"Book Reading, Baby!" An Adventure in Teaching Literature

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Abstract: McFadden argues that teaching literature to digital natives can be done by incorporating technology, but finding the correct fit for the classroom is critical.

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Digital Natives and Literature. Looks like an oxymoron, but tis not! Getting the current generation to read is no greater task than getting past generations to read. Each has been distracted by new inventions, whether going from the ink well to the ball point pen, the slate to the notebook, or, as in this instance, to the cell phone or Chromebook. The key for every educator is to figure out how to use this new fascination as a tool rather than a hinderance without abusing it. Thus became "Book Reading, Baby!" (BRB).

Context

Earlier in my career I taught eighth-grade Language Arts, which required incorporating literature circles into my curriculum. Unfortunately, my students hated it. Afterwards, I taught juniors and seniors for several years, but was eventually required to shift to Freshman English, which also required literature circles. Because of my negative experience with the eighth-grade students, I created (BRB).

BRB spawned from Literature Circles that has existed for years throughout my district. Teaching Freshman English taught me to learn to bridge the change that occurs from middle school to high school, and since all incoming Freshman get me as their teacher, the transition often falls into my hands. High School is a different atmosphere than middle school, and students often look at anything from middle school as childish. Also, being the only teacher of Freshman English affords me great latitude to experiment and try new things with instructional techniques. Since I teach all, I get all levels which again

gives freedom to adjust and modify the instructions and outcomes to fit each of my students' needs.

Elements of BRB can be traced to traditional literature circles. I have 13 titles that students can select that cover war, sci-fi, teen, mystery, and drama:

The Boxer and the Spy by Robert B. Parker	*Girl, 15, Charming But Insane* by Sue Limb
One Fat Summer by Robert Lipsyte	*Skybreaker* Kenneth Oppel
Native Son by Richard Wright	*Uglies* by Scott Westerfield
Fat Boy Swim by Catherine Forde	*Born to Rock* by Gordon Korman
All Quiet on the Western Front by Erich Maria Remarque	*The Bean Trees* by Barbara Kingsolver
Code Talker by Joseph Bruchac	*The Hitchhiker's Guide to The Galaxy* by Douglas Adams
Animal Farm by George Orwell	

The books vary in reading levels, and I emphasize which books are more difficult than others. I have limited titles, which broaden students' horizons: they are going to have to read an unfamiliar genre that, if given the choice, they might otherwise avoid. Here is where BRB becomes something other than a literature circle.

There are four BRB units throughout the year, two per semester, each with its own designed outcome or product, thus preventing monotony. Each unit requires students to pair up, select a book, and create a reading schedule based on the fact that every Wednesday there will be an activity connected to the section they read. Each unit is divided into five sections, which the pairs decide on their own and write on a bookmark.

The beginning of each unit is done the same way. The only difference is what each unit will look like, keeping the students somewhat in the unknown.

Freshmen for a while are still middle school students masquerading as high school students. They like being in the big school, but when it comes to reading, the issues are plentiful. Students dislike literature circles because they know that not everyone in their group reads. They also do not get to pick their groups, and they get tired of always having the same assignment for each reading: summarizer, word wizard, questioner, and so on. Students are fed up with having to depend on too many others for the reading to be a success.

There really is no rhyme or reason for the *order* of the units, but there is a *mission*: to get the students out of the rut that has become literature circles and away from the negative connotations associated with the process. Simply, students are bored, which makes each reading a chore, an unpleasant task. The end goal here is to bring back a semblance of joy for reading. Understanding the importance of being lifelong reading may not be clear to a fifteen year old, but the process outlined here provides multiple ways to engage a piece of literature other than through more traditional methods. The discussions are similar, but the products are not.

Objectives

I want my students to read. Just read. Too many have stated that they have not read a single book for a long time. Still, guided by the Common Core State Standards for ELA, I have identified three learning targets as a way to improve student understanding in order to focus assessment:

1. I can comprehend different genres of literature.

   CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL9-10.1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

2. I can *analyze* different literary elements such as plot, character, conflict, point of view, and theme.

   CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3. Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

3. I can write effectively.

   CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.6. Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology's capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.

   CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

   CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Of course, the learning targets can be achieved many ways, but by having students work in pairs instead of groups, the interaction is mandatory. Students talk to each other about the piece of literature orally rather than through media. Conversations foster thoughts that might create disagreements, which lead to justifications, hence thinking.

Furthermore, Daniels and Steineke's (2004) *Mini-Lessons for Literature Circles* gave me ideas to both use and modify. The design of the book is in a lesson plan format, making it quite simple to follow and see what to expect. The selection process is modified from "Presenting Book Choices with Book Talks" and dividing the book into reading sections through "Making a Reading Calendar." BRB unit one is based on "Written Conversation." The plan is simple and involves a two students writing back and forth. Part of BRB unit 2 is "Drawing" where students need to visualize a part of story. The remaining units are just ideas that came to mind.

