

# Out with the Old, in with the New: Digital Interactive Journals in an Elementary Language Arts Methods Course

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, two elementary literacy teacher educators provide elementary language arts content and methods through the implementation of digital interactive journals in a face to face classroom setting. The authors present how this practice evolved from traditional interactive journals pre-COVID to an innovative and engaging learning experience post-COVID. Interactive journals provide students with opportunities to explore and apply content and methods, while also learning a teaching strategy that pre-service teachers can implement in their own elementary classrooms. The authors describe the design and development of digital interactive journals along with student work samples and instructional steps to transfer and implement this strategy across disciplines.

## KEYWORDS

digital interactive journals;  
instructional technology;  
student engagement;  
preservice teachers;  
elementary literacy

One of my students recently commented: “I’m so proud of my journal and how much I’ve learned in language arts this semester. I never knew how creative I could be with technology (thank you, Google Slides!). My journal is something I will keep forever and will go back to when I get my own classroom.” When I (Kathleen) first began teaching my undergraduate Elementary Language Arts Methods class in fall 2019 at a mid-sized university in the southeastern United States, there was not a laptop in sight. Rather, there were “old school” composition books, markers, scissors, glue, and pieces of colored paper scattered across tables. Pre-service teachers, mostly 19–24-year-old females, were actively engaged with the materials as they made sense of new literacy content and methodologies through various writing activities, many of these in the form of “functional writing” utilizing lists and graphic organizers (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017), to use with elementary aged students, as illustrated in Figures 1-5. Students were, in essence, “writing to learn” in order to enhance their own understanding and retention of course materials (Doğan & İlhan, 2016; Pinar & Yildiz, 2020). Writing to learn was a staple in my class, and my use of “old school” interactive journals was a way for students to document and capture their learning in one place. I successfully taught college level content in ways that mirrored the best practices of elementary teachers, and the feedback I received from students was overwhelmingly positive. I knew it would be critical to maintain this effective practice of writing

to learn with my students, and I was determined to find a way to mimic this practice in a virtual setting.

