

Using social networks and ICTs to enhance literature circles: a practical approach

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe and demonstrate how social networks such as *Facebook* and *Goodreads*, and information and communication technologies (ICTs) tools like laptops and iPods can support and enhance literature circles. The innovation described is implemented by the library and aims to promote reading for all students regardless of their reading ability. The approach seeks to encourage and support language learning through the use of ICT tools and social networks. It aims to stimulate participation and discussion outside the classroom.

Children's motivation to learn language and use it effectively at school is social (Vygotsky, 1962/1986; Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984). The social aspect of communication is critical in forming positive attitudes toward reading (Ruddell, 2005) (Powell-Brown, 2006).

The approach brings English teachers and teacher-librarians together to tap student interest in social networking and their ICT expertise. In other words, it aims to motivate them through connecting more closely with their worlds and ways of learning. Expected outcomes focus on better literacy skills through helping students

- make sense of what they are reading;
- communicate more easily and effectively;
- develop the skills and mindsets necessary to become life-long learners;
- enjoy reading and learning.

By encouraging reading as a pleasurable activity we hope to improve our students' reading skill levels. We believe this is more likely to happen when they feel empowered through becoming better readers and so develop a greater desire to read and meet their own information needs.

Introduction

This paper has four sections. The first section describes the school context. The second section details the innovation, including its rationale, structure, technical needs and implementation strategy. This includes the need to support literature circles, genre groups and other varied reading initiatives. The third section draws on observation to detail the impact social networks and ICTs had on literature circles. The impact includes success in terms of student involvement, outcomes and enjoyment. The final section analyses the findings and makes some recommendations for the role of the library and teacher-librarian.

Context

Renaissance College, located in Hong Kong, is a Year 1-13 International Baccalaureate (IB) world school, which has grown from 850 to 1,800 students in under four years. The vast majority of the students are EAL (speaking English as an additional language). Three programs are offered: (Primary Years Program (PYP); Middle Years Program (MYP); and Diploma Program (DP). Growth is continuing and we expect to reach our capacity (2,100 students) within the next couple of years. The entire College campus offers wireless Internet access - in Hong Kong there is no download limit. The secondary school is working towards one-to-one laptop implementation. At this point we estimate about 75% of secondary students bring their laptop to school. Students who don't have a laptop can borrow one from the ICT Service Centre.

Rationale

While literature circles are not a new concept, keeping the model current in the 21st century involves adapting the traditional model to include digital tools that support and attract 21st century learners. The traditional literature circle program at Renaissance College is well established in Years 7 and 8. This program has had a positive effect on student motivation to read over the last five years and has been widely supported by staff, parents and the College leadership team.

The new model involving social networking and ICTs was not designed because the traditional model was failing, but because we wanted to 'stay ahead of the game' and further meet the needs of our growing EAL population. In short, we wanted to stay in touch with student interests in order to utilise their increased love of reading so we could maximise achievement in more formal outcomes.

This revised literature circle model was launched for four main interrelated reasons. The first reason was the need to improve the language awareness and capacity of EAL students. The second reason was to provide a forum for students to discuss book titles in their own space and time outside the classroom. The third reason was to try to harness the students' addiction to social networking and all things technological. This goal required us to become much more in touch with our students.

The fourth reason was to support the overall school purpose and raise the instructional visibility of the library. The main purpose of the school and the library is to improve student learning and develop students with global intelligence. Critical literacy is an essential skill for 21st century learners to develop in order to become information literate citizens. Our students need the ability to evaluate, read between the lines, and the skill to unpack meaning from texts. Literature circles strengthen critical literacy skills through activities that develop the students' ability to critically analyse text. As students work together to discuss and share ideas they become involved in deconstructing parts of the text, a valuable critical literacy skill (Dawson & Fitzgerald, 1999).

In order to prepare for the 'new' literature circles we identified and implemented a number of strategies:

Appeal

Given that the great majority of our students are EAL, titles needed to be carefully selected if they were to appeal and create curiosity and interest. We therefore chose titles with characters, settings and issues that students could relate to. Book covers needed to be current and exciting to tempt or invite the reader in.

Accessibility

The lexical density of the text needed to suit a range of reader abilities (Polias, 2007). In order to select the most appealing titles we drew on the library's ongoing quest to identify books that appeal strongly to our students. In addition to this we talked a lot to our students about their 'favourite reads', read book reviews, talked to our teaching colleagues about books, and referred to bestseller lists.

Form

Because EAL and Special Educational Needs (SEN) students tend to access texts that may be too difficult, we focused very much on the selection and provision of audio formats. We chose the MP3 file format over CD format because of its lasting quality and easy portability. Once downloaded, files can be safely stored and loaned via an iPod without scratching or damage to the file.

