


September 2023

Leveraging Student Voice and Technology within an 8th-Grade Literacy Community

Shavonne M. Jacobson

Rochester Community Schools, Rochester, sjacobson@rochester.k12.mi.us

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj>

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#), and the [Secondary Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jacobson, Shavonne M. (2023) "Leveraging Student Voice and Technology within an 8th-Grade Literacy Community," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 56: Iss. 1, Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol56/iss1/11>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Michigan Reading Journal by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Leveraging Student Voice and Technology within an 8th-Grade Literacy Community

by Shavonne Jacobson

The podcasters huddle around the microphone encased in a pop filter and surrounded by sound-absorbing foam. The clenched script holds the whispers of past rehearsals. The upbeat music cues the intro, and the students' inquiry, discussion, writing, and rehearsing culminate in a three-minute podcast showcasing their learning.

Student 1: Welcome back to the “Multiple Seconds of Sustainability” podcast. Actually, welcome because this is our first and only episode. My name is ____.

Student 2: ...and my name is _____. Today we are talking about polar bears and the polar ice caps.

Student 1: Yep, they are a-melting.

Student 2: Not the polar bears, though. I hope. (Instrumental music fades in and out.)

Student 1: No, but on a more serious note, the ice in the poles is melting, and polar bears are running out of food and homes.

Student 2: According to the scientists at the University of Alberta, “Global warming is harming polar bears as many polar bears are losing fat and body mass due to the lack of food on the melting ice.” (see Figure 1)

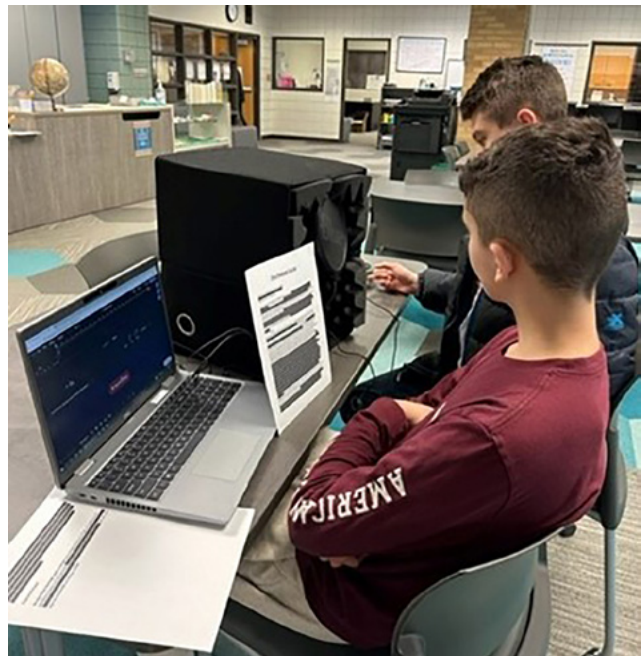
Over the next few minutes, these student podcasters share their knowledge gleaned from exposure to numerous podcast formats and styles, delineate information garnered from infographics and other reliable sources, and enact opportunities presented in the MAISA Informational Reading and Writing Unit of Study. In this unit, learners address the essential question: “How can we contribute to the sustainability of our planet?” While centering on student learning and intentionally focusing on the teaching of deep thinking, these 8th-grade literacy communities engage in a comprehensive reading and writing workshop experience to



Shavonne Jacobson

empower their voice and agency as they create a podcast to share with their peers and beyond.

Figure 1
Students Preparing to Record their Podcasts



Note. Students used a podcast station, Soundtrap software, and a highlighted script reflecting their inquiry, research, and roles.

