

How Do I Earn Buy-In from Digital Natives?

This school year alone, I (Amy Schechter [AS]) must have confiscated a cell phone at least once a week. Students cried when they lost an iPod or Nintendo-DS, but casually claimed, “I didn’t do it,” when asked about their homework. Lack of motivation in the classroom is becoming an epidemic (Moos & Marroquin, 2010). Students are being turned off from learning and turned on to electronics (Schmidt & Vandewater, 2008). If a student lacks motivation or focus, they do not put forth their maximum effort (House, 2007; Moos & Marroquin, 2010).

We find ourselves asking, “How can I infuse a love of literature and writing in my students when all they seem to care about is MTV, Facebook, and fads?” They look at me and reply, “Why should I care about stuff written by a dead guy?” Touché, students.

Research suggests that infusing technology into the curriculum will increase student motivation and achievement (Gee & Hayes, 2011). Today, teenagers as well as adults use social networking sites and digital media with fervor. Integrating this popular technology into the English curriculum will revitalize student interest and motivation in reading (Strom, Strom, Wing, & Beckert, 2009). It is possible to meet our students halfway and bridge the divide between tradition and innovation while still preserving high standards for learning. Tapping into the digital world

can help teachers create buy-in with today’s students.

Gearing Up

Action Research

Trial and error is one way to hone the craft of teaching. After doing much reading and reflecting on the benefits of using technology in the classroom, we decided that we needed to put our ideas into practice. Using four separate classrooms, sixth, seventh, ninth, and tenth grades respectively, we set out to explore the impact that utilizing more technology in the classroom would have on student motivation and achievement. We had wonderful success! Students reported that they enjoyed reading and writing more when they could use technology, and class portfolios documented the dramatic improvement in student writing by the end of the year.

Preparing Your Classroom

Many districts have policies and firewalls blocking students and teachers from utilizing certain forms of technology. The students in our classrooms were lucky enough to have a nearby public library and supportive parents, but we hope to provide adaptations for teachers facing mandates out of their control. Putting students in groups reduces the need for individual student access to computers with Internet. Much of the Internet work can be delegated to one student who is assigned as the “Web Master,” a nontraditional role that can be added to your literature circle roles. The preparation for posting to the Internet can be done in classrooms with graphic organizers. Although there are many hurdles to making

popular technology more mainstream, we hope that reading about our success stories will encourage you to try this in your own classroom.

Pedagogy for the Twenty-First Century

Many teachers underutilize social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, unaware of their potential to enhance motivation in literature circles. I (AS) realized I have been a member of Facebook since 2004, yet I only started utilizing it in my classroom this year. If teachers embrace social networking as a teaching tool, students will participate in a variety of technology-rich activities targeted at increasing motivation and achievement, while at the same time promoting valuable critical thinking skills and interacting with literature. In conducting our action research, we decided to begin with readily available media that we believe should already be used in the classroom when both possible and appropriate to the goals of the lesson.

Creating Character Profiles on Social Networking Sites

To frontload these activities, students need to track character development as they read a novel. We had the students create character bookmarks with the following headings:

- “What I look like”
- “What I say”
- “What I do”
- “What other people say about me”

Students can change their characters’ Facebook or MySpace pages periodically to reflect character changes and plot developments.

Having students work in groups and assigning one character per group can help struggling students, exceptional education students, or ELL students manage this task. Also, working in groups to manage Facebook or MySpace pages makes it unnecessary for every student to own an account. In addition, creating Facebook and MySpace pages for characters gives students a

great culminating or during-reading activity that enables students to show all they have learned about that character. Ninth- and tenth-grade students created Facebook and MySpace profiles after reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. Groups chose their character and used the text and activities completed during reading to create realistic profiles.

This project required students to comprehend both the plot and character they chose. Students enjoyed this fun activity because it is creative and rich with the technology they use every day.

Creating character portraits is one way to delve into characterization and produce deeper meaning when reading literature. Students can utilize Facebook, MySpace, or other social networking sites to create pages for characters from classic novels or young adult novels. This requires them to really get into the mind of a character so that they can create a page that stays true to the voice of that fictional person. The students write brief biographies about their characters and select pictures to fill their profiles. In so doing, students are exposed not only to the humanities and classic art as they search for pictures, but many also make connections to pop culture and movies.

They also have the opportunity to select favorite songs, television shows, and films that they believe their character would enjoy. Thomas (all names are pseudonyms), a tenth grader, thought that Hamlet would listen to emo music because of Hamlet’s depression, whereas Lauren, a sixth grader, believed that Stanley from *Holes* would enjoy traditional folk songs of Latvia. These students’ choices indicated that they understood a great deal about what was happening in the characters’ lives and family histories.

