

# Chapter 11

## Reading-to-Learn from Subject Matter Texts: A Digital Storytelling Circle Approach

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### ABSTRACT

*Digital storytelling circles (DSCs) are multimodal platforms aimed at improving students' comprehension of subject matter texts. In a small group, students in a DSC engage in reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, using digital tools, and manipulating texts and instructional strategies. Roles are assigned to each group member as they use the tools provided by the multimodal platform to create a digital story. Most of the literature supports the notion that the experience of creating digital stories can have a positive impact on students' acquisition of literacy skills and their motivation to engage with the text. This chapter presents a model for using DSCs in the post-reading phase of a Directed Reading Activity (DRA). Case study findings highlight two DSCs that exhibited qualities of developing the literacy strategies necessary in reading-to-learn with complex content area texts.*

### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we propose that with proof of concept, digital storytelling circles (DSCs) may be a useful innovation to improve students' comprehension and understanding of subject matter texts. A DSC is a multimodal platform, constituted of reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, digital tools, texts, and instructional strategies (Tobin, 2012). In a DSC, students are organized

into small groups of 4-5 students with the goal of creating a digital story about the text they are reading. Members of the group are each assigned (or volunteer for) roles such as Director, Writer, Producer, and Editor. Students then plan their digital stories and use the tools provided by the multimodal platform to create the digital story.

Most of the literature relevant to digital storytelling is descriptive and located in publications read by teachers and technology personnel. The

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presentations rarely provide a discussion of the principles on which digital storytelling is constructed, although there is data to support that the experience of creating digital stories can have a positive impact on students' acquisition of literacy skills and their motivation to engage with the text.

The purpose of this chapter is to:

- Describe digital storytelling and DSCs.
- Discuss a set of principles that may guide the utilization of digital storytelling and DSCs.
- Review the evidence-based research on digital storytelling.
- Report the results of an experimental-control group research project designed to determine the effects of participation in DSCs integrated with a Directed Reading Activity (DRA) on reading comprehension of subject matter text.
- Report an analysis of the interactions among students and tools as they engage in a digital storytelling activity.

## **BACKGROUND**

As students move through school, they are expected to develop the knowledge and skills to read, study, and comprehend complex subject matter texts that are increasingly longer, more conceptually dense, and contain more technical vocabulary, graphic representations, tables, charts, and notations. To be successful in reading and studying a subject matter text, students must activate and organize their prior knowledge of the subject matter presented in the text, develop a purpose for reading and studying, retrieve and coordinate the necessary literacy skills and strategies appropriate for the text, access information from a variety of sources, monitor progress toward attaining their purpose, critically analyze information and concepts presented in the text, participate in discussion of the text, synthesize the contributions of others, and integrate the new learning with their

prior knowledge. Assessments consistently reveal that too many students struggle to successfully perform these complex and varied tasks.

## **The Problem**

The Common Core State Standards have placed exponentially increased demands on the cognitive load students must carry to navigate the complex text at the heart of the Common Core English Language Arts Standards. Text complexity increases from one grade to another, and students encounter new vocabulary and disciplinary concepts on their own (NGACBP & CCSSO, 2010). With the new Common Core requirements, by the time they graduate, students are expected to have the literacy skills necessary to independently read, study, and comprehend the narrative and subject matter texts that will be required in colleges, universities, and workplaces (NGACBP & CCSSO, 2010). Additionally, the Common Core's focus on deep comprehension (rather than "shallow reading") calls for activities that focus on developing reading-to-learn skills that can be used independently with a variety of media.

Over the last decade, there has been a gradual shift from a traditional view of reading and studying subject matter texts to a more complex view. The emerging view proposes that deep learning from texts is much more than simply reading about a topic in a textbook, going to the library to locate more information on the topic, and then writing a report on the topic. Reading, or more appropriately literacy, is a multimodal activity (Alvermann, Phelps, & Ridgeway, 2006, Heath & Street, 2008; Kress, 2000). It is now a common understanding that students must be proficient in (a) reading, studying, interpreting, analyzing, and understanding complex subject matter texts, (b) using technology and digital media to expand information presented in subject matter texts, (c) listening to and contributing to discussion of the texts, and (d) and writing and speaking about what they have learned.

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