Web-Based Platforms for Book Reviews to Accelerate Summer Reading Among Peers: A Partnership of 'Teens for Literacy' Student Leaders and Teacher Education Candidates

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Abstract

Student leaders from an urban public middle school who were representatives of the Teens for Literacy (TFL) program visited an undergraduate education class in late spring 2013 as a component of Shadowing Day at the sponsoring university. Teacher education candidates outlined several platforms that may be used to share favorite books including a book journal, Tumblr, Blogger, and Wix. With the goal of promoting literacy in their school and with the support of teacher education candidates, the TFL student leaders created book reviews utilizing a variety of media options to generate momentum for summer reading initiatives. Teacher education candidates rotated to assist students with focused reading, comprehension strategies, and writing in preparation for their blog entries. TFL students presented their book reviews to their peers and made them accessible before the summer break began to promote authentic engagement in literacy learning.

Project Goals

"I had a chance to voice my opinion and design the website the way I wanted." –7th grade student, post-project survey, June 2013

The goal of the "Web-Based Platform for Book Reviews" initiative was two-fold—both to promote pleasure reading among the student body of an urban public middle school and to increase the reading, writing, and presentation abilities of its students. Teens for Literacy student leaders, with the support of teacher education candidates, created student-generated book reviews incorporating a variety of media. The participating students' current reading levels and goals were determined with a school-based reading curriculum assessment. Each child's reading performance was measured weekly via growth in Lexile levels and text comprehension. Effectiveness of the program was determined based upon student progress and development of a literature project. This project was implemented over the course of six weeks coinciding with the approaching summer break.

Common Core Performance Standards for English Language Arts (2013) present a valuable framework

for creating an integrated model of literacy. The importance of students being able to read multiple text types and synthesize their ideas into writing is emphasized. The twenty-first century student must be able to comprehend and evaluate complex text across a wide range of disciplines and genres while effectively articulating his/her own thoughts on the topic. In addition, students must become self-directed learners, seeking out resources to enable them to meet college and career-readiness expectations. Comprehension instruction includes having "teachers prepare students with comprehension strategies and guiding them in applying these to all types of text" (McCardle, Chhabra, & Kapinus, 2008, p. 69). I sought to establish conditions that facilitate critical understanding, enabling students to reflect upon literature they were reading so that they could express their thoughts in a meaningful way.

In Writing Now (2008), a research brief produced by the National Council of Teachers of English, the authors noted that in our changing world, we write "differently—often digitally—and we write more than in the past" (p.1). Specific to middle school students, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers (2010) has included a detailed focus on necessary literacy skills per their College and Career Readiness Standards of the Common Core State Standards. Students are expected to know how to meaningfully integrate technology throughout all literacy experiences—including reading, writing, communicating, collaborating, listening, and interacting with peers through a range of texts (Smith, 2013).

A Framework for Promoting School-Wide Literacy
The Teens for Literacy (TFL) program provides a platform for middle school student leaders to motivate their peers and their communities regarding the significance and impact of literacy in their daily lives. The program also encourages students to consider postsecondary education and their future career options. Armstrong State University sponsors the program in the Savannah-Chatham School System in downtown Savannah. The university collaborates with a designated liaison at the partnering middle school to facilitate the program, and a student leadership team of twelve students (selected by the school counselor from grades six, seven, and eight) generates ideas for promoting literacy among their peers and communities. I serve as the faculty coordinator and university liaison, facilitating weekly meetings and working with the students to implement their concepts.

The Teens for Literacy (TFL) program visited an undergraduate course in Armstrong State University's College of Education in April 2013 as a component of Shadowing Day, an annual on-campus event. During this visit, students in the TFL program shared books they enjoyed through an oral presentation to teacher education candidates. This provided a valuable opportunity for middle school students to address college students and experience collegiate academic life. Candidates in the Bachelors of Science in Education program brought books they predicted the teens might enjoy; teacher candidates then outlined interactive tools that might be used to share book reviews through Prezi. Platforms shared included the following:

a. A book journal can be a meaningful way to document favorite books. A book journal can include summaries, opinions, pictures, photos, and favorite quotes.
b. Tumblr- www.tumblr.com
Tumblr allows users to effortlessly share any media. Students can post books, quotes, music, and poetry from a computer.
c. Blogger- www.blogger.com
Blogger provides an option to share books, quotes, music, and poetry from a computer. A host of features makes blogging as simple and effective as possible.
d. Wix
With Wix.com, students can create their own website with no coding or special design skills needed. They can personalize the website by incorporating flash animation, a variety of color schemes, fonts, and sounds. In this project, students utilized Wix as the vehicle for their book reviews, as detailed in the samples outlined below.

