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Voices in the Field

Padawan's Journey: Remixing Star Wars Radio for Adolescent Literacy Education

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Abstract

In this digital literacy project, struggling high school readers remixed the *Star Wars* canon through audio storytelling. The *Star Wars* phenomenon motivates adolescents who may be disengaged in the classroom. Students served as actors, Foley artists, and directors in the recording of brief episodes based on the original trilogy. The project heightens students' oral fluency and text comprehension by engaging in close reading and structured dialogue. Through the use of Chromebooks and Google Apps, students were able to move through the production process and the recordings demonstrate how students can be effective storytellers and produce an original remix audio production.

Keywords: *Star Wars, digital literacy, storytelling, oral presentation, audio production, reading specialists*

In the *Star Wars* saga, the audience is introduced to the Jedi warrior. Jedi warriors closely resemble the knights of the medieval England or the Samurai of feudal Japan. On the journey to becoming a Jedi, each candidate must apprentice as a Padawan learner under a Jedi master. In time, the student becomes a teacher to future Padawans. The striking similarity to the art of teaching is evident. My students are apprentices of literacy, not yet proficient but motivated as learners. It is my goal to pass along my knowledge and learn from their experience.

As a reading specialist working in a public, suburban high school in the United States, I am aware that literacy instruction has changed greatly over the last decade. Previously, I relied on print resources and followed traditional practices for literacy intervention. Starting three years ago, I began developing a digital literacy curriculum for my students, who are generally identified as reading below grade level. As I watched how our school's program in the fine arts continued to evolve, I was inspired to connect the dots between literacy and the performing arts. I wondered if my Freshmen students were receiving sufficient opportunities to perform compared to their upperclassmen counterparts. Upperclassmen performed Shakespeare in school-wide productions and gave Senior presentations to the community. Freshmen performance tasks involved writing a short story in language arts or giving an informational report presentation in their history or science courses. These students could benefit through personal expression and build confidence

The ninth curriculum had several options for storytelling and performance. Specifically, the subject of Greek mythology was an appropriate fit for digital storytelling. I felt that some of my students were less interested in *The Odyssey* than I had expected. Students spoke with passion about the plot and characters of contemporary media in science fiction instead. I began to wonder: could I help students connect the hero's journey with science fiction?

I was inspired by an old script for *Star Wars*, *The National Public Radio Dramatization*, as shown in Figure 1. Created in 1981, and continuing into the 1990's, the first film of the original trilogy received a grand treatment in a classic radio drama format. New and current cast members participated in the recording while incorporating the sound effects of Ben Burtt and the orchestral score of John Williams. The radio script production built on the storylines of the films by adding new content and extended scenes. I began to see how this paralleled the fan fiction movement and was eager to present the idea to my faculty and students.

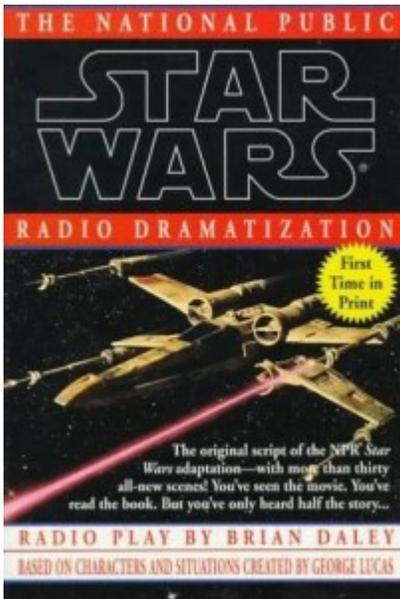


Figure 1
Book Cover for the NPR *Star Wars* Radio Dramatization Script

During the initial implementation of this unit, occurring between December 2014 and February 2015, I was thrilled to have 20 students at different levels of literacy development. Most students were Caucasian, middle class, and had no additional support services. These students did struggle in oral reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. In some cases, my students lacked the word attack skills needed to pronounce unfamiliar words. Other students had a limited understanding of the parts of speech. Nearly all of the students need practice in oral reading rates and prosody, the tone and rhythm of the spoken word.

My plan was to enhance students' reading and writing while developing a creative audio production product targeting a larger audience. If we were fortunate, the project could become an important mainstay of the literacy intervention curriculum. Moreover I hoped the effort would create interest in the larger community of literacy intervention.

