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Technology in Literacy Education: Stories about Struggling Readers and Technology

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## Stories About Struggling Readers and Technology

Rebecca Anderson, Ernest Balajthy

### Electronic Text

Rachel (all names are pseudonyms), a first-year second-grade teacher is excited about the upcoming year. She acknowledged that she spent an unusual amount of her summer vacation locating e-books for her students, especially her special needs students. When her principal explained that she would have five English-language learners (ELLs) and seven special education students, including two gifted students, in her class, she immediately knew she would have students with a wide range of reading levels. She remembered her professors in graduate school emphasizing the importance of special needs students reading a lot, and reading with the “just right” books (Allington, 2001), meaning the books are on the students’ reading level and of interest to them.

Because Rachel’s budget didn’t allow her to purchase very many bound books, and because she knows that this generation of students is more inclined to read online, she wanted to feel confident that she could match her students with the “just right” online books. She went about this in a very systematic way. First, she found the students’ reading levels. Then, she identified sources of electronic texts and e-books (Johnson, 2001) and determined their reading levels. The following is her current list for electronic texts and e-books:

- The International Children’s Digital Library—[www.childrenslibrary.org](http://www.childrenslibrary.org)
- Between the Lions: Public Television—[pbskids.org/lions](http://pbskids.org/lions)
- Classics for Young People—[www.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/storclas.html](http://www.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/storclas.html)
- Project Gutenberg—[www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org)

- Talking Book Library—[www.talkingbooklibrary.net/Matrix.htm](http://www.talkingbooklibrary.net/Matrix.htm)

### Literature Discussion Blogs

Susan is an administrator in an urban school project aimed at helping African American children who are struggling with literacy to achieve long-term academic goals. She noticed that her fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade students had little or no exposure to multiethnic trade books. Encouraging reading of such books could expand their engagement and time-on-task in literacy-related activities.

During a busy summer of finding and reading good books, Susan developed a list of about 25 books centered on African American characters that would be appropriate for her students in terms of reading level and content, and that dealt with issues of relevance to urban youngsters. She created a list with a brief description of each book and a picture of the cover and posted it on her project’s website. She was also able to find funding to buy multiple copies of the books to put in the project’s classroom library. At the same time, she arranged with a local college’s teacher education department to identify preservice teachers willing to act as reading partners with the children. In pairs, the preservice teachers set up blogs using WordPress ([www.wordpress.com](http://www.wordpress.com)). (See our earlier column for more information about blogs: Boling, Castek, Zawilinski, Barton, & Nierlich, 2008.) Their first entries on the blog were designed to introduce themselves to the students using text, pictures of themselves, and online audio recordings with an initial greeting.

As the school year started and children began visiting Susan's project site, they used the project's computer lab to choose books of interest. Susan paired up students reading the same book and assigned each pair one of the blog addresses to view and to respond with information about themselves and their book choices. She also arranged for the preservice teachers to receive copies of the books chosen by their partners.

This began a series of month-long book readings in which the children and the preservice teachers would communicate by blog about their responses to books. The professor provided guidelines and suggestions for the blog's content, but the bloggers themselves were encouraged to be creative in adapting content of their discussions to the specific books. The project culminated with a visit to the college by the children.

## Recreational Reading

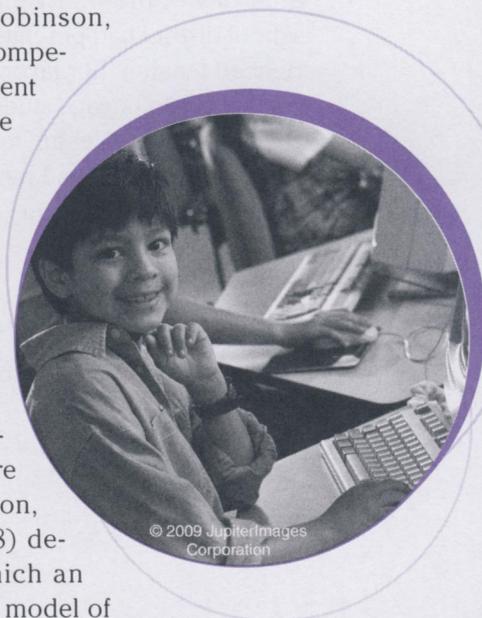
Mark picked up the phone one evening to find that Sarah, his pastor at their suburban church, was on the line. She reminded Mark that the church had been supplying volunteers to work with the literacy program at the Third Avenue Recreation Center, a project in one of the city's toughest neighborhoods. She explained, "I know you've had a lot of training and experience in teaching reading. I've heard that our volunteers are facing some challenges down there. Can you stop by and find if you can make any suggestions?"

