

Boys sharing what they see in books

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings from an action research project investigating the developing of metacognitive processes through visualization techniques as a way of encouraging boys to become more engaged readers.

Collegiate School's 4th grade produced peer review book recommendations that described sensory experiences using videos, podcasts, or drawings of any library book of choice. They published them in a MARC record of the library's online catalog. The activity was designed to strengthen boys' metacognition processes in the belief that this would enhance their free voluntary reading experience.

Three educational tenets set the tone for the research:

- The use of technology as an educational tool enhances positive attitudes toward reading.
- Readers that learn and practice comprehension skills have a deeper, more pleasurable reading experience.
- Male role models are an important factor in encouraging boys to read.

The boys' enthusiasm for the activity, the creative products the boys produced using a metacognitive strategy and their use of the library's online catalog as a social networking tool suggests that this activity can be used as a way to motivate boys to read.

Rationale

Collegiate School Library's goal is for each person to become an information literate scholar and to appreciate the power of story. In order to appreciate the power of story, the library needs to create a program that motivates our boys to read. How do we get Collegiate boys excited about reading? What are the best ways to nurture and motivate boys so they find joy as readers?

Action research is an approach to inquiry that is directly relevant to instruction and learning and provides the means for school librarians to enhance their teaching and improve student learning (Stringer 2007). This method of inquiry was used to investigate how I could develop a stronger reading culture in our school, given that the mandate of our school is dedicated to developing information literate students. Three educational trends informed the study:

- Male role models play an important factor in encouraging boys to read. For this project, the boys will become male role models for each other, as they share their book recommendations.
- Technology will enhance the educational experiences of the boys. The boys will be motivated to participate in a hands-on, active, and sensory rich activity that includes: video cameras, computers, and communication software.
- Visualization comprehension activities help to develop stronger metacognitive processes. If the boys think about how the book has stimulated their senses as they read, they will be able to experience the text in a deeper and more meaningful way.

Considering these trends as important in developing in the boys a more enthused approach to reading, the action resulted in the production of 44 book recommendations that describe a sensory experience using videos, podcasts, or drawings of any library book of choice that was published in the MARC record* of the library's online catalog†. This was seen as a first step into nurturing the joy of reading for our boys.

* * MARC record is a Machine-Readable Cataloging record. The MARC record contains a guide to its data, or fields for each piece of bibliographic information so that the computer can interpret the information about the book.

† Online catalog is an internet-based presentation of all the library materials contained in the Collegiate School.

Literature Review

In the United States, articles in the popular press and in academic journals have brought to the public's attention the widening gender gap in boys' ability to read.

Peggy Tyre's piece in *Newsweek* got people to question why this gap between boys and girls in reading was widening and what we could do about it. Tyre (2008) argued that changes in our culture were responsible for this literacy crisis and that our educational institutions or our society were not addressing this change. Academic scholarship has long recognized this dilemma. Smith & Wilhelm (2002) concluded, "The widest current gender gap for learning achievement recorded by standardized measures is in the area of literacy" (p.1).

The cause of the gender reading gap is complex and multi-faceted with researchers debating whether the reason is biologically determined or a social construct. As we learn more about how our brain works, scientists now can construct living maps of the neuronal landscape (Wolf 2007) and in time perhaps reveal an answer to this phenomenon. Indeed, educational research has already been able to document gender differences in such areas as cognitive abilities, brain activation, and strategies used during the act of reading (Logan & Johnson 2006). Wolf (2007) states: "Understanding these unique hardwired systems - which are preprogrammed generation after generation by instructions from our genes - advances our knowledge in unexpected ways that have implications we are only beginning to explore" (p.4).

Understanding how boys are hardwired is helpful but if I wanted to make a shift in the culture of reading at Collegiate, looking at boys and reading through a social constructionist lens would be a better option as Smith & Wilhelm (2002) note: "Social constructionism seems to be more useful to us as teachers. SC emphasizes that changing instructional environments, methods, and expectations can change the experience of kids" (p.6). Social constructionism urges us to ask question about what we can do to change our library programs so that these changes are more effective in getting boys to read.

