"What Messages or Symbols Make You Feel Empowered?" A Virtual Book Experience with Tristan Strong

Jason D. DeHart, PhD
Appalachian State University
dehartjd@appstate.edu

Ezra Densley, MA
Appalachian State University

Abstract

This co-authored manuscript represents the work of a literacy educator/professor and graduate

student in building on online book club experience for upper elementary and middle grades

students in the Fall 2020 semester. Kwame Mbalia's Tristan Strong series became the central

text for building reading and dialogue with students, and all interactions were in a virtual setting.

While the book club approach is not remarkable on its own, the use of digital texts and the

demands of the environment presented difficulties and generated implications that the authors

hope will be useful for the literacy field.

Keywords: online pedagogy, digital literacy, popular series, middle grades instruction, literacy

instruction, upper elementary literacy

Background on Virtual Book Clubs

In the fall of 2020, following a spring and summer of online learning, the authors of this

manuscript worked together as a faculty member/graduate student instructional team to co-

construct a virtual book club experience for upper elementary/young adolescent students. This

work stemmed from our director's vision in the university reading clinic setting for continuing to

maintain connections throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, the reading clinic has

continued to be "plugged in" and online since March 2020, even given the significant challenges

in maintaining our engagement with young readers in pandemic times. This collaboration was an

extension of our team's common philosophical foundation and willingness to craft new

experiences in difficult contexts (Ward et al., 2020).

Virtual book clubs are not a new venture (Chelton, 2001; Sedo, 2003); what was new in

our experience was the immediacy of the need for the book club experience in the absence of

possibilities for face-to-face instruction in our local school system at the time, as well as on the

university campus. We further recognized the potential for building community with an online

book club in a socially fragmented context. In the context created by the pandemic, a number of

recent publications have explored virtual engagements across levels, including the need to

humanize instruction (Budhai et al., 2021), engage in multimodal reflection and composition

(Stufft & von Gilern, 2021), and build learning experiences across languages (Setyowati et al.,

2021) .

This book club served as one part of a larger plan to continue our work with connecting

graduate students and children in clinical experiences to enrich our course content and afford

opportunities to practice pedagogy. Previous research has begun to examine creative online

teaching methods during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chamberlain et al., 2020), and research has

further indicated that virtual book clubs can promote reading growth outside of a regular school schedule (Bare, 2019). Given the at-home setting of instruction, and the need to continue to foster growth and development for students, we worked together to create a model that could be open to change as we read throughout the semester.

Initial Plans

For initial steps in our plan, we organized our thinking around a sequence of instructional steps, from informal check-ins, including open-ended low-stakes questioning, to modeling responsive reading practice. Beyond these initial ideas, we centered our work in our collaboration with one another, stemming from previous work in online literacy clinic settings. We chose to foreground a high-interest text, *Tristan Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky*, based on the recommendation of one of the students we knew would join the group. This student was, in fact, a central inspiration for this book club. The role of choice continues to be endemic to our common teaching philosophy, and has been noted as an important feature of virtual book clubs (Gardner, 2020).

We met with students one day a week in the afternoons, and Ezra met with one student individually later in the week to work one-on-one and build additional comprehension. We wanted to ensure that all students felt welcome regardless of how much they had been able to read in the previous week. We set goals and markers, with some students meeting and others exceeding those goals. We greeted students for the first 3-5 minutes of the club meetings, and then shared our favorite parts of the previous week's reading. We recognized that connection was a large part of what students were lacking in the context in which we were working, and wanted to build on the sense of invitation we sought in our virtual clinic work. While the faculty

author initiated some of this work, they foregrounded the work of the graduate student facilitator

and student audience. Also drawing on Gardner's work, we note that the live and synchronous

nature of these meetings were helpful to build connections, and we kept in mind the important

