Evaluating the Roles of Technology in the Global Read Aloud Project

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Abstract

Digital technologies readily available to many of today’s teachers and students offer new possibilities for teaching and learning. One example of this is the Global Read Aloud (GRA). Since its 2010 creation, more than one million PK-12 students from at least 60 countries have reportedly participated in the GRA, an annual project that connects classrooms in the discussion of common books. This study aimed to explore the roles of technology in the GRA. An anonymous online survey was completed by 516 educators who participated in the 2015 GRA. Teachers and students used a variety of synchronous and asynchronous technologies during the GRA. Respondents indicated technology played important roles in supporting the teaching and learning that occurred during the project. Technology expanded how and with whom teachers could collaborate in designing GRA curriculum and instruction, and broadened how and with whom students could read and discuss literature.

Key words: social media, videoconference, global education, social reading, Twitter
Introduction

Web 2.0 tools and social media can change with whom, when, where, and how students learn (Krutka & Carpenter, 2016). In particular, digital technologies create new opportunities for intercultural and collaborative learning experiences (Peters, 2009). Teachers today have a variety of ways to allow students to learn with and from people of other regions and cultures, not just about them (Lock, 2015). Accordingly, the latest International Society for Technology in Education Standards for Students (2016) include a “global collaborator” standard: “Students use digital tools to broaden their perspectives and enrich their learning by collaborating with others and working effectively in teams locally and globally.”

This article presents empirical research on one example of potential global collaboration supported by technology: the Global Read Aloud (GRA).

Created in 2010 by Wisconsin, USA middle school teacher Pernille Ripp, the GRA provides a glimpse of some of the possibilities and challenges for teaching and learning created by new technologies. As a third-year teacher, Ripp was inspired by a radio piece she heard about a virtual book club (Ripp, n.d.). After she wrote a blog post suggesting that classrooms across the globe read and discuss a common book, a handful of teachers agreed to participate and the GRA began to take shape. After this humble start, the GRA has enjoyed impressive growth in recent years, with teachers and students from more than 60 countries involved (see https://theglobalreadaloud.com/).

There is no fee to participate in the GRA. Each fall, GRA educators connect their classes with students beyond their own school to share in the reading and discussion of a common book during a six-week period. The scope and depth of the project varies according to the teachers; some educators choose to partner with one class, while others connect with multiple classes. In most cases, classes read and discuss the GRA text some as individual classes, and some with their partner classes. Although the first iteration of the GRA featured only one book, subsequent GRAs have included texts at different reading and maturity levels, and teachers choose the most appropriate book for their context.

Educators interested in participating register with Pernille Ripp via an online form, and receive e-
mail updates before and during the GRA. Before the six weeks of the actual GRA, participating educators are encouraged to access GRA Edmodo or Facebook groups to find other teachers with whom to partner. Ripp provides guidelines for reading through certain chapters by the end of each week of the GRA. Beyond this rough schedule, there is not, however, a specific, universal curriculum or lesson plans for the GRA. Instead, participating teachers are encouraged to create, discuss, and share resources, activities, and ideas via Edmodo, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and other technologies. During the GRA itself, many classes use a combination of synchronous and asynchronous technologies such as Twitter, Padlet, Skype, and blogs to communicate with each other. In 2015, the GRA ran from October 1st until November 16th. Teachers could choose from four books and one picture book author study.

**Literature Review**

**Global Education**

The Global Read Aloud has emerged in an era of strong interest in global education (Hull & Stornaiuolo, 2014). While schools have often been considered institutions primarily serving local and national needs (Tye, 2009), globalization has rendered an exclusively local perspective outdated. Advancements in technology and communication have steadily decreased the distance between peoples, and accordingly education must adjust to prepare students for a present and future marked by globalization (Darling-Hammond, 2010). However, agreement is lacking regarding what the goals of a more global approach to education should be (Barnatt, Winter, Norman, Baker, & Wieczorek, 2014; Peters, 2009; Reynolds, 2015). Various arguments for global education focus on the need for individuals and/or societies to be economically competitive in a global economy; the importance of learners developing “world minded” habits of thinking (Merryfield, Lo, Po, & Kasai, 2008); and the imperative to develop global citizens who are engaged with and take action on global issues (Harshman & Augustine, 2013; Leduc, 2013). These various visions for the purposes of global education are further complicated by use of the term “global” to at times mean Americanization or corporatization.