Figure 1: Composition Journal Entry Matching Genres to Texts

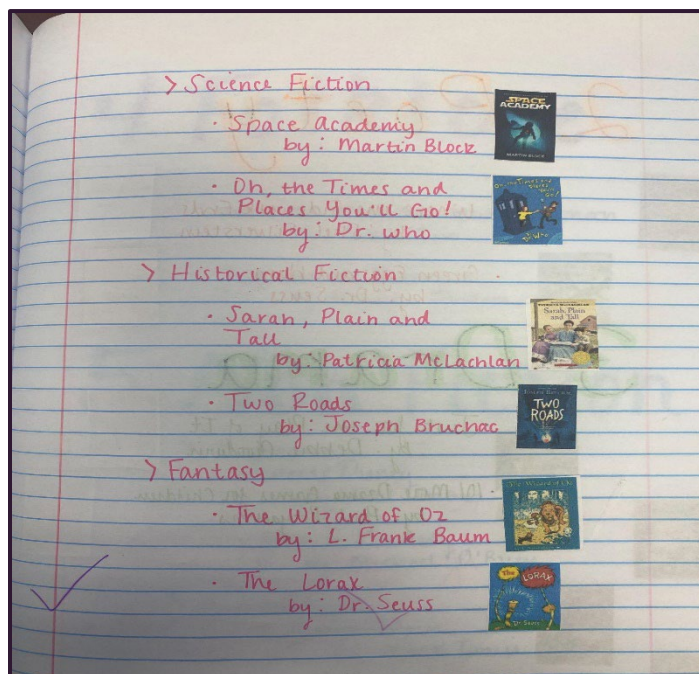


Figure 2: Composition Journal Entry Notes on Genres of Writing

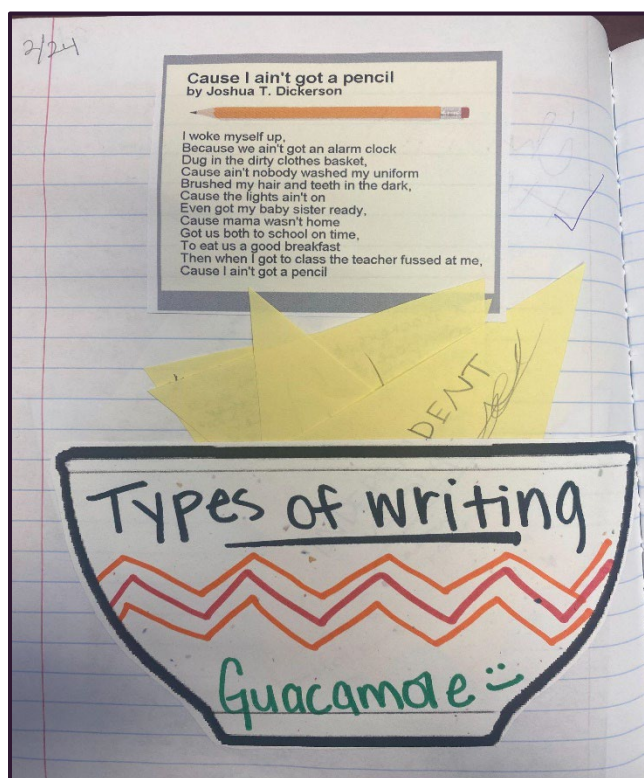