In every case, students took from their own lives and melded their background knowledge with the literature. When a student read that

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Shiloh had been lost, she posted a pained comment on MySpace pleading for help finding her dog. Another older student wrote long woe-is-me blogs as she pretended to be Ophelia watching Hamlet spiral into depression. The social messaging sites became a place for reader-response to occur in a nontraditional format. Students had the ability to connect with the text in a public forum where they regularly received feedback from other students and instructors.

The students made changes to their profiles as the novels progressed, and they could explain the purpose behind those subtle changes. For example, Lauren mentioned, “Our group unfriended Zigzag because he hit Stanley with the shovel. Stanley would not want to be friends after that.” She was referring to an incident in *Holes* in which Stanley was injured and thus her group decided to un-friend Zigzag’s group. In response, Zigzag’s group sent an apology paraphrased here (the site was taken down upon completion):

Stanley,
It was really hot. Sorry man. You know how the blood boils. I didn’t want to dig your dirt.
—Zigzag

As a teacher, I had never seen such quick buy-in with a reader-response technique. Traditionally, I had students select meaningful quotes from the text and respond to them, but I felt that my less-motivated students did not truly connect with the literature, as they saw only a boring journal assignment. Through this online method, however, hesitant students soon saw that they could communicate easily and visually with the aid of the computer, and they enjoyed posting pictures they had Googled or responding to posts from friends. Interaction with other groups of students was a powerful motivational tool because if the instructors could not comment on something due to time, the other groups would give that needed feedback.

Beyond the Literature Circle

Once students had created their character pages, they began to friend each other and communicate as if they were the other characters in the novel. We structured digital Socratic Circles, sometimes posing questions as assignments and sometimes letting conversation arise naturally. Students working in groups expressed thoughts and opinions regarding events from the novels, making it easier for all students to keep track of the story. They were able to understand relationships between characters as they realized that just like in real life, characters choose whom to talk to and whom to ignore.

After this journey, students suggested that in the future we assign different books to different groups and have the characters from different texts interact. In thinking about this, choosing a number of different books on the same theme could create a virtual support circle for the main characters of different novels. Students would need to have a deep understanding of their character in order to make those text-to-text connections. Also, this project format would allow for differentiated instruction, creating opportunities for different levels of students to interact.

Tweet before You Go

A popular CRISS (Creating Independence through Student-owned Strategies) is the student-generated, one-sentence summary of a short story or novel. The digital equivalent of this practice can be a tweet! Twitter allows 164-character messages, and it is a great alternative to a “ticket out the door” (or an “exit slip”)—an informal assessment that gauges student knowledge at the end of a lesson. My students *bate* exit slips, but they love using their phones. Creating a class Twitter page and having it open at the end of a class period can allow students to see their posts online as they tweet. The instant gratification of seeing your thoughts shared with the entire class was a motivational factor for all students. Some raced to get their thoughts out first, while others tried to pack the most information into the

164-character limit. Students who did not have phones could copy their answers from their own papers to the classroom computer directly. Exit slips were never so easy.

Passionate Affinity Spaces and Video Games

Video games have been around a long time, but they do not often make their way into the classroom. Video game culture, however, is not something to be overlooked as a teaching tool. Over the years, gaming has evolved to create massive multiplayer online role-playing games like *World of Warcraft*, as well as opportunities for large gatherings on Xbox LIVE. People are organizing themselves around their areas of interest. According to Gee and Hayes (2011), “when people organize[d] themselves in the real world and/or via the Internet to learn something connected to a shared endeavor, interest, or passion,” the term *passionate affinity-based learning* arose (2011, p. 69).

These areas of interest extend from gaming to just about anything. For example, students can participate in sites like Neopets, where they can manage a virtual pet’s health and play online games, or they can participate in a sophisticated world complete with a stock market, guilds of players working together, and a thriving online virtual business world. I joined www.neopets.com to play with my younger sisters, and in a few years I had accumulated over a million Neopoints, the currency in this online world. Yet that did not hold a candle to the serious gamers who had earned billions.

Many other young adolescents are online from 7:30 P.M. until 11:30 P.M. as they work together to defeat people whom they have never met in a game of Capture the Flag on *Halo* online. They talk strategy and plan intricate battles, all without physically being in the same room. Of course, teachers also have sites dedicated to our craft where we share ideas and swap stories about teaching. The Internet has something for everyone, and that is something the traditional classroom should harness.