nature of highlighting reading activity when we were asynchronous, as well.
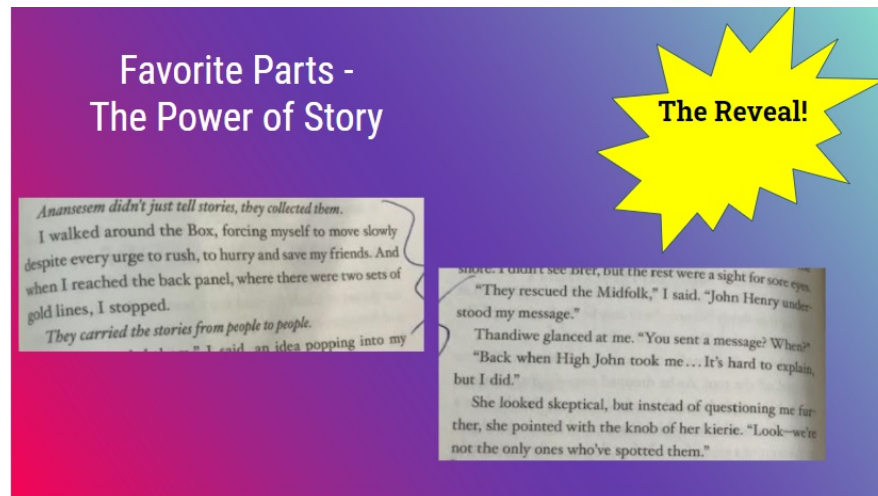
We highlighted the importance of the book we were working through, noting the

emotional journey of the character, as well as the role the book plays in fostering antiracist

education practices. We noted that the book is Coretta Scott King Award winner in our first

meeting, and drew attention to its significance with cultural references and how the book works

from the Percy Jackson world to include legends from West African and African American

traditions. In doing this work, we recognized our positionality as two white scholars, introducing

a culturally-relevant and high interest text. This move was again based on the interest of our

students, but was also supported by our focus on culturally relevant and culturally sustaining

pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014). When reading portions with students, Ezra would display the

content on the screen through the Kindle app so that everyone in the club could follow along

both on screen and with the printed copy of the book they received.

Building from our clinical work with reading graphic novels in virtual spaces, our next step was about highlighting and noting what stood out to us in the book. We asked open-ended questions to elicit responses from our readers, shared readings of particular chapters, and modelled the practices of annotating and sketching as we read. These annotations and sketches, along with additional media material collected by Ezra, were stored on a Padlet link, which we shared with students at the beginning and end of sessions.

Building on Practice
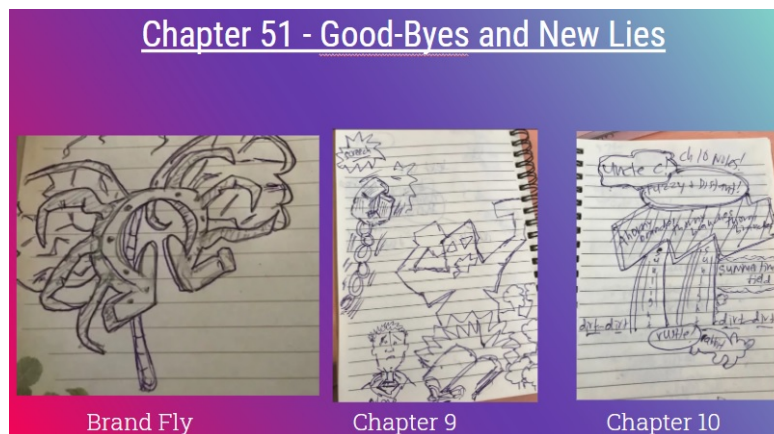
We initially began with intentions to use a literature circle approach. What we found was that, given the small size of the group, conversations as a working team led to more rich interaction. The choice to focus on one small group of students was dictated by the response that we received to the invitation to the book club experience, as well as the context for the work. Engaging with students during the school day was limited, as many children in our district and surrounding districts had other virtual work to complete. Our sessions took a more dialogic approach and centered around the plot, as well as in-the-moment prediction and inference work. During the read-aloud portion of our sessions Zoom's chat feature proved to be an affordance of

the setting, as it allowed students to participate in a way that felt lower-risk and did not interrupt

the reading. When the authors reached a stopping point in the story where we could pause to

discuss, we would read students chat messages aloud and respond to them.

Throughout each session we included several activities which prompted students to

discuss different aspects of the book. We used a Google Jamboard to keep track of students'

predictions, questions, and ideas about the story. Revisiting our Jamboard each week allowed us

to review our previous predictions and questions which sparked discussion about how the story

was unfolding and elicited further questioning.

