

Literacy Junction: Exploring Adolescent Identity and Social Agency on the Web

Hiller A. Spires
Department of Curriculum & Instruction
North Carolina State University
United States
Hiller_spires@ncsu.edu

Pru Cuper
Department of Curriculum & Instruction
North Carolina State University
United States
Pruinn@aol.com

Abstract: This paper describes *Literacy Junction*, an interactive web site for middle school teachers and students. Using an interdisciplinary approach to learning, *Literacy Junction* offers three unique features: technology-enhanced experiences with outstanding young adult literature, a virtual middle school environment replete with student-created cybercharacters and cybermodels, opportunities for critical analysis of contemporary social issues. Our ongoing research suggests the motivational value of an interactive, literary cybercommunity to support high reader/text engagement. Through their membership in this unique online community, students are challenged to develop a sense of their own social agency.

Literacy Junction, (<http://www.ncsu.edu/literacyjunction>) an interactive web site for middle school students and their teachers, takes a unique approach to connecting young adult literature to young adult audiences. Recent research suggests that adolescents are spending more time reading on the web and less time reading traditional print-based texts. Rather than attempting to reverse this natural adolescent learning trend, we are capitalizing on it by providing technology-enhanced learning opportunities to accompany young adult literature. *Literacy Junction* offers features that both peak the interest of adolescents and simultaneously augment the need for rigorous and engaging reading experiences in middle school. In order to accommodate the needs of both teachers and students, *Literacy Junction* includes the following features:

- Teacher-generated lessons tied to the NC Standard Course of Study
- Technology tutorials for teachers and students
- Publication of student-generated work
- Community of cyberpeers who model academic products
- Student-created cybercharacters
- Critical analysis of contemporary social issues

By offering the opportunity for both face-to-face and virtual meetings, this networked professional community provides the mentoring and continued support that teachers need to initiate and sustain new

teaching practices. Additionally, *Literacy Junction* offers unique opportunities for students to creatively express themselves as they grapple with contemporary social issues that are prompted from young adult literature.

As we designed *Literacy Junction*, we kept one basic premise regarding adolescents in mind — “for middle schoolers, school is primarily a place for making friends . . . and figuring out just who you are. Somewhere after all of that, it’s also a place for learning” (Beers, 1998). The three conceptual tiers underlying *Literacy Junction* take full advantage of this well-established understanding of what engages and motivates adolescents. First, there is Cyber Heights Middle School (CHMS), *Literacy Junction*’s virtual learning center. CHMS cybercharacters typify the idiosyncrasies of real world adolescents and teachers. These “virtual” characters serve as our cybermodels, demonstrating academic approaches to the literature-related activities offered at *Literacy Junction*. After getting to know the resident cybercharacters, our “actual” (or *real world*) student visitors are then invited to create their own cybercharacters to attend CHMS. These student-created characters, who form our second tier, immediately become part of the cybercommunity and are invited to participate in online learning opportunities through the genius of the students who created them. A third and final tier of the site is comprised of our “fictional” CHMS characters, who include the many protagonists from the books featured on *Literacy Junction*.

After getting acquainted with and creating cybercharacters, *Literacy Junction*’s student visitors “go to class” at CHMS in what might be best described as the *Literacy Junction Impact Zone* (Fig. 1). In this theoretical zone, actual, fictional, and virtual worlds converge as students grapple with contemporary social issues signaled from young adult literature. Through their own perspectives, as well as the unlimited perspectives of the cybercharacters they create, students negotiate their evolving identities and embrace their emerging roles as socially responsible citizens. Within the *Literacy Junction Impact Zone*, students experience unique learning opportunities that potentially include: text immersion and critical web consumerism; intellectual rigor and creative expression; perspective-taking and identity negotiation; personal efficacy and social responsibility.

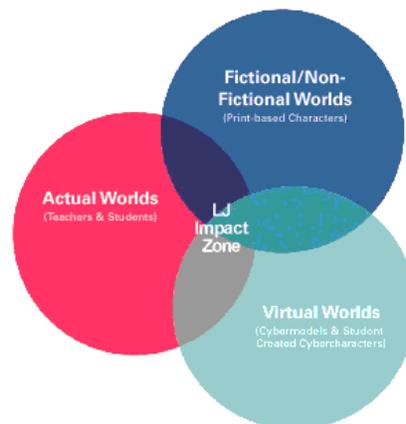


Figure 1. Literacy Junction Impact Zone

Over time, we expect *Literacy Junction* to help teachers integrate technology, to increase students’ capacities to use technology as a learning tool, and to enhance students’ academic and personal growth as they develop a sense of their own social agency. By using young adult literature as an elemental and engaging platform, *Literacy Junction* provides an appealing technology-enhanced environment for adolescent cognitive and social development.

References

Beers, K. (1999). Literature: Our way in. *Voices from the Middle*, 7, 9-16.