The dilemma of promoting young adult literacy gripped our seventh-grade team last year as never before. Kids coming to our grade level were more reluctant to read every year, it seemed, and we were facing our largest group of students yet. To compound our frustration, this group of students was notoriously reluctant to read. Our team thought hard and looked to technology to help motivate our students and break down their resistance to reading.

Before last school year, any hope of accessing computers for our lessons was impossible. Sure, we had a smattering of computers in various classrooms and two large computer labs, but the technology was inaccessible for whole classes. The computer labs were utilized for specialty computer courses, and a computer here and there just doesn’t suffice to support a class lesson. We were technologically frustrated, knowing that the equipment we needed was visible on the horizon, but remained a mirage ever out of reach.

Then the district committed to purchasing more computers and assembling a computer lab in the school library. The mirage would now become our oasis. At our disposal was an entire lab of PCs available seven periods each day, in addition to several machines in each classroom, four in the L.A. room, and eight in the resource room. Literacy could take on a whole new dimension, and we knew it.

Our seventh-grade literacy team consisted of Kara, a language arts teacher; Jim, a special education teacher; and one of the school’s reading specialists, all committed to working together. We decided to combine the language arts and reading curricula, focusing on helping kids get excited about books. Students would be expected to read independently in language arts, but, because a growing percentage of our students are reluctant to read on their own, we decided to count books read together in reading class as independent language arts reading; we hoped this would alleviate the pressure so many kids felt about outside reading. Our target was to present books and teach reading of books in a way that kids liked. Our hope was that the low-pressure, high-interest approach would get kids excited about reading on their own.

To this end, we also committed to giving technology a large role. It seemed a natural fit. Kids love computers, but the same cannot always be said for books. Why not marry the two?

We set a lofty goal. In his book, *Private Readings in Public*, Dennis J. Sumara (1996) succinctly summed up our primary reading goal with his description of a “focal practice,” which he derived from Albert Borgmann’s (1992) phrase “focal reality.” Borgmann’s focal practices are life-centering activities that engage the mind and body. Examples of such activities are painting, writing poetry, tending animals, gardening. These activities help us to better perceive and understand our world through our engagement. Sumara theorized that this practice could be applied to reading as well. That is, one doesn’t simply read, but lives a life that includes reading to such an extent that one is able to think about and interpret their life differently. Sumara writes, “the reading of literary fiction, because it requires the invocation of
the reader’s imagination, allows the reader to eventually perceive and interpret her or his world differently” (p. 9). He goes on to warn that “focal practices are often risky ventures” (p. 9). Our plan was to promote books with an eye toward teaching students to make literature a “focal practice”; this, we knew, was going to be a risky practice.

We were in this together, however, and we knew the team approach makes risky ventures possible. At the core of our philosophy was the commitment to transfer ideas that worked in one classroom into the others—an important mind-set for integrating technology into the lessons. In the end, we were armed with a plan, technology, and motivation.

**Early Success with Technology**

We found that our earliest successes did, indeed, involve technology. Jim, as special education teacher, wanted desperately to find better ways to activate students’ prior knowledge to the novels that they would be reading in class. Knowing that students seemed to get much more excited about working on computers than working out of a book, he pledged to set up lessons on the Internet designed to activate prior knowledge. With the team working off a survival theme in all of their classes to start the school year, the language arts classes were reading *The Cay* by Theodore Taylor, and the reading classes were reading a pair of Jack London survival stories.

Realizing we could not simply unleash our students into the wild world of the Web with a search on “survival methods,” we had to find a way to direct students to particular Web sites that would aid the acquisition of prior knowledge. Jim accessed a Web site that would be the team’s guiding light to prior knowledge, Trackstar (<http://trackstar.hprtec.org/>). This site allows teachers to set up a Web page of links for students, so we didn’t need to worry about students surfing and accessing unrelated information. Under each link, teachers can add annotations and guiding questions for students as they peruse the sites. Creating a site for accessing prior knowledge and pre-teaching key elements to the stories worked wonderfully. Students were thoroughly engaged and, largely on their own, accessed more prior knowledge in one class period than could ever be accomplished outside of the computer lab. All of us were excited.

This is how it worked. On Trackstar, Jim created a site with Web links covering all the elements that the three teachers agreed needed to be covered, and then he created a Microsoft Word document with a link that led students directly to the track. On the Word document, we set up numbers corresponding to questions we wanted answered. Next, this page was copied into all individual seventh-grade student files. They began the lesson by logging on and opening this Word document. They accessed the established link and began at the Trackstar home page that had been designed. Directions led students through our eight chosen Web sites (see Figure 1).