Merging Policy and Pedagogy

In 2018, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) revised a position statement sharing their beliefs for integrating technology into the language arts classroom. One of the four belief statements explains, “Technologies provide new ways to consume and produce texts” (NCTE, 2018). Capturing the essence of this statement, this revised MAISA unit of study infuses technology and expands the production of text beyond the traditional research essay. It allows students to consume and produce text while offering, as NCTE proposes, “new opportunities to read, write, listen, view, record, compose, and interact with both the texts themselves and with other people” (2018). In addition, in the International Literacy Association’s (ILA) Literacy Leadership Brief, “Improving Digital Practices for Literacy, Learning, and Justice: More Than Just Tools,” the research panel calls on teachers to build classroom environments that “reflect the contexts of learning that are encountered outside of schools and in the real world [...] Powerful literacy instruction should prepare students today to produce, communicate, interpret, and socialize with peers, adults, and the broader world they will enter when they graduate” (2018). While merging policy and pedagogy, the primary outcome of this unit is to foster collaborative, student-led inquiry and apprentice researchers in real-world practices such as podcasts.

Echoing this message, Turner’s and Hicks’ (2022) recent article published in the fall issue of the *English Journal* calls for a renewal of commitment to digital literacy in the English language arts classroom. Today, educators and learners have increasing access to technology. The researchers propose that now is the time to embrace the research on new literacies and “select technologies that allow students to consume, create, and collaborate in authentic ways” (Turner & Hicks, 2022). Our 8th-grade literacy communities heeded this call and leveraged student voice and technology to explore and record podcasts as the vehicle to collaborate and create.

Collaboration Crossroads

As Rochester Community Schools’ middle school language arts curriculum consultant, I support colleagues’

instructional practices and students’ growth as literacy learners. I collaborate with state, county, and district literacy leaders to investigate curricular options and design professional learning opportunities. The revised MAISA Units of Study captured my interest early in the year. These integrated units of study are built on the reader and writer workshop model and enhanced by the EQuIP initiative (Achieve, n.d.) to identify high-quality materials aligned with the Common Core Standards. Two years prior, Oakland School Secondary Literacy Consultant Jenelle Williams led teachers across the state in learning about the key shifts in the revised units prior to piloting. This work laid the foundation for other teachers to implement the units in their classrooms. Intrigued by the integrated informational unit, I transferred the lesson outline into an interactive presentation format to support its ease of implementation, and two 8th-grade language arts teachers volunteered to pilot the units: Barb Cavins at Hart Middle School and Laura Castonia at Reuther Middle School. Collaboration among literacy leaders was crucial to designing and successfully implementing the integrated informational unit of study (see Figure 2).

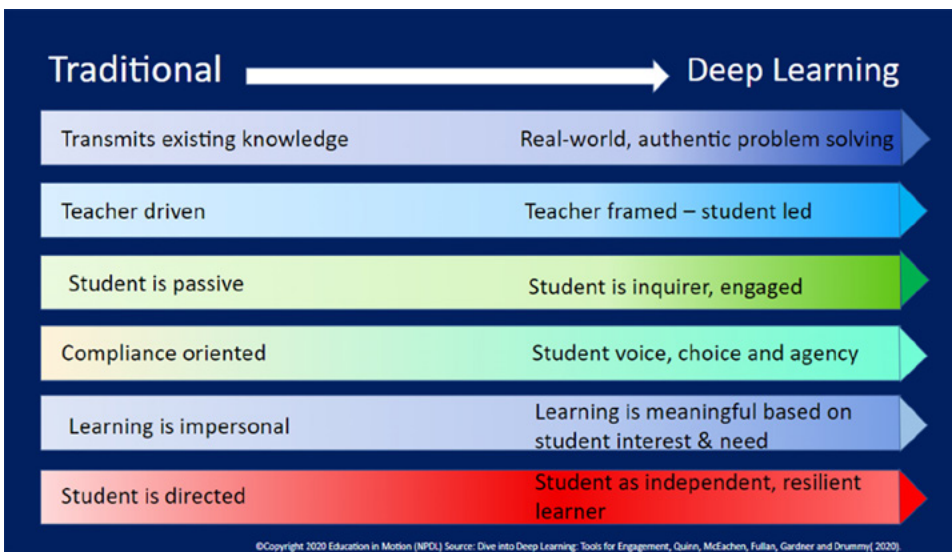
The use of specific instructional frameworks that prioritize the collaboration of instructors and students infused another dimension to this unit. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) of reading, writing, listening, and speaking underlie the learning outcomes and activities. Furthermore, our district’s focus on New Pedagogies of Deep Learning (NPDL) aligns with the unit’s emphasis on “character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking” (Quinn et al., 2019), allowing student voice, choice, and agency to drive deep learning (see Figure 3). Interweaving the standards and deep learning with the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators General Education Leadership Network Disciplinary Literacy Task Force [MAISA GELN DLTF] *Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy* increases student engagement and achievement. These instructional frameworks highlight authentic problems and allow students to explore solutions through “diverse texts and abundant reading [and writing] opportunities” (MAISA GELN DLTF, 2021).