An example of social constructionism is the work of the respected psychologists, Kindlon & Thompson (1999), in their book *Raising Cain: Protecting the emotional life of boys*. They focused on the emotional well-being of boys. Their premise is that our society teaches males

to be uncomfortable exploring their feelings. Smith & Wilhelm (2002) built on that premise and proposed that boys have trouble with a connection to reading because it is perceived as a passive and private act and involves dealing with emotions. Reading then becomes an activity in our culture that only girls are perceived to enjoy (Scieszka 2003).

Nearly all of the people who teach reading and most of the people the boys see reading are female. Sullivan suggests that boys need male role models as part of the reading selection process so boys can see themselves as readers. Encouraging reading has to be everyone's job but Sullivan (2010) laments that library programs rarely meet the needs of boy readers. The feminization of reading and lack of male role models have become, as Scieszka (2003) notes, stumbling blocks for boys' literacy. Michael Sullivan (2009) offers a solution to this problem in his book, *Connecting boys with books 2: Closing the reading gap*:

Having kids recommend reading to one another is powerful. For many kids - especially boys - who have been behind in reading and view reading as an activity not for them any book suggestions from an adult is suspect... They are much more likely to take suggestions from a peer. (p.79)

Another way of closing the reading gap is what Smith and Wilhelm (2002) call front loading, which means that we build procedural knowledge so that boys can feel competent in their ability to read. Teaching metacognition strategies is one way to build procedural knowledge because these strategies deepen the pleasure of reading by teaching children to listen to the voice in their mind that speaks while they read (Keane & Zimmerman 2007). Smith & Wilhelm recognized that boys need to feel competent in order to persist in an activity; hence, the importance of teaching reading strategies becomes apparent.

To help readers to feel competent, Keene & Zimmermann (2007) have developed seven reading strategies that strengthen metacognition.[‡] Visualization, using sensory and emotional

[‡] Metacognition is to think about our thinking (listening to the voice in your mind that speaks while you read). The following are seven metacognitive comprehension strategies:

1. Monitoring for meaning - knowing what you know using and creating schema - making connections between new and the known
 2. Using and creating schema – making connections with the new and the known
 3. Asking questions - generating questions that lead you deeper into the text
 4. Determining importance
 5. Inferring making judgments
 6. **Visualization - using sensory and emotional images to connect with the text**
 7. Synthesizing - combining understanding from different texts
- (Keene and Zimmermann, 2007, p.14)

images to connect with the text, is one of these strategies. Reading has little meaning unless we associate the words on the page with other images and memories in our lives; when the visualization is shared with others, it helps the reader to develop a deeper meaning of text. Supporting Keene & Zimmermann, Harvey & Goudvis (2007) commented that: “When we visualize, we create pictures in our minds that belong to us and no one else...visualization personalizes reading, keeps us engaged, and often prevents us from abandoning a book prematurely” (p. 132).

If visualization is one strategy to help boys become more engaged with reading and if technology is a way to stimulate their interest (Farris 2009), then merging the two ideas would present a powerful motivational force. As Smith & Wilhelm (2002) noted: “The most enjoyable and powerful form of assistance and support for reading that the boys identified were activities that involved active, participatory, hands-on response to reading” (p.101). According to Bruce (2002), being part of a community of learners and using a technical form of expression has created a richer way to explore what and how boys read. Supporting Bruce, Buehler (2009) advised that electronic spaces have also proved to be a successful hands-on tool for students discussing books.

Thus, combining a metacognitive strategy such as visualization, with hands on participatory technology appears to have some relevance in encouraging boys to read and have success in the process.

Research context

The Collegiate School is a small all boys K-12 school on the Upper West Side of New York City. It was founded by the Dutch Reform Church in 1628, and is now a secular private independent school. The school offers a challenging, rigorous academic program to a talented student body. The library is a gathering space for all of the students (640), faculty (113), and parents of the school. Lower School boys are scheduled into the library in small groups of 11 or 12 boys at a time.

