Reading Amplified

Digital Tools that Engage Students in Words, Books and Ideas

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About the Author

A National Board Certified Teacher, Lee Ann Spillane teaches English at Cypress Creek High School in Florida. “I love the everyday epiphanies of the classroom,” Lee Ann says about her teaching life. “It is the rare student who strikes a poker face in class when understanding dawns — I love the expression, the wonder, the buildup of curiosity, the magic of being in the classroom. I love the moments of community when students come together over a topic or shared piece of writing, when they burst into spontaneous applause after someone reads a piece of writing, or secretly look up so that they don’t cry — teenagers amaze me. I love being someone they can count on.”

Lee Ann became a teacher as a compromise with her father, who wanted her to major in business. “I tried it, but my passion was art,” she explains. When she was about to quit school and move home, her Dad “talked her down,” and she turned to teaching. “I never did get that art degree, but I have found the art in teaching.” During college, she also worked for a season as a wrangler at a ranch in Colorado, taking care of cabins, cooking for tourists, and wrangling llamas. “I’ve often thought in the years since that teaching freshmen is a lot like wrangling llamas.”

As a doctoral student at the University of Central Florida, Lee Ann met Dr. Janet Allen, who became her advisor and mentor. “I credit Janet for much of what I learned about adolescent literacy. She taught me to read professional books and showed me the value of reading alongside my students.”

In addition to teaching English, Lee Ann is an avid technology mentor, providing one-on-one technology help or tech-infused workshops to teachers in her district and beyond. She often presents at local, state, and national conferences and seeks out learning opportunities that help her refine her own instructional practices.
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Dedication

*Reading Amplified* is dedicated to all of the teacher friends I have ever promised a Sunday afternoon technology salon. This book is for you who love to learn.
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Writing informs my teaching. It makes the work I do in class matter even more because it is a public act, shared. Writing exposes. It clarifies. Writing refines. Writing connects. Writing a book is a collaborative effort. God brought just the right people into my life to inspire, support, push and encourage me.

Sara Holbrook and Michael Salinger shared the idea of a tutorial-rich, multi-media book and spurred me to write it. Thank you for that and for swinging by portable twenty-nine to inspire my student poets when you’re in the neighborhood. Your friendship and encouragement have meant the world to me.

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I am blessed to have two men in my life who understand how to care for a writer. My son, Collin, and I share a six-foot desk in our studio office. Thank you for your optimism even in the face of crashing hard drives. I love having you write across from me. Thank you for giving up some Saturdays and for not minding if I wrote on the sidelines during soccer. My husband, Richard, knows how to turn frustration into production with a good cup of home-roasted coffee and just the right words. Thank you for making me laugh and for helping me believe—even from far flung places like Disney’s Aulani resort.

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And thank you to the teacher-readers who, like me, have yet to stop learning. It is in your classrooms and by your example that we will change education and forge the future for youth. Thank you for all that you do for the young people sitting in front of you. Stay true and be strong. I look forward to joining you in the work ahead.
CHAPTER 1
Making the Tedious Exciting

In the classroom, cell phones are to be silenced and hidden, zippered into backpacks or stuffed deeply into pockets. School district policy prohibits us from letting students use phones for learning, yet I’m struck by the realization that the computer chips in students’ cell phones are often more powerful than the aged CPUs sitting on their tables. To me, that seems like a lot of wasted brain power.

I have been thinking about cell phones and zero tolerance policies for quite a while, asking technology presenters, education-technology consultants, curriculum evangelists, and others how to make cell phones a learning tool in a technology-intolerant school culture. I remember David Warlick telling me that “in five years it won’t matter—everyone will demand access to their personal, portable data” (2007). Perhaps, but I didn’t have five years to wait then, and I certainly don’t have that time now. As a high school teacher, I have forty-seven minutes per class period. I have today, yesterday, tomorrow, and next week. I have one hundred and eighty days in a school year. I want to put technology—even cell phone technology—to work in my classroom now.

