

Queen Victoria Public School and Forest Glade Public School

Collaborative Inquiry Team: Claire Kenno and Jillian Authier, Teacher Librarians

Research Question: Can the Forest of Reading program and the use of technology help improve student engagement in reading?

Vision

That using the Forest of Reading program in conjunction with Twitter will increase student engagement with high quality Canadian Literature. To accommodate the learning styles of today's students and include the technology that permeates their everyday lives, the library needs to take a step forward. It needs to make the necessary changes towards becoming a Learning Commons to meet the needs of today's learners.

A Learning Commons is a flexible and responsive approach to helping schools focus on learning collaboratively. Within a Learning Commons, new relationships are formed between learners, new technologies are realized and utilized and both students and educators prepare for the future as they learn new ways to learn (OLA, 2010).

Today's libraries are no longer just a quiet place to read. They are the hub of information literacy learning, offering opportunities for student directed learning resulting in creating and accessing resources for knowledge and understanding. Teacher librarians have an important role today, as they are a central figure in the school community, collaborating with teachers on resource-based learning opportunities.

Participatory learning includes the many ways that learners (of any age) use new technologies to participate in virtual communities where they share ideas, comment on one another's projects, and plan, design, implement, advance, or simply discuss their practices, goals, and ideas together. Participatory learning is not simply about interaction, but of interaction that, because of issues of access, means that one is co-creating with myriad people who are strangers and who can remain anonymous. People can respond candidly. From such a process, one learns and continues to learn from others met (if at all) only virtually, whose institutional status and credentials may be unknown (Davidson & Goldberg, 2009).

Theory of Action

- If we use the Forest of Reading program then students will become more engaged in high quality Canadian authors.
- If we integrate technology into the reading program then students will learn new skills and develop an interest in technology
- If we learn how to use Twitter to communicate with other schools then the students will see how social media can be used to communicate about academic subjects.

Purpose for the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate if using the Forest of Reading program, specifically the Blue Spruce books, in conjunction with technology such as Twitter, will increase student engagement in reading. Learning often happens as a result of collaborative opportunities offered through social media sites, such as Twitter. Queen Victoria Public School and Forest Glade Primary Learning Center

students were able to Tweet to students that they will probably never meet, but who could expand their thinking with unique ideas, views or responses.

The challenge for our education system is to leverage the learning sciences and modern technology to create engaging, relevant and personalized learning experiences for all learners that mirror students' daily lives and the reality of their futures. Effective school library programs have a positive impact on student achievement, in the processing and use of information, in knowledge content areas, on reading motivation and achievement (Haycock, 2003).

It is with this in mind that we chose to look at how the Blue Spruce Reading program impacts children's enjoyment of reading. We celebrated Canadian authors and quality literature and used technology to communicate collaboratively. Introducing the students to Canadian children's literature gives our young readers a unique chance to see their lives as Canadians reflected back at them through the artistic perspectives of our writers and artists. Ultimately in trying to define what it is, it defines who we are. Canadian author's aim in their fiction is to capture the essence of what it is to be Canadian as they also explore the lives of children and teens (Canton, 2001).

Justification for the Study

Educators of today understand that when students are provided with rich learning experiences and opportunities to explore areas of interest, they learn better. Young students today are very social, and depend heavily on technology to keep in constant touch with one another. They are comfortable learning informally with their peers as the technology brings them together socially (OSLA, 2010).

Every year, all Ontario students in grades 3 and 6 fill in surveys before they complete the province's Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) testing. The surveys include a wide range of questions, including whether students "like to read most of the time." Although the literacy scores have improved during that time, there has been a decline in the percentage of students who report that they "like to read most of the time." Since 1998/1999, the percentage of students in grade 3 who report they like to read has declined by almost a third, from 76% in 1998/1999 to only 50% in 2010/2011. There has been a similar decline for grade 6 students, from 65% in 1998/1999 to 50% in 2010/2011 (People for Education, 2011).

This subject was important to investigate as both of the researchers have observed that many students in the primary grades were not frequently engaging with high quality literature, let alone high quality Canadian Literature. Participating in the Blue Spruce reading program and including the use of Twitter was an important way to try and increase student engagement in reading through technology, as many students are very interested in technology but are unaware of how reading and technology can be linked. Using Twitter to share the student's thoughts with the other participating school allowed the students to see in action the way that social media can be used in an academic setting.

Context of the Study

The two schools involved in this research project have similar populations of primary children who may not have had a large exposure to quality Canadian literature. Both participating schools have portions of their school population who are highly transient. The subjects of this study from Queen Victoria Public School were grade one to three students who are scheduled to visit the library once a week and participated in the program each week. The subjects of this study from Forest Glade Public School were grade one and two students, as this school location only goes up until grade two. These subjects are scheduled to visit the library every other week and participated in the program bi-weekly.