The Process

BRB Unit 1. Partners have been selected, the book has been agreed upon, and the reading schedule has been divided into five manageable sections. During this first unit, students pass notes in the Written Conversation style of letter writing. Using aspects of Daniels and Steineke's model, each student is assigned a notebook. The topic is explained, such as character, events, point of view, conflict, or confusion. A sample question would be, "Which character frustrates you, and what about him or her irritates you?" The timer starts, and students write a note to their partner. After three minutes, they are told to finish their idea, exchange notebooks, and respond to their partner's writing. All this is done in complete silence because the writing is the focus. Usually the students write four entries per notebook per session, two by its owner and two by the partner. After the last entry, I allow them 5-10 minutes to discuss while I walk around, pose questions, and engage them with ideas. The next four sessions follow the same protocol. The notebooks are not graded on MUGS--mechanics, usage, grammar, spelling--but if the writing is sloppy and unreadable, points will be deducted. Also, the quality of ideas plays a bigger factor than quantity: learning to write succinctly helps students to avoid recording everything that has happened. Instead, they find key points to support their thoughts, and their partner will either agree, disagree, or ask questions, making sure that what was written actually makes sense. Students thus hold each other accountable. Poor conversation equals a poor grade.

BRB Unit 2. Partners have been selected, the book has been agreed upon, and the reading schedule has been divided into five manageable sections. One worksheet per session is the outcome for unit 2, all together offering a variety of ways to engage the reading. The worksheets are handed out randomly, so one group could be working on sheet #3 and the group next to them on sheet #4. Worksheet #1 asks the basic questions about character and events, so I avoid distributing this sheet until about the third Wednesday. Worksheet #2 requires creating a cartoon strip about a major event in the story. Drawing ability is not graded, but sloppiness is. Worksheet #3 requires drawing a map of the book's setting. I give suggestions here about other maps we know, such as a zoo map or a map detailing Walt Disney World. Worksheet #4 has students create a collage of unknown, odd, or cool words. This sheet is very much like the word wizard in the traditional literature circle, but without the label of word wizard, students do not balk at it. The last worksheet focuses on character. I prefer to distribute this worksheet toward the end because students select four characters and create a police-inspired all points bulletin profile for each one.

BRB Unit 3. Partners have been selected, the book has been agreed upon, and the reading schedule has been divided into five manageable sections. Technology is the focus here. If technology was used in either of the first two BRBs, the excitement would be gone in the same way that students lost interest in Angry Birds and Clash of Clans. When I say we are using apps and other programs, the students perk up. Indeed, they are excited because they think of games, but they eventually get over the fact that I am not letting them play games to show they have read the book. Each week provides an opportunity for them to try something new, which requires more in-depth directions than required by previous units. Also, as a 1:1 school, all students have access to Chromebooks, and their work is shared via Google Forms that include their names and the URL for that project, which is put nicely into a spreadsheet, while others require a simple email or paper copy.

The first Wednesday in BRB #3 involves *PowToon*, which is similar to PowerPoint and Google Slides but can do much more. Here's how I set-up the class:
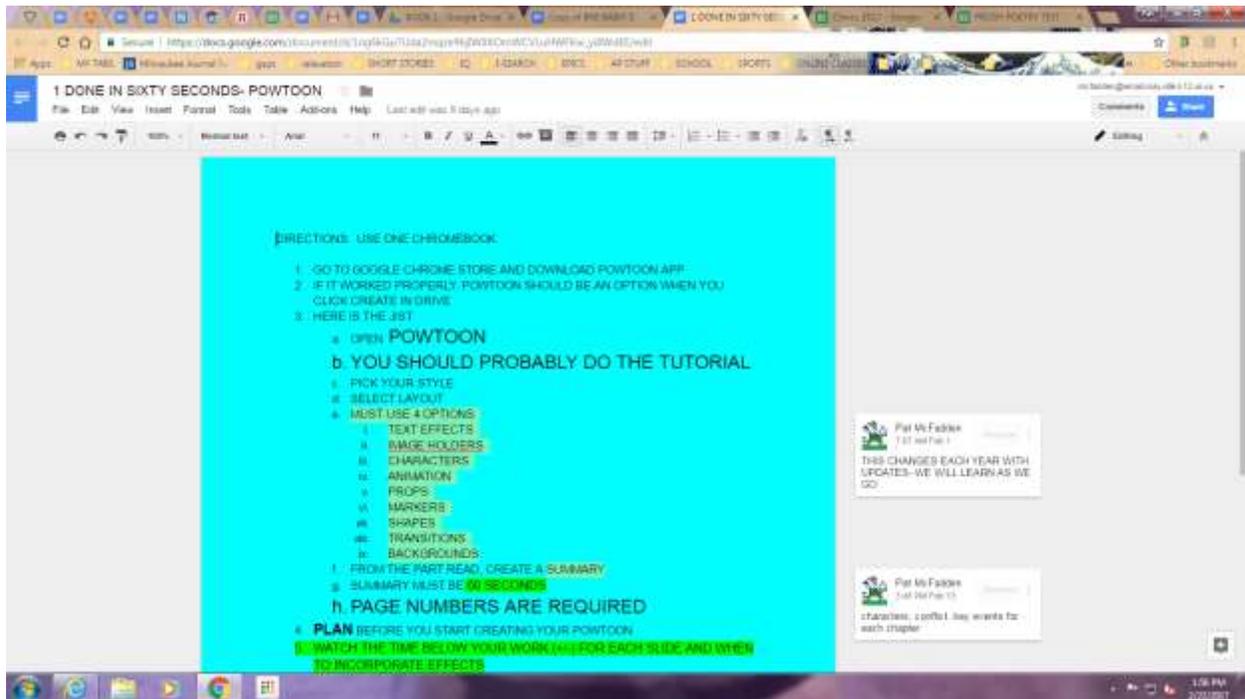

The free app—plain *PowToon Presentations*--can be downloaded from the Chrome Store, then accessed through Google Drive. From here, I turn them loose. I walk about the room offering assistance with ideas about the sections they read, like an informal quiz. Questions posed are about the protagonist/antagonist, conflicts, and key events that drive the plot. While they engage with *PowToon*, I watch them experiment with the app and troubleshoot with their partner and with other groups.

