

What's in Your Feed?

Navigating the Digital Divide to Advocate for Diverse Texts



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Abstract: Teaching with digital resources can seem overwhelming. Teachers and students sometimes struggle to use online materials, but potential solutions can be found in federated databases and curated eBook collections specially chosen for Texas teachers and students. This article assists educators as they locate and use TEKS-aligned digital resources and facilitate access to diverse texts including databases that support social-emotional learning (SEL), include differentiated texts, and provide extensive language support. Teachers should increase the volume and authenticity of the texts available to students by engaging students with high-quality online texts that include multimedia sources that students will recognize from their out-of-class text experiences. Gale digital resources are highlighted in this article due to their prevalence in Texas public schools, and TexQuest provides many of these and other digital resources to Texas K-12 public schools and open enrollment charter schools (TexQuest, 2020). Additionally, this article stands as a digital response to We Need Diverse Books, a nonprofit organization committed to promoting literature that represents the diversity found in American classrooms; the organization asks us to “imagine a world in which all children can see themselves in the pages of a book” (weneeddiversebooks.org, homepage). Access to diverse texts, as is the mission of We Need Diverse Books, means that students can access reading materials that are interesting, are current, are relevant, and are a match to their reading ability and support their linguistic development.

Keywords: digital resources, eBooks, diverse texts, social-emotional learning (SEL), ELAR TEKS

“We are living during a time of communications revolution.”
—Ernest Morrell

Introduction

How do your resources stack up? Meeting the diverse needs of students, the standards in the TEKS, and the local district curriculum require abundant access to various types of texts. In this article, the authors describe the problems associated with digital resources, review digital resources that provide solutions, and connect these resources to the ELAR TEKS. Additionally, these TEKS-aligned digital resources provide access to diverse texts that support social-emotional learning (SEL) as they increase the volume and authenticity of the texts available to students.

The Problem

When it comes to supporting classroom research and inquiries with digital resources, educators—whether teachers, administrators, or support staff—face different challenges. These varied perspectives sometimes lead to miscommunication and differing goals. Teachers struggle to find time to review the resources available, but they want to increase student engagement and differentiate their lessons. Administrators want these things as well, but they worry about stretching their budget to cover resources that often do not meet the promises made at the point of purchase. Eager to help, librarians, often with rich knowledge of digital resources, seek opportunities to work with teachers and curriculum developers to share their holdings and support digitally rich classrooms. Meanwhile, curriculum leaders see that their teachers are overwhelmed and want to simplify the process. Finally, technology directors strive to get meaningful tools in the hands of teachers but must overcome issues like incompatibility (see Figure 1).

For this article, the digital resources of Gale, a Cengage company, are highlighted based on their prevalence in Texas public schools. TexQuest, a state digital resource provider to K-12 public schools

and open enrollment charter schools (TexQuest, 2020), and Texas school districts provide these databases with additional support through their school libraries. These resources are both new, yet familiar to educators as reliable sources that students can easily access in school databases.

With the recent changes in the Texas state standards, Gale has updated its databases to align and complement the new TEKS. Teachers can access texts and resources by specific standards, and eBook libraries have been curated to match Texas standards specifically.

In a case study conducted by Project Tomorrow, seven schools, 32 teachers, and 660 students in grades 4–12 were surveyed about the role of educational databases in supporting the development of college and career-ready skills. What they found was that when teachers were asked to evaluate the impact of using *Gale In Context* databases provided through TexQuest, teachers overwhelmingly saw an increase in student comprehension, work quality, and engagement. These databases supported teachers who felt better equipped to develop engagements connected to their standards, explore topics at a deeper level, create more relevant lessons, and integrate technology. Additionally, the study shows that students exposed regularly to these resources reported comfort using these tools beyond the classroom. Three out of four teachers said students were future-ready after using Gale resources (DA Custom Publishing, 2019).

