Critical Literacy Isn’t Just for Books Anymore

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The following material, adapted from the new IRA book Getting Beyond “I Like the Book” (second edition), highlights how podcasting specifically and technology in general can be used as tools for thinking about the world and for learning and communicating.

There is no such thing as a critical literacy text. Rather, there are texts through which we may better be able to create spaces for critical literacies. The world as text, however, can be read from a critical literacy perspective. Comber, Nixon, and Reid (2007) note that in the teaching of literacy, our role as teachers includes extending the repertoires of literacy and communications practices available to our students. What this means is that issues and topics of interest that capture students’ interests as they participate in the world around them can and should be used as text to build a curriculum that has significance in their lives. How can technology provide new and interesting ways for students to communicate their ideas, questions, and understandings about the world around them?

Following is a brief look at how one teacher used podcasting with her second-grade students to engage them and show them that texts doesn’t just refer to books and to help them start understanding the concept that texts are socially constructed.

New Literacies: Podcasts in the Classroom

The children in Carol Felderman’s second-grade classroom used podcasting as a tool for conveying messages about projects they were doing or for sharing their thinking on topics or issues that were important to them, both locally, such as advocating for certain privileges, and globally, such as global warming or environmental issues.

After much deliberation, the children decided they wanted to share on the podcast those issues they had been taking up that focus on fairness and injustice, not to take the moral high ground but to make accessible to potential listeners—both kids and adults—how they have attempted to contribute to change in different spaces and places.

Steps for Preparing the Podcast

From Monday to Thursday the children generated ideas for the show, choosing themes or topics to
address based on their interests and inquiry questions. Some of these ideas were generated through their conversations and experiences outside of school, while other ideas were generated as they worked with various multimedia texts including children’s books. The children would write, revise, perform, and then revise again their various scripts until they had crafted a text they felt was meaningful to share with an audience. To do this they often asked for one another’s opinions. They worked collaboratively in small groups drawing on one another’s knowledge of particular topics or events and researching particular bits of information. They shared ideas with one another and helped one another in many ways. The parents/guardians played a role by helping with translating some of the episodes to Spanish.

Based on their interests and desires, as the children moved to doing different parts of the show, they mentored and ushered one another along. Knowledge was shared and distributed among the children, and groups were often cross functional. What this meant was that children did not always stick to working with the same group of classmates; they had no problems with creating and re-creating new groups depending on which part of the show they were interested in developing. Children who, at the start of the year, had difficulty accessing learning were able to take on different identities in the podcasting world that created space for them to participate in ways they hadn’t previously.

On Fridays, we would record the show one segment at a time. The children were quick to learn that using a digital recorder meant we could do as many takes as needed and that we could edit out extraneous artifacts and misreadings. After recording the show, I edited the pieces together over the weekend and then released the show on the following Monday. To listen to the show go to www.bazmakaz.com/100kids. Mondays were not only spent listening to the show as a group but also was a time to critique the audio and make adjustments to the upcoming episodes.

**What the Students Learned From the Experience**

For the children, producing, designing, and redesigning episodes and segments included in their podcast created a space to get at the notion that texts are socially constructed and that literacy is most definitely not a neutral technology. Through the issues they researched and talked about on the show, as well as through their own experiences in learning about how they each could contribute to this shared experience, they learned about ways they are positioned within certain social systems and the discursive practices or ways of being, doing, speaking, and acting that shape these and the ways in which they position others through the choices they make. They learned to use what the technology afforded them to reach and connect with people beyond the physical limitations of their school site. Connecting with people in other spaces and places allows children to hear the perspective of others and helps them make more informed decisions as participants of the world around them.

The use of new technology made accessible to them knowledge that they could not have gained in

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**Reflection Questions**

1. In what ways do you currently use technology in your setting? In what ways do your students currently use technology in their everyday lives? What kinds of resources, support, hardware, and software do you imagine you would need to explore the use of technology in your setting?

2. What might get in the way of your using technology? How might you get past this hurdle?

3. What sorts of technological tools are you interested in using? To do what kind of work and for what purpose?

4. In what ways are you interested in connecting with others via the Internet? For what reasons? For what purpose(s)?

5. What might you do differently with the use of technology? What might your students be able to do differently?
a pretechnological age. For instance, while using the Internet, they learned about what other young people have done in other spaces and places using social networking tools like podcasting.

Throughout this process, students drew from their cultural and semiotic resources, moved beyond more traditional ways of working with texts, including children’s literature and creating texts, and in the end the experience was transformative for many of them. Podcasting and new technologies became tools used for thinking about the world and for learning and communicating as well as representing some critical literacy work that takes into account the stuff of everyday life, everyday social issues and events, and children’s existing literacy practices, and that creates opportunities for engaging in social action projects.

References

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