The fourth grade class (44 members) participated in the study. In this group, there is a range of reading ability (from below 4th grade level to above 8th grade), and a wide difference in

their attitude toward reading (seven boys that hated reading, one boy that did nothing else, and the rest that were somewhere in between). The boys have been at Collegiate since kindergarten and by the nature of the group dynamics that plays out in the library, it is almost too easy to stereotype the class as a typical group of male readers at age eight or nine: a love of non-fiction, high activity rate, inability to sit still, and short attention span.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

I started gathering data by administering a reading motivation survey. Although I derived quantitative data from my survey and observations, this action research project focused on qualitative data to build a picture of the boys' reading profile. Within the context of the visualization activity, I was able to observe and record changes in the boys' enthusiasm for reading.

Although I documented significant experiences or events that unfolded during the project, I mainly used the traditional qualitative approach to analyze my data by categorizing and coding the information into an organized body of ideas (Stringer 2007). As shown in *figure 1*, I organized the data into three strands based on the educational tenets used in my research (male role models, visualization, and use of technology). Each strand of data was further analyzed by the source of the data (student work, observations, and interviews).

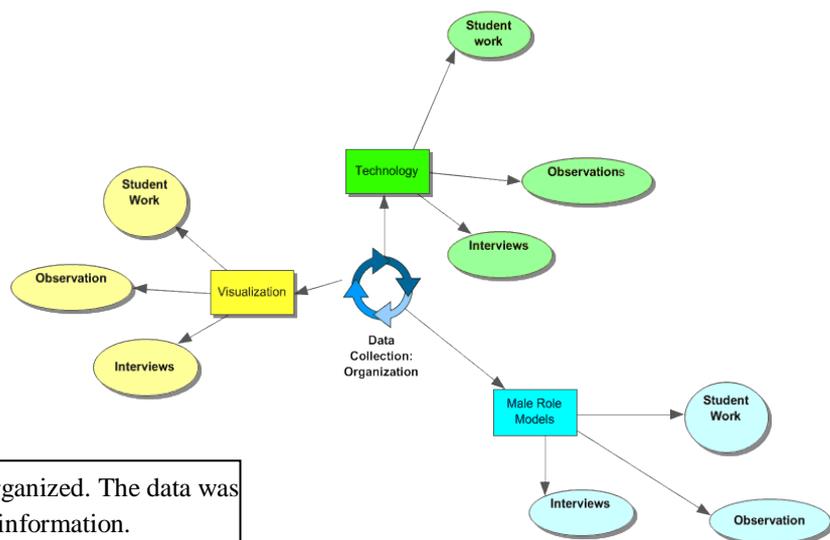


Figure 1. The way the data was organized. The data was organized according to source of information.

Listening to the boys' voices gave me insight into the effectiveness of the techniques that I had introduced to help them become more enthusiastic readers. After the project was completed, we had a film/podcast festival where each class formed a focus group to analyze their classmates' work and spark additional discussion about the activity. This gave me an opportunity to look at my data through several different lenses to test the validity of my conclusions.

Description of Action

Introduction to action research and reading motivation questionnaire

I announced that the boys would be part of an action research project and as social scientists we were going to start our investigation with a questionnaire about what they thought about reading. We were investigating if they could encourage each other to read by sharing book suggestions and, at the same time, work on the metacognition strategy of visualization.

Modeling the Activity

I read to the boys the chapter 'The great and daring mouse plot' from Roald Dahl's biography *Boy*. I explained that it was one of my favorite books and I wanted to recommend that book to everyone in the community; also I was experimenting with ways to communicate about books. I had one of our library interns film me describing the piece in the story when Mrs. Pratchett sticks her hand in the gobstopper jar and feels a 'dirty stinking mouse'. I projected the cataloging record of the book and clicked on the link where the video was embedded. It was a one sentence description of the scene and then my visualization of the disgusting soggy mouse, lying in the candy jar as well as Mrs. Pratchett's high piercing scream as she touched the dead mouse.

