

IMPROVING CHILDREN'S LITERACY WHILE PROMOTING DIGITAL FLUENCY THROUGH
THE USE OF BLOG'S IN THE CLASSROOM: SURVIVING THE HURRICANE

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ABSTRACT

IMPROVING CHILDREN'S LITERACY WHILE PROMOTING DIGITAL FLUENCY THROUGH THE USE OF BLOG'S IN THE CLASSROOM: SURVIVING THE HURRICANE

Growth towards literacy involves many steps that have been well researched and documented. As a function of technological advancements in the late 20th century, digital fluency has become a needed component to any literacy program. To explore the potential of these technologies in the elementary school classroom, a literacy project entitled "Surviving the Hurricane" was designed and implemented over a six-month period using BLOG technology. The results showed high student interest in technology as a tool for reading and writing, a desire to feel useful when members of their community are in need, and a willingness of participants to continue to play an active role in BLOG submissions.

INTRODUCTION

Literacy and Digital Fluency

Current educational initiatives require educators' involvement in students' growth towards literacy. Traditional literacy teaching methods can now include BLOG technologies. The BLOG offers students ways to express their experiences through storytelling on the Internet. Digital fluency has become a demand of the 21st century. Schools can now offer students the BLOG as a tool to stimulate thought and discussion, and showcase personal literacy. In addition, students use the classroom BLOG to practice digital fluency.

Growth towards literacy involves many researched and documented steps. Technological advancements in the late 20th century mandate digital fluency, a needed component to any literacy program. Digital fluency is defined as the competencies, new representational practices, design sensibilities, and technical expertise that a learner gains or demonstrates by using digital tools to gather, design, evaluate, critique, synthesize, and develop digital media artifacts, communication messages, or other electronic expressions (Hsi, Pinkard, & Woolsey, 2005). To determine the potential of increasing overall digital literacy, the field of digital fluency warrants examination. Business leaders, policymakers, and educators are in wide agreement that definitions of literacy must be widened to include skills with digital technology and that children will need the ability to use information technologies in order to function effectively as citizens and workers in the 21st century (Ba, Tally, & Tsikalas, 2002).

The component of digital fluency was added to an elementary class literacy program a six month period. The technology chosen for implementation was a classroom BLOG as described by David Huffaker. A BLOG is an online venue where self-expression and creativity is encouraged and online communities are built, providing an excellent opportunity for educators to advance literacy through storytelling and dialogue (2004). A common interest of many students in this area of the country is that of experiencing a natural "disaster." A BLOG entitled "Surviving the Hurricane" was developed to invite students to relate their experiences by contributing entries. This then stimulated further writing. Student response to digital fluency resulted in a high interest in technology as a tool for reading and writing, a desire to feel useful when members of their community are in need, and a willingness of participants to continue to play an active role in BLOG submissions.

Storytelling

In an effort to understand how to use new technology to enhance traditional ways of teaching literacy, we began by researching the way children learn to read. The development of children's fluency traditionally begins with oral storytelling. In this way, children begin to communicate their personal stories. Storytelling brings people together in a common perspective, and stretches everyone's capacity to empathize with others and share experiences (Huffaker, 2004). Telling stories fosters children's language and reading skills to grow. Stories, whether fictional, autobiographical, or anecdotal, give rise to more mature narratives (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). Storytelling thus became a necessary component of our class project.

Interest in Technology Often Begins at Home

Research indicates that offering students' digital technology within a school-based program as an alternative to traditional literacy tools is an extension of student interests experienced within the home. Results from a national survey suggest that in 1999, children between the ages 2 and 17 were spending approximately 1 hour 37 minutes per day using the computer and/or playing video games (Subrahmanyam et al., 2000). Ultimately, progress in literacy acquisition enhances test productivity. Early home computer use studies found that high school students who used educational software at home scored significantly higher than other students on computer literacy tests. Students who reported using their home computers for at least 10 hours during the school year for activities unrelated to a class reported better overall grades in math and English, and did better on a test of scientific knowledge than those who reported using their home computer less (Subraymanyam et al., 2000). Schools should use technology as an additional tool to support and increase overall fluency levels in their students.

