

How are Reading Experiences Transforming Students in a Virtual World?

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Abstract

The last two years have challenged the way students and teachers engage in reading experiences. Many traditional face-to-face formats have been replaced with hybrid, remote, online, and a combination of these virtual formats. When thinking back to the way most people experienced literature or grew to love reading, it is likely the moment occurred in a traditional setting of some sort. Teachers are still expected to instill a love for literature in their students despite classes being held in different formats. Common concerns expressed in the education community are “How can I make my students enjoy reading when they can never hold a book?” “How can I hold my students accountable with silent reading when they are taught in a virtual environment?” “How are my students getting exposure to literature in these non-traditional settings?” These questions and many others like this have been on the forefront of today’s educators’ minds. Teachers need to create experiences that allow their students to have those same moments as once were offered traditionally. This article provides specific strategies, online resources, and approaches to guide any teacher exposing children to literature in today’s learning environments.

Keywords: Transformative Learning, K-12 Education, Literature, Virtual Learning

Introduction

Kibler and Chapman (2019) articulate the evolution of transformative reading experiences in the classroom. Students transition from simply reading the words on a page to becoming critical thinkers through a deeper understanding of the text. A transformative reading experience occurs when a student is able to transition from taking the text literally to developing their own opinions. Literal thinking is comprehending only the words as written. A transformation begins when the literal meaning leads to making inferences about the text. Inferences challenge thinking to go beyond what the text states and make assumptions based on the students’ experiences. A transformation has occurred when inferences transition into evaluative thinking. Evidence of evaluative thinking is a newfound understanding based on personal opinions, judgements, and insights about the text (Kibler & Chapman, 2019). Ultimately, the goal for educators is to provide engaging reading experiences which transform the learner to establish an evaluative-level of thinking. To create a transformative reading experience, the teacher should support students by individualizing instruction (Abdollahzadeh et. al., 2022). The instructional approaches and resources are essential ways instruction is personalized (Balthazar, 2019).

Recent years have posed challenges to the way students and teachers engage in reading experiences. Students and teachers had to learn to work, go to school, and adjust to life in different settings. Virtual formats are utilized across education in today’s classrooms. One of the challenges has

been how teachers modify critical thinking strategies for a virtual environment. Another challenge is providing support for students to ensure critical thinking occurs.

Transformative reading experiences begin with instilling an interest in literature (Kibler & Chapman, 2019). Despite classes being held in virtual formats, engaging students through interesting texts is still a necessary foundation for transformative reading. Common concerns among teachers regarding how to create engaging reading experiences are “*How can I transform my students through reading experiences using digital texts?*” and “*How can I support my students’ reading transformation when they are taught in a virtual environment?*” These questions and many others like this have been on the forefront of today’s educators’ minds. Through high-quality, virtual resources, supportive learning environments, and a little creativity, teachers can learn how to transform the students to become intrinsically motivated, independent, collaborative, and critical thinkers. This article provides specific strategies and approaches to guide any teacher with transforming reading experiences in today’s non-traditional learning environments.

How can I transform my students through reading experiences using digital texts?

Instilling an interest in reading is an essential foundation to transforming reading experiences (Abdollahzadeh et. al., 2022). Through developing an interest in the text, students build independence and self-confidence. This development occurs because the students have an intrinsic motivation from the beginning, which assists the transformation by learning through different perspectives, and challenging their social-emotional skills (Shin & Bolkan, 2021). Today’s teachers utilize digital resources to create an engaging and collaborative environment with literature to support students’ interests. One example of a digital resource is the *Bitmoji Classroom* (Minero, 2020). A *Bitmoji Classroom* allows teachers to create a virtual representation of their classroom for students to use online. As students explore the virtual classroom, they are able to select literature in the same way they would in a traditional classroom. Students navigate through a virtual bookshelf which is organized by genres and interests. They can flip through pages and look at covers of books before making a selection. Piquing students’ interest is a foundational skill in transforming thinking. Students make connections with the text, thus forming opinions and relating information to deepen their understanding (Shin & Bolkan, 2021).

Another resource that offers students an opportunity to connect to literature is through virtual book bins (Landrigan, n.d.). Teachers sort digital texts by theme, reading level, genre, and special interests. The digital book bins are sorted in desktop folders and easily shared with students in their class. The digital book bins support transformative reading experiences by offering students personalized experiences based on individual needs and interests. Teachers embed reading activities to support the student-text connection. Students are supported through hyperlinks to resources added in the book bins which offer extended assistance with difficult concepts and texts. As students interact with the text and the embedded activities, they strengthen their understanding and open their minds to new perspectives.

Digital expository texts can be another way to transform students’ thinking. Expository texts can be especially challenging for students because of the lack of interest in new topics and readability (Marron, 2019). Virtual field trips are a great way to ignite an interest in new topics. Readers can travel to different places and times to engage in concepts related to texts. Teachers can use virtual field trips to provide students with a positive and realistic experience, while inspiring readers to explore deeper into the topics. By initiating the interest in new topics, students are motivated to delve deeper independently (Abdollahzadeh et. al., 2022). For example, if the students are studying about amphibians, they could be assigned an expository text about amphibians and then take a virtual field trip to a science museum to explore the topic more fully, such as the Ruth Patrick Science Education Center channel located on *YouTube* (Ruth Patrick Science Education Center, 2020). The students’ experience with virtual reality

provides a new outlook because they learn the concept through different lenses; thus resulting in a transformative reading experience.

