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The Fluency Development Lesson Gets Graphic

By Belinda S. Zimmerman[1], Kent State University, and Sharon D. Kruse, TheUniversity of Akron

Introduction

Over centuries, in the western world, the ability to read and to read well has opened doors for generations of students, citizens and professionals. Long considered a cornerstone of the educated, the ability to read with prosody, to stir the emotions of a crowd and to captivate the imagination of others with words has separated castes and classes, and conferred status and social standing. Yet, reading well does not come easily.

Formal entry into reading for most children has been marked by instruction in phonics, spelling, grammar, handwriting, vocabulary and comprehension. The typical beginning reader text is illustrated and the pictures serve to help the young (or novice) reader make sense of the words on the page. Early readers view illustrations as part of the text, reading them for meaning, nuance and detail. Until novice readers are taught to view text and illustration as separate, both can contribute to the act known as reading. Current graphic novel scholarship suggests that reading illustrations and text together as complementary textual features, motivates modern readers.

The introduction of the graphic novel into classroom curriculum and instruction challenges these conventions and formats by asking the reader to read both the illustration and the written word to develop insight and meaning, comprehension and understanding. By reintroducing the visual as an essential and fundamental part of the text, the graphic novel requires scholars to question the long held assumptions that underscore how written text is defined and presented (Kress, 2000; Monnin, 2011; Myers, 1996). Graphic novels also challenge assumptions about what makes text *text* and what reading text means in the socially constructed context of the classroom. As Monnin (2011) argues, literacy in the new media age requires that teachers shift instruction to include integrated visually-based English Language Arts pedagogy. As Kress (2003, p.1) notes, "The world told is a different world to the world shown." By approaching literacy learning as simultaneously text- and image-based, literacy requires readers to be able to co-create meaning from both print and illustration concurrently. In this paper, we explore the use of graphic novels in middle school settings and offer scholars in the field and classroom teachers alike insights into how the graphic novel can be employed to motivate and engage readers of all levels.

Literature Review

This article is intended to be useful for both practitioners and scholars in the field of literacy. In as much as veterans of the format already possess a working definition of related key terminology, we believe it is important to set forth both definitions of and assumptions about

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literacy its relationship to the graphic novel format. It is hoped that these clarifications might broaden the discussion about the use of graphic novels in schools, particularly in language arts classrooms. We begin by discussing and defining the graphic novel.

Graphic Novels

Although books and comics have enjoyed a longstanding publishing history and are increasingly legitimatized in school and society on a daily basis, the format of graphic novels is still a relatively new and developing enterprise in American culture and the literacy curriculum of schools. While scholars of the field posit similar definitions of graphic novels, the characteristics of graphic novels receive differing emphasis dependent on the perspective of the scholar.

Both Schwartz (2002) and Carter (2007) emphasize the comic book as the foundational source for the graphic novel.   Schwarz (2002) contends that graphic novels are "comics in book format" (p. 262). Building on Schwarz, Carter (2007) states that a graphic novel is a "book-length sequential art narrative featuring an anthology-style collection of comic art" (p.1). Similarly, Seelow (2010) describes the graphic novel as an "extended, self-contained comic book," but adds, "graphic novels are not just transitions to more advanced prose works … but that graphic novels, in themselves, are comparable to the best prose works" (p. 57).

The American Library Association (ALA; The National Coalition Against Censorship, the American Library Association & the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, 2006) characterizes the graphic novel as "a singular product of the 20th century" (p.2) that unfolds similarly to narrative as explored in film. Stressing the illustration as a primary feature of the graphic novel, the ALA sums up these definitions by suggesting that the graphic novel is a comic book in "grown up" format. Thought of in this way, the graphic novel takes on the primary features of comic books in that they both employ sequential art to further the narrative. However, unlike the comic book, the graphic novel is a complete and sophisticated story. As Hart, (2010) suggests, graphic novels contain "skillful plot construction, thoughtfully-drawn characters and conflicts, and richly-evocative language" (p. 3).