Methodology

Data Collection:

- Data source 1: A ten question online survey of reading engagement done with all participating students prior to starting the Forest of Reading program.
- Data source 2: A ten question online survey of perception of student reading enjoyment sent to all homeroom teachers of the participating students prior to the start of the Forest of Reading program.
- Data source 3: Anecdotal observations of students during the reading program based on their enjoyment of the Blue Spruce books and use of technology.
- Data source 4: A ten question online survey of reading engagement done with all participating students at the end of the Forest of Reading program.
- Data source 5: A ten question online survey of perception of student reading enjoyment sent to all homeroom teachers of the participating students at the end of the Forest of Reading program.

The online surveys were created using the website www.surveymonkey.com and can be found at the following links:

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/2LGVKTH> (Reading Enjoyment Survey)

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/2JHVRX3> (Teacher Perception of Reading Enjoyment)

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/YBRVPWR> (Follow Up to Reading Enjoyment Survey)

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/YZK8SQC> (Follow Up to Teacher Perception of Reading Enjoyment)

Prior to beginning the Blue Spruce Reading program, students completed an online survey on reading enjoyment prepared on Survey Monkey. Primary teachers were also asked to complete an online survey of their perception of student reading enjoyment on Survey Monkey. Students participated in the Blue Spruce reading program after the surveys were completed. They had the opportunity to listen to each story, participate in discussions, complete related activities and read, wrote and responded to Twitters from students from the other school using the Smartboard and laptop computers. Upon completing the Blue Spruce reading program, students and teachers were again asked to complete their respective online surveys.

Findings

Results from Forest Glade

Student Survey

It should be noted that there were nine more participants in the post-survey than in the pre-survey due to students who arrived during the course of the Forest of Reading program or who were away on extended absences during the pre-survey.

Overall, the follow up survey demonstrated very little change in most areas. When asked, “Do you enjoy reading?” the percentage of participants who responded 'Yes' remained at 68.8%. Those who read at home increased from 57.5% to 65.2%, an eight percent increase. Interestingly, the number of student participants who said they read at home for school work decreased from 62% to 56.2%. When asked “Do you like to talk about what you have read?” there was only a 1% increase over the course of the program, for a total of 43.8%.

The two most significant changes that were noted between the pre and post surveys related to the types of books students like to read and visits to the public library. In both surveys, students reported that their favourite type of book to read was chapter books. However, this number increased from 25% in the pre-survey to 38.2% in the post-survey. It is possible that this increase can be attributed to the increased number of students who have improved their reading skills over the four months of the study and now feel more confident in their ability to read chapter books. Finally, the most noted result of this study was the percentage of students who indicated that they visit the public library. In the pre-survey 42.5% indicated that they visit the public library, in the post-survey 60.7% indicated that they visit the public library, an 18.2% increase over the course of the study. Perhaps this can be attributed to an increased interest in reading or enjoying Canadian literature that they have been exposed to in the school learning commons area.

Teacher Survey

Overall, the results of the teacher perception of reading enjoyment surveys stayed the same with two exceptions. The first change was in regards to the question, “Do your students use Twitter to communicate with others?” In the pre-survey, 100% of teachers responded 'Never', while in the post-survey 100% of teachers responded 'Sometimes'. The second change was related to question number 8 which asked, “Do your students use the public library?” In the pre-survey, 100% of the teacher respondents indicated that they did not know if their students used the public library. However, in the post-survey, 100% of the teacher respondents indicated that ‘Some’ of their students use the public library. Perhaps this change in knowledge has some relation to participating in the first survey and after realizing they did not know if any of their students visit the public library that they had a conversation with their students about the library, its resources and where it may be located in the school community.

Results from Queen Victoria

Student Survey

Queen Victoria had a decrease in the number of primary students completing the post-survey, as students moved out of the area. New students arrived at the school towards the end of the Blue Spruce program, but did not complete the post-survey as they were not present for the pre-survey or for the majority of the Blue Spruce program.

Overall, an increase from 63% to 69.1% was observed in the number of students reporting ‘Yes’ when asked, “Do you enjoy reading?” The number responding, ‘Sometimes’ increased from 27% to 28.9%, while those responding ‘No’ decreased significantly from 10% to 2.1%. While there was a small increase in the number of students, from 66% to 69.1%, who replied, ‘Yes’ when asked if they read at home, there was also an increase in the number who responded ‘No’, increasing from 4% to 9.3%. This increase was interesting, as only 6.2% reported that they don’t read at home for school work. There was a slight increase from 77% to 78.4% in responses when asked, “Do you read at home for school work?” The most significant decrease demonstrated was when the students were asked, “Do you like to talk about what you have read?” The percentage of students answering, ‘Yes’ in the Pre-Survey was 34, compared to 19.6% in the post-survey. Those answering “Sometimes” increased significantly from 25% to 42.3%. When asked, “How often do you read at home?” 64.9% answered ‘Once a day,’ in the post-survey, compared to 58% in the pre-survey, an increase of 6.9%. There was also a decrease in the number of students who reported that they don’t have time to read at home, from 11% to 4.1%.

