

Risks, Rewards, and Responsibilities of Using New Literacies in Middle Grades

The first time I had to work with digital technologies, I definitely was uncomfortable. Then, the second and third times I used it, I kind of became a convert. And now, I'm a changed woman because I can't go back to the old way. The results are amazing! Kids look forward to coming to class, and they just give me things I've not thought of. So it has opened up the door for me not only to present to them, but to learn from them what works. So, yeah, new literacies has made a big change in my teaching and learning.

—Maggie, exit interview

Maggie's (all names are pseudonyms) reflections highlight the risks and rewards of teaching with new literacies. New literacies include pop culture and digital technologies. Together, these categories include the reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and designing of both print and non-print text of any kind (from classics to popular culture) through a multitude of media, such as books, flip cameras, computers, and handheld devices like smartphones, e-readers, and e-tablets.

Adolescents' expansive literacy practices of collaborating, communicating, and creating texts using new literacies have piqued educators' interest in revamping instructional practices to reflect the kinds of engagement adolescents seek out.

This article highlights how teachers move out of their comfort zones and enliven content area instruction with new literacies. I explain some of the risks teachers take to learn about and implement new literacies, I describe rewards teachers experience, and I report on the responsibilities

teachers feel about sharing lessons learned to improve instruction.

Background

Maggie and eight other teachers who taught grades 6–8 at Chaho Middle School (pseudonym) met with me bi-monthly for two hours after school to learn about new literacies. The group included 8 females and 1 male (see Table 1). They ranged from 24 to 68 years old, their teaching experiences ran the gamut from first-year teacher to veteran (47 years), and they described themselves as everything from “newbie” to “expert” in their uses of digital tools. Areas of concentration and instruction included English/language arts, health, math, reading intervention, social studies, Spanish, and special education. During the year, the group followed a loose, three-part outline.

Part One: Study of a set of common texts. This group read *Bring It to Class* (Hagood, Alvermann, & Heron-Hruby, 2010), *Copyright Clarity* (Hobbs, 2010), *Lesson Plans for Developing Digital Literacies* (Christel & Sullivan, 2010), and *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture* (Jenkins, 2006). They also watched *Digital Nation: Life on the Virtual Frontier* (Rushkoff, 2010) and participated in several new literacies webinars.

Part Two: Exploration of new literacies tools. The teachers chose a tool they wanted to explore, played with it, researched how others used it, and created a product (unrelated to work) over the next two months. For example, some teachers were interested in using flip cameras. They read about others' uses of digital stories (e.g., Robin, 2008), and then they recorded at home and created digital stories. Digital tools explored over the year included hardware (e.g., flip cameras, handheld tablets and e-readers, scribing pens/notebooks) and software/applications (such as movie making, tablet applications, websites, and Web 2.0-enabled applications on the Internet).

Part Three: Design and implementation. Teachers designed an inquiry project (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) that incorporated new literacies into their content area instruction. Usually they

chose a digital tool that they had explored during this project. As inquiry, they documented their planning and instruction, and they solicited feedback from the group during and after their implementation.

The teachers had varying degrees of expertise in new literacies and, although open to learning, were often standoffish about the realities of using them in their classrooms. Speaking to this point, Kris, an eighth-grade English teacher, noted, "My initial viewpoint on new literacies, especially the technologies, was 'put it away or it's mine!' . . . I guess I never thought that I'd embrace that, and yet here I am, and now I'm almost obsessed with it. I want to find ways to engage students differently than before!"