Drawing from this rich tradition of work, we suggest that the graphic novel is an important and contemporary format of literature. The graphic novel can be either fiction or non-fiction and always includes sequential art as a primary feature of presentation. Like traditional fiction, the graphic novel provides the reader a story that contains a complete narrative inclusive of plot, setting, characterization, resolution and a moral or lesson. Non-fiction graphic novels offer the reader informational, content specific knowledge presented in text and illustration. Engaging in format, the graphic novel positions text and art as equal partners in the literary experience. In tandem, text and illustration offer the reader multiple pathways into the written presentation.

Reading and Literacy

In the United States, three foundational definitions of reading have informed literacy instruction (Foertsch, 1998). The first addresses the mechanics of reading. Included within this definition is the basic ability to correctly decode and pronounce given words. In order to become proficient with this aspect of reading, teachers incorporate phonemic awareness, phonics, word structure and word building activities into their instruction.

Reading may also be defined as identifying words to access appropriate meaning. Here, students continue to learn about words, such as the rules of the written word, how to break up words into parts, and to identify root words. Each of these skills enables students to discover word meanings while they also consider the context of the passage. A third definition suggests that reading requires the reader to go beyond pronunciation, word identification, and simple context clues in order to bring meaning and a greater sense of understanding to the text.

Currently, a more comprehensive view of reading has been advanced that includes the three basic definitions, but also emphasizes reading and writing as a process situated within the context of authentic reading and writing experiences. Involving the higher order cognitive processes such as reasoning, comparing/contrasting, evaluating, and synthesizing the comprehensive definition of reading stresses the ways in which the reader engages with the text. This expanded definition also acknowledges the importance of strategic instructional approaches for the effective teaching of literacy processes (Allington & Cunningham, 1996; International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

The understanding of literacy acquisition and progress continues to evolve with the emergence of rapidly changing technologies and new literacies (Kist, 2005; Leu & Kinzer, 2000; O'Connor, 2010). New literacies are highly visual in nature and make good use of illustrations, charts, graphs, and photographs. In our visually-rich society, using such texts can advantage all readers, especially those who struggle. Specifically, graphic novels offer "value, variety, and a new medium for literacy that acknowledges the impact of visuals" (Schwarz, 2002, p. 262). Graphic novels allow readers to negotiate their understanding of printed materials weaving information and data gleaned from multiple world-views and vantage points as they toggle between interpretations of text and illustration (Myers, 1996). Enticing and motivating for struggling readers, graphic novels can enhance the development of the critical literacy skills that schools and the 21st century workplace necessitate.

The Importance of Fluency Instruction

There are established ways to provide high quality literacy instruction in the language arts classroom. Most recently, the work of the National Reading Panel (2000) resulted in the recognition of five instructional components required for success in reading: Phonemic awareness, phonics (decoding), fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The identification of fluency was considered by many to be the most surprising since it was referred to as the "neglected reading goal" (Allington, 1983, p. 556) of the curriculum for decades. Fluency was not considered to be integral to the reading curriculum because it was not a skill needed by most adult readers who are likely to favor silent reading. As such, reading fluency was overlooked in

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the reading curriculum and did not receive explicit attention in the classroom (Zimmerman, Rasinski, & Foreman, 2011).

Rasinki and Padak (2005) suggest that fluency may be defined in two distinct ways. On one hand, fluency is viewed as the ability to decode words automatically so that students are able to focus on text meaning. Alternatively, fluency is marked by the ability to parse the written word into meaningful chunks, resulting in expressive, prosodic reading that intentionally makes use of pauses, word emphasis, smoothness, intonation, and volume. Regardless of the perspective, in both cases fluency is understood as a precondition for comprehension and increased reading competence (Pikulski & Chard, 2005; Rasinski, 2010; Topping, 2006).

Moreover, the reader must be able to decode and comprehend simultaneously in order to engender meaningful, expressive reading. If too much cognitive energy is placed on sounding out words, the student has limited mental energy left for comprehension, the premier goal of reading (Rasinski & Padak, 2008). When students are unable to effortlessly decode while reading, comprehension suffers setting into motion a downward spiral for these students as they fall further behind their peers in academic achievement (Stanovich, 1986).

This gap becomes even more pronounced as students transition from primary to middle and upper grades. At these grade levels, the time spent and the quantity of reading tends to decline, resulting in diminished literacy skills as well as motivation to read. This is a critical time in the educational lives of "tweens" and adolescents. At this stage, they are confronted with increasingly diverse and complex texts and cannot afford to be deficient in the literacy skills necessary to navigate the reading and writing requirements of school and far beyond graduation.