Figure 3: Composition Journal Entry Sequencing Steps of an Interactive Read Aloud

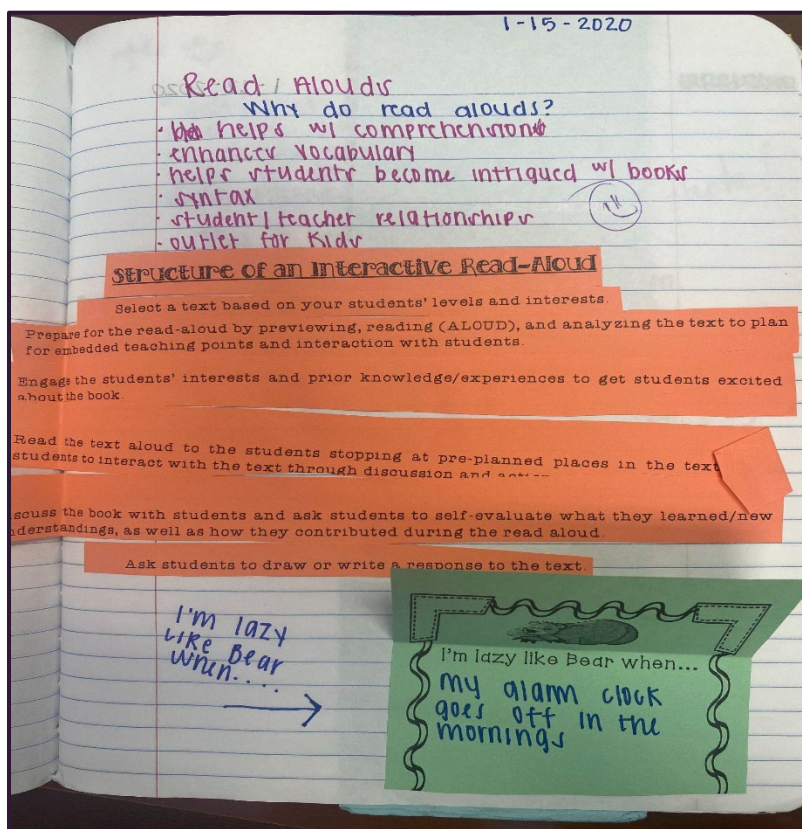
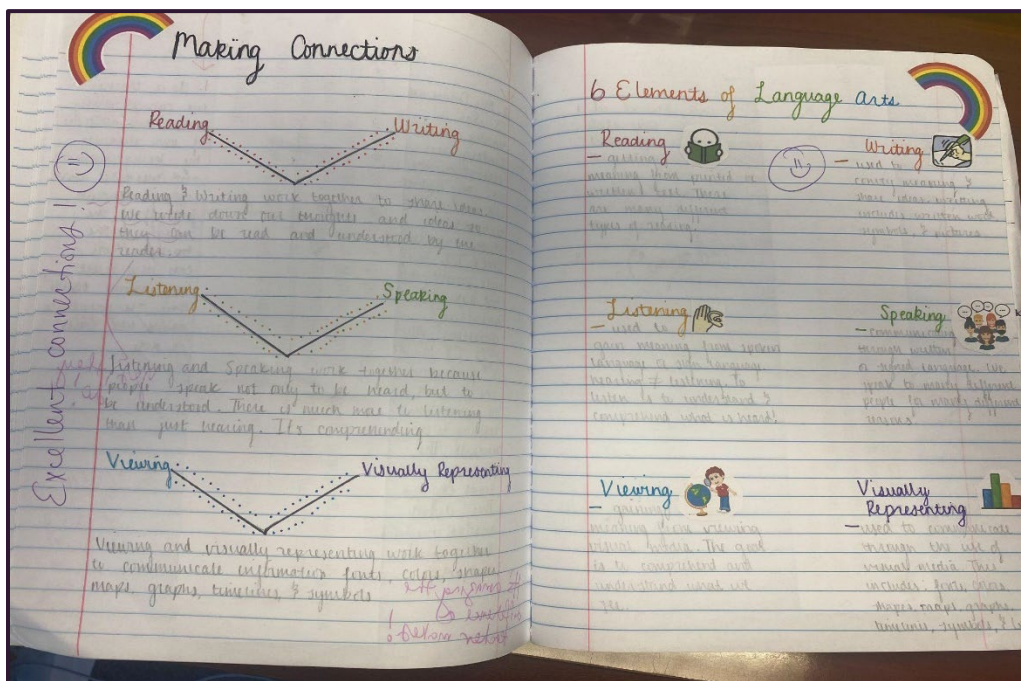
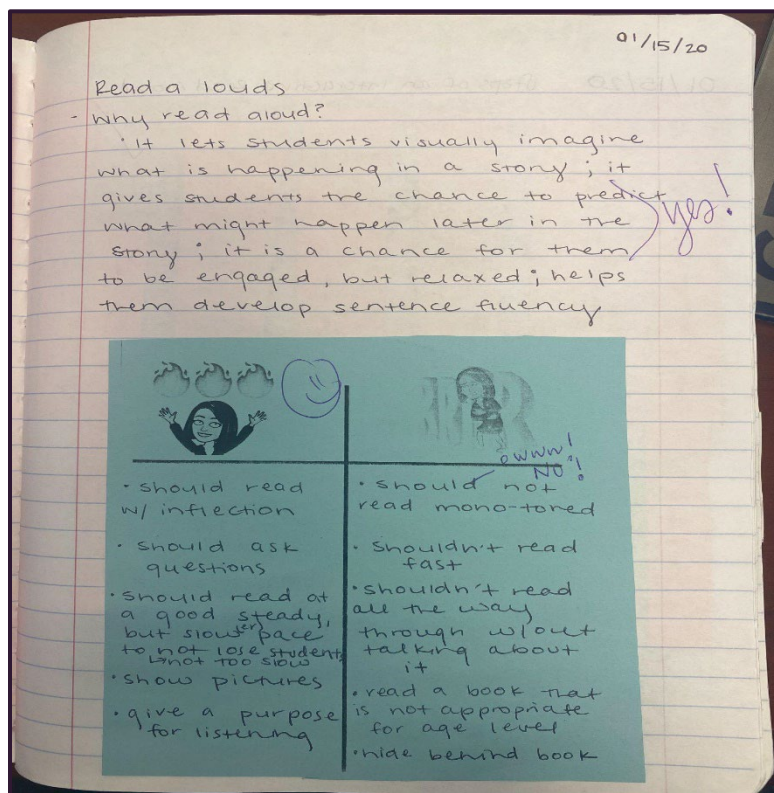


