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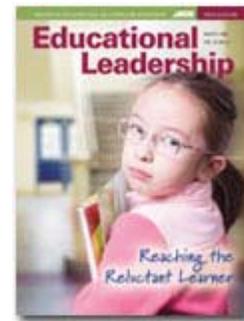# Educational Leadership

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March 2008 | Volume **65** | Number **6**
Reaching the Reluctant Learner

The Book Trailer: Engaging Teens Through Technologies

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March 2008

Seventh period "on-level" English at Western Middle School was home to 34 8th grade students.[1] However, when tested at the start of the year, the students were each reading at least two years below grade level. For these kids, even showing up to English class each day was both a struggle and an act of courage.

Across most classes and days, students like these demonstrate the typical outward signs of disengaged, reluctant readers—slumping over their desks, eyes glazed, minds wandering. This classroom is different. The classroom is teeming with energy as students use four computers to load projects and bring a handful of authors and other experts in distant locations into the class discussion.

Today, students are screening their individually crafted book trailers, one- to two-minute digital videos designed to entice classmates to read specific books. The guest authors and experts and the students will work together to award three trailers with the highest honor—a place on the class's weekly podcast, which is broadcast from the class's password-protected Web site and has an audience triple the size of the total number of yearly hits to the school Web site.

To do this work, students selected books, read, wrote, reread, storyboarded, created, and revised, and finally presented and then evaluated their work with an authentic, invested audience. This is real literacy work, or, as Garret, a student in the class said,

This is different because school is something better than the place where I just feel dumb. This place sees me as a reader and a writer in the ways that I get something from.

A Different Kind of Literacy

Garret has participated in programs that identified him as a struggling reader, a reluctant student, an at-risk student, and, most recently, a striving reader. And what has he learned? "School just tells what I'm not—how what I do outside doesn't count," he explained. Garret's low achievement in school led him to question his abilities, which led him to further disengage. "I stopped doing anything 'cause it wasn't going anywhere and I didn't see myself in any of it."

And outside school? Garret maintains a blog on cycling that receives hits from across the globe. Benita, another student in the class, works with the local historical society to create documentaries about the community. Rico creates remixes of popular media, all of which are highly ranked on online sites housing his work. These students are reading and writing, but in modes and media that are different from the print literacies valued in school. Classrooms that value these 21st-century literacies provide students with opportunities to create, think critically, genuinely collaborate with participants around the globe, and communicate through a variety of modes and media.

The Book Talk Transformed

I've used book talks throughout my teaching to challenge students to articulate what they have responded to within their reading and to invite others to read interesting texts. The problem? Asking reluctant or struggling readers to stand in front of their peers and talk about their reading just doesn't work. Having students create trailers instead of giving traditional presentations opens up the modes and media students use to communicate. Students can use images, motion or special effects, a recorded soundtrack, and print text to share their thinking, their interpretations, and their critiques of the books they read. Garret and his peers call this "layered writing," as meaning comes through the mixing of multiple modes as opposed to through a single one.

For the purposes of this project, I ask students to create a two-minute video using still images, transitions and special effects (generated with MovieMaker or iMovie software), voiceovers, and a soundtrack. Students, in consultation with me and our media center specialist, choose the books to present through the trailer. The goal of these trailer mirrors that of a movie trailer—to entice and attract audience. Students present the central characters, themes, or issues of the book visually and through written and voiceover narration. All trailers have to include the title of the book, the author's name, and a presentation that is both authentic to the text and that works to "hook" readers. I also require students to submit their trailers with a piece of writing that explores the choices they made, with an analysis of the book that shows that they made decisions on the basis of the text, and not just by using the aspects of technology that would best captivate an audience.

The Creative Process

Just like writing a traditional book report, developing trailers requires prewriting. Students read. They write first drafts. They storyboard those images that will best drive the narrative of the trailer. They plan for transitions and effects. They receive peer

review. They revise.

Throughout the process, I guide students in how to ensure their product conveys their intended meaning. I teach multimodal composition—ways of working with multiple modes to create a rich, compelling product. I assure students that the literacy knowledge they bring into the classroom is varied and valued and that we all have a "next step" to work toward in our quest to communicate even more effectively.

Once they have a clear plan for their trailers, students receive written "entrance tickets" for the computer lab. Instructional time within the lab, or in the classroom if we're lucky enough to gain access to a cart of laptops, is not about where to point and click. This is *not* because I believe that our students are digital natives (Prensky, 2001) who already know the tools and will be successful with the task because it involves a computer. It is because our planning leads students to quickly navigate the largely intuitive tools (iMovie or MovieMaker) and focus on content as opposed to bells and whistles. The goal is to get in and get it done, so we can focus our time on the screening and use of what we create.

