

WorldReaders: Young readers reading the world. Teacher-librarians using social networking to promote reading interests.

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WorldReaders is an online social network site for exploring students' independent reading interests, while providing them with an opportunity for communicating with readers in other countries. The analysis presented draws from blog postings, member profiles, the use of various media tools and general reflections by the author and teacher-librarians who facilitated students' use of the site. This project provides librarians with a successful example of using social networking to achieve teaching/learning goals, and presents new knowledge on how learners use social networks for learning; how social networks can be a rich resource for studying reading interests; and how best to develop the use of social networking for library applications.

social networking, reading promotion, digital literacies

Background

One of the most common concerns raised by many parents, teachers, and librarians is the apparent lack of reading done by many young people today. Parents and educators alike recognize the value of reading, the need for young people to practice their growing reading skills, and the pleasure and lifelong impact of well-developed reading habits (Cooper & Keiger, 2007). Schools build silent reading programs, book buddy reading programs, and a variety of incentive initiatives to encourage reading and build the reading habit. Teachers read aloud well-known books to motivate their young readers, and they work with their teacher-librarian to create an environment where reading is pleasurable and books and other reading materials are readily available. The school library often becomes the focal point for reading initiatives by hosting author visits, mounting displays to encourage reading, and providing teachers and students with quick access to a wide range of diverse and exciting reading materials (Doiron, 2005). Parents, too, work with schools by taking part in home-reading programs, taking their children to local public libraries, reading at bedtime, and providing books in the home for their children. For many children, however, the love for reading is slow to start or it may never emerge as part of their adult life.

For many adults, the blame for this resistance to read by some young people lies in the pervasive and relentless influence of media and technology. The leading challenge has come from the growth and influence of the Internet and its many billions of websites, user-created and managed social networks (i.e. Facebook and MySpace), open source software (i.e. Drupal and Moodle), innovative virtual portals (i.e. About.com and Virtual Learning Portal), and a myriad of weblogs, wikis, and text-messaging tools. The power of the Internet has been in its capacity in

combining text, images, sound, and video in ways that have led to the creation of whole new ways of learning, even suggesting that we are facing a whole new generation of learners (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). These “new learners” have embraced digital technologies as the essential tools of their learning and living, leaving adults to either abandon their old goals of encouraging the lifelong reading habit or harnessing the energy and power of these new digital technologies to help them achieve these reading goals.

The goal of this project was to harness the intrinsic interest young people have in using online social networks and develop an engaging and motivating virtual environment for readers around the world to share and discuss their reading interests. This project saw the creation of an online social network called WorldReaders (and a supporting website www.WorldReaders.org), where young readers from around the world are able to join a virtual community of young people with similar/diverse reading interests and to engage in a social networking initiative with their peers and teachers. The research focused on identifying effective tools for encouraging participation, factors which influence reading interests, the most popular reading choices made by participants, the reactions of participants to their involvement with the network, and how the social networking phenomena influences and supports young readers.

This project also attempted to provide teachers and teacher-librarians with a successful example of how we can take the power of social networking and make it work to achieve our traditional literacy/library goals. Combining images, music, video, and student input through interactive tools in a secure online environment, the hope was that students would have opportunities to develop and share their reading interests in ways that reflect their intrinsic interest in the multimedia environments of social networks. In addition, the project also yielded information on what works best online and how educators can use similar strategies in their school library programs.

The School Library Context

In school libraries, teacher-librarians are experiencing mounting pressure to find ways to connect our teaching goals with the online world where many students spend so much time. My goal was to set up a social network (SN) with teacher-librarians (from several international schools) who are interested in using these tools within the teaching and learning contexts they create in their school libraries. We know the interest (and skill) students have with these digital technologies, and the allure and power this medium can have, but, as educators, we can't simply expect to tell students about the effective and ethical uses of these technologies. Our students need to be taught effective ways to use SNs and a myriad of critical literacy skills if they are to be safe, knowledgeable, and creative users of the Internet (Doiron & Asselin, 2006). They need to be encouraged to read and write critically in an increasingly complex information world. To do this, they must have authentic learning experiences where they can practice these skills, learn along with their global peers, and continue to build their reading/writing interests and habits. As well as using the SN environment to connect with our students and use it as a teaching tool, we cannot ignore the potential such environments may have to encourage students to read, to share their reading culture with global cultures, and to engage with their peers and teachers in actually developing and growing the WorldReaders SN. As educators, we have little or no research on effective ways to use digital tools for reading motivation, tools with which we are basically unfamiliar. This project considered that the best solution for educators is to get in there and work with students in the platforms and online environments where they feel comfortable. Such an

approach was intended to form a starting point for an international group of educators to learn about and apply social networking tools to their teaching goals of promoting reading and encouraging lifelong reading habits.