Responding to the New TEKS with Digital Resources

As districts incorporate the new TEKS, the document’s introduction reminds educators to “embody the interconnected nature of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking through the seven integrated strands...” (Texas Education Agency, 2017). The intention of these strands provides for integration as evidenced in the interdependent student expectations. For example, during a genre study, students may identify the author’s purpose by analyzing elements of the author’s craft, which the

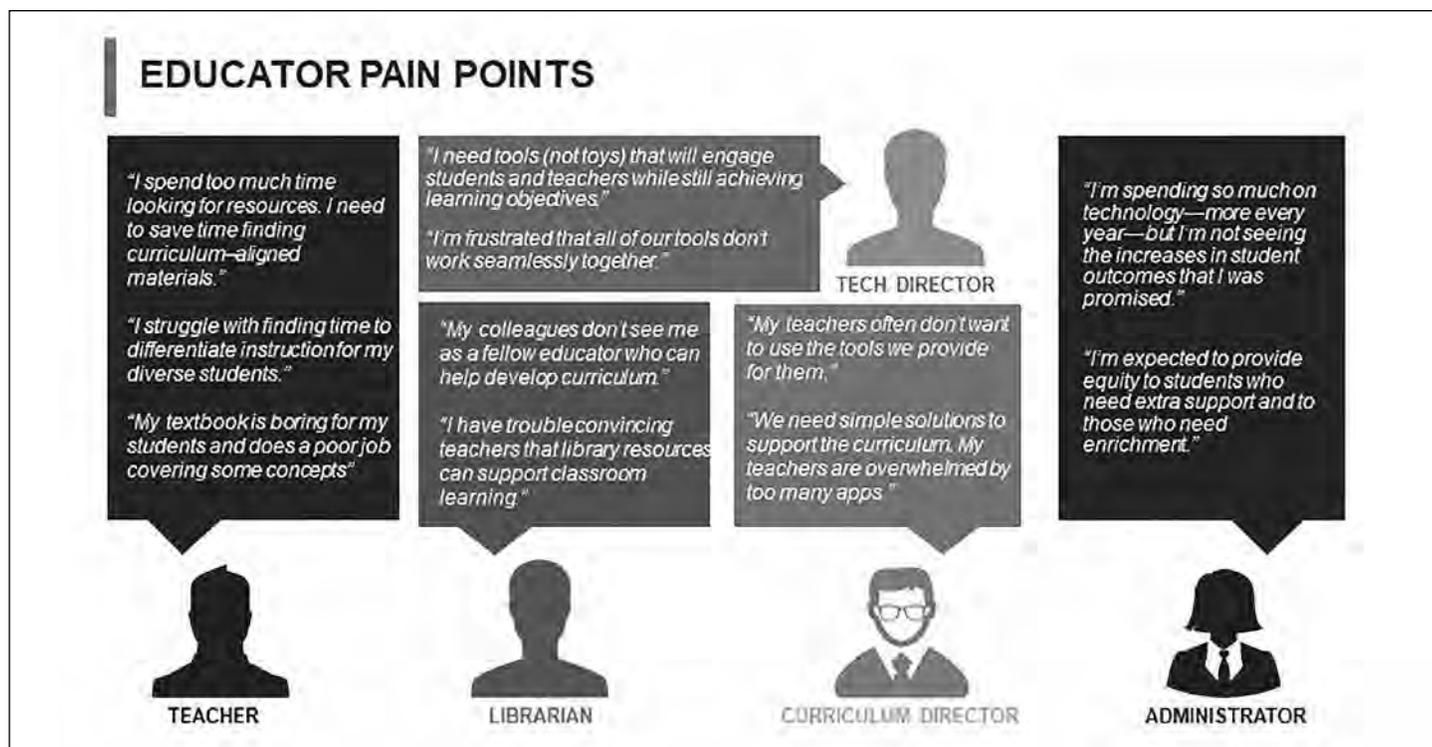


Figure 1. Educator Pain Points (Gale In Context, 2018)

student may then replicate in a composition using the original text as a mentor. Designed to build on the reciprocal nature of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and thinking, these strands, when taught together, provide a balanced approach to literacy. Additionally, the traditional once-a-year research paper is no longer the expectation. Research and inquiry will now be integrated with the other strands as students follow their questions to high-quality, reliable resources that can help them comprehend what they are reading and develop their writing using and imitating new literacies.

In an example inquiry assignment, students may search for texts on a self-selected topic, reading from a variety of genres. As they read, they compose questions on the topic and follow hot links to texts that provide new learning and model the elements and features of different genres. They take notes and annotate for a report to their peers, evaluate the information they have gathered choosing key ideas and details, and finally demonstrate their learning in a format that uses modeled text features.