A Hero's Journey Remixed

There was certainly a lot of buzz around the idea when I first introduced it to a group of my colleagues. Not only were they fans of *Star Wars*, but they were excited about the premise of a radio show performance. Today's students are exuberant fans of *Star Wars*, especially with the current animated *Star Wars* *Clone Wars* series and the release of the new film trilogy. Because mythology is essential to the ninth grade instruction, I could see an obvious curricular connection. Students study characterization and plot as features of robust storytelling. In many ways, the *Star Wars* storyline closely parallels the text used in ninth grade: Homer's *The Odyssey*. Students learn about the mythology of Ancient Greece while researching the monomyth structure, as shown in Figure 2. In upperclassmen coursework, our students use Joseph Campbell's monomyth model

(2008) to conceptualize other stories. Thus, the task would preview the format behind the storytelling and build text comprehension.

The *Star Wars* saga is an outstanding resource because it builds on the best elements of storytelling. The characters are rich in depth and conflict while the storyline intersects with a hero's journey. We can trace religious, political, and social topics across the *Star Wars* universe and draw parallels to modern society. Most of all, the technology of the distant galaxy engages the audience with magic and awe.

I had a vision for what I was hoping students could produce: a radio drama remix. I did not want the students to simply parrot back the movie or radio production. I wanted my students to ground their story in the existing canon but bring their own new characters and plots to the forefront. Students would sample from the *Star Wars* original storylines in the same fashion as the *Star Trek* reboot films from J.J. Abrams. The audience would be familiar with the lore, but engaged in a parallel universe of the students' own creation.

Research and Academic Standards

Students who struggled with reading and writing benefit greatly from practice in speaking and listening, including reading aloud (Unsworth, 2013). Traditional approaches to literacy intervention may use generic texts and comprehension questions. My curriculum would use a contemporary text with a multimedia performance component. I realized that my first challenge would be the transition to deeper learning. Some of my students demonstrated exemplary listening skills because many have adapted their own learning styles to meet the core curriculum's significant focus on direct instruction. However, this does not always translate into successful comprehension. I hoped that this experience would help bridge that gap through motivation and practice.

I was aware that some of my colleagues have been less willing to accept media studies and the arts in the core content-area curriculum. Though educators may supplement learning with films, music, and websites, they often are used without activation of deeper learning skills. Another reason for the absence of media study in core courses is the practice of conceptualizing media merely as a text feature. Among literacy educators, the term *text feature* is used to describe images and sounds present in a written piece that provide supplementary or condensed information on a similar or related topic (Callow, 2003; Levin & Mayer, 1993). Online textbooks make extensive use of text features including photographs, video clips, music, and diagrams. These elements are considered to be dependent on the nature of the written word and educators rarely provide dynamic interpretation of them (Levin & Mayer, 1993). Fortunately, scholars like Gunther Kress (2003) redefine *text* to include multimodal elements. In my work with struggling readers, I also wanted to redefine text to include both film and sound recordings.

According to the U.S. Common Core State Standards (CCSS), ninth grade students are required to examine themes in world literature. As noted before, a common selection for thematic units included Greek mythology. Many English Language Arts (ELA) teachers, including those at my school, use Homer's *The Odyssey* to fulfill this requirement. Greek mythology and the *Star Wars* stories present numerous skills that can support literacy development and fulfill curricular requirements. In my design, students practiced close reading by "analyzing 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" (ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3).

The production project also helped students to analyze author's purpose. The CCSS addresses how the "author's choices the structure of the text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulation of time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) creates such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise" (ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.5). These skills were being practiced within the ELA course using classic texts. I believed that my students were more motivated due to the familiarity with the *Star Wars* story. This allowed them to dig deeper beyond a surface level of understanding.

I wondered about the relative value of focusing on producing a radio play. I wondered, how will the *mise en scène* of *Star Wars* translate into an audio-only production? Visual literacy is critical in the media

rich environments that are integrated into our personal and professional lives (Hobbs, 2011b). Not surprisingly, my students wanted to build a visualized scene with the famous light saber special effects and action sequences. I worried that they would miss the importance of storytelling and bury the plot in a visual cacophony. This justified my decision to focus on creating a radio drama. After all, underneath the exciting effects, sounds, and music of *Star Wars* is a heroic story. The hero's journey is beautifully told through unfamiliar landscapes and with relatable characters. At times, George Lucas noted that he followed the seventeen-stage construct of Joseph Campbell (2008), as shown in Figure 2. Lucas created a hero's journey by depicting the monomyth in a science fiction environment. The audience is enchanted by the visuals but relates to the movement of the story.



