Digital Literacy PDF UEJ-1.pdf

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The term digital literacy was defined by rhetorician Richard Lanham (1995) who explained:

To be deeply literate in the digital world means being well seen and well heard as well as well read, skilled at deciphering complex images and sounds as well as the syntactical complexity of words. Above all, it means being at home in a shifting mixture of words, images, and sounds. (p. 198) [emphasis in the original].

Almost twenty years later, NCTE’s Framework for 21st Century Curriculum and Assessment (2013) echoed Lanham’s ideas, foregrounding the need for students to be digitally literate as it states:

Students in the 21st century should have experience with and develop skills around technological tools used in the classroom and the world around them. Through this they will learn about technology and learn through technology. In addition, they must be able to select the most appropriate tools to address particular needs.

For young people, images, sound bites, and video messages trump handwriting. Even texting has taken on new forms with smartphone applications such as Vine (video-messaging) and Snapchat (image-messaging). Students are surrounded by technology; they live in a digital world that does not always function on a linear level. As a result, the Core Curriculum asks students to be able to use “digital media strategically and capably” (Common Core, 2010). In order to prepare for a future where a pencil and paper will most likely be obsolete, students need to be digitally literate to make the most of their potential. And that is also true for the teachers who will instruct them.

This article describes how digital literacy is used in a university-level course to help future secondary English teachers explore young adult (YA) literature and teach them how to use it in their future classrooms. Within the course, students work on a number of digital projects that they can also use in their own teaching, including book trailers, YouTube type videos for Banned Books Week’s “Virtual Read-Out,” and graphic book reports. Particularly, it describes how using a specific type of graphic book report—a glog or graphic blog—can provide an alternative to traditional book reports while also helping students demonstrate mastery of digital literacy skills.

Technology in the Classroom

Because technologies change on an almost daily basis, educators must be digitally literate to keep pace with an increasingly technology-savvy younger generation. However, trying to keep up with technology can be scary. Today’s latest technological innovation may be tomorrow’s ho-hum, which means teachers must be lifelong learners along with their students. Many English teachers have embraced the importance of technology in their curricula (Kajder, 2012; Christel & Sullivan, 2010). For instance, Jen Curwood collaborated with her school librarian to shape a poetry unit using digital

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tools with the idea that she could teach students poetic devices more powerfully through media rather than through text alone. Their experiment, which was ultimately a success, centered on the idea that the very definition of literacy was changing: “Rather than being static, linear, individually created, and print based, the resultant texts are fluid, dynamic, nonlinear, and very often, collaboratively constructed” (Curwood & Cowell, 2011, p. 2).

Ideas are often expressed through multiple modes of communication, and many students prefer to use the plethora of new apps and devices to communicate instead of traditional tools. In an article about this new generation’s drive for success, Barbara Hamilton (2012) describes students as “image-based rather than text-based, impatient, and driven to achieve in order to compensate for the time, money, and energy their unflagging parents have lavished upon them” (p. 16). To adapt to a new environment where faster is always better, many students are unsatisfied with a single way of communicating because there is always another, quicker way. In a world where companies like Apple integrated music, video, and cell phone technology in under six years, revolutionizing the communication industry, it is no wonder that the way students view and understand the world is constantly changing. In fact, they expect it to change. Curwood and Cowell (2011) recognized the importance of adapting to the technological world in which students will thrive. By utilizing new technologies within the classroom the teacher both communicated important ideas to her students—the uses and definitions of several poetic devices—and taught them to communicate those ideas themselves using the tools they prefer.

Young Adult Literature
As part of a university educator preparation program, pre-service teachers take the course “Teaching Young Adult Literature.” Because the goals of this course include becoming familiar with a number of young adult (YA) titles over the course of a semester and considering how these books may be used in the curriculum, this course seemed like the perfect place to allow future teachers to test out and practice ideas for incorporating digital literacy into their future classrooms.