Figure 4: Composition Journal Entry Making Connection to Elements of Language Arts





**Figure 5: Composition Journal Entry Matching T-Chart Comparing “What’s Hot and What’s Not” with Interactive Read Alouds**

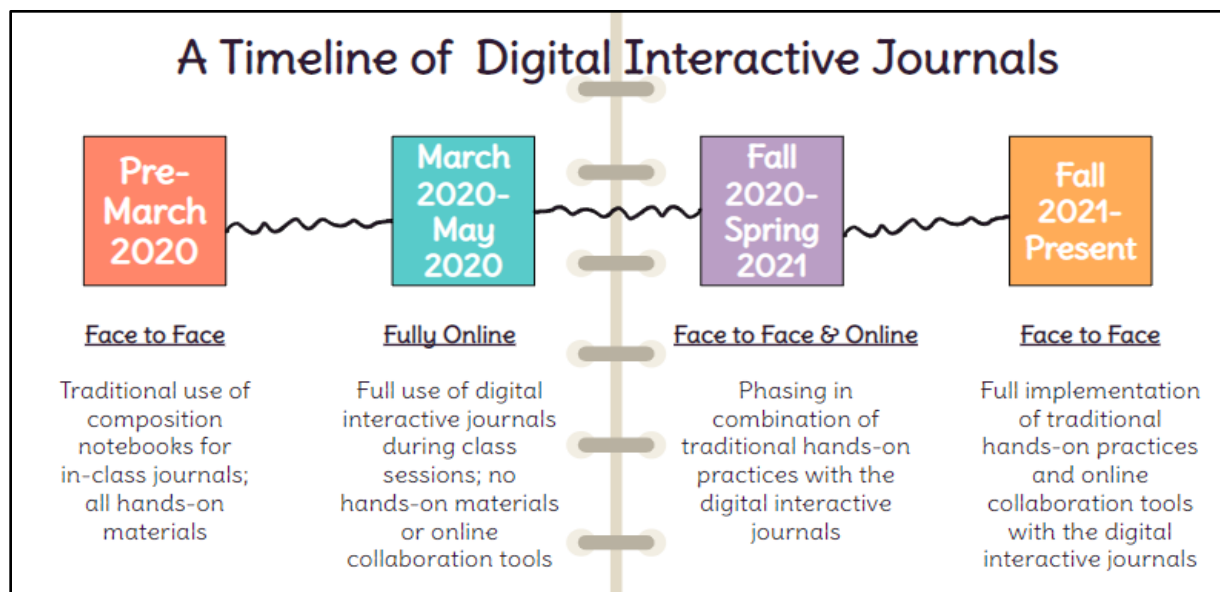


### The Evolution of Digital Interactive Journals

Then COVID-19 struck 2020 and changed everything my students and I knew as “normal” teaching in face-to-face classroom settings. This was quite the paradox, and just like K-12 teachers had no choice but to change their teaching modalities to best support the whole child (Chamberlain et al., 2020), teacher educators had to change as well in order to best support the whole teacher (Crawford, 2016). This incited the reimagination of “old school” journals and the evolution of digital interactive journals. I began to wonder about the ways I could adjust our class sessions and daily interactive journals in a fully digital world while maintaining some semblance of normalcy in an *anything but normal* world.

I selected Google Slides as a substitute for the traditional handwritten interactive journals as the platform because all students have access to Google Workspace through the university, its commenting feature allows for dialogue between student and instructor, and can be accessed on any device through Google Drive.

Over a two-year period, my classes slowly transitioned from traditional face to face classes to fully virtual classes to a hybrid of face to face classes and virtual learning and, finally, to the return to fully face to face classes (Figure 6). Even though my students and I found ourselves learning in a fully face-to-face setting once again, I quickly realized there was no going back to the “old school journals”; digital interactive journals were a welcomed change and were here to stay.

*Figure 6: Timeline of the Evolution of Digital Interactive Journals*

### Digital Interactive Journals in Practice

Digital interactive journals have become the heart of our classroom on campus. Journal entries each day consist of a wide array of activities. Students often critically research and hyperlink teaching ideas related to content covered (Figure 7), jump into a class Jamboard for collaborative work and brainstorming (Figures 8 & 9), complete Google Forms to showcase class data sets of school experiences, read and reflect on articles (Figure 10), blogs, and videos (Figure 11), and embed their own videos, images, and gifs to make blank slides, their empty canvas, in their journals come alive. In essence, their journal entries look more like an artistic scrapbook of learning and learning to teach, as opposed to more traditional college projects and papers. While the majority of journal entries are digital, I have been able to preserve some of the traditional practices of interactive journals where students are able to cut, glue, draw or color, and hand write reflections. Upon completing these in-class hands-on activities, students use their devices to take photographs of the products they create and upload the images into their interactive journals (Figures 12 & 13) or create a combination of these more traditional practices digitally (Figure 14). It is also important to note that while the students' writing is more condensed and presented in more of a non-traditional manner, I have seen growth in the depth of their written reflections and in their writing skills (Clark et al., 2020). The students are incredibly proud of their journals and often tell me how much creating them has helped them grow as teachers. They are elated when they are able to teach their peers and even their own cooperating teacher in their field placement new "tricks" and shortcuts to use. So, not only are they learning essential methods to teach language arts, they are also learning essential digital tools that are enhancing their own teaching skill set and the skill sets of others.

