

A Powerful Pairing: The Literature Circle and the Wiki

Study after study has shown that one of the best predictors of reading achievement is how much independent reading a young person does.¹ And yet, as secondary English language arts teachers feel more and more pressure to prepare students for standardized tests, independent reading is likely one of the first things to be dropped from the curriculum. Combined with pressures to teach digital literacy, media literacy, and 21st century skills, English language arts teachers may well feel overwhelmed by the challenge of meeting, much less synthesizing, all these demands.

In the process, as Gallagher argues in *Readicide* (2009), student motivation and curiosity—the very qualities most teachers want to nurture, and the ones that most often lead to student success—are extinguished (p. 10). The outlook need not look so grim, however. Fortunately, the English language arts discipline can adapt quite readily to many of these “new” requirements, since many are simply reconfigurations of skills we have been teaching all along: critical thinking, critical writing, interpretation, and creative response. And independent reading can be seamlessly integrated into approaches that meet many of these diverse requirements.

But the perennial question for teachers is *how* to nurture students’ independent reading habits, especially at the secondary level, when pleasure reading tends to drop off significantly (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007, pp. 7–8). The pedagogy of literature circles can provide the missing link between school reading and pleasure reading, since lit circles consti-

tute “a form of independent reading” (Daniels, 2002, p. 38). Creating literature circles around young adult texts, in particular, incorporates the best aspects of independent reading into the classroom by allowing students to choose what they want to read and then discuss it in peer-organized, peer-managed groups that encourage them to develop critical interpretations independently, under the guidance (not control) of the teacher. Asking students to create a wiki based on their chosen book and their group process gives them a dynamic forum for crafting responses to what they have read. Combining the two methods has proven to be an ideal way to synthesize the “learning and innovation skills” of critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity with 21st century technology skills.² Merging the low-tech literature circle with the higher-tech wiki can foster interest in autonomous reading, develop tools for collaborative meaning making, and encourage students to become better critical thinkers, which may lead to better performance on standardized tests.

Both the literature circle and the wiki emphasize collaborative meaning making through an ongoing process and, as such, complement each other in very powerful ways. I have combined literature circles and wikis in a college-level young adult literature course for preservice teachers and found that the two to work extremely well together, especially for the “sharing out” that is essential at the end of each cycle of the literature circle process. Given the many digital literacy tools available to English language arts teachers, the wiki is perhaps more flexible and adaptable

to the goals of the English language arts classroom than many others. Indeed, wikis can function as an interpretive extension of students' reading, as well as a physical space where readers can construct, discuss, revise, and fine-tune their understandings and interpretations of a text.

Making an "Old" Pedagogy New Again: Revisiting the Literature Circle

In 1994, Daniels published *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom* with the goal of meeting pressures to improve reading skills in the most liberating and student-directed way possible. Though the pedagogy is now widely known and practiced, in his 2002 revision, Daniels warned against what he referred to as "terminology drift," in which the term "literature circles" occasionally balloons to describe any sort of classroom-based literature discussion, regardless of format. The 2002 edition strives to bring practitioners' focus back to the fundamentals of the literature circle process, particularly the key concepts of choice and student-directed discussion.

Despite the explosion of classroom computer and Internet use since the first edition's appearance in 1994, however, Daniels' second edition makes only a couple of passing references to possible connections between the literature circle and digital literacy tools. The only substantive application is a description of a variation of the traditional literature circle that is conducted online (2002, p. 21). This absence likely has to do with the fact that the second edition itself is nearly a decade old; it was published before the explosion of blogs, vlogs, wikis, social-networking sites, and Nings, to name but a few of the digital literacy tools now employed in many English language arts classrooms. And yet, many of these "Web 2.0" digital literacy technologies provide the perfect technological counterpart for the interactive, collaborative, creative nature of the literature circle.