By starting with inquiry, students learn to be self-directed and participate in authentic integration of the TEKS strands (see Table 1). We have long known that an inquiry approach leads to higher student achievement in language arts (Hillocks, 1984).

Digital Resources That Provide Solutions

Diverse texts engage students in meaningful literacy lessons, and digital resources fill in gaps left by textbooks and traditional texts that struggle to match the multimodal form prevalent in authentic texts beyond the classroom. These expanded offerings also make allowances for additional student self-selection, adding volume and variety presently unavailable in physical texts. Some promising resources include: *Gale In Context: Elementary*, *Gale In Context: Opposing Viewpoints*, and *Gale eBooks*.

Gale In Context: Elementary

Currently known as *Kids Infobits*, *Gale In Context: Elementary* is scheduled for release by June 2020. This highly visual resource supports elementary students as they browse by providing images as they drill down to information. Additional audio support reads text aloud for students who need reading or language support. This source gives students an opportunity to explore genres and multimodal texts on their topics. Students may explore together simultaneously, or they may choose unique topics and search independently. On the right side of the screen, students can access translations for texts in over 40 languages and included is a read-aloud option in the translated language. Text sizes may also be increased for students with visual needs. Additionally, there are

Skill	Engagement	TEKS 110.23 - 7th Grade Example
Self-driven inquiry	Choose a topic for inquiry	7.7 (A) generate student-selected . . . questions for formal and informal inquiry
Compare different perspectives on single topic	Read multiple texts from different genres on your topic collecting text that supports differing viewpoints	7.4 (A) infer multiple themes within and across texts using text evidence
Comprehend	Write questions and wonderings in response to reading	7.2 (B) generate questions about text before, during, and after reading to deepen understanding and gain information
Take notes and annotate	Identify key sources and annotate them in preparation for use in a presentation	7.7 (D) identify and gather relevant information from a variety of sources
Evaluate resources	Review resources to ensure reliability and credibility	7.7 (H) examine sources for: (i) reliability, credibility, and bias
Choose key ideas to share	Revise your topic and presentation plan in response to the information gathered	7.7 (C) refine the major research question, if necessary, guided by the answers to a secondary set of questions
Analyze genre characteristics	Read multiple texts from different genres on your topic, noting the influence of different elements present in each on your topic	7.4.(D) analyze characteristics and structural elements of informational text including: (ii) features such as introductions, forward, preface, references, or acknowledgements . . . (iii) organizational pattern that support multiple topics, categories, and subcategories
Analyze text features and structure	Take notes on the author's purpose specifically related to the text structure and features	7.3 (E) interact with sources in meaningful ways such as notetaking, annotating . . . 7.5 (A) explain the author's purpose and message within a text 7.5 (B) analyze how the use of text structure contribute to the author's purpose 7.5 (C) analyze the author's use of print and graphic feature to achieve specific purposes
Present to peer/ collaborate	Present new learning to a peer and revise presentation based on peer feedback	7.1 (D) engage in meaningful discourse and provide and accept constructive feedback from others. 7.7 (J) use an appropriate mode of delivery . . . to present results
Create a new piece of text following a mentor	Choose a mentor from your sources, and write an informational piece of writing imitating the genre characteristics found in the mentor	7.6 (B) compose informational texts... that convey information about a topic, using a clear controlling idea or thesis statement and genre characteristics and craft

Table 1. Skill and engagements connect to the 7th grade TEKS (Texas Education Agency, 2017)



hot links and related subjects that keep student explorations going. Books cannot do this. They sit on shelves next to one another.

Many educators also use this resource for its subscriptions to *Scholastic News* and *Junior Scholastic*. The rebranded *Gale In Context: Elementary* will include a simplified design and adjustable leveled reading, so teachers can change the reading levels for each student, making the content even more accessible to all learners.

Gale In Context: Opposing Viewpoints

Opposing Viewpoints is the “issues” database, a resource to seek information in response to our questions or to build our arguments. Developed for secondary students, it includes big topics for research and incorporates topic pages based on the most common searches. These curated resources can include an encyclopedia entry, graphs and charts, new articles on the topic, and a wide range and variety of resources that allow students to consume information and develop an informed opinion. As a source for mentor texts, *Opposing Viewpoints* offers multiple perspectives on issues that make great persuasive models for student writing and texts for analysis of counter opinions.