Figure 2

A depiction of the Campbell's stages for Star Wars, Episode 4: A New Hope (Duarte, 2010)

If I could place emphasis on their creativity and design in reading this text and writing new ones, the digital tools could be the medium for presenting their understanding. However, I began to wonder if this task was feasible with the technology available to my students. As a media designer, I have access to professional tools and equipment that could easily accomplish this task. I recognized that not all students have either the skill or resources to complete this project. Therefore, I made a critical decision in the planning of this assignment. The majority of the work would use only open-source or free apps in the Google Chrome and cloud-based environment. In other words, all recording and editing would use Google Chrome App tools, available to anyone with a Google account. This would be facilitated through our one-to-one ratio of Google Chromebooks distributed to all students in the school.

Ultimately, the goal was to see how this would benefit literacy instruction. Thus the guiding questions for this unit were: How do struggling readers demonstrate oral reading fluency and text comprehension by participating in recording a radio drama? To what extent can students use professional audio production to demonstrate skills of storytelling?

Procedures and Resources

The unit included a variety of reading, writing, viewing, and discussion activities before the production of the radio drama took place. Production activities included time for rehearsal, recording and post-production. Therefore, activities were chunked to support various learning opportunities.

Character Study and Journaling. We began by watching *Star Wars, A New Hope* as a class. During this time, individuals “followed” a different character and produced a journal of their inner thoughts. The idea was to consider the person’s individual role and infer what they may be thinking or feeling. This served as a pre-writing activity and allowed us to do some close analysis of the film as a visual text.

Heightening Awareness of Sound. To demonstrate proficient listening skills, the students watched demonstrations of how both the Foley artist and the composer enhance sound in feature films. This allowed the students to learn more about how music and sound effects communicate meaning and it also activated their own creativity in imagining possibilities for their own radio play.

Analyzing Media Texts. We listened to several episodes of the original radio dramatization for the first *Star Wars* film. During periodic pauses, we plotted the characters on a plot line. We discussed characterization using academic vocabulary including the language of static and dynamic, and flat or round characters. Through group dialogue, students made inferences about the characters’ motives and behaviors. Students were also interested in creating a timeline for the entire *Star Wars* canon, to better understand the arc of the storyline.

Digital Annotation and Remixing the Script. Students began the process of creating a remix using the radio dramatization script as a foundation for their work. I used a high-resolution scanner to create the scripts using the original radio production publication. By scanning with optical-character recognition (OCR), each page was converted to a Google Docs for editing. Students then collaborated to remix and rewrite scenes and dialogue. With the aid of Chromebooks, each student could read and annotate the script as a whole class. The commenting features allowed students to add critical notes about the vocal performance as they practiced their lines. Google Drive provided a free, efficient resource for editing and storing the audio files. The recorded segments were even reviewed after school for the ambitious few that wanted to continue their work.

Choosing Audio Production Tools. For recording, we used *TwistedWave* from the Chrome Web Store as our primary audio recording tool. *TwistedWave* demonstrated the best compatibility with our microphone and was easy to learn. The product provided access to our Google Drive when you signed up for a free account. Using a Blue Snowball USB microphone, we were able to capture our sound recordings at a high fidelity. The Blue microphone provided outstanding omnidirectional input allowing students to gather around

the microphone for table readings. The *Star Wars* musical score was purchased in a digital format from the Google Play Music Store. Recordings were in the MP3 format and could be edited at a later date using *TwistedWave*. Sound effects were recorded live from the *StarWars.com Soundboard* through the system audio input. Under Creative Commons licensing, these sound elements could be incorporated into the action and served as “audio props” for our production.

Rehearsal and Production. Students needed support to collaborate and organize themselves for the rehearsal and production processes, recording each scene one at a time. Using Google Forms, I created a production log to record accomplished tasks. The form, as shown in Figure 3, allowed me to document the amount of time spent on instruction, rehearsal, and recording the segments of our work together. The log also supported the progress monitoring of my students’ work. Coupled with Google Docs, I could link my students’ documents together and examine their progress through commenting.

The image shows a Google Form titled "Task". It has four main sections:

- Task Name:** A text input field containing "Table Read of Scene 4".
- Task Type:** A dropdown menu with "Project Step" selected.
- Status:** A dropdown menu with "Partial completion" selected. Below it is a description: "The progress made during the meeting period."
- Commentary:** A large text area with a blue border containing the text: "Interventionists notes on the interaction for the task. Brian, Emily, and Rachel read through their parts out loud twice. Some corrections were made to pronunciation and pace. We discussed ways to practice inflection and create phonemic awareness from the audio recording."

At the bottom of the form is a blue "Submit" button.

Figure 3
Production Log Tool

After several recorded rehearsals, we attempted a dress rehearsal where students would record a “live” version of the scenes. We discovered that the existing technology proved to be difficult in producing an uninterrupted and clear recording of the action. However, we felt that some segments were still usable and worth post-production editing.