The guiding questions for this project were:

- How can an online social network (SN) effectively support the development of positive reading habits among upper elementary and secondary students?
- What aspects of the online SN (images, text, sound, video, and interactive tools) are most effective in encouraging student participation and communication?

Project Design and Participants

Site Selection

I started this project in the spring of 2008 with two local schools in Prince Edward Island (PEI). This allowed me to get the WorldReaders social network (SN) site field-tested locally. The schools were ones where I had worked before on research on “literacy in the lives of boys” where we used a different online tool to engage students in talking about their reading from their home computers. The idea for using a SN grew from that research, and by the fall of 2008 both of these schools had students enrolled in the site and had begun to use the site to promote reading. Over that fall, the teacher-librarians and I adapted some procedures and fine-tuned our approaches so that by January 2009 I was able to start the international component.

As a researcher in school librarianship and literacy, I have been part of two international communities: School Libraries Online and the International Association for School Libraries (IASL). Recently, I did some work for my home university at the International College (K-12) in Madrid, Spain, and at the Inter-Community School (K-12) in Zurich, Switzerland, where I discussed the WorldReaders Project with teacher-librarians in both schools. They were positive about the project because of its international focus and the use of technology in meaningful ways. I have also used the IASL network to approach schools in New Zealand, Jamaica, and Hong Kong; I approached them with a general description of the project, and several teacher-librarians showed a keen interest in the project. I also work closely on several research projects with Dr. Marlene Asselin at the University of British Columbia in Canada; I was able to use one school in the Vancouver area to take part as well. To date, there are students from eight countries enrolled on the site and teacher-librarians in eight schools are involved.

Participants

Students in grades 5, 6, or 7 were initially part of WorldReaders, and the membership has expanded to include two secondary schools as well. Students were “invited” to join WorldReaders through their teacher-librarian at the local school, who acted as the project

contact, liaised with the classroom teachers/parents of students, and gathered any consent forms. The school library was invited to initiate a new project as part of its curriculum focused on promoting reading, using the WorldReaders site. Examples of projects include: a poll of reading interests at the school and posts to the site; a focused discussion on an author; and celebrating favourite books. Schools were encouraged to develop individual projects, as well as have students take part in an exchange of information and ideas with members of the SN. Once students were part of the WorldReaders SN and they had added their personal profiles, the data collection began.

Tools to Track Activity at the Site

Several ways of tracking student activity at the site were used, and close monitoring was done by myself and two research assistants. We used these tools to document our work:

1) Descriptive data: counts of various aspects of the activity at the SN—number of participants; number of postings; number of messages responded to, etc.

2) Visual postings (photographs, drawings, posters, etc.) will be examined and coded for features of color, context, and theme.

3) An Online Survey: a survey was developed to poll reading interests, gauge interest in specific elements of the site, and to probe student reactions/reflections on being part of a SN.

4) Blog postings: The blog became a major part of the data gathering; members posted freely following a strict set of online etiquette rules and could comment on each others' postings.

5) Researchers' field notes and educators' observations: The WorldReaders SN was tracked daily by the research team who kept notes of their observations.

The WorldReaders Sites

A home page for the WorldReaders project, still in development, will act as a portal to all the activities available. The site is housed at WorldReaders.org (<http://www.worldreaders.org/>) and includes information on the project goals, the research aspects of the site, activities available, links to the main SN, and links to further resources for teachers, teacher-librarians, students, and parents. Figure 1 is an image of the homepage for WorldReaders.org.



Figure 1: Screen Capture of WorldReaders.org

The WorldReaders social network (SN) site started by using a freely available tool for creating a SN called Ning. Participants are not able to join WorldReaders until they have signed both a consent from parents and a personal assent form. Then, their teacher-librarian sends me e-mail addresses and I send them an e-invitation to join WorldReaders. They are then free to create their personal profile on the site called MyPage. Participants are not allowed to post their personal picture, nor are they to use their real names as their WorldReaders ID. At each school, students are free to create a personal icon and an online “name” which can be uploaded and used as their ID on the site. The nature of the SN software meant that no one could access the network who had not been assigned to it; someone browsing the Internet would not be able to identify or find any participant by photo or name. Figure 2 is an image of the SN homepage for WorldReaders.