One morning, on a “fun Friday” in my ninth grade classroom, I ignored the school rule regarding zero tolerance for personal electronics and let students play Jumbli (see
Figure 1.2) for the last fifteen minutes of class. Jumbli is a cross between lottery balls and Scrabble. The objective is to spell words and text them into the game quickly; as the online game receives the text, the word forms on the screen. If you’re very good at the game, your play will eventually be displayed on a billboard in Times Square. Can you imagine? Students who didn’t have cell phones teamed up to text the words to the game. They were so engaged that they jumped up out of their chairs to text words. Responding to changing technologies, LocaModa, Jumbli’s creator, eliminated the text messaging option for playing the game; users now may play via smart phone application or the Web.

Players accumulate points according to the difficulty of the letters and words they use, similar to the way Scrabble scores. I think the high score among my students was somewhere in the five hundreds, with one team texting fifty-two times compared to my lowly twenty-seven text messages. Top Jumbli scores can reach into the six digits, but those players aren’t dipping into the game for a fifteen-minute swim as my students were. Jumbli sent each phone a text back saying how many points that player scored, so it was easy for me to review the words students sent in and calculate their points after the game.

Later that day, I shared the story of the game with an administrator who commented that such class use of cell phones made it very difficult to enforce our school’s zero-
tolerance cell phone policies. I understood her point, but could not deny the way my students were thoroughly engaged using their cell phones for what was essentially a vocabulary game.

Thankfully, views on using cell phone technology in the classroom are starting to change at my school, where we are now allowed to use cell phones for academic purposes in our classrooms. However, that is not the case at most high schools in our district. We have made some progress, but there is still much to do when it comes to using technology purposefully to teach (see Video 1.1).

![Video 1.1: Introduction to Reading Amplified](Image)

(Click on image to view the video.)

**Why Technology?**

Technology engages students. Using online tools feels like play to today’s teens, just as touch-tone phones once felt like freedom to us. Technology also takes the tedium out of routine tasks we need to teach. Technology has the potential to alleviate cognitive and attention loads so that students can use their brain power to think at higher levels. Used purposefully, technology makes us feel and work smarter. If we aren’t spending our time identifying verb patterns in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s diction, we can put our cognitive energies to work analyzing, synthesizing, and ultimately creating. Technology has the power to energize our students and ourselves for the work ahead.

**Taking the Tedium Out of Textual Analysis**

Picture this: *It is September and you are a high school junior in an Advanced*
Placement class. Your school day is segmented into seven short class periods. For English, you exit the main buildings and walk out to the back field to several dozen portable classrooms. Your class is about to begin a journey into Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby. You’ve heard from your senior friends that it’s a love story and a short book, but you don’t know what else to expect.

Perhaps it’s the unexpected that makes using technology to teach reading so engaging. On this particular day, my juniors come to class having already read most of the first chapter of Gatsby. I start our day together with Wordle.

After greeting routines are finished, I begin. “Today we’re going to use an online tool to investigate, discuss and begin analyzing The Great Gatsby. Has anyone used Wordle?”

Crickets.

“What? Word L?”

“Wordle,” I respond. “It’s an online tool that creates word pictures with text. Sort of like a found poem. Wordle is like found word art.”

“Do you have to type the text in?” a student asks.

“Let me show you,” I answer as I call up the website on a laptop. “In fact, let me make a movie, so that you can see how to do it later too.”

I am connected in my classroom. I teach from a laptop, document camera, and LCD setup. We may not have many computers in the classroom—students sit in groups of four around aging desktops—but my teacher station is sweet. The document camera and LCD projector are provided by the school—my media specialist purchased the equipment with grants funds. Teachers had to complete several tech-based tasks in order to qualify for equipment. Fortunately, I had each of the tech-based tasks (and more) on hand and demonstrated a daily need to use the technology, so it remains in my classroom throughout the year. Last year I connected the document camera and LCD projector to my own laptop; this year I use a county-issued laptop or my personal iPad.

The purpose of my Wordle demonstration is to show my students how to “analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone” (Common Core State Standards
Initiative 2011). Wordle “levels up” my analysis lesson. *Leveling up* means you are playing better, smarter, harder; when you level up in a video game, you have increased your skill. In a quest to make my classes more playful, I’ve begun applying gaming vocabulary to what we do to build literacy skills. Students understand what it means to level up.