The Role of the Schools

According to an opinion by Negroponete, Resnick, and Cassell, "Educational practices are woefully outdated (1997). Though all children seem to begin their lives with active curiosities and imagination, their school lives do not typically develop these capabilities and often interfere with them (Hsi, Pinkard, & Woolsey, 2005). The traditional methods of teaching literacy need to make room for digital fluency. This type of literacy refers to the ways people become comfortable using technology as they would any other natural language. Schools play a critical role in developing children's digital literacy development.

Developing the Digitally Fluent Student: A Case for Classroom BLOGs

Digital tools provide youth with powerful ways to extend their world and to enhance their capabilities in interacting with them (Hsi, Pinkard, & Woolsey, 2005). The number of people creating and maintaining BLOGs has grown exponentially from 100 to over four million (Herring, Kouper, Schiedt, & Wright, 2004). Young people have chosen on their own to engage digital tools in online environments for many reasons. Based on youth defined desires – to communicate with friends, to listen to music, and to express themselves – youth have taught themselves how to use these very technically assessable capabilities and integrated them into their lives (Hsi, Pinkard, & Woolsey, 2005). As teachers, we can offer students opportunities to practice within our classrooms. For our class project, we chose to develop a classroom BLOG. It offers users an opportunity to speak with passion about a topic of personal interest. Children develop a sense of accomplishment and empowerment when they can create and control the objects around them (Huffaker, 2004).

PROCEDURE

Examining a BLOG in the Classroom

Step One

To explore the potential of including digital fluency in our classroom, we designed and implemented a literacy project entitled “Surviving the Hurricane.” This project began with a hurricane reflection log. Students were asked to express any first hand account of their experience with a Hurricane Charley. To re-acclimate to the school setting after the suffering the effects of the recent hurricane, it was important that students be able to process what has happened to them and to have a safe place to vent their feelings and share the experience. Students that were having a difficult time were referred to the counselors and crisis teams that were available on site.

“I was watching wrestling on T.V. when the lights went out. My sister and I wanted to watch the hurricane outside. My mom lit candles. When we heard a crash, my sister screamed behind me. I was scared. I was scared of the hurricane...my mom helped us be calm.” - Chris A.

“The hurricane was bad. It was windy and there was a storm. The storm was so hard that people did not go outside. I watched the news to see the storm and to see if there was school. No school. The hurricane did not do anything to me because I was in my house. My mom said close the windows and do not go outside.” - Marvia A.

Step Two

Shortly after the logs were completed, South Florida weather provided our students with an opportunity to explore their feelings about natural disasters further when nature provided us with Hurricane Wilma. Students answered a series of questions designed to determine how this hurricane affected their lives and the lives of their families through the following lesson plan (Table 1).

Table 1 The Lesson Plan

How Did Hurricane Wilma Impact You and Your Community?

Topic: The Effect of a Hurricane on Communities

Objectives: The students will learn that taking precautionary measures and plans are necessary for communities to effectively function in various forms of weather.

Level: Third Grade

Procedures:

Introduction--Read and share newspaper articles about Hurricane Wilma. Group the children into pairs and ask them to share with each other one incident in which they experienced during the storm. Invite students to share their stories with the class.

Activities-- Hurricane Wilma brought on strong winds that forced a power outage for many.

- What did you and your family do when the power went out?
- What supplies did you use and need to help you with this situation? List them for discussion.
- Discuss how your neighbors and friends might help. List them for discussion.
- Share stories of neighbors helping each other during hardships caused by Hurricane Wilma.
- What community resources could help you in a situation like this? List them and discuss how each of these community organizations could help.

Who? (e.g. local fire department, church organizations, police, military, hospitals, ambulances, churches, schools, community recreation groups, sports arenas, Red Cross, Salvation Army, Good Wheels, etc.)

How? (e.g. clean up, money, food, shelter, beds, medical services, communication, patrol supervision, rescue, transportation, companies with special machinery).

Closure--Communities are united when the weather causes a hardship. Neighbors and organizations in the community can help out. You, as a member of the community can be an active participant in little ways or big ways.

- Ask students to illustrate how they could help in the community if a natural disaster occurred in their community.
- Then ask students choose a topic: to write either a personal recount or expository that reflects their drawing.