Post-Production. The students added the musical score and sound effects to add emotion to the scenes. An additional test using pitch modulation was practiced using a female speaker’s voice. The student’s voice was lowered to give the impression that she was a male commander. These effects would inspire future recordings that would include the distinctive robotic sounds of Darth Vader.

What We Learned

My students got a chance to work collaboratively to create a simple radio drama, and in the process, practiced text comprehension, writing skills, language fluency, articulation and confidence in an oral

performance. By developing this project, I also learned about my students. Many are natural performers who grow in confidence behind a microphone versus in front of a whole class. In this production, they were able to immerse themselves in their roles and leave personal identities at the door. Students who were previously reluctant to read aloud emerged as confident performers in this production.

Other students learned valuable skills related to media production. These students discovered the challenges in considering the needs of the listener. They made compromises for the sake of a better product and introduced elements that were not part of the original script. On more than one occasion, several students remarked they were surprised how much work went into a few seconds of recording. Students also engaged with the content and themes of the *Star Wars* universe, and the fan fiction appeal of this project allowed students to shape the story personally. As part of their work, discussion for future productions included an adaptation of a transgender character and other underrepresented groups of people.

This was a good pilot project for me. Beyond my field test, I cannot truly state that the project improved students' reading fluency or text comprehension. Without a more robust research design, I can only assume that students made growth based on informal, qualitative observation. I am very passionate about this project and proud of the community of learners willing to continue this work. My hope is that we can expand this into a study with more diverse students. This would also include a more heterogeneous acting company who could model oral fluency skills.

Of particular note, one recording included students where English was not their native language. This provided a great opportunity to practice oral speaking and include the influence of other cultures in the recording. Not unlike the *Star Wars* universe, having non-native English speakers record in their own language enhanced the production. In the future, I would like to include non-translated recordings as part of the production's learning goal to further value the diverse learners who participated. I also want students to consider the inclusion of non-traditional characters that could be introduced to the storyline. I believe that the science fiction universe provides opportunities to consider the concept of diversity. In a radio play, the audience can let their imagination work more freely and in future characters with mixed race backgrounds and different gender identities.

Limitations and Challenges

The *Star Wars* Remixed pilot project was not without its challenges. One difficulty was the infrequency of meetings with students. With differing tasks and schedules, we could not devote daily time to the production. During the Spring 2015 semester, students were obliged to take multiple assessments that required our technology resources and our attention. In simplest of terms, this project was not prioritized in the core content curriculum and remained voluntary for a handful of students in my resource classroom.

The lack of additional pre-production tools was also problematic. Resources such as *BitStrips for Schools*, an online comic-maker tool, would have aided in storyboarding scenes and helped us with rehearsals. Due to the limited time available, most of the pre-production work was completed on-the-fly and with almost no documentation. I also ran into difficulty in presenting the completed work publically due to the population who participated. Almost all of my students have needs-based documentation that limited any public performance of their learning. This prevented me from sharing portions of our work through social media and this website. My hope is to utilize the Institutional Review Board process to secure parent permission and student ascension for public broadcasting.

Ironically, the greatest limitation was one that was self-imposed. I had decided to ensure that all technology tools would be compatible with the Chrome OS, so all non-Chrome applications were excluded from this pilot project. A variety of commercial resources would have simplified and expedited this process. For example, as a result of this self-imposed strategy, multi-track recording and post-production editing was arduous. If a program like *Adobe Audition* or *Apple Logic Pro* was used, we could have recorded "live" shows, requiring less post-production. This could have helped students who were overwhelmed with recording in a single take. Because of their unfamiliarity with the tools, some students were unable to complete the task

without significant assistance. Ideally, I would have preferred that the students would have enough instruction and time to complete the entire project independently.

I also would have liked to do more collaborative planning and review online. Using a tool such as *MindMeister*, I could have charted their learning process and assigned tasks for completion. This would have allowed me to provide a road map for the project. In future productions, I will aim to have student directors submit progress reports to the teacher using the online production log described earlier.

My students begged for an opportunity to film or photograph scenes. In a manner similar to the *pecha kucha* or an Ignite presentation styles, I am considering expanding the project to include some visual elements. The incorporation of the storyboards and behind-the-scenes images would enhance the audio production and satisfy their creative interests. Perhaps students could produce graphic novel illustrations that could accompany the radio drama playback. Again, my goal was to avoid visualization in this project, but I can see this as an enhancement to the sound production.

I am hopeful that this project will continue to grow beyond my resource room and outside of my local community. The project has both enlightened and educated me about digital literacy as a tool for intervention. I also hope they will inspire other educators to attempt this kind of task in their classroom. Hopefully we can support one another, building a community of learners with a shared passion for storytelling.

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