The second Wednesday involves *Animaker,* an online animation website that gives one the ability to move characters and upload voices to resemble a cartoon. Because *Animaker* is free, it inhibits what students can do, but the intent here is only to depict and visualize a scene from the book. We live in a visual age, and I want to see students create the world from their point of view. Because of the limitations, I don't grade how well they use *Animaker*. Instead, I grade how well they follow instructions by including key points from the scene and if what they depicted makes sense:
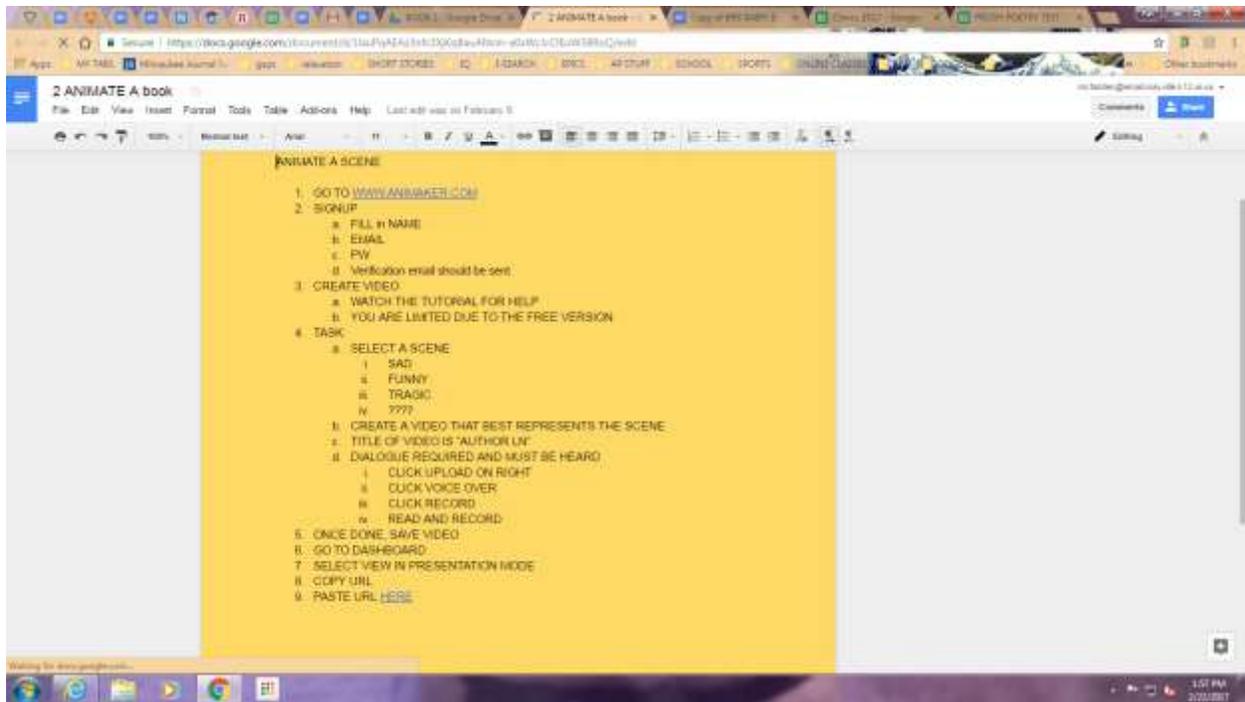
The next Wednesday involves *Floorplanner*, which allows students to construct a 3D rendering of any place in their story. The details can be very precise, ranging from the colors of walls to the bushes and curb appeal.
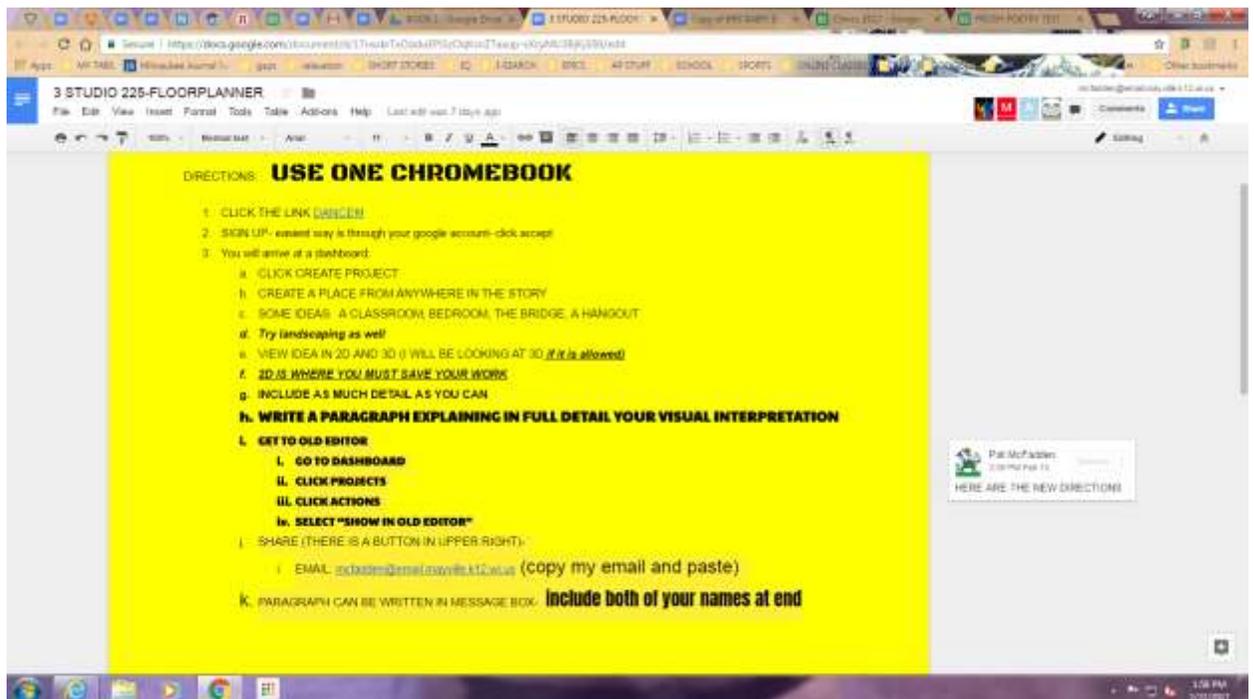
By creating a 3D piece, they create the world that they see while reading, relating the book to others in a different medium. Both partners need to come to a consensus, and the writing element requires them to justify their interpretation.