Evaluation for Students:

- How much did students participate in the discussions?
- Did students cooperate in groups?
- Did students understand that communities work together to overcome hardships?
- Did students reflect on their own abilities and experiences?

Evaluation for Teacher

- Did I allow for students to express their ideas?
- Did I expand on these ideas to relate the lesson to the students?
- Did I provide enough examples?
- Did I clearly present information so that students could understand the main idea of the lesson?

Students had much to say during classroom discussions. Several students made connections between their personal and community needs. Storytelling emerged as students relayed how their families and community serviced their needs during the aftermath of the storm. These first hand accounts often included students own fears. Students offered their own advice to others about how their own families protected themselves. They also told how they asked for assistance from their neighbors and community organizations.

"I think a hurricane changes everyone in your family. When you don't have power or your television doesn't work and you have to stay inside, you and your family stick together. We even took the dog inside. We had boards on the windows. We knew we had to watch the T.V. so we would know what to do if it got bad. It got bad when the T.V. went out. I was scared. We were all trying to listen to the radio. The radio told us where to go if got bad. They told us we couldn't bring our dog. I was scared. All my uncles and aunts and cousins came to our house after the storm. I felt better because we could help them." - Mariah M.

"I am never going to forget a hurricane. I prepared a lot with my mom. We bought water bottles, food in cans and flashlights. A hurricane is bad because it messes up your house. It destroys your favorite things. It can destroy your room when your roof comes off your house. -Susan P.

"My uncle is a fireman. He has to work, even in a hurricane. He brought his family to my house. We had to take care of them." -Christian V.

"I learned that my town has people that have to go to work during a hurricane! Somebody has to be at the shelters. Why don't shelters take your pets? They are your family! If I were a doctor, I would want to help people in a hurricane. - Matthew K.

Step Three

Our next step was designed to assist the student in posting their entries on our classroom BLOG, "Surviving the Hurricane." Students would post their stories and advice in a question/answer format. To accomplish this task, we first had to teach the students how to write complete sentences and paragraphs. We also had to teach the fundamentals of word processing, so they could independently post their entries. The writing and technology lessons required about two and half months of instruction and practice.

The students learned the basics of writing and practiced their newly acquired knowledge about the writing process using Microsoft Word software. Ironically, the students began to aspire to more than we had originally planned. We had requests for learning how to imbed their drawings, pictures, and clip art. Students became curious about how to improve the display of the writing, wanting to experiment with font styles and sizes. We learned how punctuation is placed within our writing and how to accomplish this using a keyboard.

Students posted their BLOG entries as responses to four questions originally addressed in our lesson plan, How Did Hurricane Wilma Impact You and Your Community? They keyboarded their first response in a word document then transferred the response to the BLOG. They monitored each others responses, and continued the process adding responses until everyone was finished.

RESULTS

Students completed a post-BLOG questionnaire wherein they were asked to explain how they felt about a number of issues relating to the entire process. The students were amazed at both the ability of the technology and their ability to read and write to others using this technology. When asked how they felt knowing others were reading the BLOGS, these were some of the responses.

I felt very proud because I told others how to get ready for a hurricane. I know I gave them really good advice.
- Beatris M.

I am happy because I think I tried my best to write so others could be safe in a hurricane. I don't want to do a BLOG unless it is good.
- Ariel P.

There will be more hurricanes, so this BLOG is going to help others in the future when they have more hurricanes.
- Mark W.

Next, participants were asked about their favorite new knowledge gained from this project.

I learned there are ways to help others that I didn't know about. I learned about BLOGs and how using the internet might save your life.
- Chris S.

I learned that when you have a hurricane you have to find a way to help others. This is my way to help others.
- Louise A.

CONCLUSION

Common themes emerged from the student responses in their post-BLOG questionnaire. Students realized an increased awareness of the impact and quality of their writing using a technology based tool. They discovered that helping others in a crisis is both a personal and community responsibility. Students wanted to continue to be involved in this technology based project. As educators, we realized that developing a literacy program involves a series of steps that are necessary and yet, able to be enhanced, using technology. Combining technology with a social quest to assist others provided the format this group of young children needed to motivate them not only to respond, but to respond with dignity and pride, knowing their work will help others.

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