Project Need
Current assessment results reveal that students at the school have yet to realize their fullest potential academically. There are 650 students in this urban school setting extending from Kindergarten through eighth grade. Reading scores remain below standard. However, the principal welcomes innovative ways to improve instructional materials, methods, and curriculum; and, has expressed enthusiastic support of the web-based book review platform project to generate momentum for the school's summer reading initiative. Wilcox and Angelis (2012) described how teachers and administrators in schools that are higher-performing—regardless of their ethnic, linguistic, or socioeconomic backgrounds—credited their relationships within the broader community as being very important. This includes trust, respect, a shared responsibility for performance, encouragement of initiative taking, and professional opportunities beyond the classroom.

Research has demonstrated that the purpose of school-based writing is often unclear to many middle

school students (Yancy, 2009). While student writing is often reflected in blogs, text messages, and social websites, they rarely acknowledge the connection between the casual writing they do socially and the formal writing tasks required at school. However, writing holds the power for teens to reflect more deeply about themselves and their connections to text if they are provided with the opportunity to write freely, expressing their views and experiences.

The purpose of this project was to encourage Teens for Literacy student leaders to serve as reading mentors to their peers as they read for pleasure, engage in focused comprehension activities, and meaningfully reflect upon the texts through their blog entries. Sharing the blog with their peers and teachers provides a valuable forum for students to present their work, view themselves as critical readers, and increase their peers' motivation and interest in writing for authentic purposes. Existing research reveals that a technology-enhanced classroom learning environment may help improve student achievement in traditionally struggling urban schools (Cakir, Delialioglu, Dennis, & Duffy, 2009).

Zenkov and Harmon (2009) described research reflecting students' comments about the perceived lack of relevance of the books they are asked to read and the literacy tasks teachers assign. In response, the authors described how they sought to become "teachers who trust youth enough to engage them with our literacy tasks in ways exceeding the expectations of these young adults and society in general" (p. 575). Similarly, my goal with this initiative was to motivate students to self-select independent reading books that they would enjoy as they meaningfully reflected, connected, and wrote about the impact these texts made on them as readers, learners, and young adults.

Implementing the Project

I organized a volunteer orientation at the university for teacher education candidates who would be working with us for the "Teens for Literacy: Web-Based Book Platform" project. We reviewed research-based comprehension strategies that promote critical thinking skills based upon Bloom's Taxonomy with the teacher education candidates.

A parent permission form (Figure 1) was distributed to students to describe details of the project to parents. A fellow professor's daughter volunteered her time and expertise to share her personal web blog with book reviews, poetry, and images with the TFL student leaders during our introductory session. Students listened enthusiastically about the project. The school media specialist/librarian presented me with the students' most recent Lexile levels, which guided our

FIGURE 1

Dear Teens for Literacy Parents,

I would like to take this opportunity to share with you our latest innovative activities with the Teens for Literacy (TFL) program.

Students participating in the Teens for Literacy program will create student-generated book reviews using tumblr.com or Wix.com during the last few weeks of school. Book reviews shared by TFL students will provide summer reading recommendations that other students can enjoy over the summer.

The TFL will showcase their book reviews with select classes within the next couple of weeks.

We look forward to an educational and enjoyable end of the school year.

ability to ensure that students selected appropriate books from the school library. Students were directed to self-select books of interest based upon their respective Lexile levels.

Students were presented with a folder containing a journal to record thoughts as they read, comprehension strategy intervention sheet (Figure 2), and a notebook to record unknown words. Undergraduate teacher education candidates and I rotated to assist students with focused reading, comprehension strategies, and writing in preparation for the blog entries. Lipson, Mosenthal, Mekkelsen, and Russ (2004) explained that teachers should be thoughtful decision-makers who use their knowledge of the learning goal to design instruction and select strategies that best enable students to reach their goals. This is in accordance with Nichols, Young, and Rickelman's research (2007), which advocated that professional development for teachers should be dependent on "content goals, the context of individual schools, preferences of the teachers, and needs of the students" (p. 113).

TFL students will use higher-order thinking skills, processes, and "habits of mind."