The fourth Wednesday involves *Google Story Builder*, which is limited in the number of words that can be used. Students need to be concise and specific when they are working with this app. The directions are clear cut: use 75 words to summarize the section read. The section could be seven to eight chapters, which explains the challenge. *Story Builder* is like a running script, so it appears as dialogue between characters with theme music of choice playing in the background. The products can be quite entertaining:
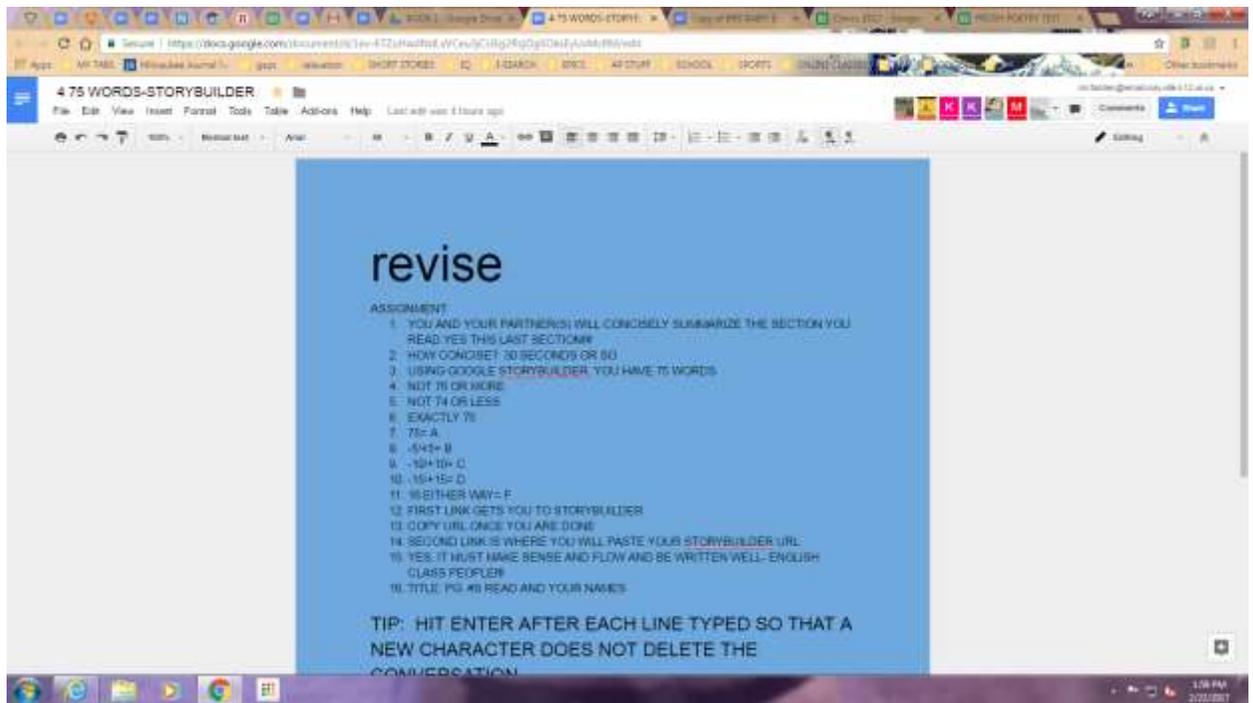
Story Builder requires students to be succinct in their thoughts and really get to the main point.