Figure 7: Student Journal Entry in Slides: Hyperlinking Phonological Awareness Activities



Figure 8: Class Jamboard: Pictures, Images, and Clipart that Start with /s/





Figure 9: Class Jamboard: Sticky Notes Representing What Students Learned in Class



Figure 10: Student Journal Entry in Slides: 3-2-1 Reflection over Assigned Text to Read

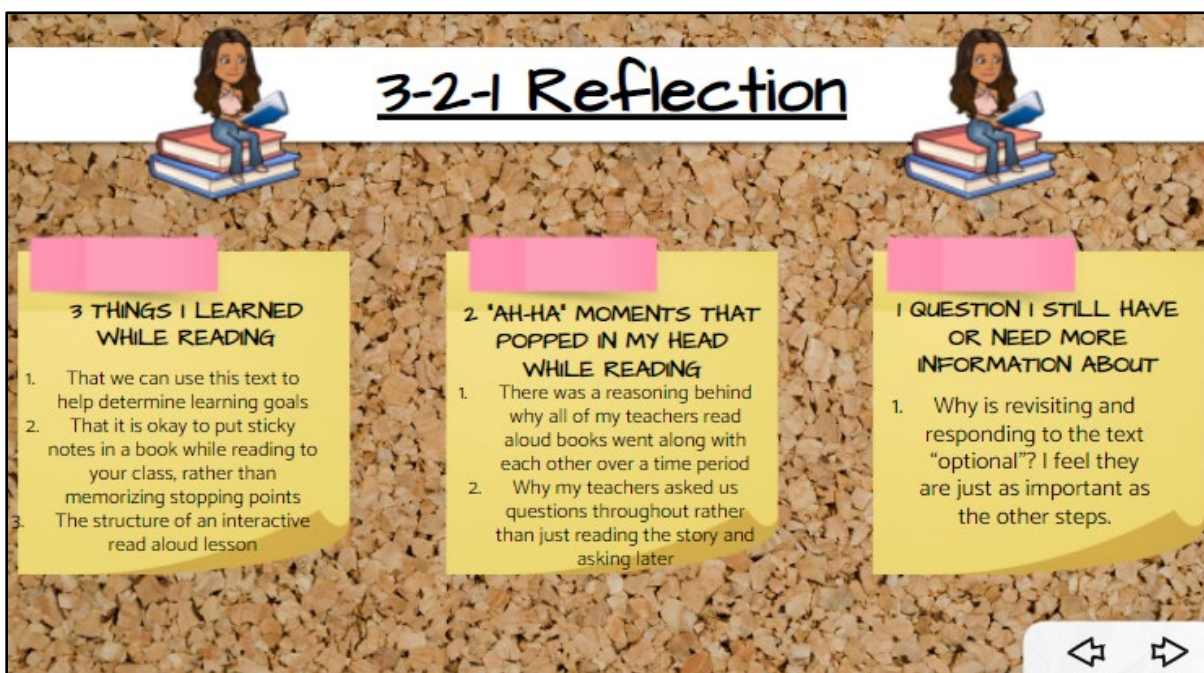


Figure 11: Student Journal Entry in Slides: Text Messages to a Friend after Watching a TED Talk

# TEXT A FRIEND

What are three things you can share with a friend about [this TED Talk](#)?

Read Alouds allow students to visualize what is being read to them. It takes away the hard part of decoding and figuring out vocabulary so they can "get inside the book."

Read alouds give students access to books and knowledge that they may not choose to read or have access to. Read aloud books can serve as windows and mirrors for our students.

Read alouds help take time away from technology and allow for teachers or parents to connect with the children.

Figure 12: Student Journal Entry in Slides: Uploaded Images of Assessing Writing Three Ways

## ASSESSING WRITING: GROUP WORK TIME!

### MY WEEKEND WITH JUST A GRADE

### MY WEEKEND WITH WRITTEN FEEDBACK

### MY WEEKEND SCORED RUBRIC



Figure 13: Student Journal Entry in Slides: Uploaded Images of Planning for an Interactive Read Aloud