On top of lack of clarity regarding its purpose(s), global education is also challenged by a number of factors such as the limited international experience of many teachers, the politically controversial
nature of some global education content, and difficulties in meshing global content with local curriculum standards (Reynolds, 2015; Tye, 2009). Teachers face the responsibility of embedding global education into their classrooms in ways that combat possible culturally paternalistic attitudes toward others (Leduc, 2013). Teaching and learning activities must not exoticize unfamiliar cultures, and should take critical approaches to global relationships and the inequalities that exist within them. Thus, despite the frequent lip service paid to the value of global education, it remains a complicated and contested field.

**Technology and Global Education**

Just as technology has played a role in creating the need for more global education, so too has it presented opportunities to enhance such education. While tyrannies of time and place have often limited the nature of learning students can experience via schools, new possibilities emerge as Web 2.0 technologies mitigate temporal and geographic constraints (Carpenter & Krutka, 2014). Students need not physically travel abroad to have rich intercultural experiences (e.g., Leask, 2004). Technology-supported interactions with far-flung peers have been credited with increasing students’ cross-cultural awareness (Krutka & Carano, 2016), engagement with texts (Larson & Dwyer, 2015), motivation to write (Ramsay, 2014), and awareness of audience (Hull & Stornaiuolo, 2014). Interacting with diverse peers can help students become more conscious of their own misconceptions and aspects of their identity and culture (Barnatt et al., 2014; Pitts & Brooks, 2016).

The extant research includes multiple descriptions of the semester-long interactions of higher education classrooms from two countries (e.g., Pitts & Brooks, 2016). For example, Krutka and Carano (2016) looked at the course-based experiences of students from the United States and Gaza (\(N=16\)) who interacted via Skype and Facebook. These technologies helped create spaces for humanizing dialogue as well as providing opportunities for the development of new media literacies. The opportunity to “look into the eyes of and respond to the words of their Gaza counterparts” (p. 220), made students more aware of the human textures and implications of global events. Similar examples of small-scale successes in connecting K-12 learners via technology have also been documented (e.g., Barnett et al., 2014).

Lock (2015) recommended that educators should avoid learning “events” that feature one-off
Educators “can get caught up in the excitement of and enthusiasm for such [global] opportunities,” (Pitts & Brooks, 2016 p. 13) and miss opportunities to move students towards more critical reflection and self-awareness (Harshman & Augustine, 2013). Educators also need to be able to respond appropriately to cultural differences regarding teaching and learning, as their colleagues from other regions will at times have different perspectives and expectations.

Pitts and Brooks (2016) asserted that global education is most beneficial when participants are “guided through a controlled process of self- and cultural-awareness.” However, many teachers cannot draw upon a reservoir of relevant personal experiences from their own time as students to inform such teaching and learning activities (Leask, 2004). Furthermore, while technology can in theory support new kinds of global education activities, not all teachers have access to said technology and/or the support they might need to put it to effective use (Leduc, 2013). Technology, therefore, appears to present both opportunities and challenges when used to facilitate global learning experiences. However, the literature that explores this potential is limited by the small scale of the studied interventions, and scarce research from PK-12 settings. Empirical research on a project of the GRA’s nature and size is lacking.

Method

Research questions

Given the innovative nature of the GRA, steady participation growth, and the absence of prior research upon the topic, this study seeks to contribute to understanding of organic, technology-intensive global teaching and learning innovations. The research questions examined were as follows:

RQ1. What roles do digital technologies play in students’ Global Read Aloud experiences?
RQ2. What roles do digital technologies play in teachers’ Global Read Aloud experiences?

Instrument

We created a 27-item anonymous online survey that gathered quantitative and qualitative data regarding participating educators, their GRA experiences, and their perceptions of those experiences. The survey was initially informed by our own knowledge of the GRA, and we shared an early draft with the
GRA’s creator, Pernille Ripp, and three GRA participants from previous years. We made minor revisions based on their feedback. The survey had three parts: informed consent, demographics, and GRA-related items. The survey included open-ended, close-ended, and Likert scale items.

