Is It Still Considered Reading? Using Digital Video Storytelling to Engage Adolescent Readers

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Abstract: In order to comprehend and ultimately enjoy reading a text, a reader must first be engaged in it. However, many high school students have difficulty engaging with texts for a variety of reasons. This study was interested in innovative solutions to this problem and examined the educational and aesthetic value of a particular digital video reading aid designed to help engage high school students in reading literature. Results suggested that this reading solution did indeed engage these students in the text while also helping them comprehend, critically analyze, and enjoy the reading experience as a whole. Additionally, these students positively responded to a bonus literature discussion section, thereby suggesting their desire to co-construct meanings with other readers.

Keywords: adolescent, readers, reading aid, reading comprehension

To encourage all students to become readers, they need to assume the creative attitudes and literate behaviors of engaged readers. To be able to reflect on a reading event, engaged readers need to first decode, then comprehend, and finally transact with the text to construct meaning. However, less engaged readers are often unable to reflect on their reading as a result of lack of interest, poor reading skills, limited comprehension strategies, or a lack of personal experiences to use to construct meaning (Egan 1992; Hynds, 1997; Wilhelm 1995). How can nonengaged readers become more engaged in what they are reading?

Since I was interested in finding innovative solutions to this problem, the purpose of this article is to describe a digital video reading aid that was created to help adolescent readers engage in texts that are typically assigned in high school English classrooms (Malin 2006). Featuring a dramatic reading of a short story, the video used a combination of the text read aloud by an experienced storyteller alongside subtitles and annotations that guided the comprehension of the text. In particular, the annotations were either pictures or words that helped summarize key ideas being discussed in the text. By using this digital video, the readers in this study were able to experience the text independently, offering them the opportunity to fully engage with and enjoy the story. Although intended to help all readers engage with texts, the multimodal (i.e., visual, oral, and written) aspect of the video was primarily intended to help remedial readers, reluctant readers, and English language learners (ELLs) who needed various means of additional support and stimuli to connect with a text. To further the meanings that the viewers could create from their reading experience, the video also included a short historical context section and a literature discussion section that featured teenagers describing their responses to the story’s comprehension questions.

Using data collected from questionnaires (see appendix A) and guided classroom discussions with high school sophomores and seniors, I examined the educational and aesthetic value of this pilot digital video reading aid and investigated whether this video format helped students to comprehend, engage with, and ultimately enjoy reading an assigned text.

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Theoretical Framework

Benton (1983) argues that in order to engage with a text, a reader must create a "secondary world" in which he or she imagines, experiences, and elaborates on the story from within it. In this way, the engaged reader is a participant in the drama of the story rather than simply a spectator. Enciso adds that a reader is engaged when he or she enters into the world of the story and can vividly "imagine and interpret the characters, setting, events, and thematic possibilities of literary texts. [This state] includes a complex interplay of imaginative and intellectual processes that are typically private and elusive, yet critical to comprehension and pleasure in reading" (1992, 1). Without taking interest in the action of the story—that is, without being able to visualize particular settings or scenes or enact various character roles—a reader will not connect the story to his or her life and subsequently will not engage with the text or construct meaning from it. Therefore, students who are not engaged in the experience see reading as a passive transmission of information that does not evoke any sort of thoughtful ideas or feelings and thus serves little, if any, meaningful purpose in their lives (Enciso 1992; Hynds 1997; Wilhelm 1995).

How can nonengaged readers be encouraged to enter into the story world and, in turn, become engaged readers? As Enciso (1990) and others have posited, mental imagery or visualization of a story has many powerful and positive effects for readers and is vital for comprehension, engagement, and response. In his study of reluctant readers, Wilhelm (1995) found that many of his students did not “see” anything when they read, and that they therefore could not think about or experience the text. Jacob (1976) found that the major difference between good and poor readers was their ability to use imagery during a reading. Purcell-Gates (1991) also found that less proficient readers did not have strategies for envisioning text available to them that would allow them to enter into story worlds. This collective research shows that seeing or imagining the story world is necessary for engagement. As Eisner explains, “We cannot know through language what we cannot imagine. The image—visual, tactile, auditory—plays a crucial role in the construction of meaning through text. Those who cannot imagine cannot read” (1992, 125). Based on this understanding, educators need to employ ways to help readers visualize a story and, subsequently, enter into the story world.

Reading aloud to students may be one way to solve this problem. Read-alouds have been shown to be effective in helping young children to develop lifelong literacy skills and behaviors and in motivating older, reluctant readers (Beckman 1996; Erickson 1996; Fisher and Frey 2007; Greaney and Hegarty 1987). In fact, the findings of a commissioned national committee of reading experts showed that reading aloud to students is “the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading” and that reading aloud is “a practice that should continue throughout the grades” (Trelease 2002, 2).