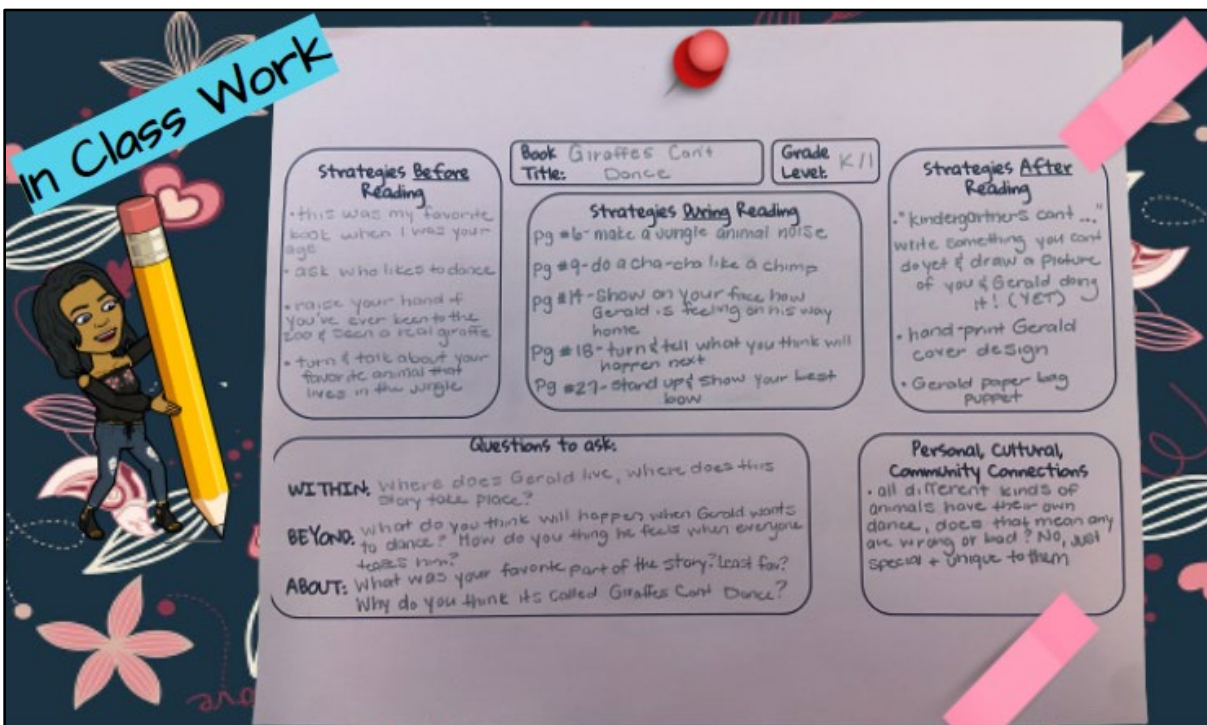
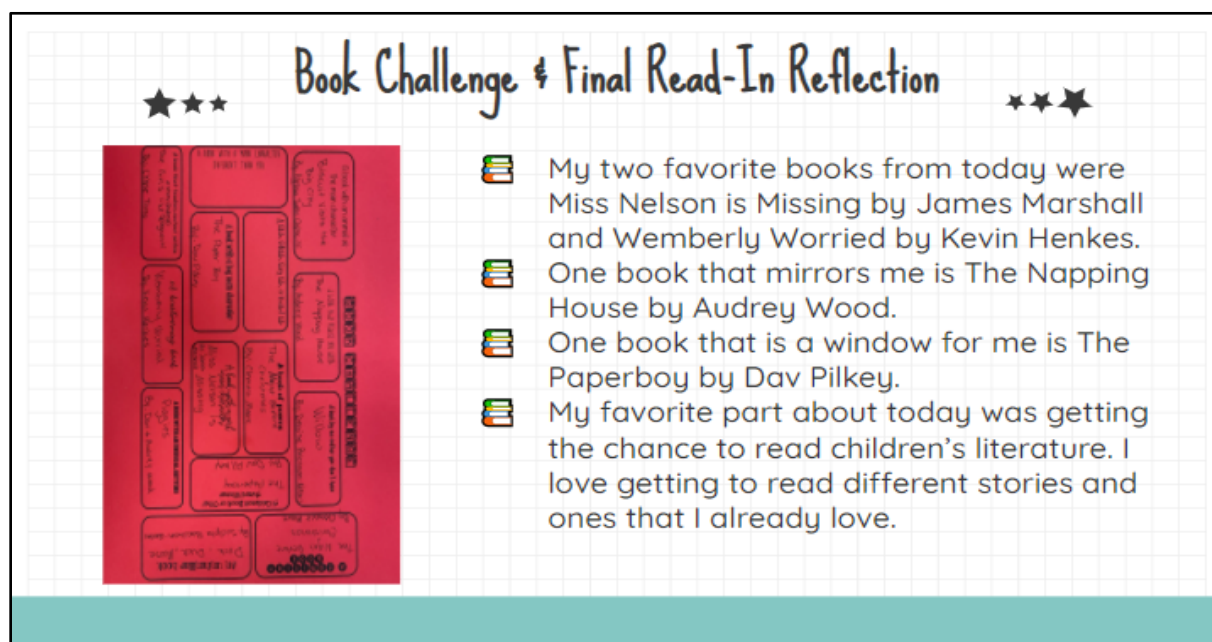