Of course, one of the strengths of literature circles is that they provide rich opportunities for complex learning without requiring expensive technology or even a full classroom set of a novel. However, the essential parts of the process could not be more readily translatable to Web-based creation and sharing. Certainly, there are other digital literacy tools (blogs, for example) that could be used equally effectively as

part of the literature circle, but the wiki, in particular, perfectly addresses the last of the eleven "key ingredients" of literature circles listed in the 2002 edition: "When books are finished, *readers share with their classmates*, and then *new groups form* around new reading choices" (2002, p. 18, emphasis Daniels'). The wiki also provides built-in assessment tools throughout the literature-circle process.

Why Wikis?

First, a brief definition of "wiki" might be in order. Most teachers are all too familiar with Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia open to anyone's contributions and revisions. As Richardson (2006) notes, however, while "most people get the 'pedia' part of the name, only a few really understand the first part, the 'wiki'" (p. 59). He goes on to define a wiki simply as "a Website where anyone can edit anything anytime they want" (p. 59). In short, a wiki is a tool for creating collaborative websites that can either open authorship and editorship to anyone (as in the case of Wikipedia), or can restrict authorship and editorship to a select group of contributors.

In *Literacy Tools in the Classroom: Teaching through Critical Inquiry, Grades 5-12*, Beach, Campano, Edmiston, and Borgmann (2010) address the educational value of wikis, noting the wiki's ability to help students "acquire a sense of the power of collective action, where the sum of everyone's contributions is greater than the isolated parts"; this, in turn, "challenges traditional academic ideologies of individual expertise and authorship" (p. 117). Indeed, I would argue that creating a wiki as part of the literature-circle experience allows students to construct a parallel text alongside the one that they are reading: the wiki becomes a contextual and interpretive extension of the book, as well as a physical space where readers can construct, discuss, revise, and fine-tune their understandings and interpretations of a text. Depending on the structure, focus, and time devoted to the wiki project, groups' wikis can function as anything from a student-generated version of "Spark Notes" on their particular book to a collaborative, multimedia essay on the text. Regardless of the ultimate goal of the wiki, using it in conjunction with the traditional literature circle allows students even more opportunities to transition from being passive consumers of text

to being active co-participants—even coauthors—of the text.

Pairing literature circles with digital or electronic communication is nothing new; previous studies have described “virtual literature circles” (Burgess, 2006; Kolu & Volotinen, 2004), some conducted via e-mail (Pate-Moulton, Klages, Erickson, & Conforti, 2004; Klages, Pate, & Conforti, 2007) and others through

Facebook (Stewart, 2009). In Stewart’s study (2009), students made use of “the features and applications of Facebook to respond to tasks and collaborate with members of their group” (p. 29). The study by Klages et al. (2007) had preservice teachers enrolled in reading classes at two different Texas universities—Texas State University/San Marcos and the University of Houston/Victoria—forming literature circles around Holocaust-themed books.

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These groups met in person in their separate classes, and then exchanged thoughts about the text one-on-one with their “distance learning partners” on the other campus (Klages et al., 2007). At the end of the process, the groups collaboratively used “e-mail, instant messaging, file-transfer protocol (FTP), and the World Wide Web (WWW) [to] create a Web page that presented an analysis and discussion of their selected book” (2007, p. 298). Both approaches were successful; however, there seem to be drawbacks to each. While integrating the literature circle with Facebook provides an ideal environment for the kind of “networked social scholarship” Stewart describes (p. 29), the site is, unfortunately, blocked by many school districts (although a similar kind of networked environment might be duplicated by creating a classroom Ning). Wiki technology allows for the creation of the kind of Web page Klages et al.’s students were assigned to create, while providing a user-friendly interface and template for doing so.

The wiki has a number of additional advantages over these other digital literacy tools, which func-

tion primarily to replace face-to-face discussion with virtual asynchronous or synchronous discussion, or to widen the scope of the literature circle beyond the physical boundaries of the classroom/school/community. Specifically, the wiki’s inherently collaborative and dynamic nature has the potential to deepen, extend, and literally make visible the fundamental goal of literature circles: to get students to make meaning collaboratively. As Beach, Campano, Edmiston, and Borgmann (2010) argue in *teachingmedialiteracy.com*, “Collaborative writing of a wiki text requires that students establish a division of labor based on the roles each student is assuming in the collaboration” (p. 14). Sound familiar? Literature circles, too, depend on discrete roles and collaboration to be effective.