In addition to diverse viewpoints, diverse genres provide students multimedia resources such as news, magazines, and statistics. Students can analyze these texts for evidence, study the patterns of evidence, facts, and statistics, or learn how to substantiate claims before composing their own arguments. This database works seamlessly with Google Docs and Google Classroom, where teachers can quickly check student work.

Gale eBooks

Building on all of the features and usability tools from their research databases, *Gale eBooks* lets students use their own inquiries to drive

their learning. Each title can be viewed in two formats: one is a traditional eBook format, so it looks like an electronic version of the real book, and the other is viewed as a digital article. One of the benefits of having a digital text is that students can use the table of contents and hyperlink to a selection. These eBooks have the read-aloud, translation, definition, and font size capabilities that provide in-text accommodations. To increase classroom efficiency, this database integrates with Google Apps for Education and Microsoft software. Students can send their articles to their Google Drive as a Google Doc or to OneNote. Additionally, students may choose to highlight or annotate the text in the database or as an uploaded document. The citation and notes stay with the text.

Gale has curated hundreds of eBook collections that are standards aligned. Some of the most popular eBook collections include *Cameron’s Collection*, *Cameron’s Camp for Wellness*, and three new TEKS ELAR aligned collections. *Cameron’s Collection* is a powerful collection that addresses the social-emotional needs of secondary students. *Cameron’s Camp for Wellness* provides targeted guidance on sensitive issues for K–5 students. Both collections were created in collaboration with the Cameron K. Gallagher Foundation. The power of these collections is that these books address very difficult topics that students deal with every day, and with the *Gale eBooks* platform, students have 24/7 online access to this very important content whenever or wherever they need it.

From an ELAR perspective, Gale also offers three collections containing more than 150 titles at each grade span of elementary, middle school, and high school, which have been specifically aligned to the TEKS. High school is the newest of these, and even contains a virtual bookshelf based specifically on the 2019 most-searched topics in Texas schools. Using the virtual bookshelves, a teacher can find the texts that connect directly to that TEKS. Students can also use this source to choose books to read independently.

Authentic Presentation of Texts

New literacies are often nonlinear in nature: data charts, infographics, social media postings, informational essays, and images are prevalent in online texts (Morrell, 2012; Porat, 2018). With this understanding, teachers consume daily news and print media looking for high-quality, interesting, and authentic texts to share with their students. However, with curated digital resources, teachers can provide their students a safe and reliable environment in which to learn and grow. This not only frees up the teacher from extensive searching for appropriate texts to use in the classroom, but it also allows the students an opportunity to choose their own topics and texts, improving engagement.

Texts for a Diverse Student Body

The NCTE Students' Right to Read position statement is a benchmark for all educators who seek to provide access to diverse texts and avoid censorship. This position statement insists on a student's freedom to seek and find texts that they want and need to read (National Council of Teachers of English, 2018). However, students often lack access to the varied texts needed to meet these guidelines, and educators often limit their understanding of diverse texts to traditional texts, primarily fiction and nonfiction books. To meet the requirements of the research and inquiry strand of the new TEKS, educators need to expand the types of texts they provide to students. Digital resources, when made freely and openly available to students, have the potential to provide information and privacy for equitable access.

Free and open access to ideas is a cornerstone of public and school libraries. The Texas Legislature recognizes the vital role equitable access to information plays in our state's democracy and establishes appropriations for TexQuest, a statewide digital resource program available for all public libraries, K-12 school libraries, and public charter schools (www.TexQuest.net). TexQuest promotes equity by offering students across the state access to high-quality digital resources for a nominal, per-student participation fee for districts. These resources include educational websites such as Teachingbooks.net, online streaming educational video, eBooks, databases, and more. TexQuest providers offer TEKS-aligned online digital resources that represent the diversity of our state, including language accommodations such as translation features, text-to-speak, and transcripts. Online databases provided through TexQuest allow students to seek information safely online over a variety of topics of personal and academic interest, serving the evolving interests and multifaceted identities of our students.

