

# Teaching and Learning with Digital Text

## *Episode 1: Why Digital Text?*

### **Opening**

This is Barbara Greenstone of MLTI, the Maine Learning Technology Initiative. Welcome to Teaching and Learning with Digital Text, a series of podcasts about literacy, technology, and 21st century skills. In this first episode, I'll be talking about why we should be thinking about digital text and how we work with it.

### **Print Text or Digital Text?**

In the 21st century digital text is pervasive in our work, our schools, and our homes. Much of the text we read and write is never printed. Much of the reading we do is online and we compose, edit, and share our writing electronically through email, chat, web pages, blogs and wikis. Teachers who grew up without technology and who may have spent the early years of their careers teaching without technology, may have a natural bias toward printed text. I know I do. I am more comfortable reading from the printed page than from the screen, especially when I'm reading for pleasure. I prefer to have the book in my hand but I'm beginning to think that's a cultural preference or maybe a generational preference. Many of our students today do not have this bias. In the words of Alan November, they are "screenagers" and reading, writing and viewing from a screen come naturally to them.

In our MLTI one-to-one computing classrooms, students have more access to digital text than ever. For many students, working with digital text has its advantages, especially for struggling readers and writers but really for everyone.

### **Advantages for Readers**

Digital text is flexible. When we read from the printed page there's only one possible format for the text - exactly the way it was printed. But with digital text, font sizes and styles can easily be changed without affecting the content. Text can be made bigger; large passages can be split into smaller chunks; contrast can be changed. The reader is now in control of how the text looks and can reformat it in ways that make it easier to read. Students can also use text-to-speech software to have any text read to them on demand. Perhaps the most advantageous feature of digital text is the ability to hyperlink, making the text interactive and non-linear. Hyperlinks are useful for scaffolding for struggling readers, allowing us to attach supporting content and cues, and it can also allow students to choose their own pathways through the text, engaging with it in a way that makes sense to them personally.

### **Advantages for Writers**

Digital text also has advantages for the writer. Research shows that students who use computer technology for all steps of the writing process, not just to type a final copy of a piece, produce more and better quality writing. In the pre-writing phase students can take advantage of the many software and web tools available now for brainstorming, mind-mapping, organizing, and rehearsing their thoughts and ideas. Digital text is easily changed,

so students are more willing to make real revisions in their writing because they no longer have to suffer through the tedium of handwriting each draft. We noticed too that students who do their writing on a computer tend to get more feedback from peers and teachers because electronic documents are so easily distributed, shared, and marked up with comments. And of course, there are many, many opportunities for students to publish their digital writing online in everything from e-zines to blogs and wikis.

## **Engagement**

And, of course, digital text is engaging for kids. As screenagers, they love reading online, especially when the text is interactive and accompanied by other media such as images, audio, and video. The web site Funbrain began publishing online books a few years ago as a way to encourage kids to read. Their book *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* became so popular they decided to publish a print version which appeared on the *The New York Times Book Review Children's Best Sellers List* within a month of its publication. This is one of the first cases of a book beginning its life online and then going to print, and all because kids found the online version so engaging.

## **Availability**

While our access to print text is limited to the books and periodicals we own or can borrow, the amount of digital text that's available to us is astounding, and much of it is free. Teachers can easily gather text from the internet to support their subject content and, unlike a print textbook, this content specific text can be found in a wide range of reading levels. In our MLTI one-to-one computing classrooms we are fortunate to have the technology tools that we need to take advantage of these vast resources and those tools are in the hands of every 7th and 8th grade teacher and student. Teachers and students in classes that have not yet achieved one-to-one computing can also find ways to begin working with digital text.

## **Closing**

In upcoming episodes of this podcast series I'll be talking about various literacy topics as they relate to digital text, including reading and writing strategies, vocabulary and Web 2.0 tools. Thanks for listening and please join me next time for more *Teaching and Learning with Digital Text*.