As a word tool, Wordle gives “greater prominence to words that appear more frequently in the source text” (Feinberg). That means that students do not have to hunt for and count the number of times Gatsby uses Daisy’s name in the first chapter—if he uses it a lot, Wordle will show the word in a larger font than other words. Not only does Wordle serve that specific practical purpose, but also it appeals to our sense of play by letting us tweak fonts and colors of words.

“Today I’m going to show you how to use Wordle in order to begin analyzing Fitzgerald’s word choice,” I explain. (Note: The *Gatsby* Wordle idea came from Ben Davis, a member of Jim Burke’s English Companion Ning [2012].) “In your Internet browser, go to Wordle.net, w-o-r-d-l-e dot n-e-t. Open another tab and go to Google to search for the text. We are going to look at Fitzgerald’s first chapter, so I want to paste Fitzgerald’s full text into Wordle.” I continue to narrate a step-by-step screencast of how to use the technology tools.

I post screencasts such as this to my classroom website so my students can have 24/7 access to tools we used or lessons we discussed in class. Watch the Wordle screencast, which shows students how to use Wordle. (See also Chapter 4, Tutorial 4.1, to see how to use Wordle to amplify reading instruction.)

Once I model the process, I give my students a directions page to guide their analysis and discussion. They work together, sharing computers at the table groups in my classroom. I also provide time for them to experiment with Wordle, copying the steps I modeled, and then I ask them to analyze Fitzgerald’s language. Next, using the words from the first chapter that they see in the Wordle I created, I ask students to create their own categories, such as character words, adjectives, or words that describe the setting (see Figure 1.3). This is a word sort activity. I give students words from or related to a text we are about to study. Students sort the words into categories they create (an open
sort) or into categories I give them (a closed sort). In this example, students do an open word sort to begin analyzing patterns of language use in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. Once students see a pattern, they create a claim they can use to analyze Fitzgerald’s work. A claim is an arguable statement. Students will use the words they see from the first chapter to make a claim about the characters or Fitzgerald’s use of language. For example, noticing that the characters’ names and directional words (*away, toward, back*) dominate, one could make this claim: Fitzgerald’s characters Tom, Daisy, Baker, and Gatsby are consumed by the past (looking back) instead of focused on the future.

“Daisy must be the most important; look at how big her name is,” notes Luis, sitting with three other students at the blue table. “I think we should have names as one of our categories for the words.”

“OK, look at all of the direction words: *away, toward, front, East, West, and side*,” adds Natalia.

“There are several action words too: *wanted, took, left, sort, come, see, remember, asked, rose*—I wonder if that’s *rose* as in *stood up* or *rose* the *flower*, I don’t remember—should we create a category for these too?”

The insight that Fitzgerald used direction and contrast to map out character relationships
was our first foray into literary analysis, using a technology tool to take away the tedium.

Most interesting to me as a teacher, however, was how my freshmen students responded to Wordles when they came in the next class period.

My freshmen students were reading *Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes. We had just done poetry rotations the day before, and one stop on the carousel was a fingerprint poem.

Students saw the ovalessque Wordle that I used for junior English and asked, “Oh! Can we make our fingerprint poems like this?”

I hadn’t seen the fingerprint shape in the oval Wordle until they mentioned it. What a neat idea, I thought. “Of course you can. This is a Wordle.”

“A what?”

“A Wordle; a word picture. Let me show you how to use it.” So I did—and more than half of them went home and tried it themselves. What I enjoy the most is when my students see something I don’t and we get to share the discovery of it. That often is how technology takes something that could be a tedious task for students and turns it into something exciting.

**Google Books: A Concordance for Every Full Text**

Analyzing texts becomes interpretive play when I introduce technology and the power of Google Books into the lesson. During a recent discussion of his book *Doing Literary Criticism* (2010) on the English Companion Ning (Burke 2012), Tim Gillespie noted that looking at text through a new critical lens “has been one of the most prominent approaches to literature in American classrooms for many decades.” As Gillespie says, Formalism or the New Critical approach to text “focuses on the kind of close reading and analysis that the Advanced Placement English literature exam currently stresses.” When we read closely like Formalist critics in my class, we are looking at and for specific words and patterns.