Interestingly, several studies have shown how reading aloud is essential to adolescents’ positive feelings about reading and literature. For instance, Herrold, Stanchfield, and Serabian (1989) studied 1,700 adolescents and found that those to whom teachers read aloud experienced positive changes in their attitudes about reading. Likewise, Ivey and Broaddus (2001) found that in a survey of 1,765 adolescents, 62 percent identified teacher read-alouds as a favorite literacy activity. Worthy (2002) also found that intermediate grade students responded with interest when their teachers introduced new texts with a read-aloud.

As well as creating positive feelings about reading, another major advantage to reading aloud to adolescents is that they may then have access to texts that might otherwise be too difficult for them to read independently for remedial reasons, language differences, or lack of motivation. Many of the texts assigned in classrooms today are well above the reading level of most students and were written primarily for adult audiences (Applebee 1993; Trelease 2002). When a text is read aloud, the listener is not limited by the reading level of the piece. As such, the listener can actually enjoy the story—the single most essential determinant of lifelong reading experiences—by being able to imagine and experience the story world. The reader is also able to focus on listening comprehension, enrich his or her vocabulary, and employ background knowledge and experiences to engage with and respond to the text, all of which are considered aspects of “best practice” reading instruction (Trelease 2002). The storyteller is also able to model prosody (the use of rate, pitch, inflection, and tone) and demonstrate subtle language nuances that influence meaning-making (Fisher and Frey 2007; Pynte and Prieur 1996).

Another advantage to a digital video read-aloud for adolescents is the ability to incorporate a reading comprehension guide within the reading of the text. To do this, the storyteller (either the teacher or another gifted reader) reads the story and, at appropriate times during the video recording, he or she integrates commentary, questions, and ideas that help readers notice important details embedded in the text and keep them engaged as they listen to the story. The reading guide can be conducted orally within the reading of the story or, as in the case of this project, using graphics while the story is being read. As a third option, the storyteller can also instruct the reader to pause and refer to a written reading guide. Because readers are able to pause, replay, control the pace, and carry out suggested learning tasks, this type of reading guide could provide an instructional means to model literate thinking, help readers
practice critical thinking and metacognition skills, and ultimately enable readers to read and respond to a text independently. In other words, this type of integrated video book and reading guide could give students access to their own personal tutor—essentially creating a totally independent and engaging learning experience.

Therefore, read-alouds with embedded reading guides, such as the digital video that was considered in this study, may be able to enhance some adolescent students’ literacy achievement growth, because it can serve as an instructional bridge between engaging with literature and practicing important literacy skills, such as fluency, word study, comprehension strategies, inference strategies, summarizing, self-questioning, and self-monitoring.

Methods and Data Sources

The digital video in this study featured the short story “The Story of an Hour” (Chopin 1984), which was selected for its short length (7 minutes and 52 seconds) and its literary complexity. Data were collected from forty-seven high school sophomores and twenty-four high school seniors ranging academically from remedial to honors level in a suburban high school. Of the seventy-one students sampled, thirty-five were considered “academic” and twenty-one were considered “academically advanced.”

Using both a questionnaire and guided group discussion, I investigated the following:

1. What the students liked and disliked about the digital video
2. Whether or not they thought the dramatic reading was helpful in promoting engagement and interest in and understanding of the text
3. Whether or not they thought the book discussion section was helpful in encouraging their construction of deeper meanings

Before viewing the digital video, I introduced myself and explained that I wanted feedback about the value of the digital video as a possible reading aid. The students were given the questionnaire before their viewing to review the questions and prepare for the viewing. The students were then shown the two sections of the digital video on a large screen in the front of the classroom. Approximately 60 percent of the students sampled had previously studied this story in class. This percentage included all of the advanced and typical students and six of the remedial students. After their viewing, students were given eight minutes to complete the questionnaire. We then conducted a guided discussion for fifteen minutes to help further determine their responses.

Results

After coding and analyzing the data from the questionnaire and the transcripts from the guided discussion, I produced five major findings:

1. Remedial and ELL readers reported gaining more benefit from this solution (97 percent) than did typical (73 percent) or advanced readers (57 percent). This finding is significant because all of the typical and advanced readers had some familiarity with the story, as they had previously studied it in class. Because the story has a surprise ending, it is possible that the typical and advanced readers did not benefit as much as the remedial and ELL readers. To further understand the validity of the result and to better understand whether this solution does indeed help students to enjoy and comprehend the texts, another study is warranted in which all three subject groups have no previous encounters with the text.

