

Using Technology to Enhance Literature Instruction

Each year, during my language arts classes, I select two to three novels of high literary value. These are typically books that the students do not select on their own, or they are books that are somewhat older and unfamiliar but that my students enjoy nonetheless. I read the books aloud to the students over the course of several weeks, holding detailed discussions in the process. My goal is to model critical thinking and reading skills to my students and help them explore aspects of reading they would not typically pursue on their own. After the reading of the book is complete, the students engage in a writing project that they select based on several provided options. I have experienced great success using this procedure and have felt a validation of this success when students go on to select other books by the same author or continue talking about the book months and even years later. However, I am aware that more could be done to integrate technology to enhance these literature units. It is my belief that by using technology, I can encourage enthusiasm and achievement from more students.

In the past 4 years, the book most preferred by students has been The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane by Kate DiCamillo. While exploring the two literature websites provided, I set out to find ways that I could enhance the teaching of this novel to my class. It is my intention to integrate the following ideas into my curriculum during the 2008-2009 school year.

The first website, Literature Learning Ladders (<http://eduscapes.com/ladders/>) allowed me to explore literature that has won notable awards. After exploring all the links, I was most intrigued by the site, "Newberys and the Net". While I am personally familiar with most of the books on the list, I am aware that my students have not read or even heard of most of these award winning stories. The Tale of Despereaux by Kate DiCamillo won the 2004 Newbury Medal. My first goal would be to check out a selection of Newbury award winning books from the library to keep in my classroom. Using the information provided on the Newbury Medal website, I would explain the award and hold a class discussion where the students described books they felt deserved an award.

Going back to the Literature Learning Ladders website, I would use the computer and projector to show all students the author biography associated with The Tale of Despereaux. While the links provided offer good information, they include a large amount of text which tends to intimidate students with learning disabilities. I would present the sites but paraphrase a condensed version for my students. I would have my students examine the cover to look for clues as to the topic and theme of the book. I would allow them to look at illustrations within the book as well, to help make a list of predictions which would remain posted in the classroom throughout the reading. Predictions would be corrected or revised during the reading. This activity has always proven helpful in engaging the students and promoting reading comprehension. I find that it is helpful for children to explore these ideas before reading so they have a sense of what to expect.

Before beginning to read, I would guide my students to the bottom of the Literature Learning Ladders website where vocabulary words are listed. The link takes the user to <http://www.dictionary.com> and provides a definition and an audio reading of the word. I find this to be

an exceptional accommodation for my students and one with which they should all become familiar. Finally, I would begin reading the book, holding discussions throughout. Also during the reading, students would be asked to write thoughts in their journals. Discussion questions are provided at <http://www.candlewick.com> under The Tale of Despereaux and Reader's Guide. When the reading is complete, students would be allowed to explore links through Literature Learning Ladders to various reviews of the book. These reviews have been written by both children and professionals. Students who wish to write their agreement or disagreement with the reviews may do so while others who are not as comfortable writing may type their thoughts or simply pair with another student and discuss their beliefs aloud.

Finally, the website Literature Learning Ladders has a section under Tale of Despereaux called Classroom Connections. I would put children in groups, placing stronger learners with struggling learners. I would ask each group to explore one of the links under Classroom Connections and find two interesting new facts to present to the class. Students who are comfortable using the computer may present these facts as a PowerPoint presentation while others may elect to simply type sentences. Students would be given several options for presenting the material and I feel that little extra would have to be done to accommodate my students who are struggling learners. Some students may have difficulty reading the text on the websites under Classroom Connections however, by pairing students, I feel that at least one student would be able to read the text. With only 10 students in each class, I am able to assist students who are experiencing difficulty. The exploration of <http://www.dictionary.com> is also a tremendous help to students who may decide to use the resource to decode an unfamiliar word when I am not available to assist them.

The unit exploring The Tale of Despereaux would serve as an introductory lesson. Once students were familiar with the author and her style of writing, it would then be easier to introduce a second book of a similar genre. It would also allow for a compare and contrast element in teaching the second book and help students become "experts" on books by the author. I have used the second website Great Literature Technology Connections (<http://www.trumbull.k12.oh.us/teachers/resources/Literature&Internet.html>), to form my plans for the second book in this discovery and exploration of children's literature.