In graduate school I did this using a *concordance*. I remember how surprised I was at
the heft and breadth of these printed tomes — nearly larger than the *Oxford English Dictionary* in terms of shelf space. Now, instead of using a concordance or asking students to skim and scan pages and pages of a novel, counting up instances of a word or image, I can send them to Google Books. With a simple word search, the concordance feature of Google Books calls up every page number on which the word appears.

The word *green*, for instance, is used thirteen times by Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*, *white* twenty-nine times. Could that mean that the green-light dreams of Gatsby are more elusive that the erasing power of Daisy’s naiveté? I’m just playing here as I think aloud and model the process for students. The concordance power of Google Books lends itself to interpretive play. It’s programming magic that turns the tedium of tracing Fitzgerald’s use of color into a guessing game of “I wonder.”

Students sit in table groups in my eleventh grade Advanced Placement language and composition class. Each table shares one computer. At the front table, I listen as Rashad directs Danielle’s search on Google Books.

“I wonder how many times he [Fitzgerald] uses the color red. Two people die and you’d think red would be an important color for Wilson’s anger or Gatsby’s frustration. Let’s see. Type in *red*,” commands Rashad. “Only nine times, what does it say? Read it, Danielle” (see Figure 1.4).

The four members of the group lean together toward the computer as Danielle scans the search results and talks through them, “Well,” she says, “the first one refers to the new books Gatsby bought, ‘red and gold like new money from the mint’ (Fitzgerald 2004). Then on page fourteen, ‘a new red gas pump’ must be Mr. Wilson’s gas station. Pages twenty and twenty-five are both descriptions of red-haired women at one of Gatsby’s parties. Oh, page one hundred and eight mentions ‘tracing a red circle in the water’—that reminds me of Gatsby’s death in the pool; could it foreshadow it?”

![Figure 1.4: Google Books screenshot showing nine results for the word red in The Great Gatsby](image)

The four members of the group lean together toward the computer as Danielle scans the search results and talks through them, “Well,” she says, “the first one refers to the new books Gatsby bought, ‘red and gold like new money from the mint’ (Fitzgerald 2004). Then on page fourteen, ‘a new red gas pump’ must be Mr. Wilson’s gas station. Pages twenty and twenty-five are both descriptions of red-haired women at one of Gatsby’s parties. Oh, page one hundred and eight mentions ‘tracing a red circle in the water’—that reminds me of Gatsby’s death in the pool; could it foreshadow it?”
“Click on that one so that we can reread the scene,” says Rashad.

And they’re off, students searching the novel for red (it appears nine times), reading bits on the computer and revisiting scenes from the print books they have in their hands. When we use Google Books to trace patterns in text, students begin to wonder, to hypothesize, to, as Brian Cambourne says, “approximate” what real critics do (Allen and Gonzalez 1998, 132). I can hear it in their voices and see it as they creep closer to the monitors to get a better look at the latest search results.

To learn how to use Google Books as a concordance with your students, see Tutorial 1.1 (click here for print version, and below for video format).

Tutorial 1.1: Use Google Books as a Concordance
(Click on image to view the video version of the tutorial.)

[Note to readers: In most cases you can find both print and video tutorials to guide you through the process of learning the software or tool.]
What’s Your Reading History?

What’s the most tedious thing you’ve ever been asked to do as a reader? Did you have to summarize every chapter? Did your English teacher follow the “reading as answering study guide questions” philosophy of teaching? Were you limited by what your teacher allowed you to read?

I’ll never forget the day my now nine-year-old got into the car crying after school when he was in first grade.

“Collin, what is the matter?”

“My teacher says . . . now . . . I can read AR [Accelerated Reader] books. Now I can’t read anything I want!” He burst into tears as the car line helper closed the car door.

I pulled over in the parking lot. I crawled into the back seat, sat next to him, and reassured him that no matter what, he would be able to read the books he wanted to read. I vowed to slay the AR dragon and battle the teacher for his right to choose books if need be. The dragon got him giggling again. We set off for the library on our way home—him not worried about color-coded level dots and me wondering how to teach him his rights as a reader.