Data Collection

After we secured IRB approval to conduct our study and the six-week window for GRA 2015 had closed, we solicited participation in the survey via multiple avenues during 38 days in November and December of 2015. An invitation to complete the survey was included in an e-mail sent by Pernille Ripp to the educators who had registered with her for the 2015 GRA. We also posted invitations to the survey to social media sites that were commonly used as a part of GRA activities. Across these media, we distributed multiple survey invitations at different times of the day throughout the week so the survey would be visible to a broad range of educators in various time zones and with different online habits. We closed the survey when the number of responses per day began to noticeably decline.

Sample

A total of 516 educators from fourteen countries responded to the survey, with 94% coming from North America. Ninety-five percent of the respondents were females, and 5% were males. The largest group of participants was those age 40-49 years (32.1%), followed by educators age 30-39 (28.8%), 50-59 (23.9%), 20-29 (9.5%), and 60 or older (5.6%). In terms of their experience with the GRA, 59.4% were first timers in 2015. Regular education teachers were almost three-quarters of the respondents, with librarian / media specialists the next largest group of participants. Respondents taught students from as young as two to as old as 20, but most commonly worked with learners aged 7 to 11. While 37.9% of the participants were the only educators in their schools involved in the GRA, the majority of participants had colleagues at their school taking part, including 7.4% of participants with 10 or more peers at their schools involved. Approximately 85% of the respondents identified themselves as frequent users and early adopters of technology in their teaching.

Data Analysis

This paper relies primarily upon qualitative data gathered from the survey. Descriptive statistics
were also generated to inform the overall analysis. Using the qualitative data, we conducted a thematic analysis in order to identify and explore patterns and themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) listed the following six phases of thematic analysis: becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, producing the report. To become familiar with the data and develop our codes, we engaged in repeated iterations of individual coding followed by comparison and discussion of interpretations. In total, we engaged in eight cycles of coding.

We began by independently reading and rereading the first one hundred responses from participants to identify patterns and themes, and develop initial codes and categories. We then compared our memos and codes. Initial code sets ranged in size from 29 to 48 codes. Through discussion, comparison, and consolidation we agreed upon a tentative coding structure that included 53 codes. Due to the interrelated nature of our questions, some codes bridged multiple prompts. Next, we met in order to synchronously code and discuss a new group of responses. Data receiving the same codes were sorted and compared to both refine the codes and consider similarities and differences in respondents’ comments.

We then individually coded the remaining responses with the code structure. At this point we again compared our individual coding to address and reconcile differences of interpretation. Codes were then reconsidered, resulting in a revised set of 51 codes. The full corpus of data was reread and coded with the revised code set. Given the interpretive nature of the type of qualitative coding we conducted, we relied upon intensive discussion and consensus to reach agreement upon codes, rather than on an interrater reliability statistic (Saldaña, 2012). For each prompt, we then prepared a summary report that included analysis of code frequencies and exemplars of data for each code. Upon exploring the reports, we identified broad themes that spanned the various prompts and codes.

Results

Data analysis suggested participant perceptions of the GRA were generally very positive. For their overall rating of the GRA, on a four-point scale with one representing “poor” and four “outstanding,” 64.7% of participants selected “four” and 33.2% selected “three,” for a combined 97.9% positive rating. Respondents (96.5%) also overwhelmingly indicated they intend to participate in future GRA iteration.
Analysis of the data indicated that technology played important roles in the GRA experiences of both students and teachers.

**RQ1. What roles do digital technologies play in students’ Global Read Aloud experiences?**

Teachers had students use Twitter, Padlet, Skype, and Edmodo the most as part of their GRA activities (Table 1). On average, respondents indicated students used 3.36 different technologies as part of the GRA. Participants also responded to an open-ended prompt that asked, “Which technology was most important to your students’ GRA experiences?” The frequencies for how often they mentioned different technologies in their responses are also provided in Table 1. Responses to this open-ended prompt often indicated how and why the teachers had students use particular digital tools. Twitter, Padlet, Edmodo, Kidblog, and Writeabout were most widely used for asynchronous communication and collaboration, while Skype and Google Hangouts were used for synchronous video conferencing. Both synchronous and asynchronous connections provided opportunities for sharing of ideas, perspectives, and experiences with a larger audience and/or group of peers.