Likewise, Kathy, a reading intervention teacher, said, "I was anti-technology, as far as

Table 1. Teachers' implementation of digital tools in content areas

Name	Age	Number of Years Taught	Content Area	Uses of New Literacies/Digital Technologies in Instruction
Anna	68	47	Academy of Reading (intervention program, grades 6–8)	Photo Story and Movie Maker to develop students' reading and writing fluency
Debbie	54	21	6th-grade Math 6th-grade Honors Math	Wiki for students' group work on understanding and constructing symmetrical designs
Kris	37	14	8th-grade ELA	Visual montage of SAT words on glogster.com
Mariah	24	1	8th-grade Social Studies/SC History	Analysis of historical documents using Wordle.net as a pre-, during-, and post-reading activity to visualize themes
Shelley	40	6	8th-grade ELA Honors & Inclusion	Demonstration of SAT words using visual media (Photo Story, collage, video)
Jerry	26	3	8th-grade English & Math Inclusion 8th-grade Pullout Resource	Use of handheld devices (smartphones, iPads, iTouch) to complete assignments
Sheryl	27	5	6th–8th-grade Health and Wellness	Use of flip cameras to record and analyze proper CPR techniques
Kathy	27	5	Tier 3 Reading Interventions (6th, 7th, and 8th Grades)	Using flip cameras to record and analyze reading fluency. Using e-readers to engage students in learning vocabulary
Maggie	66	13	World Cultures, Spanish—6th Grade	Recording of recipe creations using flip cameras and digital storytelling

readers [like Kindles] and players [like iPods], and anything like that goes. I never really saw a use for it, and I'd tell students to put it up. And now the kids and I love it!" Maggie, a Spanish and world cultures teacher, said, "Honestly, in the beginning [of the year] I thought, 'I'm not going to do that (whatever *that* was that you were sharing). I'm glad to have the recommendation, but it won't work for me; it won't work in my class.'"

Some of the teachers recognized the value of new literacies at the outset; they were just at a loss about how to implement them in their classrooms. Shelley noted, "I've always been open to these ideas, but my mindset didn't include them as a form of literacy, and I was overwhelmed with figuring out how to include them." Mariah, a first-year teacher, reflected, "I can download everything to an iPod, but really the question is, 'where does it come into play in the classroom?'"

CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

Teaching with Technology

In the article, teachers moved out of their comfort zones and added new literacies to their content area instruction. It was important that the teachers felt comfortable with the new literacies themselves. The ReadWriteThink.org Strategy Guides on "Teaching with Technology" identify, define, and provide examples of effective writing strategies and offer a list of resources related to each strategy.

- **Online Safety:** This Strategy Guide describes the strategies involved in ensuring that students understand how to be safe when they participate in online discussion and join social networks.
<http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/online-safety-30107.html>
- **Reading Online:** In this Strategy Guide, you will learn how online reading differs from offline reading and find strategies to build and reinforce the skills that online reading requires.
<http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/reading-online-30096.html>
- **Teaching with Blogs:** This Strategy Guide describes the processes involved in composing blogs in the classroom and in writing regular posts, or entries, that are published online.
<http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/teaching-with-blogs-30108.html>
- **Teaching with Glogster: Using Virtual Posters in the Classroom:** Why stop at paper and markers? With Glogster, a free, Web-based tool, students can develop virtual posters, including audio, video, text, hyperlinks, and images, and share their creations electronically.
<http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/teaching-with-glogster-using-30790.html>
- **Teaching with Podcasts:** This Strategy Guide describes the processes involved in composing and producing audio files that are published online as podcasts.
<http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/teaching-with-podcasts-30109.html>
- **Using Glogster to Support Multimodal Literacy:** Glogster, a Web 2.0 tool, supports development of students' multimodal literacy skills. This guide outlines techniques for critical evaluation and creation of multimodal texts.
<http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/using-glogster-support-multimodal-30789.html>

And Sheryl reasoned, “As a health teacher, I’m up on what’s hot and what’s not because that’s what kids are looking at, and I was eager to use this content in the classroom. I just wasn’t quite sure how.”

Yet, despite initial reservations about content and logistics, all of the teachers agreed with Debbie, a math teacher, who at the year’s end commented, “You know, my eyes are open now and I can’t go back. I have to go forward. Kids are using technologies on a daily basis, and these things motivate them, and they are developing ways to use them as part of their literacies. Now I have to find ways to tap into those things that keep and hold their interests.”

Risks: How Do Teachers Implement New Literacies and Digital Technologies Successfully?