Hitting the Web

In traditional literature circles, students discuss titles during their weekly meeting. In an attempt to expand these discussions and appeal to the students' connection to social networking we introduced *Goodreads*. This is a free website with built-in social networking capacity where readers can keep a log of their personal reading (past, current and future), post reviews, join discussion groups and view everyone else's bookshelves – all on line.

The next section briefly outlines how we implemented these strategies in Years 7 and 8.

Implementation

Overview of process

This section provides an overview of the whole process. This is broken down week by week in the following sections.

Year 7 students were introduced to the new literature circles model. Students were asked to select a book from a number of specially chosen titles. Many of these were available in both text and audio form. They then formed small temporary groups of not more than five or six students, based on book choice. Five groups read different titles. Groups met once per week to discuss their books. Over a six-week period students aimed to read two books and spent three weeks on each. Students were given special literature circles bookmarks (which included discussion ideas) and post-it-notes to mark particular pages for discussion or comment. Students were introduced to *Goodreads* during week two.

Year 8 students were introduced to the new style of literature circles. They had experience with the traditional form of literature circles while in Year 7, but now instead of groups reading the same title, students read from the same genre. While continuing to focus on the enjoyment angle we added the extra dimension of discovering the features of the different genres. Students compared genre features and discussed their reading experience. Students were introduced to *Goodreads* during week two.

Prior organisation

After the titles were selected

- books organised into genres and marked with a genre spine label for easy identification (for Year 8)
- literature circles titles (6 copies) collected (for Year 7)
- prepared audio resources (ensure library staff are trained)
- literature circles and genre bookmarks printed
- Post-it notes purchased
- *Goodreads* account set up and lists of books added
- *Goodreads* groups set-up and a discussion starter added

Week 1

- a selection of titles for five different genres/groups were placed on the table with bookmark
- a brief introduction of the genres/titles on offer was given, including what students should expect
- students browsed the five tables of books and decided which table they would like to join. Tables were limited to six persons so students needed to choose accordingly
- before leaving students estimated how much they would need to read per week to finish the book in three weeks
- students were asked to bring their laptops for the remainder of our meetings

Week 2

- students were introduced to *Goodreads* and asked to open an account using their school email address as I have set up group discussions to only allow Renaissance College students as members
- students visited the link below to see how it works and how to sign up:
http://www.goodreads.com/about/how_it_works
- students added the book they were currently reading to their bookshelf (They were able to add as many other books that they had read or wish to read in the future)
- students added Renaissance College as a friend on *Goodreads*
- students added friends from their class and members of their group
- students added a star rating when a title was read

Week 3

- students added a short comment about the book just finished on *Goodreads*
- students located and joined their group.
- students commented on their book title with friends who were reading the same book/genre

Week 4-6

Students repeated the process above and engaged in face-to-face discussions before updating their *Goodreads* comments. Students in Year 8 could read as many titles as they liked within the three-week period and within the same genre. This allowed plenty of opportunity for keen readers to continue with exciting series or favourite authors.

Impact of social networks and ICTs

Laptops, iPods and the social network *Goodreads* have added a valuable dimension to an already successful literature circle model. I was keen to take this model to the next level and try to incorporate an opportunity for discussion outside the classroom. Many of our students have *Facebook* accounts and enjoy networking socially. As a wireless laptop school they have ample Internet access and are keen users of technology.

Although very tentative at this stage, there are some indications that students who are at first attracted to audio books will also be drawn to printed text. As one student who used mainly audiobooks during the circles commented some time after:

I think literature circles make me read more books – it was fun.

Students enjoyed setting up their *Goodreads* accounts and adding titles to their shelves. As *Goodreads* allows users to set up groups I was able to tailor these groups to suit our needs. Students could join a group and follow the discussion with others in the group as well as add new comments. Students developed deeper understandings of their books by comparing problems, mysteries, characters and events. The addition of *Goodreads* certainly appears to have created a flurry of activity outside the classroom and extended the opportunity for literary analysis. Students have also enjoyed adding their 'past reads' and this has enabled students, the English Department and Library to gain a snapshot of the most popular books being read by our students. Wright (2009) supports this finding by suggesting that

Books now come to market in an increasingly open, networked environment where their fates are determined not by newspaper reviewers alone, but also by the collective judgment of readers on Amazon and social networking sites such as *Goodreads*, *LibraryThing*, and *Shelfari*, where visitors upload and share lists of books in their libraries, post reviews and ratings, and find like-minded readers.

Data shows that Year 7 students benefited in many ways from the new literature circles (see Appendix 1). Borrowing statistics for Year 7 and 8 have increased, especially with literature circle titles. Another indicator of success is that students are keen to read the second, third and subsequent titles in a series. Interestingly in their remarks, they did not comment specifically on either the social networking or ICT aspects; rather, they focused on the relational benefits. This may not mean that the technology was unimportant but that it is such a part of their learning and lives that they no longer distinguish it as a purposeful learning mechanism. It has been interesting to note their continued use of *Goodreads* even after the end of the six-week meeting time. Students continue to add titles and comments to their accounts providing the Library with ongoing data. At the time of writing we have 257 friends on *Goodreads*.