Figure 2: A Screen capture of the WorldReaders Social Network Site

The site has a collection of music, a wide range of video clips promoting reading, several book trailers, sites which introduce authors and highlight books. Participants are able to submit a video, music, or a picture to be considered to add to the site. This activity is monitored by me and my research assistants. The SN software allows students to form sub-groups (for example, they may want a Harry Potter group or a science fiction group) and they can invite other members of the SN to join them in these groups. School-based video projects will be collected and mounted, as well as many blog postings from students, teachers, and the research team.

Who are the Participants at the WorldReaders SN

Table 1 below summarizes some of the demographic information on the current users at the site.

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Number of Members | 99 13 identified as male 58 identified as female 28 did not identify gender |
|--------------------------|--|

| | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Countries of Participants | Canada United States Switzerland Ireland Jamaica New Zealand Sweden Hong Kong |
| Examples of User Names | BookBuddy Bibliophile Juno Mosswhisker Starlight Wondering Alice |

Table 1: Current WorldReaders SN Members

To date, close to 100 members have joined WorldReaders and several new groups are poised to join from schools in other countries in the near future. Most of the participants are female, and it is interesting to note that over one-quarter of the members chose not to mention their gender. The majority of participants are from Canada with a balance of members from the east and west coasts. Other members are scattered into several locations, all in English-speaking schools. Participants were asked to create usernames as one way to build in some online security. The choices of usernames has proven to be very interesting: Some usernames refer to book-related ideas, such as BookBuddy and Bibliophile; some refer to media idols such as the star of the movie *Juno*; some refer to gaming characters like Ktrtos33 and SwordMaster; some refer to favourite pets or special interests like Nugget and Sportslover1332; and others appear completely invented such as Sandshadow and Mosswhisker. The use of such names suggests participants enjoy defining their presence on the site in terms of personally important characters from books and media and/or important aspects of their out-of-school lives.

What Students are Doing at the WorldReaders SN

Media Use

Each member creates a profile made up of questions I developed. They include their username, country, school, reading interest, favourite activities, sources of reading material, and current reading choices. Once the profile has been approved, members are given their own space to create referred to as MyPage. At MyPage, users have access to a variety of tools, such as a blog and the chance to upload videos, pictures, and music, all of which are approved by site administrators before being posted at the site. Table 2 summarizes the frequency of use of some of the main media tools.

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| Pictures | 196 Photos 41 photos from Warriors book series 35 photos of animals 28 photos of space 32 photos of book covers/pictures 27 photos from Twilight books/movie series 10 photos from movie pictures 8 random pictures 5 pictures of people reading 4 pictures of scenery 4 pictures of Japanese Anime 2 pictures of reading comics |
| Videos | 30 Videos 12 book trailers 11 songs 2 book readings 3 author interviews 1 PEI travel slideshow 1 book review |

Table 2: Summary of Pictures and Video posted by Users

Pictures and Video

Visual media like photos and videos are very popular with users, and for some they are key in developing their identity at MyPage. Users who are fond of a particular book series (Warriors), particular book types (anime), or particular book themes (like horses) will often include images and videos that reflect these interests. Book trailers which promote and advertise a new book release are used frequently by users.

Blogging

A key feature of any social networking site is the blogging tool. Here, users can post comments and other members respond to their postings. A blog post can be limited to only those to whom you want to see the posting (your “friends”), left privately just for you to view, or opened for the full site to be able to read and respond. As well, topics can be generated in the Discussion Groups section and users try to build a conversation about the topic suggested. Users have to learn the proper way to blog, the nature of blogging, and that blogging is not text messaging, and this adjustment can take some users longer than others. One key feature of the blog is that users can preview their post to check for spelling and content before they post it to the site. Table 3 summarizes the current information on blog postings at the site.

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| Blog Posts | 62 Blog Posts: 35 book discussions (summaries/book reports) 7 messages to friends 3 comparing books and movies 3 discussions about book covers/authors 1 discussion on the environment/saving energy 4 slideshows (PEI, Ethiopia, Vancouver) 9 random (welcome post, technical difficulty post, empty book review post, proud to be Canadian post, maps post) |
|-------------------|---|

Table 3: Blog Postings at WorldReaders SN

Most of the postings are related to particular books that users are reading and have enjoyed and/or recommendations for others to read the book. Some have posted messages about the media, or have left messages for friends. The blogging feature has also proven to be the main area where a facilitator can really make a difference in prompting users, suggesting topics and encouraging its use.

