TEACHING TIP

BEYOND FUN AND GAMES

Using an iPad as a Tool for Critical Response

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It's a well-known fact that electronic devices—iPads, Kindles, Nintendo DSs, PS Vistas, and iPhones, just to name a few—are constantly in the hands of young children. At a recent birthday party for a 2-year-old we know, we counted no fewer than seven toddlers begging their parents for "Phone. Game. Please." These rapid changes in technology have a profound impact on the way we read and write; a joint position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media (2012) stated, "Society is experiencing a disruption almost as significant as when there was a shift from oral language to print literacy, and again when the printing press expanded access to books and the printed word" (p. 2). However, despite the omnipresence of technology in our daily lives, print books and paper-and-pencil literature responses continue to dominate in many classrooms.

While there has been an effort to increase the availability of technology in schools, teachers often don't have the tools to leverage technology for authentic and meaningful purposes. Instead, electronic devices tend to be most frequently used to develop basic technical skills (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010). This article aims to add to the conversation about effective classroom use of technology by exploring three ways in which students can use iPad applications (apps) to generate critical responses to texts.

What Is a Critical Response?

Critical text responses come from a tradition of critical pedagogy in which students are asked to read the word and the world (Freire, 1970). In this light, readers carefully explore the word (texts) in an effort to extrapolate and critique issues of power and equity. Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) argued that there are four major dimensions of critical literacy: (a) disrupting the commonplace, (b) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (c) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (d) taking action and promoting social justice. By leveraging these dimensions in literacy instruction, students and teachers have the ability to move instruction in a more critical and socially conscious direction (Wood & Jocius, 2013).

In classrooms where critical literacy is being employed, students learn to be text critics (Luke & Freebody, 1990) and begin to "determine relationships between their ideas and the ideas presented by the author of the text" (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 53). Students have the opportunity to give voice to the voiceless, situate themselves in alternate perspectives, and challenge the status quo.

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We believe that the use of critical literacy practices with children helps to build powerful readers who "do more than just enjoy books; they also question what books have to say by digging deeply and thinking broadly" (Leland, Lewison, & Harste, 2013, p. 12).

Developing Critical Perspectives

Taking on a critical perspective is an intentional decision to challenge societal norms. The development of critical awareness must be taught and nurtured. Leland, Lewison, and Harste (2013) argued that

> It behooves us to prepare readers who can unpack stories and who know how to read in between and beyond the lines of stories, not only to comprehend them but to create counter stories that illuminate alternate ways of being and acting in the world. (p. 7)

Therefore, we as teachers must recognize the importance of our role as developers of critical readers and responders. We, in many cases, are the catalysts for the development of critical perspectives in our classrooms.

Pause and Ponder

- How are you currently using technology in your classroom? In what ways is technology being used as an integral part of the learning experience?

- Reflect on the ways you currently have students respond to literature. How can you integrate technology into reader response?

- How can you leverage students' interests and technological expertise as a tool for learning? What might the benefit of integrating technology into the learning experience be for students?

Technology as a Tool for Readers

While technology is sometimes viewed as a supplement to "regular" reading and writing instruction, there are numerous benefits to a more integrated approach in which reading and writing are inextricably tied to digital tools. First, technology can support and enhance students' experiences with texts during the reading process. Digital tools such as text-to-speech (TTS), hyperlinked dictionaries, just-in-time vocabulary support, and enhanced e-books can increase students' volume of reading and create more strategic and self-sufficient readers (Dalton & Jocius, 2013).

Digital tools also open up new opportunities for literature response. As students craft responses from a wide range of images, sounds, music, texts, and other expressive forms, they have more opportunities to develop personal and critical connections to texts. Finally, digital spaces have created new spaces to collaborate and share information, which will hopefully allow for more open discussions of social and political issues that are present in society and reflected in literature.