Combining Literature Circles and Wikis: Several Approaches

To illustrate how these techniques work in tandem, I’d like to describe how I have used literature circles and wikis together in a college-level class that I teach on young adult literature. The majority of the students in the course are preservice teachers, most of whom are seeking certification to teach middle or secondary English language arts. Surprisingly few of them have heard of literature circles; among those who have, many know of them only through other teacher-preparation courses, but have not actively participated in one. Even fewer have heard of wikis (aside from the megalith Wikipedia). Though their lack of experience is a bit surprising, it is probably not unusual: often, preservice teachers have heard the jargon connected to “21st century skills,” but have little exposure to them in practice. The lit-circle/wiki project thus allows them to experience both in a short time frame, and also models how to match pedagogies with appropriate digital literacy tools.

Toward the end of each semester, students choose one young adult novel and form a literature circle around that text. As part of the literature circle process, students collaboratively create a wiki based on their chosen novel—texts as diverse as Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak* (1999), Kristin Cashore’s *Graceling* (2008), Christopher Paul Curtis’s *Bud, Not Buddy* (1999), David LaRochelle’s *Absolutely, Positively Not* (2005), and Michael Northrop’s *Gentlemen* (2009) among others.

On the first day of the project, students meet with the other folks who are reading the same text; typically, the groups have a total of five or six people. They draw up a reading schedule and determine who will play which “role” on each of the several days when they’ll be meeting in their groups. They have read selections from *Literature Circles* (Daniels, 2002) and have the role sheets for each of the basic roles. Even as college students and as future teachers themselves, they often want to treat the role sheets as “homework” or worksheets. Daniels’s lament that the role sheets have been misconstrued (or downright abused) is borne out by the fact that even students trained to think critically about pedagogies see a piece of paper with directions and empty space and instinctively go into completion mode, asking, “Do we have to fill this out before next time?” We generally have to revisit Daniels’s reminders that the roles need to be interpreted loosely, and that the sheets are only there to provide guidance, not a rigid framework.

On the first day, I also introduce students to wiki technology, since many are not familiar with it. I create the literature circle wiki on pbworks.com, which has an advertising-free option for educational users, though there are other choices. Prior to the first day, I set up a series of folders in pbworks, one for each book that students will be reading. I then create a page in each folder for each of the lit-circle roles: there’s a page for the Summarizer, the Discussion Director, the Travel Tracker, the Illustrator, the Vocabulary Enricher, the Literary Luminary, and the Connector. When introducing these elements, however, I encourage students to modify or even delete traditional roles and add their own, especially if they think something else would better fit their specific text. For example, a group of students reading Rita Garcia-Williams’s *Jumped* (2009) decided that they needed a role for a “Character Analyst,” who would interpret the actions and words of the novel’s three narrators. Another group of students reading Lynne Rae Perkins’s *Criss Cross* (2005) created a role for a “Multigenre Expert,” since the novel includes so many different kinds of writing. In other instances, groups combined several roles or simply interpreted them differently.

Of course, all of this setup could be done by the students themselves; I do it in advance mostly to save time and to keep the students from being

overwhelmed, since both the lit circle and the wiki are usually new to them. Also, while I create a single wiki for the entire class, each literature circle group could have its own separate wiki (as is the case with Wertsch’s book-group wikis, discussed below). I chose to set up a single wiki so that students can easily navigate between their own wiki and those of the other groups in class, since it seems to be helpful for students to see how other groups are putting together their wikis. Not only do they get ideas from each other, but the knowledge that others are looking at their wiki increases accountability and often gets students interested in the novels that they’re *not* reading.