Groups

We had hoped that more users would take advantage of the grouping tool at the site, where small sub-groups of members can gather around a particular topic or reason for forming a group. Table 4 summarizes the current groups at the site.

| Group Name | # of Members | # of Wall Comments/Posts | # of Discussions-Replies |
|--|---------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Sir Charles Tupper Secondary School | 1 | 0 | 0 Discussions |
| Cardigan School | 2 | 0 | 0 Discussions |
| Book Clan | 6 | 64 | 2 Discussions 2 Replies |
| Team Stonepark | 8 | 7 | 5 Discussions 44 Replies |
| Belfast School | 8 | 4 | 1 Discussion |
| Sir Winston Churchill Secondary | 3 | 0 | 0 Discussions |
| Me to We | 25 | 34 | 3 Discussions 37 Replies |
| Fans of the Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants | 4 | 5 | 0 Discussions |

| | | | |
|------------------------------------|----|----|---------------------------|
| Viscount "Hot Chocs" Reading Group | 2 | 1 | 0 Discussions |
| ICS-Everywhere! | 12 | 12 | 1 Discussion 3 Replies |

Table 4: Current Sub-Groups at WorldReaders SN

Ten groups have been formed so far and they include school groups, fan groups, one group formed for members to stay in touch over summer holidays, and one group formed as a class project to discuss particular topics. It seems users are not too familiar with how to use groups, and yet they prove to be useful when a facilitator takes on the leadership for generating the grouping and monitoring and supporting the discussions.

What We are Learning about the Use of Social Networks

This project will continue over the next year. Over 100 people have joined the WorldReaders SN and users have made major contributions not only to the content and resources available at the SNs, but to various discussions and forum interactions. Several early themes have emerged from the researchers' observations, discussions with SN administrators and teacher-librarian participants. They are presented here for consideration and discussion for those who may be interested in joining and using a SN.

- 1) The Technology Learning Curve. Everyone who joined the SN needed some initial time to learn how to navigate the site, learn what tools are available and how they work, and learn what MyPage means and how to use it. As well, users had to familiarize themselves with the technical tasks of blog posting, replying to other people's postings, and adding video, pictures, and various hyperlinked resources. This was particularly true of experienced teacher-librarians who reported having less experience with these "new technologies" and found the online environment intimidating.
- 2) Finding a "Comfort Zone." Each user had a different level of experience, and therefore comfort level, with the use of digital technology in general and with SNs in particular. Users who were members of other SNs like MySpace and/or Facebook easily made the transition to the Ning environment, while others (particularly those educators who were just starting back again into their formal education) found it more difficult to get comfortable with the technology. These users expressed many frustrations and tended to seek technical advice rather than trying to solve a problem themselves. In addition, sharing ideas and posting blogs took time for some users to become comfortable using; time also helped users see these discussions as open-ended and exploratory rather than structured and expected to be the 'right answers' to questions which were probed. Some users took time to get over the notion that blogs are places for sharing and putting ideas out there, rather than places to post final thoughts or finished works. While these problems were evident at the beginning, and took different lengths of time to ease, all

users did eventually develop a comfort with the technology and found their way with the technology.

- 3) Videos Rule! Without a doubt, the videos posted and/or linked to at the SN site proved to be the most useful (and popular) resources. They were reported as high interest resources, “fun” to watch, and very powerful tools to spark new thinking and expanded discussions. Each new video posted became an instant source of discussion and exchange of ideas. Several users were even inspired to produce video mash-ups and slideshows which were even more popular because “we made them ourselves.”
- 4) Key Role of the Site Facilitator. Close monitoring by the site facilitator was crucial in the success and level of activity at the sites. Lurking and observing, commenting (but just in the right amount), dropping in new resources at key points, responding quickly to technical difficulties, and challenging users to do something new were all roles that the facilitator played. The facilitator tried to be positioned as a member of the community, and not the one everyone relies on to show them what to do. While it was important initially to take a more direct role to allay fears and make suggestions, once the facilitator drew back and “disappeared,” real growth and excitement were generated. The local school teacher-librarian was key in getting the site started, encouraging students to join, getting the technical bumps ironed out, and then taking the lead in encouraging use of the SN. The teacher-librarian was crucial in sparking discussion, motivating students to get involved, and feeding ideas and comments into the blogs and sub-groups formed.
- 5) Once the Novelty Wears Off. There is no doubt that novelty played a role in the initial excitement of joining a SN and getting to know what it was all about. Students were impressed with how the site worked and the way they could add materials to their own page. The educators were excited to be learning to use a technology with which their students were so familiar. However, once the initial excitement wore off, it became crucial for the facilitator to add something new; spark a new activity and stimulate more activity. Key members of the SNs started to emerge as leaders at each site and they often took on this role of “getting the group going again” or adding a resource that really connected well with the members. Once again, the role of the facilitator is crucial in monitoring the site and keeping it fresh and interesting.
- 6) Being Part of a Group. In the questionnaires, many users reported how they really liked being part of a group of people drawn from different schools, communities, and parts of Canada. “We were all in it together,” learning not only about new ideas about teaching, but learning how to use these new technologies and “get into the swing” of what our students are doing outside of school. Our common interests were what bound us; yet, we each could be ourselves by creating MyPage and by adding our ideas. Users reported a big difference in their feelings of comfort with the site and that as they got to know the other members, they contributed more. Users commented on how “our personalities really come out” and how they looked forward to hearing from a particular person. People started responding to individual requests such as finding a resource for someone and “getting back to them when they found it.” What seems to be emerging was a learning community with members taking risks in sharing their ideas and “pushing themselves” to get involved and not being seen as “contributing to the work.”
- 7) Contributing to the Site. Participants reported great excitement in being able to add links to the site, upload videos, pictures, and music, and create blog postings. They searched