Three Apps for Critical Response

In the following sections, we present examples of how three iPad apps were leveraged for students' critical text responses. Allen and Nicholas (pseudonyms) are second- and third-grade African American male students, respectively, who participated in a tutoring program with Summer (first author) in which they read and responded critically to children's literature.

One method of critical response is creating an original text that calls out specific social issues in another text. For example, students could generate an
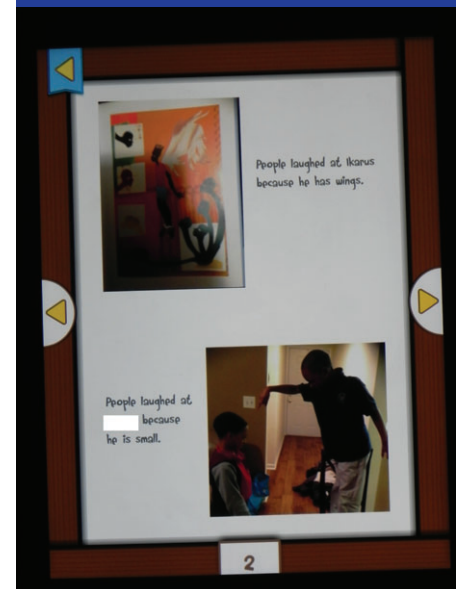
original skit that counters injustices presented in a text, create an informational text that highlights key issues and calls for change, or make an audio or visual representation of key themes and issues from the text.

Storybook Maker

In the tutoring program, Allen and Nicholas decided to create an informational text on the importance of standing up to bullies. Their text was created in response to the story *Wings* (Myers, 2000), in which a boy named Ikarus is regularly teased in school and in his neighborhood because of his wings. He becomes very sad and withdrawn until a young girl stands up for him and tells him his wings are beautiful. After Allen and Nicholas discussed the story, they used the Storybook Maker app to create an informational e-book.

What Is Storybook Maker? According to the developers, Storybook Maker is an interactive app that encourages writing and story creation (see video

Figure 1   Opening Page of Allen & Nicholas' E-book

description at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ms3lKtdIJxA). Children can make, illustrate, and narrate e-books on topics of their choice, and the e-books can be published in three different formats: (a) a PDF document without interactivity, (b) a multimedia book, or (c) a book in the public Storybook Maker library to share with users around the world.

Critical Response With Storybook Maker. Allen and Nicholas's e-book, "Being Laughed At," connects their own experiences of others laughing at them with Ikarus's experience in *Wings*. The page shown in Figure 1 states, "People laughed at Ikarus because he has wings. People laugh at Nicholas because he is small." The students chose to use visuals from the text, as well as their original images, to support the meaning of their words.
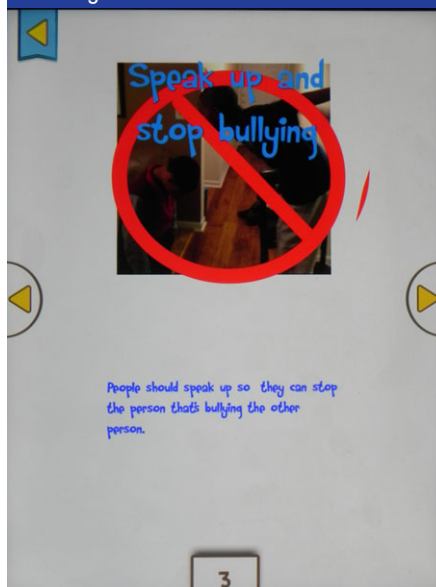
In Figure 2, you can see how the students used both words and images to challenge the social issue of bullying. They used the universal symbol for "do not" or "no" overlaid on a photo of one student bullying another, which carries meaning and communicates their message that bullying must stop. The students go on to express, in words, both the action that must take place ("speak up and stop bullying") and why it is important to take that action ("so they can stop the person that's bullying").