The last Wednesday is the most difficult because it is hard to top the previous projects in the unit. I have experimented with various apps and even had the students choose their favorite. For now, I have concluded unit 3 by having the students create QR codes. I

have five codes for them to read that have the directions. Students are required to create six codes: two character, two events, and two events. Once completed, students print off codes, I get to read them, and BRB is done. Here are the complete directions, which you can test with your own QR Reader to see how it looks on your device:
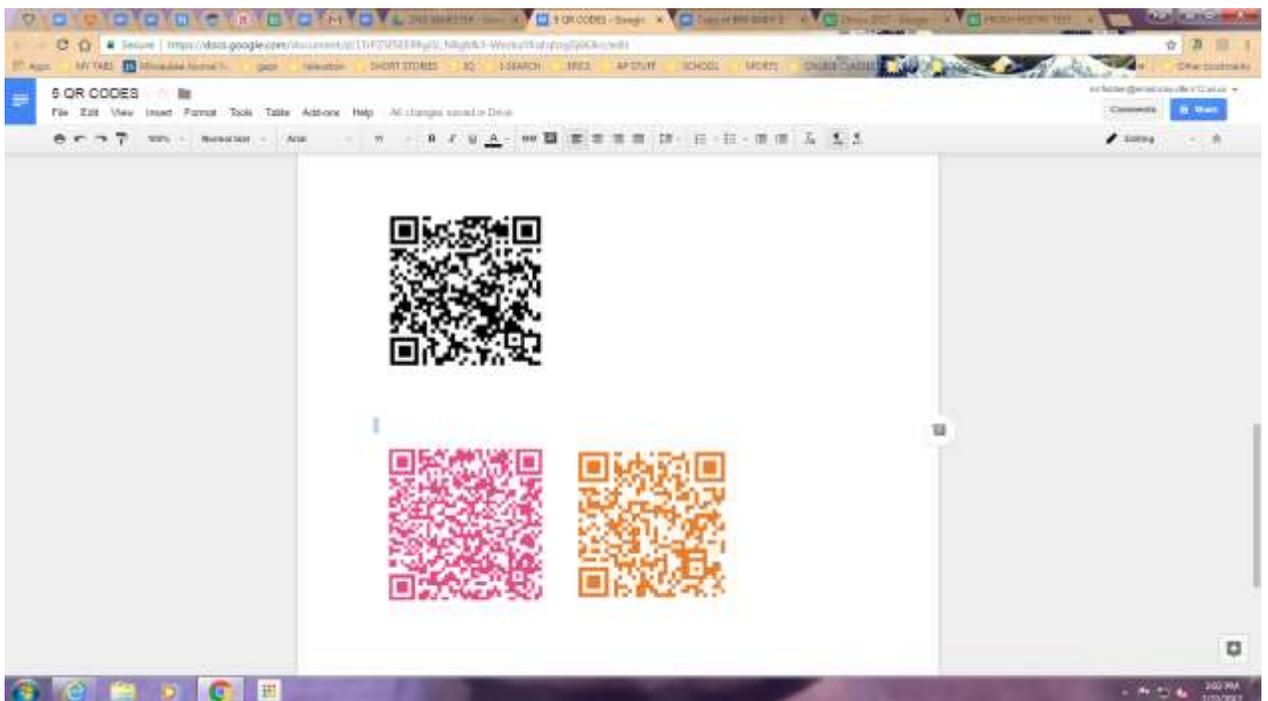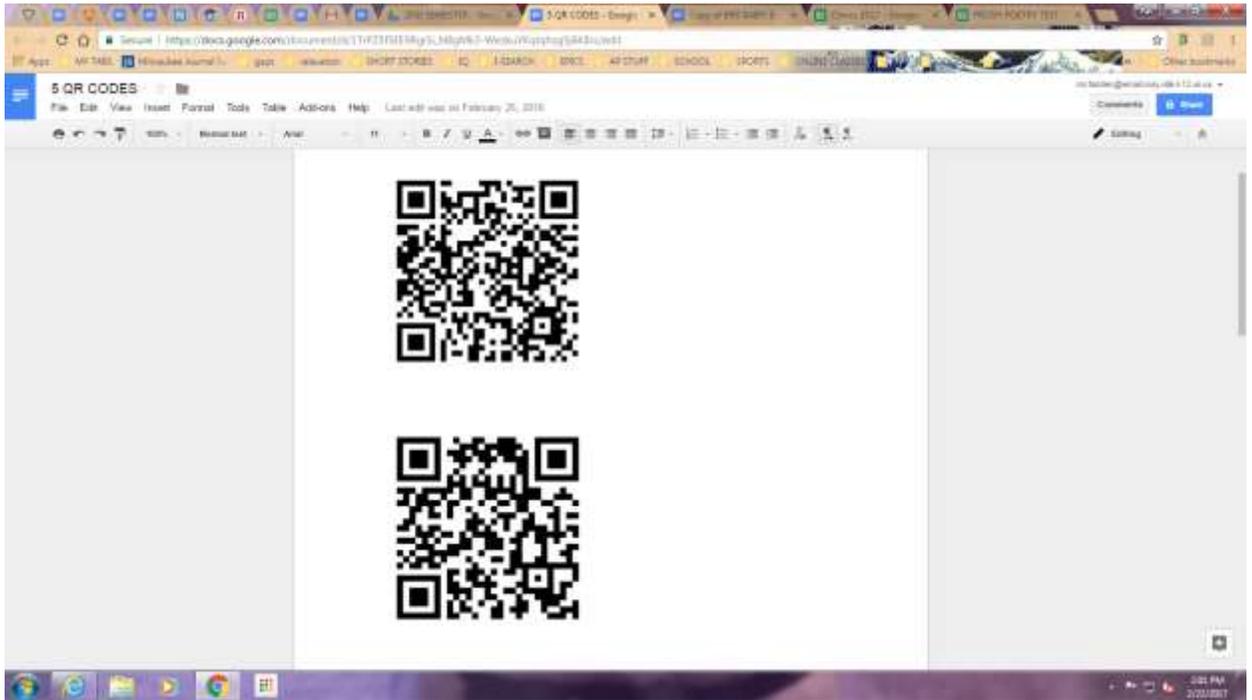
BRB Unit 4. Partners have been selected, the book has been agreed upon, and the reading schedule has been divided into five manageable sections. Each Wednesday for the next five weeks will be all about symbolism. Students will create a product that resembles a Symbol Quilt. Each chapter will have its own square, which means they will need to find something that symbolizes an aspect of the events in each chapter. They can draw, use magazine clippings, or any other medium to depict the symbols. The symbol should be colorful and artistic, stressing quality. One final instruction is that there are no words on any of the symbols.