I showed them another link in the record of a drawing of Mrs. Pratchett with her hand on the mouse in the jar and a podcast of my description and visualization. I reminded them of how they had talked about visualization in class and that their teachers had encouraged them to describe their thinking about books. If they were aware of and expressed what they saw in their minds, it would help them experience and remember the details in a more profound way. I explained that in sharing with them my visualization of this scene from *Boy*, I had a more vibrant image of Mrs. Pratchett in my head.

Video, Drawing, Recording

Choosing the project: I wanted the boys to have a choice of projects as the boys were generally much more willing to put in the effort needed to gain competence when they had the chance to express themselves in ways that they had chosen (Keene and Zimmermann, 2007).

Preparing for the video or picture: Every boy chose a book to recommend and then one small scene within the book to visualize. The boys could choose anything as long as it was in the library collection,[§] they liked the book enough to recommend it to others, and the passage brought some type of visualization to mind. They marked the passage in the book with a sticky note and wrote on the note anything they wanted to remember to say when doing their podcast or video. I also handed out a simple rubric for the project, listing the criteria we would be looking at when we evaluated each other's work. The rubric gave them an idea of what I expected the end product to be.

Filming: The boys filmed and interviewed each other with three Flip cameras.** They broke up into pairs and found a corner of the library to film each other. When they were finished filming and looking at their results, they gave me back their Flip camera and I downloaded the results onto my laptop.

Drawing: I had gathered crayons, watercolors, colored pencils, and good drawing paper so that the boys had an array of supplies to choose from. While some of their classmates were filming, others sat at one of the larger library tables with their books open to the passage that they were drawing. After their drawings were completed, I scanned their pictures and put the picture and the podcast together using a tool called Photo Stories 3 for Windows. With an inexpensive earphone / microphone headset, the boys could easily record their description and connect it to the picture.

[§]In two instances I bought the book and put it into the collection.

** Flip camcorders made by Pure Digital Technologies are simple inexpensive, cameras that provide a clip-navigation interface with a D-pad and two control buttons. They have a rechargeable battery included and can be connected to a computer with a pop-out USB connector, without the need for a cable.

Getting the digital material into Destiny:^{††} The material was uploaded into the MARC record on the server and displayed in the book's record in Collegiate Library's online catalog. The file was displayed on the record as a link that I named **4th grade Pick**. When one of the books was chosen, the link appeared in the catalog record under 'Explore', below the subject headings and author/illustrator listings. The video or drawing/ podcast popped up and played when the link was clicked. All of the books that the fourth grade had recommended were listed if a search was done on the phrase, '4th grade Pick'.

The boys then went into the catalog, found their book (see *Figure 2*), and clicked the review button. They were able to rate the book from poor (one star) to awesome (five stars). They could also add a note about their recommendation. If they felt that they did not want to type any more information about the book, I suggested that they just say, "See my recommendation video by clicking on the 4th grade pick link".



Figure 2. This is the online catalog record of a chosen book. The boy's recommendation video will pop-up if you click on the link, 4th Grade Pick.

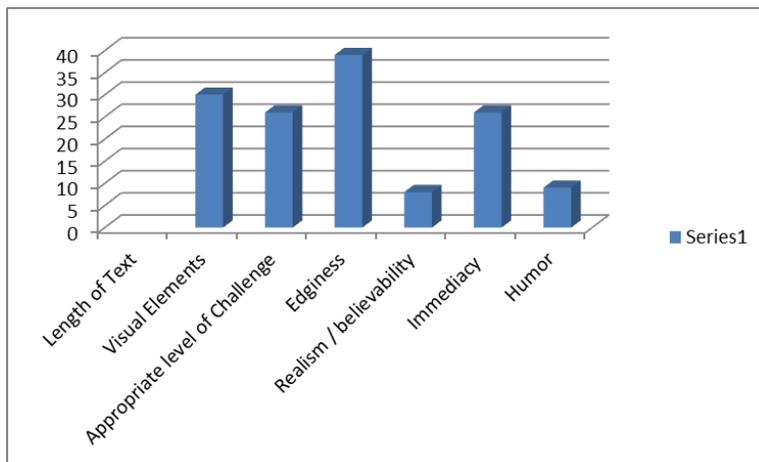
^{††} The name of the computer software produced by Follett Software Company that the Collegiate Library uses to catalog books so students can locate and identify library materials online.