Figure 14: Student Journal Entry in Slides: Uploaded Image of Graphic Organizer and Bulleted Reflection



### Launching Digital Interactive Journals

Each semester I have modified the way in which I introduce the digital interactive journal. Upon initial implementation, I mistakenly made too many assumptions about my students' familiarity with Google Slides and all of its functions. Therefore, I have learned the importance of beginning the first week of classes with in-class activities that involve the basics of Google Slides, including selecting a template for their journal using websites such as [slidesgo.com](https://slidesgo.com) and [slidesmania.com](https://slidesmania.com). My favorite introductory activity in class has been a "scavenger hunt" where the students complete tasks, after I model them, such as using the drawing tool, inserting images and embedding videos, hyperlinking websites to images and text, adding animation, changing the background and slide layout, and, their favorite, inserting their personalized bitmojis. Each of the activities in the scavenger hunt involve *getting to know you* prompts, such as:

- Insert an image of your favorite food and hyperlink a recipe to the image
- Insert a shape of your choice and fill in the shape with your favorite color. In the shape tell me about your best friend or pet. Now, make the shape spin.
- Make a bulleted list of your favorite restaurants. Now, right click the top bullet, select "more bullets" and change the bullet points to a food emoji of your choice.
- Copy and paste Slide 23 from my slideshow into your journal. Change the font size, type, and color. Now, add in an image of a famous person you'd like to meet. Want to remove the background of the famous person? Go to [remove.bg](https://remove.bg) - it's magical!
- Using a combination of images, gifs, memes, and videos, create a digital collage of your go to Netflix, Hulu, Disney+, and HBO Max shows.
- Go outside and take a selfie at your favorite place on campus. Now, insert the picture and a textbox to describe why it's your favorite place.

Not only are students able to learn how to easily navigate Slides on their own, I am also able to spend this time getting to know my students and building our classroom community in order to give them a greater sense of belonging in a college classroom (Kirby & Thomas, 2021). Once students are able to easily and quickly operate the basic functions of Google Slides with minimal support, class sessions run smoothly, and students are able to place their focus on the content of the course rather than "stressing out" about not being able to figure out the technological tools and feeling behind or rushed during class.

Through the implementation of digital interactive journals, I have learned how to effectively blend traditional hands-on practices with digital tools to maximize student learning and engagement and to capture the growth of my pre-service teachers' understanding of best literacy practices with in-class activities and prompts such as the ones presented in the above figures and the additional examples listed below:

- Insert a Venn diagram in your journal to compare and contrast interactive read alouds with shared reading.
- Jump into this Jamboard and insert an image that has /ă/ as the medial sound. Now, copy/paste that same image into your journal and insert an additional picture.
- As you watch this writers workshop video, create a bulleted list of key ideas and/or questions you have in your journal. Be ready to discuss.

- Complete this planning for guided reading graphic organizer (hard copy). When you're finished, take a picture and insert it into your journal. Add the title of your selected book at the top of the slide and insert a picture of the book cover.
- Reflect on your experiences with spelling. What do you remember? Were your experiences positive or negative? Insert an image to match.

As students submit their interactive journals throughout the semester, I am able to use the comment feature to provide immediate feedback that students can easily access in live time. The comment feature allows me to praise quality work, clarify any misconceptions, quickly answer questions students pose, provide additional resources through hyperlinks. I am also able to insert a variety of emojis to personalize my comments and make the feedback feel more like cognitive coaching (Costa & Garmston, 2002) and a conversation, rather than a “yes/no, right/wrong, here’s your grade” (Figure 15).

*Figure 15: Personalized Instructor Feedback in Digital Interactive Journal*

**Three • Two • One Reading Reflection**

**Three Things You Learned:**

THREE!

- Optimal time for shared reading is 10 minutes a day (most of my teachers didn't do this at all)
- If you can't find large print books, you can use a document camera
- With shared reading, students actually read the text with you the second time

**Two Connections You Made:**

TWO!

- I remember having one teacher use the large-print book. It was so much fun!
- My teacher has done this with a document camera. However, she didn't allow students to read with her.