Issues and Challenges

Students not reading shows in the work, especially Unit 1. When I read the notes written between the partners, it becomes quite obvious who is reading and who is not. I leave notes in all notebooks, and the most common one I write is, "You are not reading." The following Wednesday students get their notebooks for the next round of note writing, they read the comments, and it is now in their hands to make changes . I try to read the entries at least three times so that students can use the feedback to better improve the conversation with their partner (and for them to know I'm checking). Also, when the students finish the notes each time, I grant them a few minutes to discuss their entries for the day while I walk around and engage with them. Each group knows I'm on my way, and they know I will call them out if they cannot answer a few simple questions.

Another strategy to help combat the lack of reading is an informal interview, similar to what I stated earlier. I engage with each pair by asking simple questions for basic recall and open-ended questions to allow for opinion. I don't get to each pair each Wednesday, but they know I'll eventually get to them so should be prepared.

Another issue that arises is quality of work. The first two units are the traditional paper and pen assignment. Too often, they scribble incomplete sentences or illegible hand writing to the point that it looks more like hieroglyphics than modern English. Some argue that they cannot draw well, which I deflect by telling them I can't either, but my stick man is the best stick man they will ever see. Again, sloppiness is reflected in the

grade. Great ideas may be expressed, but if it looks careless and hurried, it really does not matter what it says.

The technology units create one hurdle after another because we are constantly troubleshooting while working with the apps. I do not have all the answers and neither does the IT department, but some kids are just so tech savvy that I don't need IT. Plus, the students really enjoy helping me to help others because I make sure that everyone knows who figured out the solution to the problem.

The biggest pitfall that occurred with BRB was time constraints. Each Wednesday was designated for BRB with a time of roughly 20-25 minutes. The remainder of class was to move on with the current unit in class. That has not happened. I do not think this is a bad thing either. Since I am constantly moving around the room, I listen to the students during BRB, and for the most part, they are discussing their book, addressing the task at hand, and finalizing anything else with the book. Yes, there are times students are off task, but that happens. So, BRB has become the entire class period, and I prepare for that when lesson planning. Could there be days that the assignment is completed and we can move on to something else? Yes. There has to be flexibility. Also, Unit 3 with all the APPs will take a few days, where I plan time in class Thursday, Friday, Monday, and Tuesday for partners to work.

Since I run my classroom like a workshop, students have choices about what they can do. They can read their BRB book, work on the homework for the current unit, or complete the BRB assignments. A typical class would consist of 20-25 minutes discussing the current unit, and the remainder of the hour is about choice, which has helped BRB. I like to keep my students active by giving them the opportunity to shift gears on their own if they feel they are getting bogged down.