**Table 1. Student use of technology.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technology</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>54.7%</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Padlet</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>54.1%</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>53.1%</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>28.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Synchronous interactions. Skype and Google Hangouts were the two main tools used for synchronous video conferencing between classrooms of students, with Skype the most popular. Seventy-nine percent of the teachers in our sample indicated their students used at least one of these two videoconferencing tools during the GRA, and 38.3% of the respondents mentioned that one of the two was the most important technology in their students’ GRA experiences (Table 1). Participant descriptions of the synchronous interactions supported by Skype and Google Hangout frequently included enthusiastic language, such as “students couldn’t get enough;” “It was killer!,” and “They LOVED it! [emphasis in the teacher’s response]” The face-to-face, real-time nature of Skype and Google Hangout interactions was frequently mentioned as an exciting part of the GRA experience. For example, a female elementary school teacher from Wisconsin wrote, “The students were so excited to see and speak to the kids in Virginia. For some students this was the first time they had ever done a video chat.” Skype and Google Hangouts were also credited with helping to make more personal the connections that occurred during the GRA. By allowing students to interact visually with their partner class peers, videoconferencing thus appeared to play an important role in providing motivation for the GRA experience as a whole. Additional data suggested that videoconferencing was also able to support discussions of the GRA books, leading to “meaningful dialogue about their thoughts and ideas on the book” and exchanges that helped students “universalize their reading experience.”

Asynchronous interactions. While two main technologies dominated GRA synchronous interactions, participants reported a variety of different tools being used for asynchronous communication.
Seven different technologies were mentioned by at least 20% of respondents. Technologies that facilitated asynchronous communication helped overcome some of the challenges associated with collaboration outside of one’s school or district. Asynchronous technologies allowed students to post their perspectives and ideas on the GRA books, and receive responses whenever peers were available. For example, a teacher commented on how Twitter helped mitigate scheduling obstacles: “Since we were in a very different time zone we relied on Twitter to share our ideas and see different people's thoughts.” Padlet was similarly praised by multiple participants for allowing students to collaborate asynchronously.

Twitter and Padlet were preferred as tools that enabled asynchronous interactions with peers beyond those in partner classes. The active use of the general #GRA15 Twitter hashtag and several book-specific hashtags meant that student questions and ideas about the books that were shared via Twitter regularly received responses from other GRA participants. Similarly, a number of Padlets were widely shared, and received posts from a variety of classes that were not officially partnered. While some participating teachers found establishing an extended classroom partnership to be challenging, Twitter and Padlet thus enabled more spontaneous, one-off interactions. For instance, participants said of Twitter that “The students enjoyed seeing posts by others about the story we are reading” and of Padlet that “It allowed us to quickly and easily collaborate and share thoughts with students internationally and locally.”

Asynchronous technologies also supported more extended writing about and discussion of the GRA literature. Edmodo, Google Drive, Kidblog, e-mail, and Writeabout were the most frequently used technologies for such interactions. In comparison to the public nature of Twitter and Padlet, these tools offered a greater degree of teacher control and/or student privacy, and appeared to be the preferred asynchronous choice for sharing and discussions with partner classes. A common GRA activity mentioned by participants involved students regularly posting their thoughts about the GRA reading to a shared space where peers from partner classes could then read and respond. For instance, a 4th grade teacher explained that Kidblog was used by students “every week as a literacy center. They were able to read the ideas of other students and comment on their posts.” Technology also provided opportunities for students to have a wider audience for sharing of and receiving feedback on their thinking. Asynchronous
technologies therefore supported interactions among participants that were planned and structured, as well as more unplanned sharing and exchanges.

RQ2. What roles do digital technologies play in teachers’ Global Read Aloud experience?

According to participants, E-mail, Edmodo, Twitter, and Google drive were the technologies educators used most to implement the GRA (Table 2). Participants also responded to an open-ended prompt that asked, “Which technology was most important to you? Why?” Responses to this open-ended prompt often indicated how and why the teachers used particular technologies. The frequencies for how often they mentioned different technologies in their responses are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Teacher use of technology.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technology</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td>394</td>
<td>79.4%</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>22.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edmodo</td>
<td>346</td>
<td>69.8%</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>68.9%</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Google Drive</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>54.0%</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>39.3%</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>29.6%</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Google Hangout</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussing, sharing, and acquiring GRA resources and ideas. Technology allowed for teachers to find and share GRA-related ideas and resources. Teachers had easy and just-in-time access to the activities, questions, and prompts that GRA colleagues were using. Edmodo and Twitter were mentioned most often as the technologies that supported such peer professional support. For instance, a teacher stated that through Edmodo, “we shared ideas, comments, and experiences,” while another
participant described Twitter as a place to “get ideas for purposeful activities for my students.”