While retelling has its own merits, the task given to students here was not to retell the story but to critically analyze in order to present a message to others about the social issue presented in literature.

Croak.it

Vasquez and Felderman (2013) emphasize the importance of authentic purposes and authentic audiences for critical literacy work. In classrooms, our conversations about books are often

Figure 2   Allen & Nicholas Use Electronic Media to Promote Their Social Justice Message

limited to those within our immediate space, yet students often have profound things to share that could benefit our world and society. So, for their response to *Feathers and Fools* (Fox, 1989), a story showing the dangers of fearing others because of difference, Allen and Nicholas created a podcast to share with others.

What Is Croak.it? Croak.it is a podcasting app that "makes it easier than ever to express yourself whenever the mood strikes" (see www.croak.it for complete description). Podcasting is a quick and effective way of allowing students' voices to extend beyond the classroom walls. Users can upload up to a 30-second audio recording and share their "croaks" with family, with friends, on social networks, and with the Croak.it community.

Critical Response With Croak.it. After having a rich discussion about the story *Feathers and Fools* and discussing the importance of accepting differences,

Allen and Nicholas created a podcast. This was not a writing assignment; the students did not write out what they would say. Instead, they discussed potential comments and questions before recording their podcast. We mention this because writing is often used as a gatekeeper for digital tasks in classrooms, but digital tools can be used for idea generation and creation and as a forum for demonstrating understanding and performance. In this case, students planned and presented their ideas using only digital tools and verbal interaction.

The maximum croak length of 30 seconds initially created a challenge for the boys as they planned their podcast. In their discussion of *Feathers and Fools*, they made many strong connections between the issues stated in the text and issues of racism and civil rights. For example, Nicholas critically examined influence and the importance of fighting against injustice, saying, "If the peacocks were still alive, they might tell him (the baby peacock) to fight the swan."

The podcast itself focuses on key themes from the story. In the final version (creating it took multiple tries), the boys said that "*Feathers and Fools* is about making friends together." They then discussed the battle that ensued and shared how, in the end, "there was a peacock and a swan and they were friends." This response highlights a key theme of the story: hate can lead to destruction, but friendship can prevail in the end.

However, one of the greatest benefits of the podcast format is the potential to share with authentic audiences. Every time Summer saw Allen and Nicholas after creating their podcast responding to *Feathers and Fools*, "How many people have listened to our croak?" was the first question they asked. As the numbers of listens climbed, both Allen and Nicholas beamed at the notion that there were other people, people they did

TAKE ACTION!

1. Choose high-interest children's books that present issues of power and equity.

  a. Does the selected text provide an opportunity to disrupt the commonplace, focus on sociopolitical issues, interrogate multiple viewpoints, or take social action?

  b. Consider the lived experiences of your students and people within your community as you select books.

2. Preread the selected book and consider how this text will be shared with the class. Will you present the critical theme (e.g., race, gender, class), or will students have the opportunity to discover the critical theme themselves? In what ways will you support the critical discussion of the book?

3. Determine how you would like students to critically respond to the book. What technology will be used? Do you have the technology and apps needed? Will this be a group or individual response activity? What probing questions or activity prompts will provided to children to help them think and respond critically?

4. During read-aloud, provide students an opportunity to discuss the text with you and their peers. What questions can help guide students to the critical response? How will you support peer discussion?

5. Model the use of technology to create a critical response. While students are generally quite proficient using technology, it is vital that teachers take the time to model exactly how the technology is to be used for reader response. For older students, consider creating user guides that give step-by-step directions on how to use particular apps and devices.

6. Allow students the opportunity to use technology to respond critically to texts.

not even know, who were listening to their podcast. (You can listen to Allen and Nicholas's podcast at croak.it/h/mcid531e2e43bd419.)