Student readers in my classroom have rights, too. Rights that Daniel Pennac details in Better Than Life (1999, 175-207):

1. The right to not read.
2. The right to skip pages.
3. The right to not finish.
4. The right to reread.
5. The right to read anything.
6. The right to escapism.
7. The right to read anywhere.
8. The right to browse.
9. The right to read out loud.
10. The right not to defend your tastes.
How do middle and high school teachers honor readers’ rights while at the same time fulfilling the duties of ever-more demanding departments, districts, or states? How can I teach text features, a skill that testing data indicates that my current students need, while still honoring a student’s right to read anything?

I am still crafting the answer to that question in my own classroom. Striking a balance between strategic reading and reading for enjoyment in a high school classroom is a fine-tuning process. As Janice Pilgreen says in *The SSR Handbook*, “Only you know best how to balance curricular demands with reading time” (2000, 68). Just when I think I’ve struck the right chord, the tune changes: Testing pressures or department mandates chime in to complicate the melody. What I do know is that tuning my students into reading for pleasure—making time for it every week or every day—sweeps whatever song they will sing and carries them through whatever course may challenge them.
CHAPTER 2

What’s Your Take on Reading?

As custodians of reading instruction, teachers must be readers first . . . we need to understand reading comprehension strategies ourselves and notice how they play out in our own reading before we can successfully teach them to children.

—Harvey and Goudvis (2000, 52)

Do You Hear What I Hear? Eavesdropping on Readers

I come from a family of readers. When I was a child, my mom made the weekly pilgrimage to the Orlando Public Library with my brother and me. A modern concrete monolith, the library squats on a city block just up Central Avenue from Lake Eola. Summer-soothed by the hush of the central air conditioning, my brother and I could entertain ourselves for quite some time in the stacks of the children’s reading room. We dipped into books, swirled and soared with the words a page or two at a time, reshelving those that didn’t capture our imaginations and reading aloud bits of those that did.

Now, we’re more likely to be found browsing in a bookstore or online than in the local branch of the public library. Stand in any popular bookstore and watch real readers engage with text and each other. What happens? What do you notice? I imagine you’ll see readers perusing books and magazines often by themselves, but look closer. What reading relationships can you see?

When I observe real readers in their natural habitats—the bookstore, the Internet, and the library—I notice a lot of activity in the hive. Readers fly in and out of texts, crossing from fiction to nonfiction, dipping into audiobooks, computers, and the social network along the way. Readers buzz up to each other and share lines, paragraphs, links, and
sometimes whole scenes. Open books are passed back and forth as fingers point to pictures or text. Titles are tweeted. Articles are bookmarked. Reading statuses are updated. Some readers sit and read, occasionally in the middle of a honeycombed aisle, the book so good that they had to sit and stay with it awhile. Readers read, of course, but they also talk to each other about their reading and read to each other. Like Donalyn Miller, I “recognize that there are legitimate moments of natural dialogue that support reading” (2009, 68). This dialogue happens in person and online. The hive is never silent.

**Reading Approaches and Elements**

As a teacher, I see the reading approaches mentioned below at work wherever I run across readers (see Video 2.1).

![Video 2.1: Stages of reading](image)

(Click on image to view the video.)

Does your classroom allow students to use reading approaches fluidly and to their advantage?

Think back to the bookstore. You are meeting a friend in the bookstore café and have arrived early, so you decide to pick up a recent favorite title to share with your friend. In my case, the friend arriving is my mother and the book I’ve chosen to share with her is *Motel of the Mysteries* by David MacAulay. Set in the future, MacAulay’s story features a middle-aged archeologist, Howard Carson, on a trip to North America.
Destroyed and misunderstood by people, North America has become a wasteland of cultural artifacts. Carson discovers what he believes is an ancient tomb in the Root & Toot Motel and proceeds to explain each carefully documented artifact. Mom and I barely made it through the outer burial chamber (picture a skeleton reclining on a hotel bed in front of the television) before laughing out loud at the picture of Carson’s assistant in ceremonial dress for a funeral. The amateur archaeologist’s costume? A toilet seat worn as a necklace and headdress. We delighted in the story.