Access to diverse texts means that students can engage with reading materials that are interesting, are current, are relevant, and are a match to their reading ability. These texts should respond to the variety of cultures represented in the student body and would provide support to our language learners. There should also be a variety of media formats in addition to genre choices, and there should be enough texts that each student can read independently from self-selected texts that meet these needs.

We Need Diverse Books, a non-profit organization committed to promoting literature that represents the diversity found in American classrooms, asks us to "imagine a world in which all children can see themselves in the pages of a book" (weneeddiversebooks.org, homepage). Diverse texts can support students' social emotional learning needs, provide differentiation for students with special learning or language needs, meet the interests and engage learners

that resist literacy encounters, honor students' identities, and build bridges across the cultures (Short, 2018). This diversity is encouraged at every grade level in the state standards when students engage in "increasingly complex traditional, contemporary, classical, and diverse texts" [emphasis added] (Texas Education Agency, 2017).

When the social and emotional needs of students are being met with the academic needs and driven by recursive student-led inquiry, the outcomes are immeasurable. Take a look inside one Texas teen's personal learning journey. Cam is a 17-year old, high school senior in a large, suburban 6A high school. Cam's teacher and librarian have collaborated on a unit where students are invited to explore any social justice topic of their choosing. First, Cam is introduced to a wide variety of diverse Young Adult literature to read for independent reading. Cam chooses to browse and select from the collection of books that involve LGBTQIA+ teens. She confides in the librarian that she cannot checkout one of these books for fear that her parents may find it and question her. After conferring with her librarian and teacher about her inquiry, Cam chooses to explore how LGBTQIA teens' relationships with their family members impact their gender identity. Cam accesses psychology journals, newspaper articles, interview transcripts, statistics, and graphs through the school library's online resources. She reads eBooks written for teens struggling with family dynamics and curates her own collection of resources, choosing what to further explore, analyze, and integrate into her final product. Because she engages deeply with the topic, she is motivated to keep seeking information. With high-quality, diverse resources, she explores a variety of perspectives, helping her to shape her own worldview.

Social Emotional Learning

Districts are becoming more aware of their students' needs beyond academic competencies and are taking steps to ensure the development of the whole child. CASEL is an organization that has been a leader of the pursuit to create a new schoolwide culture (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: CASEL Wheel & Competencies (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2020)

Digital resources provide a tremendous opportunity to support social emotional development. Instead of looking for books on divorce or suicide in the library, students may access these texts at home 24/7. These federated resources provide accurate information and guidance to students instead of scrolling TikTok™, Reddit™, or



Instagram™ for faulty information as they struggle. The ability to find supportive texts to read during difficult periods in a student’s life is part of a schoolwide SEL culture.

Recently, a comparative report of several meta-analyses focused on purposeful social-emotional learning. Students perform better academically while they are developing their social-emotional competencies and supported by SEL at school. In a recent research study on the effect of an SEL approach, “57% more students in schools with an SEL program improved their skills compared to students in schools without an SEL program, 27% improved their academic performance, and 24% more improved their emotional well-being and social behavior” (Mahoney, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2018).

Conclusion

Digital resources meet students’ interests and abilities by moving beyond the traditional texts found in the classroom. They provide an extensive collection of sources to answer student inquiries, a place to look for texts after the classroom library has been exhausted, a place for students who struggle to find interesting texts at their readability AND maturity level, and a place for privacy as students pursue their interests as they come to understand themselves and the world.

These resources also improve accessibility for students with special needs. Digital resources include the ability to alter the print on the screen or have the text read aloud to the student in English and over 40 languages, making the texts more inclusive. In these cases, well-chosen digital resources remove the burden from the teacher to create or locate special texts, tasks that are time consuming and suppress student-directed lessons in favor of direct instruction. With digital resources, students’ interest can be pursued without concern that the students will encounter inaccurate or damaging content or frustration when texts are not available for all students.

Digital texts also allow teachers to connect students to texts from a wide range of languages beyond English and Spanish, so that emergent bilinguals have an opportunity to learn content “using the full features of their linguistic repertoires” (Garcia, Johnson, & Seltzer, 2016). When we provide first-language texts to English language learners, the learning environment is more equitable.

Most Texas educators have access to these resources through their school libraries or through TexQuest. These databases and collections have been specially curated to be used in an integrated approach with the new TEKS and that provide opportunities for your students to participate in self-directed inquiry that is engaging for all learners.

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