A few days later, Mark met Stevven, the pastor of an inner city African American congregation who was also serving as the director of the literacy program. Stevven's entrepreneurial drive led him to continually search for new ways to serve his neighborhood, and the start-up of this literacy effort was his latest project. He had convinced the city recreation authorities to give him two rooms for the project inside the recreation center next door to his church. He found a local businessperson who had been willing to donate the money necessary to purchase several computers with Internet connections, a library of trade books, and the license necessary to access Accelerated Reader (AR) software. Finally, Stevven had used his connections with Mark's suburban church to get additional funding and, most importantly, ten volunteers who came downtown to staff the center on weekday

afternoons from 3:00 to 6:00 p.m. "But we are having some problems," Stevven told Mark. "I was wondering if you can help us be more effective in helping these children."

By chance or Providence, Mark was just the person to bring in for a program evaluation. He was an elementary literacy coach at his school, and he used technology extensively. He recognized AR ([www.renlearn.com/ar](http://www.renlearn.com/ar)) as being designed to encourage differentiated and recreational reading. Children at the center would choose a book to read from the large collection in the library room. They could take it home to read, or they could keep it in the center for afternoon reading in the lounge room, which was provided with comfortable chairs and several tables and desks. After finishing, they would use a center computer to go online and take a short test on the book, provided at the AR website. Additionally, the AR software tracked student progress in an online management system that provided up-to-date information to the literacy project's staff.

Mark's philosophy about dealing with problems in blending technology with traditional print materials had been formed by his own experiences and by two journal articles that had been particularly useful. In his graduate studies, he had read one online journal article that showed that even professional reading teachers tended to treat technology as having almost magical effects on children (Balajthy, Reuber, & Robinson, 2001). Teachers would competently think through student needs and differentiate instruction using print materials. But when they used computer software, there was a tendency to withdraw from the process, to use technology without first examining it for appropriateness for individual student needs. A more recent article (Thompson, Madhuri, & Taylor, 2008) described a school in which an inappropriate, inflexible model of technology implementation had been used. Unfortunately, no one appeared to be reflectively examining whether or not the technology was



being used appropriately, and the school was filled with grievous misapplications that undercut the effectiveness of the technology.

Similarly, at the recreational center, volunteers wandered about aimlessly. While they could operate the software, there was little understanding of its function in developing reading and literacy. The process of involving children and young people in recreational reading was breaking down, but Mark was able to help the staff think through the problems they were facing. "A computer-based test is not a replacement for well-considered reading activities," he explained, and he showed them how to interact with students about AR books and how to form and guide discussion groups. A key component in blending technology with books is the maintenance of community building. Mark helped the volunteers think through ways of engaging hard-to-motivate students in reading. He also explained how the AR software could be used to help children choose books that would interest them and that would be at appropriate difficulty levels.

## Language Experience

Martha knew how discouraged her second-grade struggling readers could become as they faced day after day of the intervention curriculum that the school district had purchased for their use. An experienced teacher, her favorite method of varying the curriculum to engage students was language experience activities. Esteban, for example, was telling her about a new toy he had received for his birthday, and they were creating a story that Martha would use as

the basis of his reading lessons for the next several days. She knew she could address the same objectives covered in the commercial curriculum using Esteban's own story, and she was confident that he would find it more engaging.

Although Martha had used language experience stories since her first years in teaching, more recently she had brought the new twists of cooperative learning and technology to her classroom. Now the first draft of Esteban's story was typed into a PowerPoint file by one of the more advanced children in the class. Next Martha and Esteban finished the revising and editing stages, and soon Esteban would be working with a group of other children who were illustrating their stories on several different computers. She hoped that Esteban would be able to find pictures online that could be pasted into the PowerPoint file to provide context clues for future reading lessons based on Esteban's new electronic storybook.

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