Our focus on adolescents is not accidental. As NAEP (2009) results suggest, reading proficiency drops from grade four through grade ten with nearly 70 percent of middle and high school students scoring below the proficient level in reading achievement. When student scores at the basic level are included in the sample, the results are even more distressing. Twenty-five percent of eighth-grade students and 27 percent of twelfth grade students score below the basic level of reading achievement, suggesting that they do not have even "partial mastery of appropriate grade-level knowledge and skills" (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010, pg.1). As the cognitive demands of the workplace increase, literacy is fast becoming a nonnegotiable skill for today's youth.

The Fluency Development Lesson

The Fluency Development Lesson (FDL), an instructional reading routine, was originally developed as an intervention to support the regular reading program (Rasinski, Padak, Linek, & Sturtevant, 1994). The primary purpose was to increase the progress of students who find learning to read difficult. Although the FDL was initially designed as an instructional model for struggling primary-aged children, the FDL has been successfully implemented with elementary and middle/secondary school students as well as with English language learners (Zimmerman, Rasinski, & Foreman, 2011). In the FDL, several specific components of research-based fluency instruction work together in a manner that accelerates students' reading progress in a relatively

condensed time frame (Rasinski, 2010). Within the focused FDL routine, students have multiple opportunities to engage in authentic reading, thereby honing their fluency, comprehension, and word recognition skills (Padak & Rasinski, 2008). Practice is crucial to the development of reading progress and proficiencies. The importance of the increased time spent on reading provided by the FDL cannot be overstated. When implemented with fidelity to the lesson structure on a regular basis, the FDL holds much potential for substantial improvements in reading since such progress is significantly related to increased time on task (Gallagher, 2003).

The approach requires that students and teachers work for 10 to 15 minutes each day with a carefully selected text in which the teacher, or a more capable peer, models reading the text for the students. The teacher then gradually hands over the responsibility for the reading task to the students. Through a series of repeated readings, word study, and attention to comprehension, students master reading the passage beyond the surface level to achieve in depth understanding.

Graphic novels come in a variety of formats. While not all graphic novel formats lend themselves to oral reading, many do. Examples of these include the *Bizenghast* series (LeGrow, 2005), the *Vampire Kisses* series (Schreiber, 2007), and the 2008 Caldecott Medal winner, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* (Selznick, 2007). In these books, full-page text is present and could be adapted to the FDL. In other cases, where the text is less dense and more fluid, the graphic novel might be used as an engaging, interactive reading practice. The combination of shorter passages paired with graphics provides the reader strong clues to content and meaning. In this way, use of the graphic novel enhances student reading comprehension that in turn, enhances student learning. As Myers (1996, p.42) notes, graphic novels incorporate many of the conventions that appear in the "drawing and social notes of [students] where they interact with oral language, songs, actions and gestures" to produce a text rich in the resources of popular culture. While no study has yet paired graphic novels and the FDL, other work (Horn & Giacobbe, 2007) suggests that such a pairing holds great promise.

Fluency matters regardless of whether the reading is in oral or silent form. As students gain control over the processes of decoding and word identification and are successfully reading at basic levels silent reading emerges, requiring students to employ in-the-head thinking processes to acquire the meaning in texts (Clay, 2005). According to Topping (2006), the "extraction of maximum meaning at maximum speed in a relatively continuous flow" is the main purpose of silent reading (p. 173) so that the reader can attend to the larger meaning behind the text. Students need to develop solid silent reading abilities to succeed in school, perform well on tests, and to function in the world beyond the classroom. Given the importance of competent silent reading, it is surprising that schools often emphasize silent reading fluency the least, although it is expected and tested the most (Gregg, 2010).

As we describe the FDL and its use with graphic novels, we will illustrate how the silent and oral reading of graphic novels complement each other and can result in more powerful practices for student learning as related to fluency and comprehension. We will also weave into our discussion how using more traditional texts for the initial phases of the FDL can then be adapted by students into graphic novel formats increasing comprehension, motivation and engagement in their work.