Using Trackstar (<http://trackstar.sctec.org/>) teachers can easily program in links to other sites that students need for their research, inserting annotations and questions to help them focus. Here are the sites we used for students to obtain background knowledge on *The Cay*:

- www.uboat.net —Great information and pictures on German U-boats.
- www.usmm.org/lehigh.html —Story and picture of the sinking of a ship by German U-boats.
- www.usatoday.com/weather/hurricane/whur0.htm —Information on hurricanes.
- www.barbados.org/flyfish.htm—Information and a picture on flying fish.
- www.malaria.org/—Information on malaria.

**Figure 1.** Trackstar homepage developed for research on *The Cay*
1), which they accessed by simply clicking on each individual link. When students found an answer to the question, they copied the information, minimized their Web page, and pasted the answer into the corresponding number on their Word document. The level of technological instruction that students needed for this lesson was minimal, and the information that they were able to access surpassed our wildest expectations.

Within 45 minutes, students had gathered all of the information needed to better comprehend *The Cay*. They studied maps of the island Curacao, from where Philip and Timothy departed, as well as maps showing their voyage and the island where they were marooned. They learned about German U-boats and the Caribbean's role in WWII. They studied the Caribbean Sea, a hurricane survival site, and learned about the fish that sustained the two main characters while marooned at sea. In addition to facts needed for understanding the setting of the novel, students learned about the author’s life and his motivation for writing the book. Students did this all very independently and enthusiastically. In their view, we were letting them have a fun period, but we knew they were internalizing knowledge vital for full comprehension of *The Cay*. Success had come early.

Before reading the novel, the language arts students shared their results and insights in class. Once into the class reading, that shared knowledge helped students work through a difficult section of the novel by providing a common reference point. The work with *The Cay* was so productive that we decided we needed to do more with technology. While we studied survival, we thought that students could really demonstrate what they’d learned by writing their own survival stories. Again, we turned to our oasis, the computer lab. We chose to utilize the computer-mapping program Inspiration (www.inspiration.com) to walk students through the prewriting process. As students had never used Inspiration prior to this year, Kara made a sample story web showing the elements of her fictitious survival story. This web was copied and pasted into a shared drive where all students could access it. A brief worksheet was then created to test students’ understanding of the web’s contents. Once students were clearly comfortable with the web, we directed them to a template web, designed after the teacher’s sample, with all the elements of the short story: characters, setting, conflict, beginning, middle, end. They simply had to fill in the shapes with information pertaining to a story they were going to write themselves. Because this was the students’ first time on Inspiration, we created the initial web for them, but the next day they created a second web of their own that mapped out the plot of the story, as the initial web did not allow much room for full plot development. By the end of two class periods in the computer lab, students had two webs to use for their story drafts.

In addition to providing a basic prewriting web, Inspiration has many fun pictures, shapes, and colors for students to experiment with. Therefore, we had to focus the students by not allowing them to “play” until all their blank shapes had words in them; however, once free to experiment with the possibilities, students became more involved in the creative process as they searched for pictures to represent their setting and characters. This was especially helpful for those who wanted to write about a relatively unfamiliar setting, such as a desert. The picture on their web helped them envision the setting, making it easier to use authentic detail when it came time to write the story.
Another bonus of using Inspiration that we had not foreseen was the additional time students had to share their story ideas with one another. Students would naturally look at one another’s monitors and ask questions about each other’s stories. With the colorful web in front of their eyes, student discussion was truly focused on their survival stories instead of nonacademic topics. Inspiration was a success, and throughout the year we continued to use it for other writing assignments, such as a comparative essay. We also plan to use it to assess story comprehension by having students create a web about a story they’ve already read, rather than a story they are planning to create.

**Promoting Books through Technology**

With a new technological tool to help students write, we again focused on our initial goal of fostering an interest in, and hopefully a love of, books, perhaps making them a “focal practice” in our students’ lives. Kara had always assigned independent reading accompanied by book projects or standard book reports, but found that only students who already enjoyed reading were truly successful. While the question of how to get students interested in reading a book in the first place outweighs the goal of designing a fun book project, we actually accomplished both through technology.

Many students had simply developed an innate disdain for books. In *Teaching Middle School Reading*, Laura Robb addresses this issue:

> For students to develop a personal reading life and become lifelong readers, it’s crucial to provide opportunities for them to select books that can relate to their interests. (p. 197)

We always allowed students to choose their own books, but we had to get them enthusiastic about reading. All students, including our reluctant readers, were reading Gary Paulsen’s novel *Hatchet* to build upon the survival information. Many chose to use this book as their language arts independent book as well, and we encouraged this. We viewed it as the scaffolding that students need to learn a new book. Since the book was read for enjoyment, and not with the idea that students would be expected to take a test, we hoped that reluctant readers would find safety in the experience.