Teacher Candidate _____ Student _____ Baseline Lexile _____
Text / Lexile _____ Web Based Platform _____ Date _____

Activity / Data

Engaged Reading	Beginning Time _____ Ending Time _____	Total Time:	Thumbs up ☺ Thumbs down ☹ It's Okay (:- I
Bloom's Taxonomy	**Remembering** Discussion _____ Journal _____ **Understanding** Discussion _____ Journal _____ **Vocabulary Development** *New words- Meaning *Synonym(s) *Antonym(s) Discussion _____ Journal _____	**Applying** Discussion _____ v Journal _____ **Analyzing** Discussion _____ Journal _____	**Evaluating** Discussion _____ Journal _____ **Creating** Discussion _____ Journal _____
Web Based Platform Criterion adapted from Georgia Department of Education ~ K-8 NETS-S Scope and Sequence	The TFL applied existing knowledge to generate new ideas, products, or processes. Yes _____ No _____	The TFL created an original work as a means of personal or group expression. Yes _____ No _____	The TFL practiced safe, legal, and responsible use of information and technology. Yes _____ No _____

Reflections from teacher education candidates recognized the value of the project and its impact on their future pedagogy. One student noted that "Teens for Literacy combines old school with new school. In today's world, literacy goes beyond the traditional views and expands into our world of technology. This means our students need to develop reading and writing skills that involve digital media." Another education major voiced how she appreciated the opportunity to work directly with middle school students and to encourage students to become avid readers. "I found that the students enjoyed the entire process, from reading, to the documentation in notebooks, and especially the creation of their own personal book review website. Each student read every day, and showed up prepared and excited to create. I believe these students will continue to be successful, lifelong learners." As Benning (2014) noted, the teacher candidates sought to "encourage students to read a variety and number of texts . . .(with a) primary focus related to independent reading. . .authentic engagement."

## Examining Student Profiles and Book Review Postings

Below are samples of four student profiles and book reviews that appeared on the Teens for Literacy blog. Growth in identity as a reader/ writer, evidence of text analysis, and a sample of new vocabulary terms that appeared in blog posts is included in the chart below for four middle school students who were participants in the initiative. Students presented their work to their peers as well as teachers, school administration, and university students at the conclusion of the project. Wilhelm (2013) asserted that teachers' most essential professional goal is to "help kids become competent and engaged lifelong readers, and to help teachers help kids become lifelong readers" (p. 56). This project makes significant strides toward helping Teens for Literacy students, and their school community, assume the identity of lifelong reader and writer.

Key themes that emerged after analyzing these four middle school student book blog postings are detailed in the chart below:

	Growth in identity as a reader and writer	Evidence of text analysis	Sample of vocabulary terms included in blog
Student A (female, Grade 6)	Student blog profile- "Teens for Literacy helps you read and to improve in your ELA skills." "We made this article called 'Ask Dotty' that gives advice to people who need help." (for school-wide newspaper initiative) "I like to draw, read, write poems, and design clothes." Additional book review in progress- Student noted that a *Dolphin Tale* book review was coming soon.	*The Name of this Book is Secret* blog posting- "You never know what's going to happen." "She always tries to figure out mysteries and prove that everything is not as it seems." "This book is like Sherlock Holmes." *Milo: Sticky Notes and Brain Freeze* blog posting- ". . .Milo's mother died. Just like any kid, Milo cried, remembered things his mother used to do, and told told the story." "You should read this book because it's like you're reading another person's life." "I think the main purpose of this book is to say that things will get better, nothing is at it seems, and it's better to try."	−improve −design −conflicts −mentioned −unique −opinion −purpose
Student B (male, Grade 7)	Student blog profile- "This is a website about some of the interesting books that I have read." "I am now reading *A Series of Unfortunate Events*." *A Series of Unfortunate Events: The Bad Beginning* blog posting- "I would recommend you read this book because it's a book that has lots of mystery and will have you wanting to read the whole series."	*A Series of Unfortunate Events: The Bad Beginning* blog posting- "The character I would most like to spend the day with is Klaus. . . He is also book smart and can read well." "I would teach him how to have fun during his sad times. He likes to read about animals and other things to take his mind off the death of his parents." *A Series of Unfortunate Events: Reptile Room* posting-	−adventures −recommend −series −mystery −suspense