I love sharing books with other readers. As Jim Trelease notes in *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, “Human beings will voluntarily do over and over what brings them pleasure” (2006, 5). What started in my family with my mother reading to my brother and me grew into a lifetime of reading and enjoying books together. In terms of reading approaches, we begin our reading lives with read-aloud and shared reading. The lap reading experiences of early childhood and the big books teachers share with us during our primary years shape us and develop our skills as readers. In my high school classroom, many students come from impoverished homes; I teach in a school where more than 70 percent of the students receive free and reduced-price lunches. Most of these students do not spontaneously share their favorite books. Most of them, at the beginning of the year, cannot name a favorite book or author. They have not logged the same reading experiences as I did as a child. This lack of reading experience means I need to build positive interactions with text into our time together. I need to read aloud and use shared reading to engage students with story before I can do anything else. When students exclaim, “No, one more chapter!” during read-aloud or shared reading I know they’ve arrived. They *can* and, more important, they *will* read. Read-aloud and shared reading dominate our reading landscape early in the school year.

During the second quarter, instead of using the initial bell-work tasks of written questions or prompts for students, I ask them for ten minutes of independent reading time. My goal is to, as Pilgreen (2000) encourages, hook them on the one habit that will make them truly proficient and lifelong lovers of reading: reading. I want to hook students with short sessions of independent reading in order to leave them wanting more reading time. As I transition to independent reading time, I use the shared reading
approach less often.

“OK, for bell work today, why don’t I let you get back to your own books?” I say to students once the bell rings for class.

“No!” Carl blurts out from his seat directly in front of me. “I thought we were reading *Speak*!”

“Yeah,” Maria chimes in. “Let’s just read *Speak* today. We can read our own books at home.”

Do your students associate pleasure with the printed word? Do we know if my students are engaged in the story at this point in the reading? No; they have just begun to read independently for pleasure and still rely on me to guide and support them as they choose books or engage in story. *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson, is our anchor text for a unit of study examining the archetypal hero’s journey, which speaks to teenagers’ process of self-discovery (Campbell 1972). It is also the book I am using to teach students how to question and visualize. Our essential question is, “How do trials in our journey through high school shape us?” We use that question as we talk about *Speak* and our own high school lives.

During shared reading, students follow along while a fluent voice reads the text. Our shared reading of *Speak* is strategic during the last half of the book. At this point in the reading, students are hooked on the story, so I know I can interrupt our reading without losing them.

During one such interruption, I want to focus students’ attention on character. A recent assignment I asked students to complete while a substitute was with the class involved sending them to our language arts textbooks to take Cornell-style notes on plot elements, specifically character. Developed at Cornell University by Walter Pauk, the Cornell Note-Taking System directs students to take notes in three sections: notes, questions, and summary. Each page of notes stands alone and is summarized (as cited in Allen 2004). I knew from reviewing students’ notes that they had read about how authors shape characters through actions, speech, description, and thoughts. It was time to determine if my students could apply what they had discovered about character to our
shared novel. I wondered if they could pull examples from the text to show how Anderson shapes Melinda’s character. To guide their note-taking, I show them how to create Dinah Zike’s (2002) four-tab book foldable (see Figure 2.1). Foldables are kinesthetic graphic organizers created with blank paper. To create a four-tab book, students fold a piece of paper lengthwise (hot dog style), then in half, and then in half again. Students then cut four tabs on one side of the book and glue the back cover of the book into their academic journal.

Figure 2.1: Four-tab book foldable created to study character

Shared reading can and should be uninterrupted in order to build that sense of enjoyment and community that engaged readers demonstrate. Where readers are, in terms of engagement, dictates which reading approach to use.
Kelly Gallagher notes in *Deeper Reading*, “if we simply assign reading instead of teaching students how to read, we’ll get poor reading” (2004, 7). If students haven’t come from reading families, haven’t logged thousands of reading miles by the time they reach high school, then I need to start with shared and guided reading. To move students up the engagement scale, I need to take on the responsibility of reading. Once engaged, I can gradually release the responsibility of reading to them (see Figure 2.2). Shared reading is the scaffold I use to support the readers in my room. Eventually they won’t need me to scaffold the reading—they will be reading on their own.