Although they taught in the same school, the teachers as a whole did not know each other well. Over the year, they formed a rapport and a close bond, supporting each other’s classroom implementations. Reflecting on the experience, they advised others who want to include new literacies in their instruction to start small.

Start Small: The Concept of One

The teachers simultaneously felt excited and exhausted by the endless possibilities of ever-changing technologies. Maggie, an experienced teacher, said:

I used to get disheartened because there’s so much out there. But I now know that I can use what suits me, and I’m not allowing myself to be frustrated by the fact that I don’t know it all, and don’t have time to use it all. So I’m looking at what are the most important things that I want to accomplish and how I can utilize new literacies to improve the gains I’ve made with my students.

Maggie used this perspective to revamp a unit she taught to sixth graders in a world cultures class. First, she spent two months learning about and using a flip camera and creating her own digital stories, mostly about her life and her

grandchildren. Then, she applied her knowledge of digital storytelling to her instruction.

In the past, Maggie had students choose a country to research and write about in individual essays that they submitted for grading. She chose to apply her new literacies discoveries to this assignment, but rather than reworking the project with entirely new content, she started small. She tweaked the assignment by building upon the new literacies of visual image and design and by incorporating students’ interests in technologies and pop culture (see Vasudevan, 2006; Ware, 2006). She taught students how to use flip cameras and to create a digital story. Then she grouped students into teams and had them choose a country, conduct group research (including basic facts and pop culture, such as music, sports, and celebrities), and select a recipe from the country. The recipe allowed students to learn about the ingredients grown in the country and how people prepare them. The students worked collaboratively to create scripts and to design, direct, film, and edit their digital stories. Some groups dressed and acted like the local celebrities they had researched, giving background information on their country and presenting a brief cooking demonstration using the recipe. Several groups also included popular music from the country in the background. All students shared their digital stories during an in-class film viewing.

Maggie noted that she and the students enjoyed the project and learned more than when she had previously taught this assignment. She felt the success of her project was based upon taking small steps. Across the group, all the teachers felt that it was acutely important to set parameters and goals that allowed them to become proficient in one literacy, use it with one idea from their content area, and implement it in one class they taught. Tweaking an assignment by insert-

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ing new literacies was more effective than designing a new unit of study to include new literacies.

If at First You Don't Succeed . . .

The teachers unanimously felt that they developed flexibility and more open-minded outlooks as they expanded their repertoires of new literacies. As with all instruction, sometimes their ideas didn't work out the first time. But, indicative of excellent instructors, these teachers refused to be daunted by failures. Their resiliency often led

them to breakthroughs in their own understanding of their content and of how things work.

Mariah, for example, taught eighth-grade social studies. Although she was facile with technologies, she often felt overwhelmed with the pressures of being a first-year teacher and had difficulty implementing new literacies into her instruction. She aptly stated:

Knowing how to use the technology is very much the first step, but I don't think that knowing how to use it necessarily means you know how to teach it and use it to teach. Kind of like if you know all the content in the world, it doesn't mean that you're going to be a good teacher of that content.

Mariah became very strategic about accessing new literacies in her instruction. When students had difficulty understanding ideas, she noticed that it helped to revisit content using new literacies. One such example included Martin Luther King's speech, "I have a dream." In the first attempt at reading the speech aloud and then discussing it, students had difficulty understanding the themes. Mariah noted, "Some students read it and saw dream mentioned umpteen times. And some of them skimmed right over that and missed the theme entirely." Recalling her reading of others' work with new literacies

(Christel & Sullivan, 2010), she typed the first two paragraphs of the speech into a word cloud (www.wordle.net), and then shared the visual as a pre-reading schema activation activity. She said:

So I tried it again, as a revisit. I did it to see if it would change the way that students reacted to what [the speech] means. So, in Wordle, you see before you even read it what the main themes are going to be because it's been repeated and repeated. It gave everyone something to see that they could use to discuss from it.