Where can you tap into these passions within the English classroom? The great thing about digital media is that students have enthusiasm; they already participate in these activities outside of school, and where one person may go online to talk about fashion, another student may be writing a walk-through or cheat guide for finishing the latest *Call of Duty* game. The key is to remember that there are different forms of communication that can serve as a springboard to literacy.

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Nonfiction

Technical writing is a skill that many math and science teachers bemoan. “Our students cannot write nonfiction,” they cry. But this is not true! Students need to see the connections between writing a gaming guide and writing a lab report. Both need to follow chronological order, and both need to be very clear. Having students practice writing gaming guides or guides to activities they enjoy will help them organize their writing.

A great way to introduce this technique is to have students write directions to some hidden place on campus. Students soon find that there are many ways to interpret a phrase such as “go forward five steps.” After students run around campus aimlessly, we have a conversation about what went wrong. This is where you can ask how many students have ever followed a walkthrough to finish a difficult video game level. (A walkthrough is a step-by-step guide to help players navigate video games that they otherwise may not be able to finish on their own.) Many students mentioned that they often Google ways to finish video games. Depending on the resources available in your school, you can have students play a video game like *Portal*, *Oregon Trail*, or *Myst*, but ask them to write a guide that tells how to beat a level or, alternatively, a guide for a game they have at home.

Fan Fiction

The greatest success we had this year was in the realm of writing fan fiction and short stories. Students are passionate about what they are reading and playing outside of school, but they

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never think that they have the ability to continue a storyline or fill in the holes before the next installment of their favorite book series or television show. Sixth graders wrote epic military adventures as the

characters from *Call of Duty Black Ops*, frenzied battles between legendary warriors from *Dragon-BallZ*, and continuations of television shows like *Pretty Little Liars*. In fact, they didn't want to stop writing. We graded some 15-page short stories, and not one student failed to hand in something.

We utilized a writer's workshop approach showing mentor texts, highlighting instances of good writing, and going over dialogue. In addition to mentor texts that the instructors brought to class, students brought fan fiction they had

found online. We screened the fan fiction for appropriateness and then shared those texts with the class. Students self-conferenced and peer-conferenced, wrote and rewrote. They had the opportunity to completely fabricate something or to base their writing on an existing story line that they enjoyed. This choice was paramount in creating the buy-in for writing and reading short stories.

Some of the older high school students posted their fan fiction to online forums where they could receive feedback from online communities dedicated to their interest. Many students created artwork to go along with what they were writing. It became more than a project; it became a passion.

Our Own Re-education

So much of the success we had this year came from learning about and valuing our students' interests. Utilizing an online forum for sharing stories and conversations provided students with a break from the monotony, and students felt comfortable trying new things because they could retain some of the old things they already liked to

CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

Social Networking as Teaching Tool

The article advocates that teachers should embrace social networking as a teaching tool. ReadWriteThink.org has several lesson plans that do just that. In **"Using Microblogging and Social Networking to Explore Characterization and Style,"** students use social networking sites to trace the development of characters by assuming the persona of a character on the class Ning and sending a set number of tweets, or status updates.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/using-microblogging-social-networking-1171.html>

"There Are No Small Parts: Minor Characters in *David Copperfield*" capitalizes on students' interest in social networking by asking students to build an online profile for a minor character in Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/there-small-parts-minor-1154.html>

Anne Frank shared her experiences through a private diary that became public as a book. In **"The Blog of Anne Frank?: Taking on Social Roles through Online Writing,"** students will consider how writing creates social identities as they blog about a political issue.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/blog-anne-frank-taking-30721.html>

do. The online forums also provided them an audience, even if their posts covered such mundane activities as, “I’m eating a sandwich.”

Students had a hand in the lessons, and whenever possible, we made them feel like it was their idea in the first place. We helped create student ownership of learning, and now, even as I send some accomplished writers on to the next grade level, I get to play *Call of Duty* with my husband.

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Call for 2012 Halle Award Nominations

The NCTE Richard W. Halle Award for Outstanding Middle Level Educator honors a middle level educator who has consistently worked to improve the quality of middle school education and middle school educators, especially in the English language arts. Originally established in 1996 by the Junior High/Middle School Assembly, this award pays special tribute to the person who has worked to improve schools and schooling for the middle level—teacher, principal, college faculty, curriculum specialist, or supervisor.

Nomination information can be found on the NCTE website at www.ncte.org/awards/halle and must be submitted no later than June 1, 2012. Results will be announced in September, and the award will be presented at the 2012 Annual Convention in Las Vegas, Nevada, during the Middle Level Get-Together.