When the question of an alternate book project came up, we immediately saw advantages to using PowerPoint. Because the traditional book report format is a written report that incorporates all of the book elements we cover in language arts class—character, setting, plot, conflict, and theme—the categorical nature of the assignment made PowerPoint a perfect match; the various literary elements could be separated into slides rather than paragraphs. In past years, PowerPoint had been a successful presentation tool in seventh-grade science class, so we decided to incorporate the slide show program into our classes as well. In *The English Teacher’s Companion*, Jim Burke states, “Public speaking provides one of the most powerful and engaging opportunities to incorporate technology” (p. 196). We couldn’t agree more. In addition to being a “cool” presentation tool, PowerPoint teaches kids organizational skills, as Jim Burke writes, “. . . presentation software like PowerPoint teaches students the skill of organizing information, ‘thinking in bullets,’ and addressing your idea to an audience” (p. 196). While outlining is usually a tedious task for middle school students, PowerPoint makes outlining almost recreational!

As with Inspiration, Kara first created a sample book project based on *The Cay*, as all the students had read it in class and thoroughly understood its elements, thanks to our Trackstar lesson. She gave her presentation of *The Cay* slide show, and then we brought the students to the computer lab again to have them navigate the PowerPoint presentation on their own so they would be comfortable with the program. We let them experiment with colors, fonts, graphics, etc., so they were excited to make their own slide show. By doing this, students were inspired to read their own book, knowing that if they didn’t, it would be impossible to
create and give their own slide show. One parent actually called Jim and thanked him for inspiring his son to read, claiming it was the first time in seven years of school that his son told him he was excited to finish his independent novel; it was the first time his son had ever finished a book on his own. With one success story validated, our enthusiasm for technology grew ten-fold.

The next trip to the computer lab proved students had gone home and read their books. No one was stuck on what to write, as was often the case with the traditional book report format; instead, the only sound was the quiet tapping of eager fingers flying across their keyboards. The reluctant readers, excited about the use of PowerPoint, grasped onto Hatchet and worked hard as well. We let students use Kara’s sample slide show as a template for their own, so no one would leave out any important information, and several students made even more slides than the teacher used in order to tell all the details of their own novels. Jim was thrilled about a book report that was accessible to all students, not just the good writers.

The slide shows were truly impressive, and each student proudly presented to interested classmates. All students completed their reports with a high level of independence. As with Inspiration, we found a surprise bonus in our PowerPoint idea. When students were told that after the presentations, they would be asked to list three books that they might be interested in reading after hearing their peers’ presentations, they became actively engaged, analytical listeners. As a result, certain books swept through the seventh grade like a tidal wave, filling students with awe over the fact they actually enjoyed reading. We couldn’t keep Monster by Walter Dean Myers on our shelves as the boys clamored for it; the girls read Star Girl by Jerry Spinelli and The Wish by Gail Carson Levine, passing them from friend to friend throughout social circles. Book talk in the classroom, the hallways, the cafeteria—everywhere for that matter—became common!

Continued Progress
By the end of first quarter, we knew we were onto something. The problem was how to keep up this jumbo zeppelin of enthusiasm without letting it crash and burn. We didn’t want to keep repeating the same technology over and over; although we did continue to use Trackstar to build prior knowledge and Inspiration to web prewriting ideas. Second quarter, we chose a pamphlet for a book project. It was nothing more than a Word document set to a landscape print setting with three columns, but the students were just as enthusiastic about this as they were about PowerPoint. Just the difference in print setting made them think they were “playing” instead of reporting. We threw in a little art to decorate the pamphlets, and the students once again proudly presented their pieces to an engaged audience. The bonus with pamphlets was that our rooms were decorated in information about high-interest, young adult literature, which students could access at any time, unlike the slide shows that were shut off at the end of a presentation (see Figure 2).

Some students continued to utilize the read-alouds in the reading class for their independent reading projects; however, the number of students who did not increased dramatically. All students read several books on their own. Rather than just staring at books on shelves in the library, students who couldn’t find a specific book were given individual book search sessions on the computer. In the lab, we taught them how to do a search on Amazon.com and B&N.com (the Barnes and Noble site). Students simply searched for a book that they liked and wound up with information about literature on a higher level, and requesting a repeat performance. We could understand why: it was their book and they wanted to let the class know what was so good about it. It gave the students ownership and pride. Were students actually making reading a focal point of their lives?
Figure 2. One student’s pamphlet project

Voices from the Middle, Volume 11 Number 3, March 2004
on that book plus a list of related books. If they found a book that sounded interesting, we made an effort to locate the book. We decided that the success of this individualized system justified a whole-group lesson in the computer lab during the 2003–2004 school year.

We continued to integrate Trackstar and Inspiration into the lessons for the remainder of the year. The book report on PowerPoint launched the seventh grade into a yearlong love of books. The book projects following PowerPoint, although not all technology based, followed a creative path accompanied by an oral presentation. Students were always required to listen carefully and create a list of books they were interested in reading. We concluded that a number of our students had incorporated books into their lives as never before. Using technology in our classes had started them on the road toward making reading literature a focal practice.

References

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