Figure 2
Presentation to Practice



Note. Teachers utilized and adapted this [linked](#) presentation to support the units' ease of implementation. Each lesson aligns with the Michigan Middle School 8th grade Informational unit.

Figure 3
NPDL Traditional to Deep Learning Graphic



Note. When framing learning under the New Pedagogies Deep Learning framework, teachers structure their research unit so that student voice, choice, and agency position learners to address real-world issues.

One of the most exciting aspects of this unit was the leaders' and learners' collaboration on multiple levels. The teacher's role shifted from presenter to facilitator. Both classroom teachers noted the student creators' high engagement, motivation, and competency in navigating technology and multiliteracies. Through this multi-modal, integrated informational unit, collaboration promoted the students' creativity, generative thinking, and problem-solving skills. In Castonia's class, students connected their experiences with podcasts outside the classroom and initiated podcast listening days to share their favorite podcasters with peers. In Cavin's class, 96% of students rated collaboration as a strong to significant factor supporting their final project on a post-unit reflection. Together, students expanded their knowledge and produced, in this case, a better podcast than one they could have created alone.

While piloting the unit, teachers relied on the expertise of their colleagues to support the pedagogy and technology. The media specialists in each building, Kristi Trimboli at Hart Middle School and Jennifer Lin at Reuther Middle School, played an integral role in facilitating the recording of the podcasts. Trimboli wrote a Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) grant to purchase four portable podcasting stations. In addition, Rachel Mainero, Rochester's Instructional Technology Specialist, created a video to support students' use of Soundtrap by Spotify to capture and explore creative sound recordings. During an interview, Mainero recalled the podcasters' energy and enthusiasm while recording and their competence to solve problems as they arose. All participants collaborated to gain skills and expertise and to create a culminating podcast that showcased their research.

Expanding and Evolving a MAISA Unit of Study

Last August, Oakland Schools launched the revised integrated units of study. The units were informed by evidence-based practices emphasizing "multi-modal texts that reflect an authentic, real-world learning experience and future career aspirations" (J. Williams, personal communication, August 2022). Each grade-

level unit provides explicit instructional support to guide learning and motivate students to grow as critical consumers and thinkers.

Researcher Steve Graham (2020) of Arizona State University, a leading authority on integrated literacies, shares the theory and evidence supporting the reciprocal relationship between the reading and writing processes in his article "The Sciences of Reading and Writing Must Become More Fully Integrated," and this informational unit of study integrates the reading and writing standards based on Graham's scientific evidence. Williams shared additional foundational non-negotiables that informed the unit's development: "disciplinary literacy instructional practices, accounting for learner variability, and intentional supports for multilingual students and students with IEPs to allow for equitable access to rich language opportunities for all" (personal communication, August 2022).