Fotobabble

Analyzing multiple (and often opposing) viewpoints is a way for students to critically think about the ideas within texts. In children's literature, illustrations often provide a rich context for considering multiple viewpoints, as there are characters presented in the visual displays to whom the author has not given voice. Therefore, readers have the opportunity to animate and explore these voiceless characters. With this in mind, Allen and Nicholas used the Fotobabble app to give voice to different characters in the story *Uncle Jed's Barbershop* (Mitchell, 1998).

What Is Fotobabble? Fotobabble (www.fotobabble.com) is an app that allows users to "capture and share mobile photo and audio content on location and in real time." Users can take a photo or use an existing one from their photo libraries, then record voices over the photo. This app provides the opportunity for presenting an image and talking extensively about the image for others to hear.

Critical Response With Fotobabble. Allen and Nicholas' task was to consider the multiple viewpoints of the characters in *Uncle Jed's Barbershop*. In this story, Uncle Jed, the only Black barber in his county during the Jim Crow era and the Great Depression, saves money in the hope of building his own barbershop. However, he postpones that dream when his great-niece becomes deathly ill and needs an expensive surgery. The illustrator depicts a scene in which the family is in the colored waiting room, waiting to be seen by the doctor.

Figure 3   Students Use Fotobabble to Represent Missing Voices

The author's words come from the perspective of the great-niece and do not give voice to the family members depicted in the waiting room scene. So, Allen and Nicholas selected four of the characters from this illustration to whom they wanted to give voice, and they named and labeled each character. In skit form, they presented what they believed to be each character's viewpoint.

This is what was recorded on their Fotobabble (see Figure 3 for corresponding image):

> "'When are the White people going to be done?' said Shelvin."

> "'You have to pay me 300 dollars!' said Dr. Albert."

> "'How many more White people are there?' said Bernard."

> "'That's a bad man! Three hundred dollars for what?' said Gru."

> "'We don't have 300 dollars, uh, Dr. Albert! We're broke!' said Shelvin."

> "'Well, get out of here!' said Dr. Albert with a loud voice."

In order to give the characters voice, Allen and Nicholas had to consider the feelings and thoughts of those who were being mistreated. They had to understand and process the social context in which these characters were operating and consider how each one might feel in this situation. This short skit may seem like a just fun activity, but students actually go much deeper, analyzing the power of positioning and the influence of power.

Conclusion

We live in an age in which technology undergirds most of our daily happenings. When developing classroom activities, we must account for this ever-changing world. As Leland, Lewison, & Harste (2013) state, "extending stories by inviting children to use technology, art, music, drama, dance, and mathematics not only gives students the opportunity to think deeply but insures access to literacy for more students" (p. 136). With this in mind, we can hopefully open up spaces where out-of-school literacies are valued, where students' voices can be heard, and where critical pedagogies and literacies can be explored.

However, we must remember that digital devices are not magic wands that instantly turn literary responses into critical responses. Like paper and pencils, technology is a tool, and it's what teachers and students do with the tool that matters. It is our hope that educators will continue to create and expand the ways in which we are using technology to support our young readers, writers, and creators.

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MORE TO EXPLORE

- Critical Literacy in Practice (CLIP) Podcast (www.clippodcast.com): "An on-demand Internet broadcast on critical literacy as it is practiced and talked about in different spaces and places."
- ReadWriteThink lesson plan on critical literacy by Theodore Kesler (www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/seeing-multiple-perspectives-introductory-30792.html): This lesson plan serves as an introduction to critical literacy for elementary students. It could easily be expanded to include a digital critical response.
- Leland, C., Harste, J., Ociepka, A., Lewison, M., & Vasquez, V. (1999). Exploring critical literacy: You can hear a pin drop. *Language Arts, 77*(1).
  - The authors provide a list of books that can be used to foster critical conversations about issues of power and social justice.
- Vasquez, V. (2004). *Negotiating critical literacies with young children*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
  - Vivian Vasquez draws on her personal experiences in the classroom to show how critical literacy can emerge from everyday conversations with prekindergarten students.