**ONE! One Question You Still Have OR Something You Want to Know More About:**

ONE!

- How many teachers know about this/actually do this? (it is a great idea, but I haven't seen many use it)

Feedback:

I think it's because shared reading is often associated with younger grades - it tends to taper off around 2nd grade. With that said, I KNOW my 4th and 5th graders LOVED it. 🥰

Big books: I got you! 📖

<https://shop.scholastic.com/teachers-e-commerce/teacher/shops/big-book-collections.html>

As a reflective practitioner, I consistently seek feedback from my teacher candidates when teaching or trying new strategies. I collected feedback through Google forms, and my teacher candidates had very positive statements about the digital interactive journals. Many indicated that the digital journals provided them with a resource that will be useful in their future classrooms. “I like that I will always be able to refer back to these when I'm creating lessons and even when I have my own classroom I'll be able to use this as a resource because of how accessible it is.” Students also enjoyed the personalization aspect of the digital journals and preparation to utilize technology to enhance learning. “I can make it MY way! It also has prepared me so much technology wise.” Given the positive feedback I received from my students, I have shared this



teaching strategy with other colleagues, and we have since embedded this practice in other undergraduate and graduate courses. Author 2 and I collaboratively plan and use digital interactive journals in multiple literacy courses within our teacher education program. In Table 1, we outline general steps to begin using digital interactive journals in other content areas and contexts.

**Table 1: Getting Started with Digital Interactive Journals**

|                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Step 1</b>  | Familiarize yourself with the fundamentals of Google Slides, and avoid asking your students to try different functionalities without first having tried them yourself. For more information about the basic of Google Slides, you can access the following website: <a href="http://bit.ly/3XmWiRC">bit.ly/3XmWiRC</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Step 2</b>  | Baby steps. Start slowly and have patience; remember, the students are not only showing their understanding and acquisition of content, but they are also learning the fundamentals and functionalities of technology, even as digital natives.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Step 3</b>  | Ensure students have equitable access to technological devices and connectivity.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Step 4</b>  | Use the digital interactive journals each class session. For two sample class sessions, access the following links: <a href="http://bit.ly/3S4ROhP">bit.ly/3S4ROhP</a> , <a href="http://bit.ly/3YnGyz9">bit.ly/3YnGyz9</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Step 5</b>  | Let students give peer technical support; they often have new and different ways of completing activities that they can share with other students.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>Step 6</b>  | Maintain your focus when assessing the journals and providing feedback. Remember that you are assessing the content of their journal entries and their learning, not their technological capabilities or aesthetic appeal.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Step 7</b>  | When providing feedback using the commenting tool, make it conversational, rather than corrective, to help build and sustain relationships with your students. Some sample comment stems are as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>I like how you _____.</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Have you considered _____?</i></li> <li>▪ <i>I remember you saying this in class – what other connections can you make?</i></li> <li>▪ <i>This reminds me of _____.</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Yes! For more information, check out this link: _____.</i></li> <li>▪ <i>LOL – so true. We’re going to talk more about this in class next week!</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Try it out! Open one of your student’s assignments, and see where you could easily embed comments such as the ones above.</i></li> </ul> |
| <b>Step 8</b>  | Insert hyperlinks or additional resources to build on or clarify student content knowledge when providing feedback.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Step 9</b>  | Let students be creative - they will surprise you when given the opportunity to derail from the norm of paper and pencil in-class activities and assessments.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Step 10</b> | Reflect. What is working? What should be adjusted? Not sure? Go to the direct source. Ask your students for some feedback!                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

### Final Thoughts and Lessons Learned

Digital interactive journals have been a game changer in my Elementary Language Arts class, and I am confident that these practices could easily be adapted by teachers across grade levels and

content areas to keep students engaged (Gebre et al., 2014) and to ensure they are writing to learn throughout the semester. As with all teaching practices, it is important to remember to stop, reflect, and adjust when starting this strategy; digital interactive journals will not go perfectly at first, but the end result, their treasured digital keepsakes, is well worth the effort for both students and teachers. This classroom practice can be best summarized with one teacher candidate saying, “Thank you, Author 1, for introducing these journals to us. I’ve never done anything like this in a college class, and I feel like I’ve learned more in your class than any other. The journal has helped me stay organized, let me be creative (yay slides.go and bitmojis!), and taught me soooo much about Google Slides. I’ll hold on to this FOREVER, and I can’t wait to try this with students of my own!”

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