Prior to each class, each group member gets on the wiki site and enters material for the role she or he will be playing during the next group meeting. So, the Summarizer posts a synopsis of the section the group is to read for the next meeting, the Discussion Director posts questions about it, and so forth. In my classes, the person in the Illustrator role usually embeds images and photographs found on the Web rather than creating original artwork, though a few do scan in their own drawings and add them to the Illustrator page. Interestingly, many students who weren’t confident about their drawing skills emphasized how much less stress they felt about playing the Illustrator role when they knew they could use ready-made images; in fact, several students commented on how much fun it was to look for relevant images online. This is a strength of translating the traditional “Illustrator” role into a digital context. While much of the material students entered into their wikis was text-based, many students also embedded videos, created wordle clouds related to the novel, posted MapQuest or Google Maps showing where the story was taking place, and added links to outside sites and resources related to their chosen book. A number of them expressed surprise at how much it helped their understanding of the text to reflect on it using such a rich variety of media; though most English-education majors are understandably word-oriented, through building their wikis, they truly came to understand that there are also valuable, non-text-based ways to respond to a piece of literature.

During class, students met either in their traditional face-to-face literature circles or as one large group gathered around a computer responding to the materials everyone had posted. Whichever method they chose (groups would often morph in and out

of both contexts), they usually ended up working collaboratively on the wiki site by the end of class, adding pertinent links, images, and other insights and information that had come up during discussion. At the end of the process, students presented their wikis to the full class and gave a brief book talk that summarized their responses to the novel they read.

The project helps these future teachers develop an understanding of how both the literature circle approach and wikis might be useful to them in their own classrooms. They appreciate the openness of the literature circle approach, the collaborative and process-oriented nature of the wiki, and the ways in which combining the two techniques fosters peer-to-peer interpretations of literature, rather than the top-down, “teacher-as-literary-authority” stance that most of them claim they do not want to replicate in their own classrooms.

From my own perspective, the lit circle/wiki project is an enlightening way to end the semester. These college students go from responding to young adult texts from the perspective of a future teacher—from which they evaluate texts primarily for their “teachability”—to responding to them simply as readers. Unsurprisingly, there’s often a radical difference

between these two modes of response, and I think the students themselves notice the gap and ponder what it might mean in terms of how they select and approach “appropriate” literature for their future students. By participating in the literature circle and creating the wikis, they also come to appreciate the collaborative, student-driven nature of both, and the ways each can enhance reading comprehension and hone interpretive skills. Even those students who claim to be very traditional, nonvisual learners enjoy finding images and video clips to embed in their sites, linking to other sites, and generally making sense of their chosen novel in a variety of non-text-based ways, thus gaining valuable insight into learner differences.

Students immediately appreciated the wiki’s potential as a visual record of the group’s work and as a way of sharing their book with others. Daniels (2002) stresses the importance of this kind of sharing and suggests a number of sharing devices that could be developed at the end of the literature circle process—posters, letters, dramatizations of parts of the novel, and so forth (p. 91). Of thirty-some possible sharing devices listed, however, technology is a component of only a few; even then, “technology” is limited to using a video camera to record dramatizations or mock

Digital Literacy Terms Used in Article

Blogs	Short for “weblog,” a blog is a personal website where one or several individuals can post writing, photos, and videos. Readers generally can comment on posts. Popular hosting sites include Blogger.com and Wordpress.com.
Vlogs	“Video weblogs.” Serve a similar function as blogs, but—as the name suggests—are video-only.
Wikis	Tools for creating collaborative websites that can either open authorship and editorship to anyone (as in the case of Wikipedia), or can restrict authorship and editorship to a select group of contributors. Hosting sites include pbworks.com, wetpaint.com, wikia.com, wikispaces.org, and wikispot.org, to name just a few.
Nings	From Ning.com, an online platform that allows users to create their own social networking groups around specific interests or commonalities (special-interest, mini-“Facebook”-type communities). Initially free, there are now three levels of service available, all of which have a monthly fee.
Web 2.0	Generic label applied to all digital technologies that allow interaction and collaboration among Web creators and users. Also known as the “Read-Write Web,” since it allows users not merely to read static content posted by others, but to comment on existing content and to create new content.

interviews with characters. Clearly, there are now many digital literacy tools that can be used creatively to share student work and their selected books with others. Daniels cautions, though, that these sharing devices need to be natural extensions of the literature circle, not tacked-on assignments at the end of the process just to provide the teacher with an assessable product.