Showcases: End of Unit

End of the unit sharing does not happen as often as I would like because I have limited titles for students to select, and if each class with each group shares what they read,
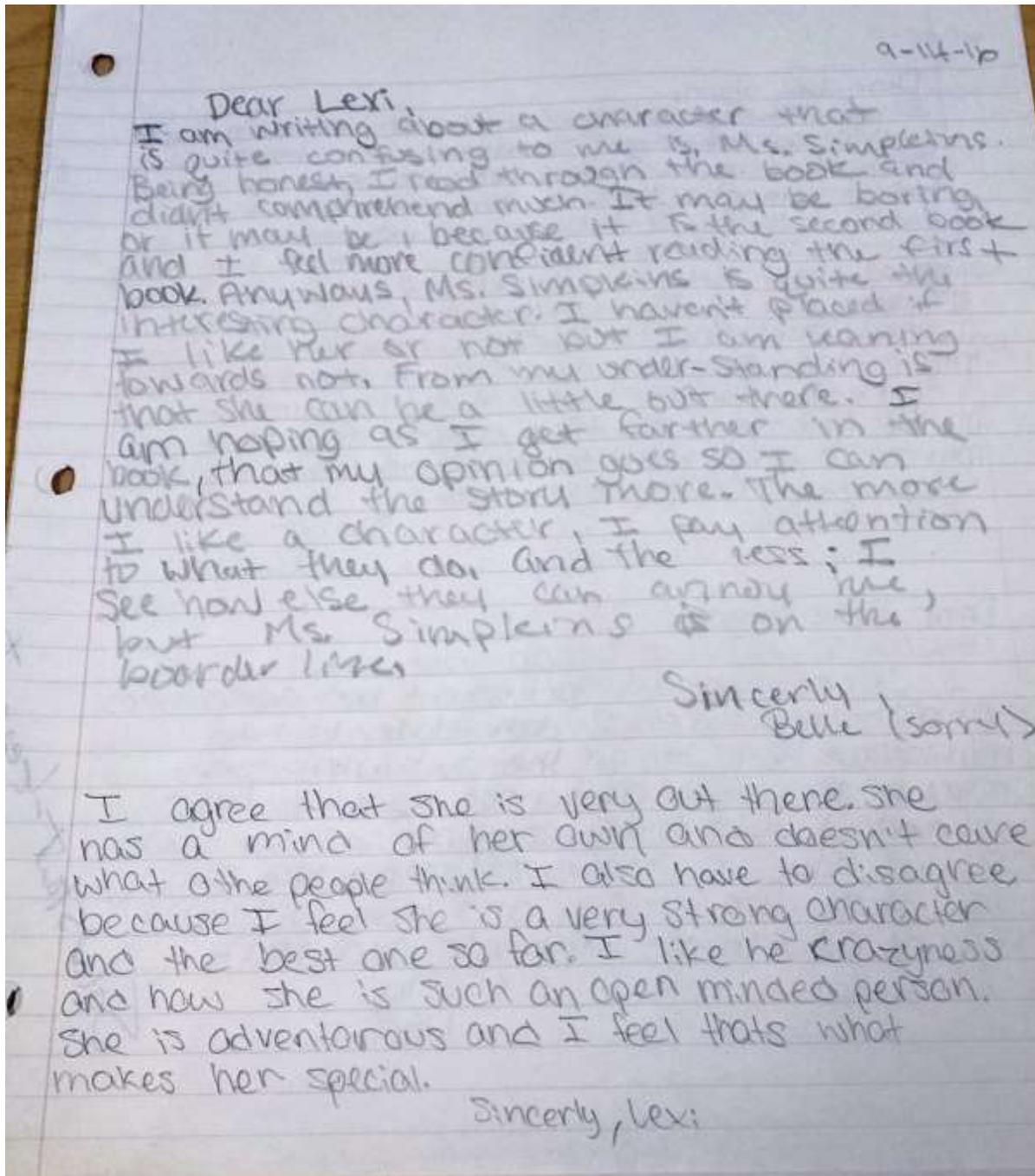
students can get the jist of the book, risk believing that reading is optional, and do just enough to pass the course. Think of the class where all you do is read novels. Therefore showcases tend to take place much later in the year.

Unit 3 allows easy access and presentation possibilities because I can project any of the projects onto a screen. For example, students share links via a Google Form that gets populated in a Google Spreadsheet. From there, I select a few to show progress. Rather than setting aside this time for showing work, I take advantage of lulls in class and proceed to entertain the students with their own work. They often request to display their own work or to see that from their peers, or they ask me what I like. Also, by Unit 3, the classes and I are in third quarter, so the relationships have been formed, allowing us to have some fun teasing each other about the work.

Student Outcomes

Here are a few samples from the first three units. Each does not necessarily reflect great work, but sometimes the journey is better than the results.

Unit 1. A letter between partners discussing a confusing character.

9-14-16

Dear Lexi,

I am writing about a character that is quite confusing to me is, Ms. Simpleins. Being honest, I read through the book and didn't comprehend much. It may be boring or it may be, because it is the second book and I feel more confident reading the first book. Anyways, Ms. Simpleins is quite the interesting character. I haven't placed if I like her or not but I am leaning towards not. From my under-standing is that she can be a little out there. I am hoping as I get farther in the book, that my opinion goes so I can understand the story more. The more I like a character, I pay attention to what they do, And the less, I see how else they can annoy me, but Ms. Simpleins is on the boorder line.

Sincerly
Belle (sorry)

I agree that she is very out there. She has a mind of her own and doesn't care what other people think. I also have to disagree because I feel she is a very strong character and the best one so far. I like he crazyness and how she is such an open minded person. She is adventorous and I feel thats what makes her special.

Sincerly, Lexi

Unit 2. One of the five worksheets. This one asks for a cartoon strip.

