Literacy Junction: Exploring Narrative Theory and Books for Youth in a Cyberworld

Hiller A. Spires, Pru Cuper, & Cris Crissman
Department of Curriculum & Instruction
North Carolina State University
United States
Hiller_Spires@ncsu.edu, pruinnc@aol.com, cris@writinglife.org

Abstract: This paper describes the development of *Literacy Junction*, which is an interactive web site for teachers and students in grades 5-8. Using an interdisciplinary approach to learning, *Literacy Junction* offers two distinct features: technology-enhanced experiences with outstanding young adult literature and cybercharacters who serve as both academic models and technology guides. A pilot study was conducted in which 8 students created their own cybercharacters after interacting with the site's cybercharacters as well as text-based literary characters. Through qualitative analysis of students' character drawings and oral and written discourse, several themes emerged depicting the role of cybercharacters in conjunction with students' aesthetic responses to narrative texts. Based on these preliminary findings we anticipate that future studies will contribute to narrative transactional theory as it is recontextualized from print-based to web-based learning environments.

Introduction

Literacy Junction (www.ncsu.edu/literacyjunction) recently funded by BellSouth and the Kenan Institute, is an interactive web site for teachers and students in grades 5-8. Based on a ten-month iterative design process with input from a teacher advisory board, *Literacy Junction's* purpose is to encourage teachers to accelerate the integration of new and emerging technologies into literacy instruction. 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. 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 student achievement.

What Are the Theoretical Underpinnings of *Literacy Junction*?

Using an interdisciplinary approach to learning, *Literacy Junction* offers two unique features. First, the site includes technology-enhanced experiences with outstanding children's and young adult literature. For example, as students read Christopher Paul Curtis's, *Bud Not Buddy*, they select from a variety of activities to explore the thematic layers of the book. They might then create a WebQuest, audio-documentary, or participate in a Socratic seminar. Tutorials created specifically for the site provide support for both teachers and students new to these technologies and strategies. A second feature of the site is the Cyber Heights Middle School. This fictional middle school offers an online community of cybercharacters who serve as both academic models and technology guides as teachers and students interact with the offerings on *Literacy Junction*. Cyberteacher Jan Rosenberg models online teaching strategies while students Anjoli, Garret, JC and Claire model participation in the reading-related activities on the site (see Fig. 1). All of the characters reflect real world personalities so students who visit the site can identify with both the character's strengths and weaknesses. Students are also given the opportunity to examine and critique the academic work of the cybercharacters.
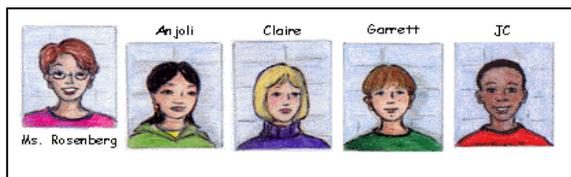
Figure 1: Cybercharacters in *Literacy Junction*

The creators of *Literacy Junction* endorse the time-honored pedagogy underlying Louise Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory as a platform for student engagement with narrative text. This theory suggests that within any reading experience, a reader's stance may fluctuate along a continuum between aesthetic and efferent. Readers taking an aesthetic stance bring their own personal meaning to the text, in effect "living through" the textual event. Rosenblatt argues that, to optimally experience narrative texts, students should take an aesthetic stance when reading. By extending Rosenblatt's theory to *Literacy Junction's* cyberworld, students are invited to engage aesthetically not only with the featured novels in a *primary transaction* but also with the site's cybercharacters and their cyberworld in a *secondary transaction*.

Pilot Study

Considerable research has been conducted on primary transactions with text (see Marshall, 2000) articulating spontaneous and idiosyncratic associations with personal experiences of the reader. However, extending transactional theory into cyberspace has yet to be fully explored (see Turkle, 1995; Tapscott, 1998 for a related discussion on parallel identities in virtual spaces). Our qualitative pilot study investigated the consequences for this type of secondary transaction, specifically examining the nature of students' relationships with the cybercharacters in the *Literacy Junction* environment. Guiding research questions included the following: How do students react to cyberpeers? How do they position these peers within the virtual/actual continuum? How do they identify with the personality traits of their cyberpeers? How are students' primary transactions with literature affected by their secondary transaction with cyberpeers reacting to the same literature? The participants consisted of eight 6th grade students (i.e., 2 African Americans and 6 Caucasians; 4 males and 4 females). Over a period of six weeks, the participants met with a researcher for six one-hour sessions as they read a sample novel and interacted with the primary characters from the novel, engaged with the site's cybercharacters through a series of oral and written activities, and finally created their own cybercharacters related to the novel.

Preliminary Findings and Future Research Directions

Through qualitative analysis of students' character drawings and oral and written discourse, the following themes emerged. First, the highest level of student engagement, interest, and motivation occurred when students were given the opportunity to create their own cybercharacters. Of particular interest to the students was the worldwide publishing capacity afforded by the Web. They wanted their actual peers to become familiar with the virtual characters they had generated. Second, students projected their personal idiosyncrasies and attributes onto the characters they created, signaling their capacity to objectify significant issues and experiences they face as adolescents. Third, the process of comparing and contrasting the cybercharacters' engagement with the actual characters from the novel (i.e., secondary transaction) appeared to entice students to revisit their initial aesthetic transaction with the text. Based on these preliminary findings, we anticipate that future studies using the unique features of *Literacy Junction* will amplify narrative transactional theory as it is recontextualized from print-based to web-based learning environments.

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