**Finding partners.** Technology helped teachers find partners classes outside of their school, district, state, or country. Twenty-four percent of the educators’ responses to the prompt “Which technology was most important for you? Why?” mentioned how a given technology helped them “connect” with partner teachers and classes. Again, Edmodo and Twitter were the most frequently mentioned technologies in such responses. For example, one teacher stated that, “Edmodo was the platform where I first made connections and that was important.” To a lesser degree, Facebook was mentioned as a site for making initial connections with partners.

**Collaborating with partners.** Because there is not a standard curriculum for the GRA, teachers who partner their classes need opportunities to collaboratively define their expectations and goals, as well as plan activities and create materials. Technology facilitated collaboration among partner teachers by supporting co-planning and curriculum construction. Email and Google Drive were the most popular technologies for such collaboration. For instance, one teacher wrote that, “Email was also important to go deeper with teachers I'd connected with so that we could clarify how we wanted things to work for our classes.” Many teachers are accustomed to communicating via e-mail outside of the GRA, and a number of participants described e-mail’s place as part of their implementation of the GRA using terms such as “comfortable,” “a natural way to communicate,” “easy,” “efficient,” and “quick.”

Google Drive was also frequently credited with being an efficient means of sharing and co-creating GRA materials. For example, a teacher wrote that, “Google Drive was very useful and helpful in sharing resources and the ease of collaboration was seamless.” A number of different teachers described working with their partners on a shared brainstorming or planning Google document that grew as they made their way through the reading of the GRA book. Google Drive also provided some groups of teachers a space to collaborate apart from some of the larger, busier GRA environments such as Twitter.

**Discussion**

Despite the limitations of this research, we believe our findings contribute to the field and suggest various potential points of departure for additional research. Considering the positive experiences among
respondents, educators seeking to expose their students to peers beyond their own schools may want to contemplate participating in future Global Read Alouds. Administrators and policy makers could explore how incentives and/or policies might support organic, low-cost teaching and learning collaborations like the GRA. For example, school district acceptable use policies for technology might need to be adjusted to accommodate collaboration with peers beyond the district. Outside of school, human interaction is less and less limited to face-to-face communication, and projects such as the Global Read Aloud suggest schools too can provide students with opportunities to interact with peers from beyond their local settings. However, it is also likely that many teachers will need support to be able to derive the most benefit from such collaborations, particularly if such collaborations expand to include teachers who are less tech-savvy and globally minded than those in our sample. Support will need to multifaceted and individualized, as educators will have different needs for technological, pedagogical, and content-area assistance.

The GRA and similar projects are fertile ground for further research in a number of areas. The field could benefit from research that compares the processes and outcomes of an organic, teacher-led initiative like the GRA with more structured and supported global collaboration programs (e.g., International Education and Resource Network, Flat Connections). What are the costs and benefits when non-profit, for-profit, and government-supported organizations are involved in facilitating global education activities, in contrast to the self-organized nature of the GRA? Research should also further explore the impact of the GRA. Researchers could investigate similarities and differences in how educators enact the GRA, and compare outcomes. Future studies might assess whether and how participation influences teaching and learning after the GRA. Do some classes that partner during the six weeks of the GRA subsequently engage in other collaborative activities? Studies could follow teachers who have partnered their classes for multiple GRA iterations to explore how such extended collaboration operates. Similarly, in order to understand the benefits of collective participation, research might delve into the experiences of GRA participants at school sites with larger numbers of participating teachers.

**Conclusion**

In an increasingly interconnected world, the need to develop new approaches to teaching and
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learning that support the development of skills for cross-cultural communication is clear. To be professionally successful and a responsible citizen in today’s society, students must be exposed to different cultures and world issues. While many classrooms remain cut off from the diversity within their own district, state, country, and world (Peters, 2009), technology appears to hold potential to make the distant and foreign feel closer and less “other.” The Global Read Aloud offers an intriguing example of a low-cost, participant-driven initiative that leverages digital technologies to open up more classrooms to a direct interaction with a larger world.

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