Unit 3. Floorplanner based on the bar scene from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.*
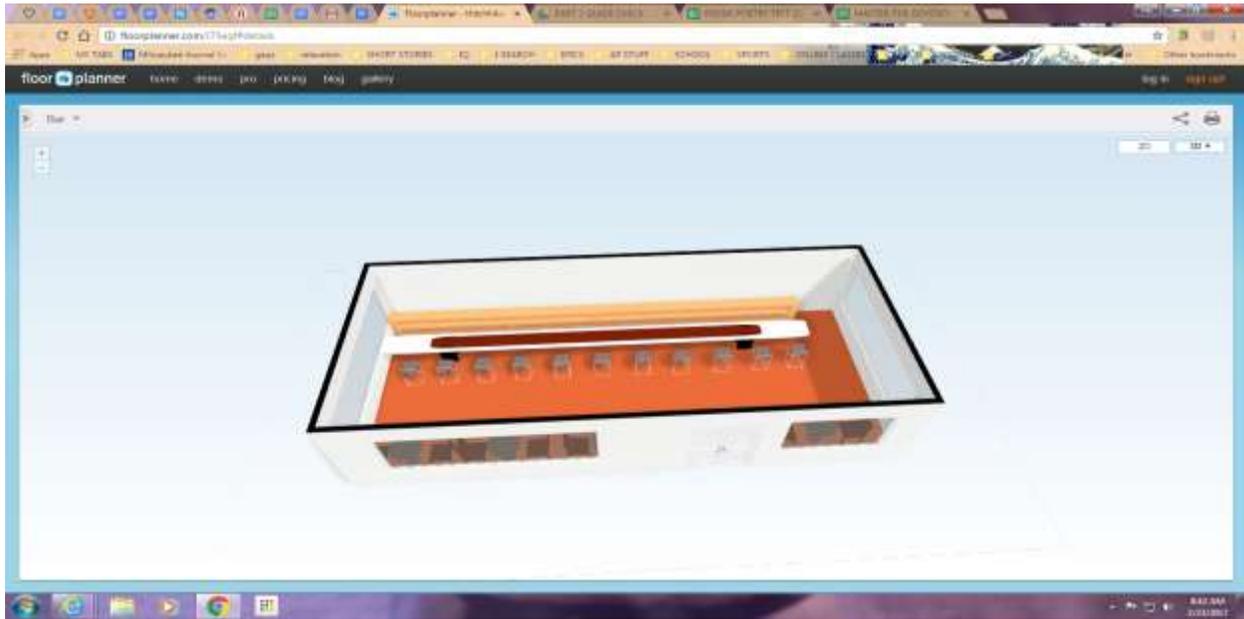
Grading

Unit 1 is graded on the ability to create a conversation with succinct details about the book. Grading MUGS would hinder the process because some students would be more worried about writing well than actually discussing the book. The notebooks are like a freewrite, and students generally write grammatically correct sentences. If the writing is just too difficult to comprehend, I step in and conference with the student to work on writing skills. If the writing is just sloppy, that's on the student, and, as I have stated, sloppiness will affect the grade tremendously.

Unit 2's grading is based on content plus quality. Each worksheet is worth 10 points, and poor quality or unclear work will cause students to lose points. The worksheets offer a different type of response, so if drawing is not your forte, the sheets will offer opportunities to show the skill and knowledge expected.

Units 3 and 4 use rubrics due to the lack of ability to comment directly on the product. Students have used rubrics throughout the year in class for other work to see how they

earned their grades and to know what exactly is to be graded. Plus, with Unit 4 based on chapter count, scoring becomes easier when that is clearly stated.

Unit 3 Rubric:

NAME: _____

BOOK: _____

APP/PROGRAM	CRITERIA	COMMENTS	POINTS
Powtoon	60 seconds 4 effects - Key points summarized - Pg #s		/10
Animaker	- Scene - Dialogue - Video represents scene		/10
Floorplanner	- Place selected - Details and landscaping - Paragraph (5-8 sentences & MUGS)		/10

Storybuilder	75 words - MUGS		/10
Qr codes	6 codes 2 characters 2 events 2 conflicts 2-3 sentences each - MUGS		/10

Unit 4 Rubric:

GROUP: _____

BOOK: _____

# of chapters	
# of symbols	
Colorful	
Artistic	

Overall quality	
Grade/comments	

Accommodations

For students with special needs whose assignments need to be modified, I follow their IEP or 504. What does that really mean since both plans cover a lot of areas from length of assignment to type of product produced to level of reading? Of course, each student, regardless of ability, is unique, and as a teacher I need to form that relationship to understand where they are both academically and emotionally. For example, I direct my ELL students and native speakers with difficulty reading to free audio books read on YouTube, which can teach critical listening and provide a read-aloud model. Also, despite the controversy over their usefulness, I will send students to Schmoop or Sparknotes. Although some may argue that students actually aren't reading the novels when using these study aids, I find that poor readers benefit because, even if they're reading only the summaries, they're still reading. Also, I can vary the assignment by focusing on one aspect such as conflict rather than on all of the plot devices working together. In other words, what I expect depends on the student.

Final Thoughts

BRB has changed the way I teach. I cannot continue down the path under the assumption that all students read, comprehend, and explain what they read all the same way. They need various outlets to create various outcomes to show their learning. With

BRB, students have those opportunities: the artists can shine, and the techies can thrive. There truly is something for all my students, which makes my classroom run more smoothly. When a classroom is running smoothly, learning is taking place.

The lasting impact is that students read. Because I'm also a coach, students often candidly confess their learning and effort while on the practice field or in the dugout. As a classroom teacher, I've heard repeatedly that my students actually read in Freshman English. For some, it's the only time they do, which they are quite proud to announce.

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