Discussion of the Findings

The findings from this action research cycle provided evidence that integrating technology into a reading strategy coupled with visualization motivated Collegiate's 4th grade boys to read more and find joy in reading. During library classes, I had observed that many of the boys were not excited or positive about reading aloud nor did they enjoy traditional book talks. The book selection process was difficult. The boys would say "*I already read this stuff,*" or "*The library has nothing I want.*" The pre-intervention questionnaire painted a picture of an unengaged reader. When asked 'Would you read more if you had the chance?', fifteen boys were firm that they would not choose reading if they had a choice.

At the end of this intervention, there were more positive conversations about books in library class. Two of the boys reversed their attitude toward reading and became more positive forces in the dynamics of the group.

The boys began the visualization strategy, and became engaged in the technology aspect (using



the cameras, recordings, and the catalog as a social networking tool). They were excited, "*I love the flip,*" and "*Can we do this again?*" I was amazed at how quickly they decided whether they wanted to do the picture / podcast or the video.

Figure 3. Number of book choices that met highest criteria for each category of book characteristics that appeal to boys.

The positive reaction to the task demonstrated that technology improves enthusiasm for an activity, especially with boys who are usually reluctant participants. Using the catalog as a social networking tool for book choice was a successful strategy. The boys put a great deal of trust into their classmates' choices. When asked, 'Who recommends the books you read?', thirty members of the class answered, "*friends*", and four answered, "*the librarian*". When the 4th

graders evaluated their classmates' recommendations, there was further evidence of the boys' trust in their friends' choices. One of the rubrics the fourth graders used to evaluate the projects was a list of book characteristics that appeal to boy readers: visual elements, appropriate level of challenge, edginess, realism, immediacy, and humor (Smith & Wilhelm 2002). The boys gave over 30 of the books the highest rating in three of the categories (see *figure 3*). The most compelling evidence that social networking on the catalog was successful was the change in the boys' attitude during book selection in the library.

Instead of stating, "*the library has nothing I want to read*", the boys would use one of the three OPACs^{‡‡} to search the list of 4th grade picks. The activity also brought about more face-to-face recommendations between the boys. They started depending on each other for book suggestions. I have received requests to buy a book for the library - usually from reluctant readers – because a classmate was reading it.

The goal of reinforcing and practicing the visualization strategy was accomplished. I asked, 'Do you feel that by using visualization, you had a better and more detailed understanding of the passage you chose?' Twenty-nine boys said they could see a correlation between a better understanding of the passage and the activity. Comments from their videos or podcasts attested to the positive finding that the boys understood the strategy, could apply it to a short passage, and were engaged with the book they were reading.

"Miss Trunchbull was crazy and angry. When she got angry I visualized her with red dimples, smoke coming out of her ears, and a red face." Matilda by Roald Dahl

"I am at the base of a hill staring up at five mounted riders. ... As they are staring down at me, I feel a cold chill." Fellowship of the Rings by J. R. R. Tolkien

^{‡‡} On-line Public Access Catalog – these are the computer stations in the library that are permanently set up to search for materials in Collegiate Library's online catalog.