One particular assignment requires the pre-service teachers to write a book review. While they can use a traditional format for their reviews that involves summary, analysis, and classroom application, many choose an alternative version. Drawn from an article by Diana Mitchell (1998), alternative book reports offer students ways to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of books the student selects. She explains, “Students tire of responding to novels in the same ways. They want new ways to think about a piece of literature and new ways to dig into it” (p. 92). Her list of 50 alternatives is creative, thought-provoking, and fun. Alternative book reports offer ways to appeal to all students, regardless of background and talent. There are book reports for the artist, the writer, or the computer-savvy; there are book reports that see YAL through a lens of pop-culture, politics, or poetry. Mitchell’s list should “whet the interest of students in exploring new directions and in responding with greater depth to the books they read” (p. 92). Alternative book reports provided our students an opportunity to “throw out” the traditional book report, as Christine Cluff Thompson also noted in her 2013 Utah English Journal article.

The alternative report is wonderfully suited for our purposes of developing content to be used in a digital environment. Note how the following alternative book reports suggested by Mitchell (1998) immediately suggest visual renderings:

Character astrology signs. After reading brief descriptions of the astrology or sun signs, figure out which signs you think three of the main characters from your book were born under. Write an explanation of why you think they fit
the sign, drawing on their actions, attitudes, and thoughts from the book (p. 92).

**Movie recommendations.** Consider all the movies you’ve seen in the last couple of years and then pick five you would recommend that your character see. Give a brief summary of each movie, and explain why you think the character should see it (p. 93).

**Awards.** Create an award for each of the main characters based on their actions in the novel. One might be awarded “most courageous” for fighting peer pressure, another might be awarded “wisest” for the guidance given to other characters. For each award, write a paragraph that explains why this character deserves this award (p. 93).

**Scrapbook.** Think about all the kinds of mementos you would put in a scrapbook if you had one. Then, create a scrapbook for your character, cutting out pictures from magazines or drawing the mementos he or she would have in a scrapbook (p. 93).

Mitchell’s suggestions offer variety and the opportunity for students to explore their own creativity and talent. Many of her variations draw on the possibilities that arise from technology, including the composition of emails between characters in a book or a social media page that reflects the personality of the main character. Several students used their own knowledge of technology to create their book reports. Instead of cutting out pictures from a magazine for a word collage, they scoured the Internet and found the relevant words online. Or, instead of drawing a cartoon square, they used graphic design skills to create an important scene from the novel. Students found that having ownership, not only over the choice of the book but also over the way they presented it, was empowering. For instance, one student took great care in designing a book cover for James Dashner’s The Maze Runner, offering a design, which came about as a result of a discussion on font choices (See Figure 1.). In short, the alternative reports offered students opportunities to respond creatively and provided a foundation for moving to work in digital formats.

The pre-service teachers enjoyed the alternative book reports, but noted that what initially seemed a fun option to the traditional book report was not always easy. First, the list of fifty had to be scrutinized to find an appropriate fit with the selection. However, as a result of each student’s careful analysis of their books the alternative reports enhanced understanding of the thematic elements in a book. Their analyses of the books, combined with current understanding of technological tools, made creating the alternative book reports an exciting way to...
exercise their own digital literacy. Using critical thinking allowed one student to recognize that while creating a music playlist for Marcus Sedgwick’s *Revolver* would be technologically unique, it would not enhance further understanding of the book. However, by using tools on the computer to create a visually compelling police report, they could successfully communicate themes of the book while using their digital knowledge to make it more palatable to the 21st-century mind. Essentially, the students learned what Curwood and Cowell (2011) wanted students to learn: How to use images and sounds as a way to strengthen comprehension and communication rather than to keep it static.

Enter Glogster
Because the alternative book reports relied heavily on visual elements, and because the purpose of using the alternative reports was to find more creative ways of understanding YA literature, Glogster seemed a suitable platform for publishing the students’ innovative work.