	"Reading can help you go to a new place and go on new adventures."	"I would like you to read this because I think it shows lots of suspense."	
Student C (female, Grade 6)	Student blog profile- Header- "Today a reader, tomorrow a leader." "I love to read books pertaining to action/ adventure, romance, and mystery." "I am in a group called Teens for Literacy which helps children and teenagers like reading better. They just need to know what kinds of books they like." "Again, I love to read. Especially books like *The Twilight Saga, The Mortal Instruments, The Secret Series*, and also *Harry Potter*."	*City of Bones* blog posting- "Have you ever wanted to live in a world where magic and myths were real?" "This book is full of continuous suspense from warlocks to fairies, and vampires to werewolves." "You should definitely read this book."	–pertaining –myths –discovers –revealing –continuous –opinion
Student D (male, Grade 7)	Student blog profile- "I read a lot of books That is why I am so smart." "This website is about some of my favorite books. I hope you enjoy!" *My Life in Dog Years* blog posting- "I learned so much about what some dogs wouldn't dare to do, but in this book did."	*My Life in Dog Years* blog posting- "In Gary Paulsen's *My Life in Dog Years*, he talks about what each dog meant in his life." "If you want to find out about the capabilities of some dogs, this is definitely the book you need to read." *The Ninth Ward* blog posting- "Also, when you're done reading the book, check out the Author's Note to learn more about what happened to New Orleans and the Ninth Ward when Hurricane Katrina hit and about the aftermath."	–memorable –literature –capabilities –recommend –aftermath
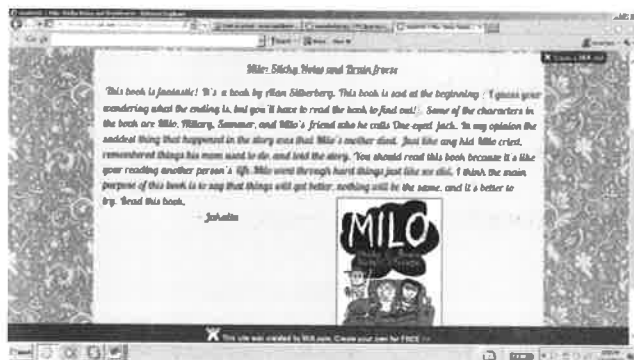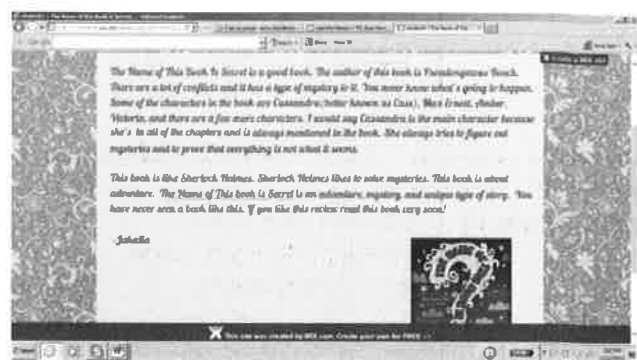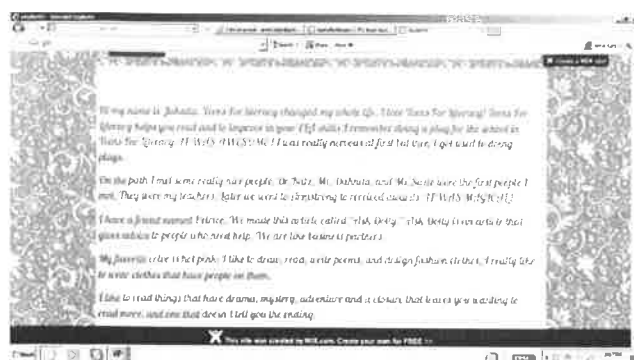
Project Outcomes

This project design drew upon research and evidence-based practices. Evidence-based strategies included the following elements:

▨ explicit vocabulary instruction. Each project included a "new words" component.

▨ opportunities for extended discussion and interpretation. Each project is designed to be shared with peers.

▨ Increased student motivation and engagement in literacy learning (Kamil, Borman, Dole, Kral, Salinger, & Torgesen, 2008).

Progress monitoring trends revealed that students participating in this project seemed to experience greater gains in reading skills than peers not involved in this project. Future research could examine if results could be replicated on a larger scale. In keeping with Armstrong State University's College of Education's Strategic Plan, the initiative supported a commitment to "build upon our history of producing prepared reflective educators" (# 1); a "commitment to the profession of teaching by ensuring that learning experiences are transformative for both the instructors and the candidates" (# 2); and dedication to "strengthen our efforts to provide quality and diverse technology-based learning experiences" (# 3) (Armstrong State University College of Education Strategic Plan, 2011).

Teens for Literacy student leaders' personal comments during a post-project survey reflected the value of this initiative:

■ *"The book reviews and the teachers helped me understand the book better. I want to read more books to add to my website."*

■ *"It helped me to understand, because now I know how to write reviews and learn to pick out key information. It helped me find a good series to read."*

■ *"I started to read more books than I have read in the school year...I will encourage friends to read more and share it on wix.com. Then other people will do the same thing as well."*

■ *"Writing the book review made me go back to the book and made me realize more things about the book that I've read."*

■ *"I recommend creating website book reviews to friends...because if they do it and like it, they can get more people involved."*

■ *"Boring paper and pencil book reviews aren't even competition to website book reviews!"*

A quote from one of the Teens for Literacy students on the post-project survey resonated with me. A seventh grade young man wrote, "I will recommend creating website book reviews to a friend because they can share it with everybody else and maybe they will create one too." The multiliteracies theory, as described by the New London Group (2000), states that today's students need to be able to create meaning through a variety of modalities and a range of technologies— including sound, written language, and images. With this project, I hope to validate this critical observation and substantiate this claim.

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