Multimodal Literacy: iPads and Creative Connections in a First Grade Class

Dr Sue Das
Grade One Teacher
Brunswick School, Greenwich, CT

Introduction

As reflective process is a powerful tool for professional development, and being an action research teacher for 15 years, this study came at a time when my school—being invested in 21st century literacies—provides iPads for use in the classrooms. This action research occurred in a first grade classroom comprising 18 boys. The purpose of the study was to see how primary boys are able to create digital stories using two apps: Toontastic and Little Bird Tales. Being aware that as teachers we need to know the new literacies available to us, Getting and Swainey’s (2012) study in a first grade using iPads showed significant increase in the achievements of the lowest reading groups. Sheneman (2008) found that apps like Animoto, Photo Story, and Movie Maker increased students’ interest in book trailers. This study shows how teachers can study their practice, implement new ideas, becoming more knowledgeable.

The Research Question

How do storytelling apps encourage Grade 1 boys to create original stories?

Research Context

Brunswick School is an all-boys school in Greenwich, CT. It is 110 years old, a mixture of traditionalism and new literacies: this school teaches boys from a holistic standpoint, Pre-K through 12. There are three sections of grade 1, with 18 boys each. Each class in the lower school have a head and an assistant teacher.

Participants

Parent consents of the 18 boys were obtained, ranging in age between 6- and 7-years. All were fluent in English, with 1 having Spanish as the first language. They were at varying developmental levels in oral language, reading, and writing. Informed Consent from the boys was obtained. This was the first year that iPads were to be used in the classroom. The boys had different small-motor developments, and this impacted their writing pace.

The Research Action

Stage 1: we read fables during the first 6 weeks of school and the boys were given a partner to write their own fables. No direct instruction is given on story elements and they write using their pre-existing knowledge and read-alouds.

Stage 2: the boys used Toontastic and created their written fables digitally.

Stage 3: they used Little Bird Tales, to take pictures of settings at school (gym, library, music room, art room, playground, cafeteria, science room). Then, they created original digital stories around a setting of their choice in the same partnerships.

Creativity is...??

Data Collection

Videotaped sessions (6 sessions out of 12)

Semi-structured boys’ post interviews (9)

Reflective and Descriptive Field Notes (10 each)

Assistant Teacher’s Observations and Reflections

Data Analysis

Systematic data analysis approach was maintained. Triangulation was done for objectivity. The constant comparison method was used to find common themes within the data sources. Videotaped data were transcribed by dividing them into stanzas with beginning, middle, and end. Coding was done to organize data with two kinds of data categories: whole group and partner-work, across the 27 texts during each: Stage 1 (writing fables), Stage 2 (digital fables using Toontastic), Stage 3 (original digital stories using Little Bird Tales). Brookhart’s (2013) creativity rubric was reformatted and used as an assessment tool.

Mechanics Used by Emerging Writers in Fable-Writing:

Story Elements: two or more characters, setting, problem, solution, use of complete sentences and spelling (invented and conventional), use of end punctuation and capital letters, stylistic Mechanics: hyphens, quotation marks, illustrations: speech bubbles, sketches, cover, other details, Original ideas and story plots sprinkled with imitation of fables read. (Creative)

App Features Used By Emerging Digital Storytellers:

Toontastic: written fables to digital, storyboarding, story elements, music, illustrations, character movements, voice recordings. (Very Creative)

Little Bird Tales: planning & storyboarding, framing, action & dialog, voice recordings, camera pictures, illustrations using strokes & color palette, themselves as characters. (Very Creative)

Key Findings and Discussion

1) Emergent writers, readers write their thoughts in journals/stories initially, making their thinking visible before transferring them to another media. “I liked writing the fables first and the illustrating that. As then you know what to draw. Writing is more fun, it takes more time. I prefer to write over talk.”

2) Boys in emergent stages (6-and-7 year old), require interest-driven, open-ended tasks to nurture risk-taking—essential components fostering creativity.

3) Today, young children live in a fast-paced society, where time is valuable --- using iPads in classrooms seems more time-saving—children might have avoided. “iPad helps you think out before writing. Paper have to be erased.”

4) The choice of apps is crucial, as features easier to navigate attract young boys to engage in free play. As the digital world provides instant gratification in more sophisticated ways, open-ended apps with high quality graphics and music should be introduced to classrooms.

“Toontastic had more choice of characters.” “Little Bird Tales’ was easier to use, as the setting was given to us. I recommend ‘Toontastic’ to others.”

5) Creativity does not occur randomly or all the time. There is a time and place and teachers who sacrifice some power, encourage young learners to think out-of-the-box more successfully.

6) Digital storytelling is a powerful tool for language development.

7) Currently, children are required to be ‘multiliterate’ (cognitively, socially literate with paper, multimedia into the curriculum (specifically first grade, being pivotal for the teaching of both reading and writing is essential). A global need to educate and nurture creative thinkers leads us to question how, when, what kinds of creativity should and could be considered in our schools. What contexts could be successful in motivating young boys to love school being lifelong readers and writers. Partner-work contexts can be used in private schools, but their feasibility in coeducational public schools with larger class sizes needs to be uncovered. In this study, multimodality was seen in ways the boys chose to engage with the apps. We need to explore how such modern texts can be incorporated in schools, so that primary children are able to make more text-to-text, text-to-self, text-to-world connections. Being educators, we should be steeped in inquiry that can lead to significant changes in ways that students and teachers approach instruction, learning and curriculum. Since action research is a cyclical process, this study leaves me with a thirst to explore further into the use of digital technology in my first grade. I have already started using a third app to discover individual creativity, and next year will be continuing this cycle. My school is encouraging me to share this information with the faculty, and my hope is to spread the action research culture within the school, so that teachers can own their professional development. This will eventually transform the school culture.

Conclusions

Investigations need to be done how elementary classrooms can incorporate multimedia into the curriculum (specifically first grade, being pivotal for the teaching of both reading and writing is essential). A global need to educate and nurture creative thinkers leads us to question how, when, what kinds of creativity should and could be considered in our schools. What contexts could be successful in motivating young boys to love school being lifelong readers and writers. Partner-work contexts can be used in private schools, but their feasibility in coeducational public schools with larger class sizes needs to be uncovered. In this study, multimodality was seen in ways the boys chose to engage with the apps. We need to explore how such modern texts can be incorporated in schools, so that primary children are able to make more text-to-text, text-to-self, text-to-world connections. Being educators, we should be steeped in inquiry that can lead to significant changes in ways that students and teachers approach instruction, learning and curriculum. Since action research is a cyclical process, this study leaves me with a thirst to explore further into the use of digital technology in my first grade. I have already started using a third app to discover individual creativity, and next year will be continuing this cycle. My school is encouraging me to share this information with the faculty, and my hope is to spread the action research culture within the school, so that teachers can own their professional development. This will eventually transform the school culture.

Key Readings


Further Information

The full report of this project and an online copy of this poster are available at http://www.theibsc.org/.

Researcher’s Email: sdas@brunswickschool.org