Implementation and Insights

Each of the revised MAISA units are centered on problem-based instruction that "frame important problems in order to provide authentic purposes for students to read and write beyond being assigned [...] to address needs in their community or beyond" (MAISA GELN DLTF, 2021). The integrated informational unit focuses on essential questions related to the problem of sustainability, researching valid and credible sources, and leveraging podcasts to reach a broader audience. The unit's 18 lessons outline the steps to investigate an issue and create a script for a podcast. The explicit instruction includes "daily active engagement" with articles, podcast transcripts, podcasts, and infographics. Additionally, detailed lessons focus on "entering a conversation" through informational text, infographics, and podcasts; exploring questions with research; analyzing conflicting points of view; and reaching an audience using podcasts (Oakland Schools, 2021). Student resources are hyperlinked in each lesson to support implementation. Cavin's commented that before the unit's implementation she was concerned whether her students needed a traditional research unit to prepare for high school. However, she observed in her students' scripts and podcasts that they were able to effectively

integrate and incorporate the essential elements of research that she previously addressed in a five-paragraph research paper.

Students' choice and voice were central to the learning. Researchers selected a sustainability topic that matched their interests. The diverse issues sparked inquiry, including the sustainability of bees, oceans, energy, and fashion. Also, students chose their podcast partner(s)

and selected the format that matched their presentation style. Podcasts amplified the students' voice and ability to share their learning with an authentic audience. At the end of the unit, students responded to a reflection on their experience and shared their observations of their group's and individual growth. Of Cavin's surveyed students, 95% reported that the final research and podcast project met or exceeded their learning expectations (see Table 1).

Table 1
Cavin's Student Reflections on the Integrated Information Unit

Students' Responses to "Would you recommend this unit to future student researchers? Why or why not?"
1. Yes, it is a fun way to learn a new topic, and it helps you retain the information you learn more than just writing an essay would.
2. I would recommend this unit because it is a fun way to learn about creating podcasts and to be able to share your podcast. Also, it is fun listening to other people with the same topic to see how they view the topic.
3. Yes, it is a fun way to learn a new topic and helps you retain the information you learn more than just writing an essay.
4. Yes, it was a creative way of learning and more enjoyable than writing an essay or taking a test.
5. I would recommend this unit to future researchers. This unit didn't only show how to make a podcast, but it also showed things such as how to work in a group nicely, how to format some topics to sound formal or informal, and you got to learn new things that you may have never thought of researching.
6. Yes and no. Yes, because I got to research a new topic, and editing the podcast was fun. No, because there were some parts that were a little stressful, and working with a group was hard during some parts.
7. I would recommend this project because it differs from the traditional essay format and gives people a chance to research their topic and learn how to do a podcast. It was also fun to work in a group setting as opposed to working alone.
8. Yes, I would recommend this unit to future student research because it was a fun, hands-on way to learn how to be a better reader, writer, and researcher. It was very fun to collaborate with my group.
9. I would not because making an essay into a script is hard, and the mics didn't sound better than the Chromebook mics.
10. I think this is a fun and unique way to research that I'll remember more than a research paper.

Practitioner to Practitioner

In post-project interviews, practitioners shared their thoughts and recommendations to help users understand how the unit met all learners' needs and to generate feedback to improve the unit's design:

1. The classroom teachers and media specialists recommend circumventing the limitations of the free version of Soundtrap by upgrading to the premium version. This version allows access to editing features and sound loops. Castonia encountered roadblocks using the free version of Spotify, but her students were able to produce their podcasts on Canva.
2. Our district and building-level media specialists invested in portable podcasting stations to support a high-quality recording space. Manero recommends publishing podcasts on Spotify to share the podcasts with a broader audience. Another suggestion is to extend topics to the United Nation's sustainable development goals (United Nations, n.d.).
3. Williams encourages teachers to be responsive to the needs of learners in their communities; however, she advises sticking with the instruction sequence during their first implementation to ensure the fidelity of the unit's learning goals.

All stakeholders agreed that the unit's focus on inquiry and collaboration fostered students' agency and lifted their voice.