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Overview of the Fluency Development Lesson

The following provides a brief overview of the essential features of the FDL (Adapted from Zimmerman & O'Connor, 2011):

1. *Modeling*. A first expressive reading is presented by a fluent reader. This may be the teacher or it might be another student who has demonstrated strong fluency skills. The role of the students is to listen and enjoy the performance.

2. *Text shared with students*. The teacher (or other fluent reading model) presents copies of the selected text to the students. The students are now able to follow along as the teacher or model reader presents another oral reading performance of the selected text. The qualities of the oral reading are discussed by both the teacher and the students.

3. *Repeated Readings*. The students and teacher work together for several more expressive readings of the passage. With each attempt, the teacher and the students become aware of student improvement in reading rate, decoding and word recognition. Comprehension is also enhanced as rereading is a key strategy for both improving text recall and understanding (Rasinski, 2010). Throughout the repeated readings, the student is encouraged to underline or circle parts of the passage that interest or challenge them.

4. *Comprehension and vocabulary*. At this juncture in the FDL, attention shifts from various forms of choral and paired repeated readings to determining what the passage offers the reader. Discussion focuses on developing meaning and comprehension of the material as well as identifying unknown vocabulary words.

5. *Paired practice*. Once the meaning of the passage is clear and key vocabulary is defined, it is time for the students to read the passage in pairs without teacher support. This choral reading reinforces fluency in that it allows students to practice reading in a fluid, confident way.

6. *Alternating reading*. Students should then practice the passage by alternating the reading with their partner paying close attention to expression, word accuracy and fluency. At this time, students may continue their discussion of the content of the passage, broadening their comprehension by working with the ideas contained within the text as they focus on proper use of the vocabulary in the passage in their own conversation.

7. *Rehearsal.* Individually or with partners the students practice and prepare for performance of the text or passage. The practice involves both oral and silent reading as a way to gain lasting fluency skills.

8. *Performance.* The students individually or in partners perform the text for an audience. Positive feedback should then be provided to the performing students. Positive feedback can be provided in any number of ways including verbal praise,

short written comments by teachers and peers, and/or applause, or more formal discussions of what went well in the reading.

In practice, incorporating graphic novels into FDL might unfold as follows:

Preparation

Preparation for the FDL is not a labor intensive process. The first step involves the teacher or student carefully selecting the designated fluency text. Texts written with a sense of voice are ideal texts to be selected for use in the FDL because they are meant to be performed or become more powerful when read aloud (Rasinski, 2006). The graphic novel also enhances the presentation by pairing the spoken words with engaging and provocative visuals. The addition of visual panels along-side well-read text can result in more complex student performances. In turn, this complexity informs comprehension efforts as students focus on the written words and the panels together to derive meaning from the text.

The Daily Lesson (Adapted from Zimmerman, Rasinski, & Foreman, 2011, pp. 375-377)

Monday**:** Launch the lesson and read to students.

1. After the text is carefully selected, the teacher reads, modeling fluent, phrased, prosodic reading. During this time, the students are to simply listen and enjoy as the teacher reads the text. Using a full page of text is one way to launch the lesson and arouse students' curiosity about the book, and ultimately motivate them to read the story in its entirety. Passages that include matters of intrigue or mystery, dialogue, humor, and rich vocabulary make ideal texts to launch the lesson. We offer the following excerpt from the beginning of a chapter from the graphic novel *Bizenghast* (LeGrow, 2005, p. 36) a graphic novel that contains themes and content of interest to middle grade students to demonstrate the types of graphic novels that are well suited to this practice.

"Second Graveyard" Theory Still Disputed

Recent investigation into the town records of Bizenghast (a small mill city outside of Watertown) has left historians stymied, as a large number of death certificates officiated in the town between 1701 and 1950 do not match up to any of the plots in the residential graveyard.

This apparent lack of bodies to match the certificates was for a long time the only concern of local genealogists. Recently however … visitors from the suburbs have begun to take long hiking trips through the woods of Bizenghast on a quest to find out what has now become known as Bizenghast's Graveyard, an alleged second cemetery that historians claim must exist, in order to contain the missing bodies. To add to the confusion, many visitors to the antiquated town claim to have found the graveyard in the woods, only to mysteriously lose it again.