Glogster EDU (http://edu.glogster.com) is one of several educational technologies available to teachers. The website allows its users to create glogs, or graphic blogs. Instead of text as the main mode of communication, as with a traditional blog, glogs use visual elements to convey the message of the creator. Students can develop virtual posters, including audio, video, text, hyperlinks, and images, and then share them publicly. Essentially, the finished product looks like an interactive poster with components such as music, YouTube videos, pictures, and text to create a representation of a main idea. Glogster differs from traditional blogging platforms. The site attempts to create a virtual classroom where K-12 students can post various projects. The teacher has the main account and students have individual sub-accounts to create their glogs. By accessing their accounts, a teacher can grade and give feedback on their work directly on the Glogster.edu site. With these and other characteristics, Glogster is well suited for a K-12 setting (see Figure 2. for a portion of a glog that features a book title acrostic for *Heist Society* by Ally Carter).

Glogster was created for educators and their students to “expand digital literacy” and “provide differentiated instructional activities” (Glogster.com, n.p.). As described by its website, the easy-to-use drop interface creates a platform for students to creatively express their ideas while providing a beneficial educational experience.

Using Glogs to Foster Digital Literacy
Multiple traits of Glogster reinforce concepts essential to digital literacy. First, many of the tools help foster creativity. A variety of templates to construct a glog give students the option of choosing their own layouts. Allowing choice in design lends itself well to the alternative book reports because, much in the same way that one report may not accurately represent all novels, one layout or design may not accurately represent all reports. The many different kinds of virtual buttons, pictures, and textboxes were also helpful when trying to be creative. Because there are many ways to create a glog, the platform effectively caters to the in-
individual ways in which students interpret literature.

One student designing a glog based on What I Saw and How I Lied by Judy Blundell (2008) focused on how the naïve Evie fell in love with Peter, making the glog more childlike with some upbeat music and pictures, but another focused on the courtroom where Evie learns to grow up (see Figure 3.). Both are effective—the book focuses on the events that lead to adulthood, and both eras in Evie's lifetime are relevant to that progression. Glogster provides the means for students to reflect both of the interpretations.

Second, developing glogs helps students meet objectives of NCTE's Framework for 21st Century Literacies to “Create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia texts” (n.p.). Students in the 21st century must be critical consumers and creators of multimedia texts and the following questions suggested under the framework can help teachers consider the kinds of mini-lessons that would help students make thoughtful choices about their glogs:

- Do students use tools to communicate original perspectives and to make new thinking visible?
- Do students communicate information and ideas in a variety of forms and for various purposes?
- Do students communicate information and ideas to different audiences?
- Do students articulate thoughts and ideas so that others can understand and act on them?
- Do students analyze and evaluate the multimedia sources that they use?
- Do students evaluate multimedia sources for the effects of visuals, sounds, hyperlinks, and other features on the text’s meaning or emotional impact?

We would also add the following: Do students use information ethically, understand intellectual property, copyright, and the fair use of copyrighted material?

Classroom Examples of Applying Glogs to Alternative Book Reports
How might developing glogs—one example of multimedia texts—play out in the English classroom? As teachers of literature, we are accustomed to leading our students through critical analysis. Many of those same terms that we use in talking about literature—mood, tone, character, conflict, theme, setting—help our students understand elements of visual design and sound. The lesson introducing Glogster will vary depending on the level of the students, but a good starting point is to begin with a literary selection that everyone has in common, perhaps a whole class novel read previously.

If students had read Harper Lee's book To Kill a Mockingbird (1960), the alternative idea of book choices for a character would be a fitting
option. Mitchell (1998) asks students to do the following:

Select a character and then choose five books for him or her, thinking about what he or she might like and also what you think they need to know more about. Why did you select the nonfiction books you did? What do you hope your character will like about or get out of the fiction? (p. 95)

This writing assignment requires students to get inside the head of a character. What would Jem want to read? Dill? Scout? Atticus? Once students develop the content, then issues of design come into play. How can the setting of the novel—the South in the 1930s—be depicted? Will bright colors be used or perhaps sepia tones? How can design choices signal that this novel is based on memory? In terms of assembling the glog itself, the covers of the books chosen provide ready material. Students may use an image from the classic 1962 film to identify the character, and the title of the glog might be “Jem’s Reading List” or “Dill’s Library.”

Even here, font choice will be important, and assuming the teacher is demonstrating for the class, various fonts can be used with the class members noting pros and cons of each until deciding on one. For instance, students would not likely choose a wooden fence style font that would suggest Old West.