Queen Victoria’s survey response was similar to Forest Glade’s when students were asked ‘What topic do you most like to read about?’ In the pre-survey, 23% of the students chose picture books.

That decreased to 21.6% in the post-survey, with chapter books increasing to 27.8% from 20% in the pre-survey. Again, we would attribute that to the increase in reading ability over the four months of the time of the study. Students were asked, 'Do you like coming to the school library?' In the pre-survey, 95% of the students responded, 'Yes.' Their answers included their love of reading, being able to pick out a good book, having a good selection of books to choose from, having fun reading books and enjoyment of listening to a book being read to them. The post-survey recorded a 'Yes' response of 99% of the students' answers with similar reasons. Finally, there was also an increase in the number of students who responded that they visit the public library. In the pre-survey, 59% responded that they do visit the public library and in the post-survey this number increased to 63.9%, close to a five percent increase. Many students were curious about the public library when asked this question, perhaps asking parents to take them later.

Teacher Survey

At Queen Victoria, there was little change in the post-survey answers as compared to the pre-survey answers overall. The question, "Does your class enjoy reading?" demonstrated a significant increase of 33.4% in the number of teachers reporting, 'All of the class.' Only one other question showed a change. When asked, "Will students choose a book to read over choosing an activity?" there was an increase of 16.7% in the number of teachers who responded, 'Never.' This was also expressed as an equivalent decrease in the answer, 'Sometimes.'

Informally, teachers were asked if their students showed excitement or interest in using Twitter with another school. Of the teachers that responded, they all reported that the students never mentioned it during class.

Recommendations

The Blue Spruce program proved to be a valuable resource to introduce to the two school library programs. Students expressed excitement weekly to see what the new Blue Spruce book would be about and were anxious to take the new books home from the library. The majority of students were excited to talk about the books, making many connections from text to self, text and to the world. Students were exposed to quality Canadian literature, allowing them to create a sense of Canadian identity within themselves and providing reading pleasure.

The role of the teacher librarian is integral to developing resources, introducing technology and providing a stimulating environment in which to learn. The students enjoyed using technology as it provided a hands-on experience. During the course of the Blue Spruce program, the students were excited to read what their 'friends' at Forest Glade or Queen Victoria had written. An exception to that statement is one of the Grade 3 classes at Queen Victoria. Midway through the Blue Spruce program, they complained about reading and writing responses on the Smartboard and wanted the opportunity to write themselves. We decided that they would be able to write their own Tweets using laptops. After reading and discussing the story, they were permitted to add their own thoughts to our Twitter account with Forest Glade, after it had been previewed by the teacher. Writing their own Tweets renewed their interest in the activity. It was observed that older students who walked into the library during classes were excited and envious to hear that the primary students were using Twitter. Many students expressed an interest to use Twitter at home and some have recently said that they do Tweet with their friends.

One difficulty we encountered during the course of the study was that the students at Forest Glade Public School only visited the library every other week. The two schools were usually reading different books which made it difficult to respond to what the other school had written. Queen Victoria Public School visited the library weekly, which could have contributed to the increase in the number of

students who reported that they enjoyed reading.

Overall, we feel that having a teacher-librarian as part of the library program increases students' enjoyment of reading. Teachers collaborating with Teacher-Librarians can create an environment where reading is valued, promoted and encouraged. We can increase reading development by encouraging independent reading using our wide range of current materials. A print-rich environment leads to more reading, and independent reading is the best predictor of comprehension, vocabulary growth, spelling and grammatical ability, and writing style (Lonsdale, 2006).

Conclusion

The real mandate of the Learning Commons is to design, facilitate and support dynamic learning experiences that utilize the best available resources, technologies, strategies and learning environments (OSLA, 2010). As we begin our transition towards a Learning Commons in our school libraries, we can see what an impact it has on our students. Through collaborative teaching between teacher-librarians, we can share learning experiences with children in other parts of the city or even other parts of the world. Through the use of technology we could communicate our learning in real time. Twitter allowed us to share book talks, reviews and comments of the Blue Spruce nominees.

The Learning Commons provides essential building blocks for the personal, social and cultural growth of students. Within the Commons, the school library offers a rich, broad-ranging, diverse, and inclusive resource collection, as well as a stimulating learning environment. It can foster a keen culture of inquiry. Through learning partnerships, the school library can provide students with opportunities to explore their interests. Qualities such as imagination and creativity, confidence and self-esteem, leadership and social contribution are integral values that need to be seamlessly woven into our educational fabric. The Learning Commons creates the atmosphere for this to happen (OSLA, 2010).

When students are encouraged to pursue their own interests and are free to choose from a rich collection within an inviting environment, they are motivated to read and their reading and depth of understanding improve. The Learning Commons can nurture good reading habits among students (Koechlin et al. 2010).

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Permission granted by Dani Hayes from Victoria Public School in Tecumseh, Ontario for use of her Reading Survey on Survey Monkey.