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"My husband and I were out hiking in the woods when we found this enormous place, right in the middle of a field," Maryann King told the Daily Eagle. "It was like a huge graveyard with really big towers that looked kind of like horses or something. We had no idea anyone was looking for it until we got back to town and asked the manager of the inn about it. We came back later with [sister] Joyce and [brother-in-law] Robert, but we couldn't find it again. We went right to the spot where it was in, but it wasn't there. And all the pictures I took came out overexposed."

"I don't want them anyhow," added King, "That place gives me the creeps."

Similar stories have appeared on the Internet, so many that the town of Bizenghast has promised to issue an official statement on its website, advising visitors not to enter the woods without a guide, as sudden cliffs and drop-offs near the coastline represent a risk of injury to inexperienced hikers. Unfortunately for the town, its remote location and unexplained electrical storms have taken the town's official website offline for months.

2. The teacher discusses the probable meanings of the text with the class as the quality of his or reading.

3. The teacher displays the text on the visual presenter or the SMART board.
   The teacher reads the passage again to the students who are directed to follow along silently. Again, the students are asked to relax and enjoy.

4. The entire group is invited to join in and read the text chorally several times. The teacher may create variety in the choral reading by having students read the passage or portions of it in groups.

Tuesday: Repeated reading

1. The class reads and rereads the passage again chorally. Again, variations on choral reading may be requested by the teacher.

2. Comprehension and vocabulary are emphasized at this point of the FDL. The teacher may ask questions that have students identify points of intrigue, mystery and make predictions about what will happen next in the story. Additionally, interesting and/or challenging words are highlighted on the students' texts and discussed to ensure understanding.

3. At this point, the students are encouraged to engage in wide reading (Kuhn and Stahl, 2003). Here, they begin to silently read the novel and strive to eventually read the novel in its entirety.

Wednesday: Repeated reading**,** comprehension and vocabulary

1. The students again read the text chorally.

2. The students read in partners, alternating the text reading.

3. Together, the students read ahead in the graphic novel to discount or affirm predictions and to further address the meaning and vocabulary of the story. From the Bizehghast passage, the teacher may suggest that the students work together to use background knowledge and context clues to identify word meanings.

Thursday: Silent reading and creating graphics

1. Silent reading of the selected passage begins the lesson.

2. Next, the students work individually or in pairs to identify the main idea of the passage and create a graphic novel panel that illustrates this point. Teachers encourage the use of pictures, symbols, speech bubbles, and captions to summarize the main idea of the text. Engagement with this creative process increases fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary as the selected passage must be revisited several times to compose the panel that accurately captures the essence of the piece.

3. The students share their panels and understanding with others in the classroom.

Friday: Performance

1. The teacher asks for volunteers to perform the text. The students often use a reader's theater type of format to present the passage to the class. The performers receive positive and constructive feedback from the teacher and peers. The provision of feedback concerning fluency (e.g., how well the passage was read), comprehension (e.g., how well the student was able to explain the passage) and analysis (e.g., how a student might compare this passage and visual panels to other types of material) reinforces the hard work in which students have engaged as well as their final presentation and understanding(s.)

Implications for Classroom Teachers

The adoption of graphic novels as authentic and legitimate forms of text in a fluency development lesson can be motivating for struggling and reluctant readers (Hughes, King, Perkins & Fuke, 2011). Certainly, the inclusion of illustrative images makes the books appear, on the surface, to be an easier read than text dense volumes. However, we argue that just like one should not judge a book by its cover, the graphic novel should not be judged by its predominate use of images.

Image, within the graphic novel, transcends the typical picture that accompanies traditional text. Each panel contributes to the story, challenging the reader to make cognitive

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sense of the story as it unfolds. As Lavin (1998) and Lyga (2006) assert, engaging with graphic novels is a more rigorous cognitive activity than reading conventional text-only books. Since the images are part of the text and contribute to comprehension of the material, reading the images requires the student to make sense of the visual cues within the content of the written text (Monnin, 2010). In this way, the FDL employs visual metaphors that are embedded within the graphic frame and students are challenged to make sense of the story line using these context clues. By teaching and encouraging visual literacy in concert with the FDL, teachers who pair text with images expand the ways in which students can access content knowledge and understanding.

