

Extending Readers Theater: Podcasting to Push Performance Reading to New Levels of Engagement and Student Success
An Accepted Proposal to the International Reading Association Conference

The researchers will share the results of integration of two powerhouses of student engagement, student performances and technology to improve students reading fluency and comprehension and engagement in repeated reading of texts. Extending the work of Martinez, Roser and Strecker (1999) and Griffith and Rasinski's Readers Theater work (2004) in Texas third grade classrooms to include podcasting as an authentic audience, the researchers set out to answer the following questions:

Does using podcasting as the audience for Readers Theater affect engagement in the process of repeated reading in third grade classrooms? Does it affect fluency and comprehension?

How will the gains in fluency and comprehension compare with using podcasting as the audience?

Is this an engaging way to provide opportunities for repeated reading?

(How) Does using podcasting as the audience for Readers Theater affect the results?

How will changing the audience of Readers Theater to podcasting affect the results?

Will students make comparable gains in fluency and comprehension?

Is this an engaging way to provide opportunities for repeated reading?

Once the "neglected goal" of reading instruction (Allington, 1983), fluency has enjoyed a new prominence in reading practices since the publication of the National Reading Panel's (2000) report on some of the critical components of research based implications for reading instruction. Repeated reading as a way to improve both fluency and comprehension is well established in the research (Dowhower, 1987). Even before the NRP report, repeated reading of appropriate texts as a means to achieve fluency was established, but finding an authentic purpose for that type of reading and rereading was challenging. By providing a performance and an audience, Readers Theater provides an authentic purpose for the kind of repeated practice required to become a fluent reader – especially for strugglers.

Clearly, integrating technology for the sake of technology itself might result in initial engagement due to novelty, but the long term effects would certainly wane. Kozma (1994) advocates selecting technology that is uniquely suited to the learning project at hand. Readers Theater depends solely on the voice to convey meaning and it is through the interpretive reading that students grow in their fluency and comprehension. Thus, any technology that adds a visual dimension to the readings would detract from the ultimate goal. Podcasting, as a purely aural medium, is an ideal technology to authentically integrate technology, widen the audience for the students' readings and maintain the integrity of the Readers Theater goals. Further, integrating this technology into students' reading work introduces and extends the concepts of new literacies that can be developed and learned through the use of technology (e.g., see Gee, 2003; Leu, Castek, Henry, Coiro & McMullan, 2004; Richardson, 2006).

Student engagement is described with such phrases as “emotional involvement”, “total absorption” (Harris & Hodges, 1995) and “psychological investment” (Newmann, 1992). Engaged students will persist in work that they may find difficult to accomplish a desired goal (Schlechty, 2001). Seymour Papert calls this “hard fun” (Papert, 1993). Schlechty (2001) identifies affirmation of performance as one of ten qualities of engagement that can be purposely included in the design of high quality student work. Readers Theater and podcasting together provide an audience beyond the teacher and classmates to others who are significant in the lives of the students such as family, friends and the public at large.

Along with the results of this project, the researchers will share the instructional plan for implementing this project in a multiple methods framework, including road blocks and difficulties, as well as a process for measuring student engagement (Schlechty, 2001). Participants will also hear actual podcasts samples from the beginning, middle and end of the ten week time frame highlighting the progress of struggling and at-risk readers.