by Lorna Collier

Teaching Teens—and Ourselves—to Be Mindful, Connected Readers

Fourteen-year-old Nikki's favorite activity is reading novels, which she likes to do in printed form, with actual paper books in her hands; she feels she reads more closely and carefully this way. But she frequently reads online content, too—scanning news sites and clicking the links on stories she finds interesting, scrolling through posts from her 700-plus Facebook friends, researching topics for school.

Like many teens today—and adults, for that matter—Nikki's reading is a blend of both digital and print. Perhaps at some point in the not-too-distant future, print will be passé, but for now, paper textbooks and assignments are still common—along with new digital technologies making their way into an increasing number of schools.

How should digital elements be approached in the English classroom? How can students learn to filter, analyze, curate, and share digital content, while making the best use of new technologies and tools, sometimes in coordination with existing print texts?

Troy Hicks, assistant professor of English at Central Michigan University, and Kristen Hawley Turner, associate professor of English education at Fordham University, explore these issues in their new book, *Connected Reading: Teaching Adolescent Readers in a Digital World* (NCTE 2015).

Readers in a Reading Community

For the book, Hicks and Turner surveyed 804 middle- and high-school students in 12 classrooms, including urban, rural, and suburban districts across the United States, to learn how, what, where, and why students read. Hicks and Turner also interviewed 23 students extensively, including the aforementioned Nikki.

Troy Hicks

Kristen Hawley Turner

Their findings led them to develop the concept of connected reading—a model that recognizes that today's readers live within a reading community, both online and in person, and use a variety of forms of text. The authors also explore ways to help students become connected, active readers, not just passive recipients of whatever scrolls past.

"We need to teach students strategies for dealing with digital texts," says Hicks. But, he stresses, the authors are not trying to create a dichotomy between print and digital. "What we're suggesting is that we do both," he says.

Some highlights from Turner and Hicks's student research:

- 87 percent said they went online every day, often via smartphones. Another 11 percent went less frequently, but still had access. Only 2 percent didn't have tools, but were able to get online using friends' computers or at places like the public library.

  "We want to allay that fear that teachers have—they say 'my kids don't have access' and then they don't move beyond that," says Turner. In fact, the vast majority of kids are able to get on the Internet, she says, so teachers need to learn strategies to help them navigate it.

- Many students still say they prefer to read in print; reasons included ebook cost, reliability, and physical comfort (some cited eyestrain). However, most students read a mix of online and digital materials, with more digital content consumed outside of school and more mobile devices used outside of school than within.

- Only a slim majority of students (54 percent) see their social media reading as "real" reading. Most

students also reported liking reading either a great deal (45 percent) or "some" (32 percent)—that's a 77 percent favorability rate, with 49 percent saying they read for themselves daily.

- Just 8 percent of students had an account used for discussing their reading; most had never heard of networks like Goodreads and didn't talk about their reading on social media.

  Having students post book reviews and comments can be a way for them to learn how to become part of a community of readers, says Hicks. A good way to start is via Youthvoices website's Booktalk channel (**http://youthvoices.net/channel/37444**), he suggests.

- Students reported feeling "overwhelmed and distracted by the possibilities of the Internet," which keeps them from using savvy reading practices and strategies. Instead, they do a lot of skimming of short items that come their way—news headlines on Google or Twitter posts.

"One of the things we want students to do is to use their short-form reading to springboard to a deeper, more engaged reading," says Turner.

However, most weren't aware of tools that can help them be more mindful digital readers, notes Hicks.

Most students don't know about RSS readers, for example, which let users subscribe to blogs, newspapers, or other sources and receive articles directly to their devices. They don't curate content via aggregation tools like Flipboard, which lets you create collections of articles based on topic areas. They don't use browser tools like Pocket and Readability, which let you easily save articles for later, offline reading (Readability also lets you strip out images so you can focus on text).

But then, adults—including many teachers—don't know about these tools either, which is why Hicks says professional development is needed so educators can become better informed.

Connected Reading in the Middle School Classroom

Jeremy Hyler is an English teacher at Fulton Middle School in Middleton, Michigan, and coauthor with Hicks of *Create, Compose, Connect!: Reading, Writing and Learning with Digital Tools* (Routledge 2014). He has been using digital tools with his students in his rural school district for the past four years and today runs a largely paperless classroom.