“What I saw was the sail boat floating and the motor boat driving away. What I heard was the sound of the motor boat and then just the sound of crickets and the water.” Wind Catcher by Avi

“The scene I want to describe is when the boys are walking down a street in Hawaii and they are being booed and spit on and yelled at. I can imagine how that would feel.” A boy no more by Harry Mazer

I found that, for boys, reading activities become more engaging with technology integration. The library catalog, used as a social networking tool, made it possible for the 4th grade boys to become virtual reading partners and to use their power of persuasion to convince their classmates to try the title they had recommended.

Implications of Study on Practice

During the study, I learned to step back and let the boys help one another find books. This practice was especially effective with reluctant readers. I was also convinced that teaching metacognition strategies improves competency in reading. During the study, the fourth graders became aware that the visualization strategy was a useful tool to help improve their comprehension. As they applied the strategy, the boys could understand and recall the passage from the book. I will continue to develop this strategy with the boys as a way of engaging them in leisure reading.

Since I began this project, there is a slight change in the way that I perceive my role as a teacher librarian. I had taught reading earlier in my career but had always thought of the process of learning how to read as a mixture of phonics and unexplained miracles. I had become a teacher librarian because I wanted to inspire children to love to read. I use to agree with Michael Sullivan (2009) when he quoted Julie Dahlhauser as saying: “...classroom teachers are already teaching them how to read; it is my job to teach them why to read” (p. 42). After reading *Proust and the Squid: The story and science of the reading brain* by Wolf (2007), I became aware of

how much work goes on in boys' brains to become successful readers.^{§§} I realized how helpful it is for a teacher librarian to be informed about how reading is taught. In a culture where boys are struggling, I need to take my role as teacher librarian seriously. I should know how to make meaningful connections with the curriculum so the library is a positive force in the reading program of our school.

This does not mean I will lose sight of helping boys find joy in reading. During the activity one of the boys who loves to read, asked me, "Could we just read instead of doing an activity?" This comment was especially ironic, seeing as the goal of the study was to foster an increased love of reading. I was reminded that making time during the school day for everyone to just read a book of choice is valuable. I feel my expertise will help my colleagues keep the joy of reading at the forefront of Collegiate's reading program.

Implications for Future Research

Action research is about change – reflecting on what you accomplished and how you will change your practice next time to be more effective. My plan for next year is to continue to work on finding ways to encourage boys to be each other's role models.

Part of the action research process is communicating outcomes to others. I wish I had shared my ideas earlier in the project and received feedback from my Collegiate colleagues. As I prepare to add more metacognitive strategies to the library curriculum for the next action cycle, I hope to do a better job of integrating my plans with the third and fourth grade classrooms teachers. The activity will be a richer experience for the boys.

^{§§} ...as you linked all this linguistic and conceptual information, you generated your own inferences and hypotheses based on your own background knowledge and engagement. If this cumulative information failed to make sense, you might have reread some parts to ensure that they fit within the given context. Then after you integrated all this visual, conceptual, and linguistic information with your background knowledge and inferences, you arrived at an understanding of what Proust was describing: a glorious day in childhood made timeless through the "divine pleasure" that is reading!

Conclusion

If we are all called to make a cultural shift in thinking about boys and reading, school librarians should be on the forefront in finding ways to make learning to read more fun. This action research project became a catalyst for helping me rethink and improve my practice.

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Reflection

I am very grateful that I was given the opportunity to do the action research project by the International Boys' Schools Coalition (ISBC). It has given me a chance to explore how I can integrate the library program with what I have learned about reading under the leadership of Melanie Hutchinson, Collegiate's Curriculum Coordinator. The Action Research Program helped me focus the professional development that was done on the reading curriculum, with my role as teacher librarian.

At the beginning of the project our group leader, Linda Gibson-Langford, challenged us to let our action research project make a difference in the reading life of our boys.

This action research project invites us to ponder that something which reaches out and takes our boys by the hand, gets them excited and leads them to enter worlds of critical and imaginative thinking and emotional awareness, and to know that, through enriching their reading capacity, the world opens to them.

With Linda's help and the international library team, I was able to redefine where I fit in the process of getting boys to find joy in reading.