Virtual book clubs provide opportunities for students to engage with new texts and to support transformative thinking. Students get opportunities to read and explore texts they typically would not have selected. When students read a range of diverse texts, it broadens their understanding of new topics (Kibler & Chapman, 2019). One way teachers can support transformative thinking is through scavenger hunts. Book Riot (www.bookriot.com) provides readers with literacy hunts to challenge students to explore a range of texts. One example of a literacy hunt is where students are tasked with locating a character in a book who represents similar traits as themselves. Students compare traits and use critical thinking skills to justify similarities and differences between themselves and the characters.

Collaboration is an essential aspect of transforming learning. Students gain new insights through interactions with peers and teachers (Kibler & Chapman, 2019). *Blackboard Collaborate* (www.blackboard.com) and *Canvas* (www.canvas.net) are two interactive platforms that have peer collaboration features. Students are able to have meaningful conversations through the use of the discussion board feature about what they are learning from the texts. Through the discussion board, students provide insight into their peer's ideas and questions promptly. One idea is the teacher posts a prompt about a book the class is reading currently and students share their perspectives in the discussion board. Another idea is the use of the wiki and blog feature. In both features students network with one another by posting information about a topic. Allowing ways for students to interact and engage in meaningful conversations will likely produce transformation in reading experiences (Kibler & Chapman, 2019).

How can I support my students' reading transformation when they are taught in a virtual environment?"

Websites, apps, and software can be personalized to meet any students' learning preferences. According to Urlica et. al. (2021), virtual learning became a sustainable option for students because of the individualized learning options. Formative assessments, virtual read alouds, field trips, scavenger hunts, and more are all ways teachers can support transformative reading experiences. Students engage with websites, apps, and software to practice skills on their current level. This prepares students for a solid foundation on the concept which leads to more advanced thinking. Students explore concepts on their level, while the technology scaffolds more challenging skills. Students' thinking transforms through gaining deeper insights, making judgements, and forming opinions related to diverse concepts and texts (Kibler & Chapman, 2019).

One of the most effective ways to support students' reading transformation is through ongoing formative assessments (Tolley, 2019). Formative assessments are necessary because teachers need to be able to identify when students have misinterpretations of text and develop appropriate redirection as soon as possible. Websites such as *Pear Deck* (www.peardeck.com) and *Ed Puzzle* (www.edpuzzle.com) provide students with embedded checkpoints to challenge their thinking and reflect on the reading experiences. Eliciting questions is a standard way to determine the pace and level of the instruction, while providing an opportunity for students to become critical thinkers (Nappi, 2017).

Transformation occurs when students use their knowledge and critical reasoning skills to work together constructively. *Socratic Seminar* (Filkins, n.d.) is a strategy that supports transformative reading through student-led discussions. In this strategy, students work in small groups and collaborate with peers to create essential questions about the reading. Specifically, students bring their own perspectives to the group and work together to develop critical interpretations and questions; therefore, leading to a transformative reading experience.

A digital corkboard is an interactive approach where students can showcase their transformative thinking skills. *Padlet* (www.padlet.com) is a digital corkboard where students can post personal digital connections on a topic, embed videos and images, and link websites on the same board. It is a resource to demonstrate how a student is analyzing and reflecting texts and other concepts. Ultimately, students gain deeper insights through independent reflections. For example, students could reflect on the book, *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1980) by posting a link to a video showing life on the farm, images of real people who fit the traits of the animals in the story, and links to sites which relate to the overall theme of friendship. Students use evaluative thinking when they make the connections between the story and the real world.

Another mode to support students' reading transformations is through videos. *Flipgrid* (www.flipgrid.com) is a video discussion platform used by students to reflect on open-ended questions posed by the teacher, share opinions of texts, discuss their ideas and experiences with their peers, and so much more. The use of videos is an accurate form of assessment because students are able to speak responses as opposed to writing (Tolley, 2019). Students who are not proficient in typing or spelling can still be involved with the learning process. For example, students could submit a 1-3 minute *Flipgrid* (www.flipgrid.com) video-reflection responding to a prompt posed by the teacher. The student can then preview other students' responses and formulate deeper understanding, develop new opinions, and gain new insights because they hear diverse responses; thus resulting in a transformative reading experience.

In conclusion, teachers have always been tasked with transforming and supporting students' reading experiences. Due to the recent virtual movement in education, teachers have a need to learn different approaches to transform thinking through reading. The websites and resources shared in this article will hopefully spark creativity in teachers and give them immediate access to virtual activities to transform students' reading experiences. The sites support transformative reading by exposing students to quality literature, while challenging them to go beyond literal and inferential thinking. The use of the resources provides engaging reading experiences which transform the learner to establish an evaluative-level of thinking. When students explore diverse perspectives, reflect on challenging prompts, and interact with quality reading resources, the result is a transformative reading experience.

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