As new characters were introduced, we noted our observations and inferences about them

on a google slide, with Ezra transcribing the students' words. We encouraged students to cite

evidence from the text when they made inferences about characters feelings and traits. We

modelled this by showing highlighted passages from the book and wondering aloud what these

quotes might suggest about the characters, sharing our own ideas and asking about our students'

opinions.

Near the end of each session, we noted anything mentioned in the book that we wanted to

learn more about. This was a space where both students and facilitators could ask questions

about cultural and historical references from the text, as well as questions about the story. In the

following week, Ezra would research these cultural and historical references and provide

educational resources on Padlet, which they would draw students' attention to at the end of the

next session.

Changes in the Plan

When we began the sessions, we quickly realized we would be working with a small group of 3-5 students each week. We also recognized that some students would read ahead, while others were reading along with us in the way that chapters were broken down by week. We shared responses to the text that we created in these virtual settings using the Padlet tool and invited students to do the same.

At first, we checked with student reading progress using an anonymous Zoom poll. When we gathered the trends in how much students were reading, we felt we could discontinue use of this tool. Since some students read several chapters ahead while others followed our suggested reading schedule, we began including summaries of the week's readings at the beginning of each session to refresh students' memory of where we were in the story.

Over time we noticed that students were more likely to engage with material shared during our synchronous sessions than material posted on Padlet. In response to this, Ezra began sharing information about the cultures and history referenced in the book at the end of each session on google slides, while still posting additional resources on Padlet.

We attempted to spotlight videos of Africans and African Americans sharing their own cultures as much as possible both on Padlet and in our sessions. However, this proved to be a challenge and regrettably our Padlet in particular didn't feature as many Black voices as we would have preferred. It was often difficult to locate accessible and free online resources about the history and cultures we were researching that were of quality. The need to find materials written in English also created a challenge, as well as the criteria for materials to be appropriate for school aged children, and by Black creators. Despite these barriers, we were still able to present several videos that met these criteria, including clips of traditional crafts, oral storytelling, folk magic, and an interview with the author, Kwame Mbalia.

When we reached the part of the story in which the protagonists embark on a heroic journey, we created a second Jamboard featuring the map of Alke (the mythological world where the majority of the book is set) from the book. We asked students to read passages that described the characters' trajectory and used Jamboard's pen feature to plot the course of their journey over several weeks of reading. During this process we would pause to discuss sections of their route we had to infer, as well as various features of interest on the map and our predictions about the rest of their voyage. When three characters made an incorporeal journey later in the book, we avoided visual confusion by using a different color to represent their path.

In our first few sessions, Ezra led students in icebreaker activities to build camaraderie among the group such as an artifact hunt based on their identities and interests. At the conclusion of our time together, we also knew that we wanted to craft a meaningful and memorable capstone experience for students. In our final session, Ezra led the students in a Kahoot to share facts about the book and its cultural and historical references. Taking inspiration from the

Adinkra symbols described in the book, which originated from the Akan people of Ghana,

students and facilitators also designed and shared their own symbols with personal meanings.

Our audience was relatively stable, but also fluid, and we checked in with students that

were missing, just as one might make an attendance call in a typical school setting. Our check-

ins came from a place of concern, rather than an authoritarian desire to maintain an attendance

policy.

Implications for Further Practice

Here, we enumerate four centers for continued practice, each worth further consideration

if constructing/co-constructing a similar literacy experience for students:

1. Consider the interests/needs of students, regardless of the face-to-face or virtual context.

2. When possible, implement culturally-sustaining and culturally-relevant text choices.

3. Begin with community-building steps to check in with readers and build a warm

   environment.

4. As with all instruction, shifts may be necessary and plans may change as the group forms

   and as challenges arise.

Conclusions/Recommendations

While we had many plans for what this virtual book club would be, the changes that

occurred in the fall 2020 semester, including school reopenings and additional work demands

placed on students, made flexibility a necessity. Central to this work was the collaboration

between our co-teaching team, with Ezra taking a more visible role as the club continued. We

furthermore discovered the affordances of additional support between meetings for student

attendees who required additional scaffolds. The digital nature of our text, as well as the

engaging nature of the author's work, were two assets that we leveraged throughout the book

club experience. Future work might focus on expanding the approach we have described with a

wider audience, including multiple student groups.

Above all, we wish to retain the invitational nature of this experience, regardless of the

possibility of face-to-face formats for reading instruction that may arrive in the next year.

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