



Free Choice Reading Fostered by Digital Platforms and Gamification

by JILL SCHECHTER

“When kids have access and the freedom to self-select books, they develop their identities as readers. It’s part of an education that allows them to learn how to think, not what to think.”

— Allison Varnes, author of *Property of a Rebel Librarian*



LITERACY CHAMPION: JILL SCHECHTER

Jill has worked as a Library Media Specialist since the 2005-2006 school year both in Baltimore, MD, and Washington, DC. She has served on the Maryland Black Eyed Susan Picture Book committee, The Washington DC Three Star Committee, and has done work on September 11th curriculum through the 9/11 Tribute Center and the Pentagon. Jill is the immediate past president of the DCASL chapter of ASL as well as the director of the SLS division of DCLA. She has also served on the leadership team for DCPS libraries, and the advisory board for Scholastic. Jill and her husband, Josh have three children, two sons and one daughter (Hunter, 9 Teddy, 8, and Mikayla, 6.) They live in Anne Arundel county Maryland.

One to Know: Free Choice Reading During a Pandemic

The Shutdown: March 13th 2020, a point in time that will go down in history as the day the world changed. Like many pivotal historical events, (9/11, Pearl Harbor, The Challenger explosion) we can all recall what we were doing when disaster struck. That afternoon I was sitting in my oldest son’s initial IEP meeting for a learning disability diagnosis. Like many others around the world, I was preparing for a three-week shut down of schools until things returned to “normal” and petrified of the long term effects of this pandemic on my students and my own children.

As a veteran educator in my 17th year and as the mom of a child with a newly diagnosed learning disability, I knew that the answer to the question “What do we do now?” was going to be found in a book. For me, it was a book that could take me to the beach on a summer holiday with an old favorite *Summer Sisters* by Judy Blume, or into the world of characters dreamed up by my favorite adult author, Emily Giffin, or on the streets of 9/11 New York in Alan Gratz’s *Ground Zero*.

For my children, it was through Drew Daywalt’s humor or Jacqueline Woodson’s kindness. I knew the importance that free choice reading books were going to take in the lives of myself, my children and my students and we weathered this “three week” storm.

As a mom, I rushed my children to the public library in the hour before it too was going to shut down for them to pick out books that THEY would like to read. I knew all three were at a critical time in my children’s education as they were starting to develop their identity as readers.

As an educator, I drove into school on Monday March 16th and spent the better part of the afternoon loading up my small Honda CRV with as many books as I could fit. In those very early days of the pandemic, the trunk of my car turned into a makeshift library as I drove around the neighborhood, lending out books that children could read to (1) get them off their screens;)2) bring them away from the scary world of March of 2020, and (3) Give them some sort of academia in the three weeks that school was going to be out of session.

A Whole New World.

As we all now know, very quickly the shutdown progressed, and my mobile library was grounded. We all were confined to our house glued to our screens. What did that mean for my children’s book accessibility and free choice reading? What did this new world mean to me as an educator? How about as a mom who was constantly restricting electronic time?

Since everything I knew about education was turned upside down, I (along with the rest of the world) now had to accept that the CDC guidelines for screen time had gone out the window. Moms everywhere were forced to relax their out-dated screen time rules and embrace the next new world. Educators were forced to rethink their craft virtually and embrace online platforms like zoom, teams, and google classroom and start creating virtual classrooms with stylish “bitmoji’s.” The digital gamification of education was quickly becoming the new normal.

As an educator and a mother, I knew that I needed to embrace gamification in education and digital learning platforms as our primary form of learning.

Through my professional learning channels, I discovered Bookelicious, a new platform for my students to create their own bookmojis and experience the joy of having quality titles matched to their bookmoji identities by some of the best curators in the country. Through their free and user-friendly platform, my students were also able to create “wishlists” (think “my next read”) and take these wishlists to a variety of virtual library platforms.

With the ability for my students (which at this time also included my children) to self-select books, they were able to virtually create their reading identity in a way I never would have imagined. This gave them the opportunity to select exciting titles and access them through their school and public library sponsored digital accounts. In this new virtual world, we were all able to continue free choice reading through digital platforms!

More to Know

As the world continues to evolve (and we all start to go back to a reasonable amount of screen time) gamification and digital platforms have kept open the door to great conversation starters and learning more about my students' (and my own children's) interests. In any world (virtual or in person) it is important that students have a "To Be Read list" that they use so they always know what they will read next. In addition, teachers and librarians can use these lists to refresh school and classroom libraries. I know that as a teacher I will continue to promote and encourage my students to continue to use digital platforms and gamification to generate self-selected books. This will ensure that my readers will be able to read books of interest and grow their identity as a reader. As a mom, I am ecstatic that my children love learning through gamification. They have discovered new ways of free choice reading that no one would have encountered without a global pandemic in the backdrop.

I am super excited to report that through COVID 19, my students and own my children (especially my newly diagnosed son) were able to develop their reader's identity and continue to grow their skills thanks to new digital options like Bookelicious.

References

Varnes, A. (2019, [March 14](#)). Why Kids Need the Freedom to Choose the Books They Read. Retrieved September 17, 2021, from <https://www.readbrightly.com/allison-varnes-on-kids-freedom-to-read/>

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