We cannot draw this distinction sharply enough. Recently, scholars (Schmoker, 2011) have taken aim at the use of 'art projects' as a poor substitute for offering students challenging academic work in the literacy classroom. We argue that unlike the shoebox diorama, coat hanger mobile or sugar cube fortress; teaching students to read and produce complex images that forward, rather than simply accompany, understanding of text(s), cognitively engages students in synthetic and evaluative learning.

Use of the FDL in tandem with visual literacy pedagogies demands that the reader engage actively with the text beyond basic comprehension. It challenges the reader to take in a variety of stimuli as part of the sense-making process. In turn, the FDL requires the reader to enter into a dialogue with the text itself, questioning, predicting, creating and reflecting as meaning is developed. In one sense, thinking of literacy in this way, places the reader first. Unlike more conventional approaches, that ask the reader to make sense of an author's purpose or perspective, visual literacy as supported by use of graphic novels, suggests that the reader's experience of the text be legitimized and explored.

By brokering a different dynamic between text and reader, literacy becomes less a search to understand the other and more a pursuit to understand the self in context with the other. Students who may have never experienced reading as an authentic extension of their world may well be able to do so as their experiences become part of a shared narrative concerning the text. The increased fluency that results from utilizing the FDL fosters an opportunity for the reader to smoothly shift between visual images and printed text within the graphic novel. As a result of increased fluency, students gain higher-level understanding(s) from shared literary experiences.

Furthermore, the graphic novel can provide scaffolding to conventional novels (Carter, 2007; Hart, 2010; Hughes, King, Perkins & Fuke, 2011). A note of caution here: We do not want to undermine the potential of graphic novels to serve this important bridging function for struggling or reluctant readers. However, we do want to suggest that graphic novels can be a primary genre of literature within the classroom. When viewed within the context of visual literacy, educators can begin to understand the ways in which these texts and their unique format can contribute to fluency and comprehension.

Conclusion

In this paper we have argued for two important ideas. The first suggests that fluency matters. The second suggests that graphic novels are an important to enhance visual literary. Taken together, we emphasize that the use of graphic novels as a tool to inform fluency instruction can provide middle school teachers a powerful educational tool. While we have focused the instructional intervention themes of this paper on using graphic novels to reach and teach struggling readers, the FDL intervention has the potential to reach readers of all levels. We hope that these understandings alone offer much to the discussion.

However, more importantly, is our call to action. Teachers can assist readers, especially those who struggle, by thinking of reading instruction more inclusively. By employing forms of text like the graphic novel, engagement in the literacy classroom can be increased. Furthermore, by engaging with the graphic novel as a pathway into visual literacy, teachers can advance comprehension in important contemporary contexts.

In turn, as comprehension grows, so does the reader's ability to critically examine text. When students become critically and intellectually engaged with text, they can also begin to understand the importance of literacy and the ways in which engagement with text can both expand and inform their world. By using the graphic novel as a way into the development of fluency, teachers can place the reader first, thus creating a student-centered context for learning.

As we reach the end of this piece, we would like to argue that this learning context is a unique mix of the social and the personal. It is social in that oral fluency, as emphasized in the FDL, demands the performance of the written word in the social space of the classroom. Furthermore, fluency, when paired with visual literacy, depends on the development of shared meanings of the studied text. As discussion is informed by the voices of students, the knowledge that is generated is unavoidably co-created in shared space. It is personal because the individual's voice, whether part of discussion or part of performance is required. Engagement with not only the graphic novel material, but with the process of meaning making requires that students show up and be present in their own learning experience. This is a powerful mix of interaction, one which, we argue, fundamentally changes the classroom space.
The classroom space is changed for two reasons, we assert.

When new tools, such as graphic novels are introduced (and legitimized) new content becomes part of the vocabulary of the classroom and the grammar of schooling. As visual images and printed words become equally probed for meaning and what text means is investigated in the context of multiple voices and experience, the learning plane can be leveled. Subtle shifts in the ways students speak and the ways students interact can create compelling outcomes for learning. Second, new tools inevitably create a new context for learning. The context we envision is one in which connecting with and collaborating about text is fostered. The result can be a classroom where students are more engaged in their learning and more compelled by the understandings they create.

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