In that spirit, the wiki is the ideal sharing device, since it is an organic part of the literature circle process, one that students create and revise throughout their reading of the book. It not only provides students with all the materials they might need to share their book with others, the wiki *becomes* the way they can share the book with others. As students conclude their reading and begin thinking about their wiki presentations, they often revise and clarify the content of their site in order to make it more accessible to people outside their group. In addition to allowing them to review what they've discovered in the process of reading, this kind of revision also reinforces the skill of writing and revising for a specific audience and purpose. And the process of building the wiki itself provides visual evidence of just how collaborative meaning making really is in the literature classroom. Here are some of the observations the preservice teachers in my young adult literature class made about both the literature circle and the wiki as pedagogical techniques:

It was interesting to read the book knowing that you were looking for something specific, such as vocabulary or key phrases. I feel like it made me pay a lot more attention to details that I might have otherwise missed. It also made me more conscious of how other readers would think while reading the book, which is an important skill for English teachers to have. (Sara, blog post, Fall 2008)

The Wiki allowed us to get a feel for what everyone else thought and was working on before we actually met. I really enjoyed looking through my group's Wiki site a day or two before class just to see what everyone else thought. (Rebecca, blog post, Fall 2008)

The Wiki aspect gives the students a concrete view of what they've accomplished together. They can use it as a before and after record of what they've learned along the way. I think it's an awesome tool that does all of this while combining their love of technology and playing online. (Jenn, blog post, Spring 2010)³

These comments underscore the shared strength that links literature circle pedagogy and wiki technol-

ogy: the power to develop students' abilities to think and write collaboratively about literature. And if the fundamental purpose of the literature circle is to help students better engage with a text by focusing their efforts toward particular roles, and then bringing the group together to broaden everyone's understanding, the wiki deepens this engagement by making those roles more visible and permanent. It allows students to document both their individual and their collaborative work while continuing to reflect on their discussion as they modify, edit, and add on to each other's work on the wiki.

Of course, my approach is only one possibility; there are many other ways to combine literature circles and wikis. Wertsch, a high school English language arts teacher, has students in his literature courses form book clubs around their choice of texts. Wertsch creates a separate wiki site for each book, although students can navigate back to a home page to link to other groups' wikis. Rather than including pages devoted to specific literature circle roles, as my setup does, Wertsch requires students to devote sections of their wiki to characters, plot, setting, conflicts, and themes, in addition to posting questions about their reading and creating a collaborative review of the book describing each student's response to it. Wertsch's students' wikis are well worth checking out, both to see the range of books they have created wikis for (everything from the nonfiction memoir *A Child Called It* [Pelzer, 1995] to the graphic novel *Maus* [Spiegelman, 1986, 1991] to a "cheesy vampire book no one wanted to read," as the link describes it) and to see how different groups constructed their pages, even within the fairly prescriptive parameters of the required sections. (See <http://wertsch.pbworks.com/Book-Club-Wiki-Pages>.)

Wertsch's use of literary terms and concepts for the sections of his wiki illustrates the adaptability of both the literature circle and the wiki approaches. Both Wertsch and I predetermined the general content and structure of the wiki, but this would not have to be the case. Just as Daniels advises students to throw out the role sheets once they have mastered the lit-circle process, groups could make their own decisions about how to organize and add content to their wikis, once they understand how wikis work. Wertsch's approach—organizing the wikis around traditional literary concepts—functions well to reinforce

those concepts for students while also giving them some freedom to interpret and describe those aspects of their chosen books in their own ways. However, Daniels—a firm believer in reader response theory—

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cautions against trying to put too much of a didactic template over the work of literature circles. As he says, “Though some teachers do seek ways to infuse literary terminology and analytical procedures into their literature circles, I do not see this as one of the structure’s defining ingredients,” because it tends to undermine the pedagogy’s basis “on a faith in self-directed practice” (2002, p. 23). Nevertheless, for teachers wishing to use literature circles and wikis at the high school level,

such an infusion may be necessary to meet curricular requirements and other standards.