Messages for librarians

A number of lessons can be extracted from our experiences with the 'new' literature circles.

Read and learn

There are many advantages and no apparent disadvantages to running literature circles. Students enjoy the opportunity to have some choice in their reading selection and not having to submit formal book reports. Emphasis is placed on reading for fun. Students get to do 'real' reading followed by 'real' responding as they participate in thoughtful discussions. When students are writing their comments on books in their own space and time, it's amazing what emerges. I have been astounded by the depth and insight of some. This frank and honest review was posted by one of our 13 year-old students.

**** Spoiler Alert ****

Ugh. That's the first word that comes to mind when I think of this book. So be prepared to see a lot of it.

This was a deep, deep book that delves into the mind of a talented, but unnoticed boy who grows jealous of his best friend. Gene, the main character of the book, is over shadowed by his athletic, handsome, popular, charismatic, best friend, Finny. Obviously, this causes a lot of one sided tension between them. To make matters worse, Finny often tries to drag Gene away from his studies. In a fit of jealousy, Gene madly reasons that Finny can not bear the fact that Gene is smarter than him, and is trying to distract him so that Finny may top him in class as well. This tension builds up, until finally, he vents by, basically, shoving him off a tree.

I didn't really find this book to be too bad, but neither was it very good. A majority of the characters seemed exaggerated, and didn't seem real enough. Ironically, the most believable character, for me, was Leper, a sheltered boy who goes to war, and cracks under pressure.

I'm certain that this was a wonderful book, and a great read. For adults. But for 13, 14 year olds? Definitely not.

Stay flexible

The opportunity for personal responses such as the above assists with the development of emotional intelligence. It is my belief that teacher-librarians need to understand their users' needs and stay flexible enough to meet these needs as they shift. Flexibility is important in terms of technological advances, student interest and cultural appropriateness. Some students prefer to chat online and surf the Internet rather than pick up a book; some prefer to play computer games and download files; others prefer to talk in groups and just hang-out; while some want a quiet place to study or read a book (Boyd, 2006). It is important to take these differences into account when choosing literature circle titles. The right book at the right time is an essential ingredient for great literature circles. The Library at Renaissance College has used *Facebook* as another useful social network to promote titles. Recently we have been adding book trailers to our Library *Facebook* account to promote book titles. Book trailers are a great tool to use for creating a buzz about new release novels. As the website *The Book Gryffin* (n.d.) states

Book trailers are a valuable and underused tool for engaging reluctant readers. Like movie trailers, book trailers are short audio visual previews of books. They are an exciting way to present a synopsis for a book.

Take it further

The development of the new approach to literature circles was an attempt for us to 'push the envelope', and next year we will take this even further. The plan for next year's literature circle classes is to involve students in creating their own book trailers to further link ICT and critical literacy skills.

Work together

One final ingredient of successful literature circles is collaborating with teachers. This is important but certainly not always easy. Teacher-librarians need to consciously and patiently invite teachers to engage in

joint selection and planning. The visibility and influence of the library is best done through improving outcomes and actively collaborating.

Conclusion

The aim of the new literature/genre circles was primarily for enjoyment and outcomes. Although it was primarily a time for students to read for pleasure without having to worry about completing a book report at the end, it would also appear that such an approach has created a more subtle path to improving their reading ability. This view is supported by Dawson and Fitzgerald (1999) who state "Literature circles shift the reading process to a more active form of reading, bringing the pursuit of knowledge, underpinned by skills and understandings, alive".

Literature circles using ICTs and drawing on social networking structures appear to be successful at promoting reading because of their simple and flexible structure. The fact that students have some freedom of choice and an opportunity to articulate group understandings in a non-threatening (face-to-face and virtual) manner would seem to be the key to success. Some students have even commented that they enjoyed the discussion more than the book.

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Appendix 1

Literature circle feedback from 7D

Interesting comments from students

- I asked inquiring questions
- I responded to other peoples' comments and compared the book to my life
- I need to balance my reading by reading every day
- the discussions were very entertaining because we had jokes
- I enjoyed the discussion more than the book
- I wish I could read faster
- hearing other comments helped my understanding
- I learned that reading and writing are an important part of life
- I learned to get along with other group members

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- our discussions were not always on task but I think it was okay
- I enjoy reading and I hope we have literature circles again
- I think literature circles make me read more books – it was fun
- we worked in a group and we spoke in English
- I asked many questions as I didn't understand the book very much
- I listened to what other people said and helped them understand things in the book
- sometimes group members hadn't done the required reading which limited discussion
- some people finished the book in one week
- we were very 'into' the discussion
- I think it would be better to use a notebook rather than post-it notes
- the book was good but sad
- we helped each other with difficult words
- next time I choose a book I will read the blurb on the back of the book so I know what the story's about