One approach Hyler has found successful for reading discussion is the digital literature circle. He has his students use a social media site called Celly (https://cel.ly) that sets up private text messaging "cells" (users can't see each others' numbers). Literature circles are formed with four to five students each, who text each other about their books, whether in or out of class. This private messaging lets students have

Findings from Hicks and Turner suggest that the vast majority of teens are able to get on the Internet, but most aren't aware of tools that can help them be more mindful digital readers.

"more authentic conversations like adults do with a book club," says Hyler.

Students also create a wiki space for books they are studying and make digital book trailers for them, using free animation tools like Animoto.

For informational texts, Hyler has students use digital annotation tools. The text may be copied into a Google doc, with students easily inserting comments. Or sometimes Hyler uses Skitch, an Evernote tool that lets students draw circles, arrows, textboxes, or other symbols on the image of a document.

Online book discussions take place using Schoology (similar to Edmodo). Here, students create questions and make comments in digital form—a method that, Hyler says, brings out the shy students who don't like to participate in verbal class discussions.

While he can't yet point to higher test scores as a metric of success, he says students are more engaged and "they are producing more authentic pieces of writing. They are being more creative, and that's what employers are looking for in the job market."

He advises teachers not to try to add too many new apps at once. "Don't overwhelm yourself—

there's a ton of tools out there. My rule of thumb is I try two new tools a year. Then in five years, you've got 10 tools under your belt."

Going Digital in Hell's Kitchen

Lauren King teaches sophomore English at the Urban Assembly School of Design & Construction in Hell's Kitchen, New York—a Title I school in which students are predominantly male, with a majority on free and reduced lunch.

King began introducing technology two years ago. An early finding: many students rode the subway an hour each way to get to and from school—but since reading books isn't considered cool, students weren't using the time for homework. So, she scans or photographs texts she wants them to read, then emails them to students to read on their smartphones. (It's OK to be seen looking at your phone.)

Last summer, she put a reading project on Twitter, posting high-interest articles that kids could read over break and comment on via tweet—which raised participation. Why? "Their reading and discussion was authentic and visibly connected to the rest of the world," explains King.

Another big project marrying digital and print literacies: having students make short films. Last year, they created public service announcements; this year, 10-minute documentaries for airing on YouTube. Topics include issues that concerned them, like tensions with the police. Students used iPad minis to film on-the-street interviews, for which they created questions. They also analyzed "mentor texts"—other documentaries or interviews, which they watched twice and wrote responses to. They selected which quotes and footage to use, and also read chapters from Geoffrey Canada's memoir *Fist Stick Knife Gun*, using close reading skills.

"We're still following all the Common Core standards, but we're just doing it in a different way," says King.

While most of her students prefer print, she is seeing more students who opt for digital texts, particularly struggling readers. Digital texts offer instant dictionary look-ups; plus, she notes, "it feels less daunting sometimes for kids who are challenged by reading because they are not sitting there looking at 300 pages in front of them—it's only one page at a time."

King says she's had to make some adjustments as she's learned to incorporate digital tools. In the video projects, for example, she's had to rely on students to explain video editing, with which she is unfamiliar.

"As teachers we are used to being experts," King says. "It was scary to let go of the reins. I was scared of failing and I was worried about what would happen to my unit and my student learning."

Tools Mentioned in This Article

Celly – https://cel.ly
An app that allows you to create a free, private texting network between cellphones without having to reveal phone numbers

Animoto – https://animoto.com
Video and photo slideshow maker

Schoology – https://www.schoology.com
Learning management system with social networking, discussion tools

Youthvoices Booktalk Channel – http://youthvoices.net/channel/37444
Allows students to discuss and review literature

Feedly – http://feedly.com
An RSS reader (RSS readers let you subscribe to blogs, news sites, and other types of digital content)

Flipboard – http://flipboard.com
A content aggregator that lets you create "magazines" about specific topics

Pocket – https://getpocket.com
A browser add-on that allows you to download Web content for later reading (including offline)

Readability – https://readability.com/apps
A browser add-on that strips out graphics and other clutter, plus lets you save Web content for later viewing

Skitch – https://evernote.com/skitch/
An Evernote product that lets users graphically annotate images

Wiki spaces - http://www.wikispaces.com
A blog creation tool

For more detail about these tools and many others, visit the "Connected Reading" wiki:
https://connectedreading.wikispaces.com/Connected+Reading+Wiki+Home

Hicks says when he encounters teachers who are daunted by technology, he reminds them that they know the important stuff: what it means to be a reader and writer.

"You may not be smart in terms of pushing every button the right way, but you're not going to break it, and the kids are going to help you," he says. "And then you do what you do, which is teach them how to read and write."

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