Another model for combining literature circles and wikis comes from Emily Gray Junior High School (EGJHS) in Tucson, Arizona, where eighth graders participate in literature circles focused around their choice of young adult texts in the categories of Southwestern literature, fantasy/science fiction, and historical fiction, among others. The EGJHS approach to constructing literature circle wikis falls somewhere between my structure, based on literature circle roles, and Scott Wertsch’s, based on literary terms. EGJHS’s wikis organize their content into pages based on roles *and* traditional literary concepts.⁴ Groups are required to create pages based on characters, plot, and setting, as with Wertsch’s wikis, but some groups have additional pages with information about the author or links to published book reviews, for example. Apart from the required information about characters, plot, and setting, students are required to create some kind of “original media” response to their novel, which could take the form of a drawing (done by hand or computer), a podcast, a wordle, or a creative text, such as a poem written in response to the reading. In some cases, these media are embedded on pages titled

to reflect traditional literature circle roles, such as pages for “pictures” or “graphic illustrations”—variations on the typical “Illustrator” role. Each group’s wiki also includes a tab marked “discussion,” which is used flexibly to informally fulfill the roles of the summarizer, connector, and questioner. Its blend of required elements and open-endedness makes the EGJHS formulation a good way to address curriculum needs while allowing for reader-response, as well.

What about Assessment?

The complexity of assessing literature circles has been one of the major obstacles to their implementation. But this is where combining wiki technology with the literature circle becomes especially powerful and beneficial, since the wiki organically fulfills many assessment needs by supplying documentation of each participant’s work. One of the typical challenges in evaluating any collaborative effort is determining how much work any individual member of the group did—and doing so without pitting group members against each other to “rat out” the slackers. As Richardson (2006) explains, wiki technology makes this highly charged process transparent, if not virtually objective: “Each page on a wiki . . . comes with another very important feature: a page history. . . . when you click it, you can see when changes were made, by whom, and what was changed” (p. 63). Most wiki sites, such as pbworks, send email updates to the wiki’s writers, editors, and administrators with a detailed report of who made what specific changes to the site, and when. The technology itself generates a detailed record of student participation. As Moreillon, Hunt, and Ewing (2010) put it, “Accountability is inherent in the wiki space” (p. 27).

Of course, students and teachers will still need to figure out ways of assessing the quality of individual contributions, and how any individual’s work fits into the production of the whole. These more subjective concerns can likely be addressed via one of the methods Daniels describes in the chapter on assessment in the second edition of his book, or through the kind of self-reflection that Beach, Campano, Edmiston, and Borgmann (2010) advocate for use in conjunction with literacy tools such as wikis. They suggest that at the end of the process, students ask themselves questions such as, “How effectively am I [or are we] using this

tool to engage my [our] audience? . . . What might I or we do differently?” (p. 145). Of their own literature circle/wiki project, Moreillon et al. (2010) note that this kind of reflection arose naturally in groups as students “became more aware of their own thinking and learning processes and applied metacognition to the self-assessment of their work” (p. 28). If a more concrete artifact is desired, this kind of self-reflection could take a number of forms: a traditional paper, a journal entry, a blog post, a letter, and so forth.

Most important, however, each group’s wiki functions as a final project that the literature circle group generates organically through its process. As discussed above, while Daniels sees a sharing device as one of the key ingredients of a literature circle, he cautions that it is not itself the goal or requisite “end product” of the process. Most of the sharing devices he describes, however, require significant work and time to create once the group finishes reading and discussing the book. Since the wiki is being created and revised as part of the reading and discussion process, it is more or less complete as a sharing device once the group’s work is done. Students may choose to revise it to make it more appealing to an outside audience, but essentially, the process and the product are one and the same. Students can then, as Daniels (2002) advocates, move immediately to reading and discussing the next book (pp. 89–90). In this way, especially, the wiki is the perfect digital literacy pairing for the literature circle.

