

Technology and Literacy: Perfect Together

Ask a student to describe the plot of the book he or she has just read for class, and chances are you will receive a blank stare in response. Ask the same student to describe the plot of the latest video game or app sensation, and you may be overwhelmed by the excited flood of words pouring forth in response. Technology is here to stay, and as teachers, we need to embrace this as an additional tool of connecting with our students to improve their literacy.

As a literacy specialist who works primarily with middle and high school students, I am well aware of the growing disconnect between the printed word and my students' virtual world. Students complain they don't have time to read the novel assigned for language arts, and parents complain about the time their children spend on social media or online gaming.

However, technology can be an aid to improving the literacy of struggling and reluctant readers. The key is being able to incorporate media literacy into our classrooms in such a way that we not only instruct, but also inspire the curiosity and discernment our students need for success in the 21st century. The new literacy is not limited to traditional forms of printed text, but encompasses a wide range of media forms and constructs.

Students who regard themselves as non-readers may actually be avid and proficient consumers of text. They just don't regard checking email, researching a topic of interest, blogging, or engaging in an online discussion of their favorite graphic novel as literacy-based activities. Using all of that information, students make value judgments, infer explicit and intrinsic meanings, and evaluate the effectiveness of the messages. They do all of these things intuitively, but do not identify them as literacy-based activities. It is up to teachers to make that connection for our students. Once students

recognize the literacy skills they already possess and use in one context, they are able to transfer that same skill set to an academic setting. Technology allows teachers the flexibility of presenting an unfamiliar topic in a student-friendly manner that poses a high-level of success. It is much easier to guide struggling readers through a lesson on inference using a 100-word tweet or text than a multi-page essay. Students may even assign different meanings to the same tweet, leading to discussion of miscommunications and how personal experiences shape our perceptions.

Technology also helps improve literacy through adaptive devices that enable students to personalize their reading experience. Online history textbooks, for example, feature hyperlinks to more in-depth and timely discussions of historical events. Online math texts include video tutorials. English Language Learners can read their textbooks online translated into their native languages, enabling them to understand the academic content even as they work through the intricacies of the English language. Struggling readers can use audio books to help them keep on pace with their classmates. Technology allows teachers to personalize the instructional needs of their students, creating a more positive and successful atmosphere within the classroom.

Literacy is not confined to the printed text, nor should we limit our students in such a manner. They need to develop their literacy skills across all areas of mass communication, through the social networks, and be able to navigate the internet to discern fact from fiction, and gauge the reliability of their informational sources. While I firmly believe in the value and power of books and the printed word, I also believe that we must teach our students the value and power of technology as well.