A Community of Practice

Collectively, colleagues partnered to expand their practice and embraced the opportunity to pilot a unit that aligns with disciplinary literacy practices and deep learning. Their commitment allowed students to explore multiliteracies and share their research findings authentically and collaboratively. As a first-time unit, each teacher followed the prescribed outline of the unit; however, both teachers adapted the unit to meet their learners' needs. In a community of practice, collaboration is critical. When paired with the standards and social learning, the key components of collaboration

and explicit teaching are instructional shifts that build capacity in teachers and student researchers. Hopefully, the successful implementation of this unit may inspire other 8th-grade literacy communities to consider a new approach to their informational research unit. Capture and share students' learning in a podcast.

Acknowledgment

Students granted permission to share an excerpt of their podcast as well as their finalized podcasts for this publication.

References

- Achieve. (n.d.). *EQUIP*. <https://www.achieve.org/our-initiatives/equip/equip>
- Graham, S. (2020). The sciences of reading and writing must become more fully integrated. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 55, S35-S44. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.332>
- International Literacy Association. (2018). *Improving digital practices for literacy, learning, and justice: More than just tools* [Literacy leadership brief]. Author. <https://www.literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/where-we-stand/ila-improving-digital-practices-literacy-learning-justice.pdf>
- Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators General Education Leadership Network Disciplinary Literacy Task Force. (2021). *Essential instructional practices for disciplinary literacy: Grades 6 to 12*. Authors.
- National Council of Teachers of English. (2018). *Beliefs for integrating technology into the English language arts classroom*. <https://ncte.org/statement/beliefs-technology-preparation-english-teachers>
- Oakland Schools. (2021). *8th grade informational unit of study: Suggested lessons* [Detailed lesson plans]. Curriculum: ELA Common Core-Aligned Units. <https://www.oaklandschoolsliteracy.org/resources/common-core-resources/ccss-curriculum/>
- Quinn, J., McEachen, J., Fullan, M., Gardner, M., & Drummy, M. (2019). *Dive into deep learning: Tools for engagement*. Corwin Press.
- Turner, K. H., & Hicks, T. W. (2022). Digital literacy (still) can't wait: Four questions to reframe the conversation around technology in the English classroom. *English Journal*, 112(1), 86-93.
- United Nations. (n.d.). *The 17 goals*. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

Author Biography

Mrs. Shavonne Jacobson is a middle school language arts teacher supporting diverse learners; she is also a Middle School Language Arts Curriculum Consultant in the Rochester Community Schools district. She holds an Education Specialist in Reading and certification as a special education teacher. Her passions are inspiring her students' reading joy and collaborating with her colleagues to create a thriving community of practice. She can be reached at sjacobson@rochester.k12.mi.us.



Michigan Reading Association Names Annual Cohort of 30 Under 30 Honorees

OFFICIAL CONTACTS

Liz Lietz, President-Elect, lizlietz@gmail.com

Andy Schoenborn, President, aschoenborn76@gmail.com

August 30, 2023

At a time when Michigan is facing a critical teaching shortage and high teacher turnover, coupled with the need for a more diverse educator workforce, [Michigan Reading Association's](#) (MRA) *30 Under 30* list is a momentous celebration of Michigan educators and the impact they are having every day across our state. Literacy is critical across all areas of education and these literacy leaders are making a difference in classrooms and communities every day!

MRA's *30 Under 30* list celebrates rising innovators, disruptors, and visionaries in the literacy field. These educators, researchers, and advocates represent some of the best and brightest emerging leaders in Michigan who are working to achieve our collective mission: literacy for all. MRA's *30 Under 30* list will be released annually and nominations are accepted on a rolling basis; 2023-24 nominations are open on the [award's nomination site](#).

Honorees on the 2024 list represent diverse communities and regions—they are leading the way for excellence and equity in literacy education. They will be announced on MRA's [Facebook page](#) and other social media platforms, and will be recognized at the MRA [Annual Conference](#) in Lansing, March 15-17. *30 Under 30* honorees become important members of the MRA family and may choose to serve as General Session speakers, presenters, and moderators at the organization's conference. Honorees have the opportunity to volunteer for task forces, be featured in professional development and advocacy webinars, and become valuable members of MRA local chapters and affiliates.