for interesting links from the Internet and then linked them from the site in order to illustrate a point, to spark discussion, or just to “have some fun.” After the period of initiation, users took more control over what was on the site; they changed their MyPage to reflect more of their interests and personalities; and they moved from making superficial comments (“I really like that idea.”) to more meaningful reflections and contributions to their own learning and their colleagues.

Key Considerations for Trying Social Networking

While there are opinions that some students do not respond well to teachers using tools like SNs for school-based activities (Wintour, 2009), others indicate that for some children this is a very good approach (Prensky, 2005) or at least, another useful tool teacher-librarians can use to promote reading among students (Richardson, 2006; Farkas, 2006). To date, the setting up of a worldwide social network for teacher-librarians and students to join and discuss reading and reading interests has proven to be of interest to several schools; getting it off the ground and keeping it active has proven more difficult. There are often technical issues at the school level if their computer network blocks messages from social networks. The site’s success depended very much on a good site administrator and interested school-based facilitators such as the teacher-librarian. Once more students have joined from more countries, the data pool will be richer and will add more clarity to some of the early findings shared here. Several over-arching themes, however, warrant some final discussion.

Building community is difficult and time consuming. In most of our efforts as teacher-librarians to promote reading and build life-long reading habits, what we are really doing is building a community of young readers who are enthusiastic about their reading: this can be a major challenge. While we may think that our difficulties lie in learning the technology associated with SNs and designing and developing an engaging look and interesting content for the site, the real challenge for teacher-librarians is in the time and effort it takes to manage the site, encourage participation, and create opportunities for users to interact. Any success we are having with WorldReaders is largely because of the effort of the teacher leaders who took on the project and decided to make it work for their students. In all cases, we started with small groups of students who were already connected in some way at the school level, so that using the SN became an additional part of their already existing relationship. For example, students were already in bookclubs at the school or they were all studying the same book.

Balancing your visibility as the teacher-librarian with the independence and initiative of your users. It is crucial that some sort of facilitation be present if the SN site is to be successful; at the same time, your role can’t appear to be too “school-like” or adding more school work to the users. Users need the flexibility to add images, text, and sound to their MyPage profiles, but they also benefit when teachers give a short session on building that space and making it your own unique part of the SN. You can engage in blog discussions or set up a task or question for them, but you can’t expect all or even any to respond—be an active participant but not the driving force.

Becoming a learner yourself. Learning along with our students has been the major aspect of our work with the *WorldReaders* project. In order to take our traditional

goals and zeal for promoting reading and use the potential for social software like a SN, we need to join with our students and learn along with them. We need to be prepared to invest time in learning new technologies, giving students more choice and control in developing their reading habits and accepting the fact that not everyone wants to take part all of the time. This is just another tool in the arsenal teacher-librarians can use to promote reading. It is also an avenue for you to learn more about technology uses and to connect you more with the everyday uses of technology that many of your students are using.

Teaching the critical use of social networking. This project has opened up real opportunities for educators to use authentic activities for teaching students the critical and ethical skills essential to their safe and effective use of the Internet. Through this project, students had to learn not to reveal too much personal information about themselves, how to blog effectively, how to use various technical tools, how to respect copyright, and how to share their ideas with others around the world. WorldReaders as a social networking site devoted to encouraging an international conversation among young readers is just getting started, but it has afforded students the opportunity to place themselves into a global context, learning about themselves and others and recognizing the universal value of reading and of becoming a lifelong reader.

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Statement of Originality

This statement certifies that the paper above is based upon original research undertaken by the author and that the paper was conceived and written by the author(s) alone and has not been published elsewhere. All information and ideas from others is referenced.