2. 88 percent of the sampled students reported feeling “better prepared” to participate in classroom discussions. They mentioned that they were able to “read” the story independently and thereby begin to construct initial interpretations of it. Also, by viewing the literature discussion section, these students felt that they could anticipate some of the topics that would be addressed in their own classroom discussions and thus be more prepared to participate in them.

3. 58 percent of the students felt that the on-screen annotation aided their ability to critically examine the text’s various literary aspects before they discussed the story in class. Yet 63 percent of the students found this format for annotations distracting and difficult to follow. Of the students that found the annotations distracting thirty-one were ELL and remedial students, eight were typical students, and six advanced students. This finding is interesting, because most of the students who had not previously read the story for class found that their basic comprehension of the plot was impeded. This result leads me to consider technologically implementing the ability of a reader to “turn off” the annotations feature in a future solution so that he or she can first listen to the story and then view it again with the annotations.

4. 88 percent of the students sampled believed that reading in this way was an enjoyable experience and would like to have future experiences with reading in this fashion.

5. Students reported an overwhelmingly positive interest in the filmed literature discussion (96 percent on the questionnaire and a majority of responses during the guided discussion). They offered such comments as “my favorite part was the discussion... I liked seeing how other kids thought about the story... I like knowing different takes on a book” and “as a person
who mostly speaks Polish, [the discussion] was most helpful in making me understand it better... it was really cool.” Comments like these reflect students’ desire to participate in communal meaning making of texts in some way and a desire to see how others construct meaning from texts. Although they do encounter some discussions in class, the students felt that this format was a more relaxed and creative way to add meaning and interest to the text before participating in a discussion in the classroom.

Educational Importance

As the ultimate goal of all secondary reading programs is to “develop independent readers and learners” (International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English 2005), the results from this modest pilot study imply that video read-alouds do offer some students some of the support and tools needed to help guide them toward independent reading and comprehension of a text. In using this type of digital reading aid, readers were encouraged to enter the story world and participate fully with a text by being able to envision the drama of the story and thus actively construct personal meanings. More important, after constructing these personal meanings, readers were encouraged to extend their thinking by viewing a filmed discussion group. As the data from the transcriptions suggest, in viewing this type of discussion, those readers who did not formally offer their responses in a larger setting, such as a classroom, or who did not have many ideas to share felt that they might be more likely to contribute their insights in a similar group setting after hearing the digitally filmed discussion. The overwhelmingly positive interest in the filmed discussion also reinforced the importance of participating in a discussion about a text, even if one’s role is that of a listener, because this opportunity helps readers extend their understandings about a text.

Based on these findings, subsequent research projects should include a more detailed study of the responses of all levels of readers to filmed literature discussion groups and an expanded examination of the responses of remedial readers and ELLs to this type of digital reading aid. It would also be important to create alternative reading guides, such as an embedded oral guide that the storyteller leads, or an opportunity to connect the text to a written study guide. Additionally, the ability to “turn off” the annotations in order to simply engage with the story may be an important way to allow readers to customize their reading experience.

Although this solution is currently only at a testing stage, practitioners who want to use this type of reading solution with their students may be inclined to create their own video by replicating some of the successful aspects of this aid. By using an inexpensive “shoot and share” digital flip camera, a teacher can essentially film a discussion of several teachers or students discussing a text and easily upload it to a video-sharing Web site such as Youtube or Viddler. A teacher can also film him or herself reading a text and could interject verbal annotations or prompts so that students could more independently read and engage with the text and thereby prepare for a classroom discussion. These sites also often show an author reading his or her own text aloud, which could provide an opportunity for a reader to further extend his or her enjoyment of the text. Although the quality of the solution presented here was fairly professional, a teacher with a digital video recorder and a computer could create a useful, high-quality tool that his or her students would value and that would help them to independently comprehend a text and ultimately enjoy the reading experience.

REFERENCES

Appendix A

Questionnaire for “The Story of an Hour” and the Literature Discussion Group

1. What were three things that you liked about this video reading guide?
2. What were three things that you did not like about this video reading guide?
3. Would this product be helpful to you for your reading? Would you want to have this type of video available to help you read all of your assigned reading in English class? Why or why not?
4. Was the book discussion section helpful? Would you like to watch this type of discussion on other books that you were assigned in school?
5. Can you give any other information that might be helpful?
6. Which of the following would you consider yourself to be?
   a. English language learner
   b. Remedial reader
   c. Typical reader
   d. Advanced reader