A second option focuses on music. Again, Mitchell (1998) outlines the following:

After reading a novel, figure out how you would divide up the book into sections. Then select a piece of music that you think captures the feel or tone of each section. Record the pieces and if possible do voice-overs explaining what is happening in the novel during the piece of music and why you felt this piece of music fit the section of the novel. (p. 93)

The visual elements of the glog require that each section is depicted in some way. For this reason, one section might focus on Atticus keeping watch at the jail with brooding, tense music while another might feature more sentimental strains for the quiet moment when Atticus and Scout sit on the porch. If students looked at top songs of 1930s, they might find inspiration for music. For instance, Louis Armstrong’s “Stardust” is among the songs on the list of classic hits that might possibly fit a scene. With some searching, students may also discover other Armstrong numbers such as “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen.” It may become clear that Armstrong’s work could provide a common thread that could be traced through all the scenes. Or, students may find other appropriate selections any of a number of free music sites on the Internet. The goal of any analysis of literature is to reflect important ideas and Glogster provides the platform to enable students to decide how to use visual and auditory aids to not only represent their ideas, but to enhance them.

Assessment
Assessing the impact of the glog allows teachers to hold students accountable for the digital literacy skills they use. A sample rubric that provides opportunities for feedback might look like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Glog Components</th>
<th>What Works</th>
<th>What Doesn’t Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is the content well-written and engaging?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are the design choices appropriate to the text?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do the design choices convey the intended mood or tone?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the music fit the subject?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If there are hyperlinks, are they appropriate to the content?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is attribution of materials included to ensure ethical use of others’ work?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Challenges and Potential
Like all professionals-in-training must do, the students in the YA literature course weighed the pros and cons of using the glog format with their future classrooms. Not all students will be interested: some will shine, and others will not. Investment in an annual license for Glogster is modest. Access to computers is also important, and teachers will need to invest time in educating students in how to construct a glog (a possibility is for a student to take the lead on learning Glogster and provide instruction). Glogster itself does a less-than-impeccable job of training; fortunately, several YouTube videos created by teachers offer a solid supplement.

New technology, no matter how well introduced, always comes with frustrations, and Glogster is no exception. While using it for our project, some students experienced problems uploading YouTube videos and images. The speed of the interface was also inconsistent and did not work equally well on Apple and PC products. For this reason, good facilities are essential, especially as tablets and computers are quickly replacing textbooks and notebooks. Glogster does provide the html codes to embed the glogs onto other sites, which led the students in our class to consider a different blogging site for publication. See Figure 4. for a portion of the glog Bud, Not Buddy (Curtis, 1999) on the blog Teaching Literature in a Digital World. Not surprisingly, when creating the glog some students were more facile with the technology than others. But all students can potentially benefit from learning how to use this platform as it gives them enhanced technological skills and prepares them for the reality that technology changes rapidly.

Final Thoughts
That idea, in essence, is what the changing definition of literacy is all about. Communicating in only one way is inefficient because there are multiple ways to understand and learn. Students and teachers, as Lanham (1995) notes,
must be used to “being at home in a shifting mixture of words, images, and sounds” (p. 98). It is about expressing ideas and adapting to a world where ideas are always progressing, and what is current becoming outdated in short order.

Glogster is only one technological way to communicate an idea. Perhaps it will improve in the coming years—as Glogster has an app to use on a tablet, it seems they are trying to keep up with the times—or perhaps glogs will become an obsolete term, only to be replaced with an even more innovative platform for communication. In teaching YA literature, or for that matter, any literature, incorporating technologies can help make literature more engaging. In order for that to happen, however, educators need to make those attempts so students can learn how to better navigate technology as an educational tool.

We urge future and current English teachers to explore new ways to teach using digital literacy and embrace NCTE’s 21st Century Framework. Doing so can contribute to the main goal of all English or language arts classrooms: to help students develop or enhance their love for and understanding of literature and respond critically and creatively. Experimenting with new technology may be hard—especially in the English classroom—but when it comes to our students, we need to explore every option so they can be well read, well seen, and well heard.

References

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