This work is not about doing a "technology project." It is about using the unique capacities of the technology to provide a different kind of composing space and, more important, a different kind of a product for an invested, real audience.

The Product

Sam's book trailer focused on *The Number Devil: A Mathematical Adventure* by Hans Magnus Enzerberger (Holt Paperbacks, 2000), a book that had, up until this assignment, never been checked out of the school media center. To appeal to teens' interest in mystery, Sam started the trailer with a black screen and an eerie electronic soundtrack. The words, "What if your dreams were so horrible that you never wanted to sleep?" fade in and out, hanging on the screen in a red, vampiric scrawl. Almost as soon as the viewer can read and process the words, the screen flashes a series of what appear to be random images: a spiderweb, a lightning bolt, the inside of a computer chip, and ripples on the surface of a pond. Each image lingers for less than a second, heightening the audience's sense of disorientation.

The trailer continues by posing a second question: "What if you found yourself in an adventure where numbers and patterns were at the center of everything?" The creepy font paired with the pulsating electronic soundtrack creates an eerie tone. Once again, images appear, this time offering Sam's original photographs of tessellations and mathematical patterns in spiderwebs, flowers, insect wings, and architecture. The screen begins to fill with numbers as the voice of Sam's math teacher, Mr. Goldberg, echoes, "the numbers, they are everywhere." This voiceover loops repeatedly as the images and numbers fill the screen more rapidly, leading several students to whisper, "Cool!" when first viewing the trailer. The two-minute, four-second trailer closes with the words, "What would you do?"

Where the conventional book talk would ask students to offer a summary, analysis, or "hook" for other student readers, the book trailer offers an invitation through the selection of images, text, voiceover, and soundtrack. What worked well about Sam's trailer was his ability to leverage each of these modes to create an effect that speech

alone could not have conveyed. (For examples of additional trailers by students around the United States, see http://www.digitalbooktalk.com/, www.tppl.org/trp/trailers.htm, and http://springfieldvideo.edublogs.org/taxonomy/tags/book-trailers.)

Expanding the Audience

Traditional book talks were inevitably a performance for me as teacher, as opposed to an opportunity for collective meaning making or deeper reflection. In this class, we answer that challenge in two ways.

One answer is traditional in that students review and assess one another's work by completing rubrics during the screening of the trailers and by sharing books after the screening. Even after the project is over, however, students return to the trailers. Allison calls the trailers "our 'what's next' reading." Ideas from the trailers feed both our classroom library and students' reading lists.

The second answer came as we expanded the classroom community to include authors and other experts who virtually visit our classroom. As Garret explains, "Having the Internet in the room means that the teacher is no longer the only smart person there." The goal is to get eyes and ears on the students' work and to secure feedback that amplifies their learning and takes their engagement to a whole new level. We begin by inviting book authors and content experts to participate in the screening of our trailers. In Sam's case, we speak with a professor in the math department at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Kelsey speaks with a composer who works for Pixar, the California computer animation studio that created such films as *Toy Story, The Incredibles*, and *Ratatouille*. Alec speaks with an oral historian.

I send a copy of the trailer to each participant by e-mail before the discussion; we then use Skype or iChat for an audio conversation during class. All that either tool requires, once you are logged on, is a microphone and an Internet connection. Using these tools enables us to record the conversations so that students have an artifact of the feedback they receive.

The conversations focus on our guests' responses to the students' trailers, providing feedback that emphasizes how these students were working as writers rather than the authors' specific texts. The goal here is feedback, taking students' work and thinking to a richer and deeper place.

Literacy for Today … and Tomorrow

Garret and his peers taught me a lot about engaging reluctant readers and writers. What it means to read and write has changed—more so outside of school than in. When we expand our understanding of what counts as valued communication, we value our students. This doesn't come at a cost to the richness and rigor of the work conducted in the classroom, because working across multiple media and modes is complex. As O'Brien (2006) argues,

multimediating is reshaping our traditional notions of literate competence at the same time it critiques the print-based notions of literacy tied to school practices. (p. 43)

Teaching with emerging technologies and new literacies requires finding ways that the multiple and nuanced literacies that our students bring into our classrooms can amplify and enrich learning. Each new technology adds to the set of available texts, tools, and change agents.

But technology is not the goal. Student writers and readers are at the center of our instruction. And we, as mindful teachers, must thoughtfully and deliberately prepare *all* of our students for success by critically exploring the new technological tools and then using the ones that can help us and our students to powerfully convey what we think and know.

I can't think of a more exciting time to teach, as we're immersed in new possibilities for working with words and with one another. When we teach creatively with emergent tools in mind, we stand a better chance of engaging reluctant students by giving what we teach real meaning. Each day is an invitation to examine, play, invent, reinvent, and join in the conversation.

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Endnote

[1] The school and student names used in this article are pseudonyms.

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