The website Great Literature Technology Connections provides an excellent, six step process for developing lessons using literature and technology. The first step is to select a book and going along with the established theme, I have selected a second book by Kate DiCamillo, The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane. As previously mentioned, I have used this novel in the past but not to the extent to which it could be used. I have also not yet integrated technology with relation to this book. I found no specific sets of lesson plans available for this story and felt the lack of plans presented a good opportunity to explore what could be done without being influenced by the ideas of others.

The second step is to search for author and illustrator information. The book has its own website, (www.edwardtulane.com). This site contains a wealth of resources including a video featuring Kate DiCamillo and the illustrator of The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane, Bagram Ibatoulline. This is a great way to present information to students as it does not require the reading of text, is short, and

is easy to understand while providing quality information at the same time. Additional information, including an interview with the author and illustrator is available on the website under Teacher's Guide. The interview gives information about the book which would again help students make predictions and increase interest prior to reading. Step Three according to Great Literature Technology Connections, sends teachers on a quest for book information which is readily available on the Internet both on the Edward Tulane website, the author's website and dozens of other places on the Web. The teacher's guide on the Edward Tulane website however, provides more than enough information for inquiring minds. Providing students with learning problems with too much information is overwhelming so it is important to provide adequate resources and guide interested students to find additional information independently. I would bookmark several quality sites on each computer so interested students could explore them separately.

Step Four is to identify topics and resources. This aspect of the planning phase is most exciting because there are several recurring themes in The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane. I would focus on the themes of love, compassion, character and trust. These topics are somewhat abstract but the Catholic school environment in which I work, lends itself to further exploration of these ideas through service learning. I would ask students to trace the ideas of love, compassion, character and trust throughout the book, as well as identify any other major themes they would like to explore further. At this point in the unit, we would again read the novel together as a class, discussing themes and major ideas along the way. The idea of character is well explored in the lesson found here http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=50. The lesson calls for students to explore elements of character to create a webpage. However, not having these resources, I feel this project could best be completed using MS Word instead. This activity would help students increase familiarity with the program and would allow them to use both text and images to describe Edward. Struggling learners may use Kidspiration as an alternative, perhaps using a graphic organizer to explain Edward's changes in character over the course of the book. The other three themes would be explored in Step Five.

Step Five is to develop meaningful activities. The character activity mentioned previously would be the first. Edward Tulane is a very dynamic, deep character so much could be done with this aspect both on the surface level for more concrete learners to the conceptual level for those more abstract thinkers. A second pursuit would be a writing activity in which students wrote their own review of the book, took their review through the editing process, and submitted it on the Scholastic: Share What You're Reading site. (<http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/swyar/write.asp>) This provides an excellent opportunity for students to write for an authentic audience.

Finally, as a culmination of the unit and exploration of the deeper themes of the story, also tying in with the school's yearly service learning project, I would have students brainstorm ways to show love and compassion towards others as Edward learns to do in the story. Depending on the group of students, I would either lead the discussion using the computer and projector or I would allow small groups of students to search the Internet for organizations in which they can show their compassion for others by doing a service project. The searching would use technology, possibly bringing to light service needs in other parts of the world. The actual project may or may not involve the use of technology and

while it would need to meet the approval of the school's principal, it would help students identify ways in which they can help others. It would also help the students form a connection to Edward's character and perhaps have a greater understanding of the author's purpose.

The last step is to implement and evaluate the process. Throughout the course of the school year, students will become familiar with two works of literature and the author of the books. The students will use technology to explore awards given to books, language definitions and pronunciation, ways in which the Internet can provide additional information on a topic, and author information. They will view video and read author interviews. They will use computer graphics to artistically explore character traits and they will demonstrate writing skills by posting a review to one of the stories. Finally, they will delve deeper into the meaning behind the second story by investigating ways in which they can enact the themes of the book by helping others. All these connections will be made through the use of technology and all of these learning experiences exhibit ways of presenting material which has not been done before in my classroom. I feel there is tremendous potential for a positive outcome because these stories appeal to both genders and the lessons involved attract interest from students of all learning styles. The unit as a whole has been suitably modified to meet the learning needs and limitations of my students and I feel confident that all aspects of this project can take place in my classroom with guidance and patience on my part. I am excited to implement these lessons and I will continue to use the resources found on the two provided websites to enhance my literature curriculum and integrate technology into my classroom.