Conclusions

There are many challenges to incorporating either the literature circle or the wiki into the secondary English/language arts classroom, “especially for departmentalized middle and high school teachers, who must often deliver a huge mandated English curriculum in forty- or fifty-minute periods” (Daniels, 2002, p. 81). The amount of time required to get something like this off the ground, coupled with the need for holistic assessment techniques, may render either of these strategies a pipedream. However, my own experience suggests that students grasp the concepts of both the literature circle and the wiki very quickly; their initial anxiety dissipates almost as soon as they get started, and is replaced by an atmosphere of focused, student-centered work.

While my observations are of college students, I suspect a similar dynamic would occur in the secondary classroom. Teachers do need to allocate time to train students in both the lit circle and the wiki at the outset, but after students have gone through the process once or twice, there is usually no need for additional instructional downtime; students know what to do and can begin work immediately. I would argue, too, that the wiki further enhances this kind of autonomy by giving students a concrete and endlessly revisable framework for tracking their thoughts and their work. Time “lost” to the setup is easily recouped when teachers no longer have to repeat instructions or introduce new ones and when the creation of the wiki both documents student work and generates an assessable final project. No additional assignments or assessments need to be tacked on to the end of a unit.

Is all of this worth it? When we consider the startlingly clear statistic that “reading achievement is more highly correlated with independent reading than with any other single factor” (Daniels, 2002, p. 33), then the answer is clear: as teachers, we need to build independent reading into the curriculum as much as possible. And literature circle work can motivate students to continue reading beyond the classroom: students in my classes, on looking at other groups’ wikis, often discover other books that they want to read on their own. In these ways, the literature circle technique may offer a surprisingly direct way to encourage independent reading and, in turn, lead to higher scores on standardized reading-comprehension assessments.

Meanwhile, the wiki offers a very accessible, easy-to-master tool to meet 21st century skills mandates. Most important, though, both the literature circle and the wiki bring us back to the deepest foundations of our discipline—instilling in students an appreciation of the value of reading, and helping them develop skills both for interpreting what they read and for communicating their ideas about that reading to others. The student-centered approach of both the literature circle and the wiki gives students a sense of investment and ownership that few other pedagogies allow. As Richardson (2006) says of online publishing tools like blogs and wikis, “We can now offer our students a totally new way of looking at the work they do. . . . It’s not meant to be discarded or stored in a folder somewhere; it’s meant to be added to the

conversation and potentially used to teach others” (p. 132). But I like the ways my own students explain the value of these strategies best:

The beauty of the lit circle/wiki [is that] both are flexible structures within which individualized learning can happen. Once a teacher knows her students, she can help guide them into books and roles they might enjoy. (Andrea, blog post, Fall 2009)

Wikis are a good way to integrate technology and group work, and they rip open the traditional parameters of any assignment. It might be tough for some to become comfortable with the flexibility of wikis (I’m thinking about issues in grade objectivity, etc.), but as educators more willingly adopt experiential learning models into their curricula, I foresee wikis taking a major role in classrooms. (Emma, blog post, Fall 2009)

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Notes

- ¹ See, for example, studies by Cunningham & Stanovich (1991), Krashen (1993), Stanovich & Cunningham (1993), and the National Endowment for the Arts (2007).
- ² My definition of “21st century skills” comes from the Partnership for 21st Century Skills at http://www.p21.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=254&Itemid=120.
- ³ The student comments about literature circles and wikis come from blog posts written by students in my English 405: Young Adult Literature classes at West Virginia University during Fall 2008, Fall 2009, and Spring 2010 semesters. I thank them for their willingness to go along with my crazy scheme, which they always approach with skepticism, and for giving me such substantive, valuable feedback about the process. This paper would never have come into being without them.
- ⁴ This literature circle/wiki project is discussed in Moreillon, Hunt, & Ewing’s (2009) article “Learning and Teaching in WANDA Wiki Wonderland: Literature Circles in the Digital Commons.” The students’ wikis themselves can be viewed at <http://wandawiki.wikispaces.com/>.

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