will best convey their message. What often ends up being most difficult for students, but also possibly most important, is figuring out how to keep all group members on track and productive. The group dynamics are quite interesting to watch play out. All of these skills would be lost if students were required to take a pencil and paper test instead of this project, which also meets many state standards.

As a young teacher, I am always looking for new ways to engage my students with text and get them excited about reading and writing. There are many ways that teachers are including technology into their teaching of reading and writing to help engage those nontraditional literacies that so many students possess like blogging, podcasting, and creating movie trailers for books. I've found that these can be great activities to take the place of the traditional book report or test, and I hope to find more ways to incorporate projects like these into my classes in the future.

For student examples of some of these projects, please visit <http://olmsmrstaylor.weebly.com>.

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Digital Book Talk <http://www.digitalbooktalk.com>
iMovie (Mac) www.apple.com
SoundzAbound www.soundzabound.com
SurveyMonkey <http://www.surveymonkey.com>
Weebly for Education <http://education.weebly.com>
Windows MovieMaker (PC) www.microsoft.com

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If you wish to mentor, please let Julie know. She will pair you up with a "Dreamer" mentee. Often mentors communicate with their mentees via electronic media, such that face-to-face meetings are not necessary. Many mentors have helped mentees use course work projects or dissertation research to create their professional work. Also, many mentors have brought mentees in on their own presentations. All who are interested should contact Julie.