Reflecting on the activity, Mariah said, "Using technologies has allowed me to present the same material in a different way with more engagement. . . . And it's allowing [students] a basis of understanding that allows [me] to go further rather than just handing them a piece of paper to answer 10 questions."

Similarly, Jerry said that risk-taking involved "good old flopping on your face!" As team teachers, Jerry and Shelley valued the flops because they provided opportunities both for students to assist in correcting the mistakes/errors and for progression along their own learning curve.

Rewards: Why Should Teachers Care about New Literacies and Digital Technologies?

The teachers understood the immediacy of invigorating their instruction with relevant new literacies. Debbie summed it up well, stating:

Teachers can't sit behind desks any longer. If we don't embrace new literacies, they will swallow us up because that's where students are going. We can't just put on blinders because that doesn't help anyone. We have got to pay attention to *now*.

Yet the concern of being left behind wasn't what spurred these teachers on. They were compelled by the rewards of teacher and student engagement, learning, and the changing relationships that they experienced.

Motivation and Engagement

Anna, a teacher of 47 years, experienced a shift in engagement and motivation when she incorporated new literacies in her instruction of

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striving readers. After completing prescribed assignments, Anna taught students how to create digital stories using the Photo Story photo presentation software. She was amazed at what the students created, from a story on the Iditarod to a recounting of the Holocaust to a video welcoming new students to the school. Anna commented:

These sorts of projects take longer to implement, but students have more fun and are more interested when standards are presented in ways that allow them to create with digital technologies . . . and teachers are having fun with it, too. I loved teaching them and then learning new ways of using the technologies from what students created.

Reframing Teacher/Student Relationships

Jerry and Shelley used new literacies to rework their study of SAT words with eighth-grade students. In the past, Jerry and Shelley presented SAT vocabulary via PowerPoint, which Jerry described as “efficient but boring.” Understanding the importance of pop culture in adolescents’ lives (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007) and of reading visual images (Siegel, 2006), they changed their approach to SAT words.

They created the “Text in the City” project whereby they brought in visual examples of SAT vocabulary that they saw or heard depicted in their environment. Advertisements, billboard slogans, song lyrics, and transcribed text from movies covered their bulletin boards. They then invited students to add to the examples. And as a year-end project, students created a visual montage of SAT words. Reflecting on this approach, Shelley said, “My job is so much more fun now.” Jerry concurred, stating:

We are now facilitators. The kids are doing the learning, *and* we are doing learning because we are working along side of them. . . . Everyone is engaged—creating—and learning useful skills for now and the future. And also, the collaboration aspect is central. The kids start asking us questions, and we all engage with concepts and start realizing that this is more than just school; this is about life!

More Heads Are Better than One

Moving from a traditional “by the book” approach to teaching to an idiomatic “by the Nook!” approach must be a collaborative endeavor. Teachers repeatedly observed that the community galvanized them to continue their work with new literacies in their content areas. Both Maggie and Kris felt that collaboration with a more experienced person is key. Maggie said,

Try to collaborate with someone who is a little bit further down the road. . . . Partner with someone who has already figured [some] stuff out, and [when] you have something to add to the conversation, too, [you’ll think] “Oh, that’s doable. It’s worth a shot!”

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Responsibilities: Now What Do We Do with This Knowledge?

The work of new literacies is always about making connections within and across contexts and people. It is the work of sharing and communicating. Teachers have a responsibility to share their knowledge and learning with others, beyond what they implement in their classrooms. That sharing should take place in multiple iterations (informal, face-to-face mentorship; small-group implementations; online discussion boards; conference presentations; websites, to name just a few). Growth occurs through sharing. Maggie said it well:

Once you have reached that success [with the implementation of some new tool], you must share it with someone else. Because really that is how we are going to succeed. It’s going to be from one person to another saying, “Just give this a try.” And then you can add, “And I’ll be glad to help you!”

For change that is meaningful and relevant to both teachers and students to occur in literacy instruction, we must move beyond taking risks

and reaping rewards as individuals. Teachers need to identify or create spaces where they can share what they've learned to further the process. It's not just a "nice to do"—it's a "must do."

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