

Literacy Technology Boys

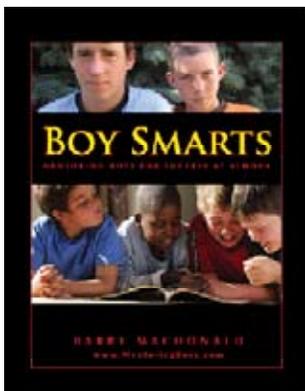


REAL READERS RESPOND

How can we respond to the literacy needs of boys who gravitate toward digital technologies, yet resist traditional classroom learning?

Last month's Boy Smarts Newsletter on the use of classroom technology to engage boys in diverse literacy experiences generated many interesting responses from across the country. While most comments emphasized the power of technology to transform learning for boys who balk at traditional classroom learning, many others complained about inadequate resources: "It's easy for school officials to talk poetically about 21st century education, but do they realize that the latest piece of technological equipment in my classroom is a new VCR? Yesterday a boy called it the 'dinosaur-machine'!" exclaimed Betty, a teacher from New Brunswick.

A British Columbian teacher expressed frustrations about feeling in a double bind, as the rhetoric about the learning potentiality of technology is not supported by school policies: "We are encouraged to embrace new technologies, but with our hands tied. It is tremendously frustrating when school rules prohibit student access to email, instant messaging, cell phones, cell phone cameras, Wikipedia, and other potentially highly effective educational tools...I am not even allowed to access Facebook with students to teach them about personal safety."



Another BC teacher wrote: “HELP! I often face resistance as I seek to bring technology into my class, even so far as not being allowed to use flashdrives...I very much need to incorporate the tools that students use in their lives every day if I am to hold their attention...When you consider that boys who play video games are so smart with technology it only makes sense that they need things faster than their teachers are used to providing them, but that they also have many other new learning needs as well, such as access to digital information and multiple data streams...these kids are born into technology.”

Parents also expressed their concerns about the failure of some schools to engage with newer forms of media literacies. At the same time they often posed interesting questions we might do well to reflect upon. One Montreal father was moved to write: “Schools need to get past sit still textbook learning. My son learns more online at home than at school,” adding, “Why does he even need to go to school when online learning has already turned the classroom upside down?”

An Albertan parent conveyed her disappointment after helping her son complete a homework project: “I helped my 15 year old son copy text from an old Social Studies textbook by reading aloud as he copied verbatim what I read. He sees school as a waste of time, yet I know that he is just the kind of boy who is likely to become the Human-robot Integration Specialist you spoke of in your newsletter. How are schools helping intelligent boys who dislike writing like my son stay tuned?”

Another parent from Winnipeg inquired, “Most topics taught at school have a YouTube clip about it. Why don’t students watch a well-designed short movie clip and then get help from a teacher to practice what they have learned?”

A parent from a Surrey school described how she channeled her frustrations into action by rounding up concerned parents to meet with the school principal in order to identify and obtain classroom technology resources.

She echoed the lament of many parents who yearn to advocate for change, but questioned how much parental assertion is too much: “I want to help but I am cautious to not impose. I often feel as though I walk a tightrope as I advocate for learning to be more hi-tech. We must frame the challenge of teaching our technology-smart kids in a broader context. The world is changing and our children need to see us as leaders of technology, not uncomfortable followers.”



Heartfelt comments like these remind me how strong the pressure against disrupting the status quo has always been in schools, stronger than the pressure for change in schools. One teacher compared under-achieving boys to canaries in the coal mine, alerting us to the dangers of trying to maintain our grip as information gatekeepers in a fast-moving digital world. These boys’ disengagement with learning is a signal that something needs to shift.

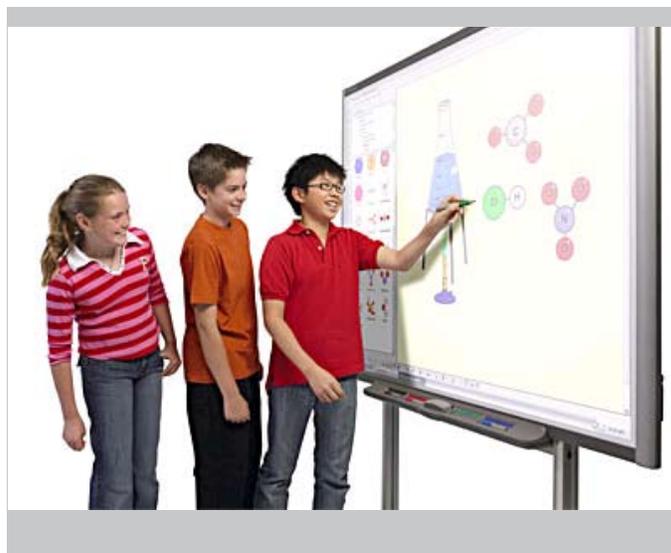
In addition to acknowledging our apprehensions about technology, and our concerns about limited resources, we must also pay attention to approaches that show promising signs of success. At one point I imagined bringing parents and teachers together to discuss frustrations and successes. Consider how the parent who helped her son copy notes from the textbook might respond to the humanities teacher from Montreal named Sarah who wrote:

“Forget copying notes from the board. It is a waste of time, especially for boys who dismiss textbook learning as outdated. I want my students to think, not just copy and memorize. In my humanities class students are just as likely to find their subject matter on the internet as the textbook, as likely to tap compositions into their iPhone as commit them by pencil onto a piece of paper. I marvel as boys with written output problems zoom among hyperlinks and twitter or text with acronyms, creative punctuation, and other shortcuts that redefine everyday communication. It is my observation that these new technologies really get boys reading and writing more frequently, just not in the traditional ways many associate with schooling. The pressing challenge is to help these boys distinguish what is reliable from the cyberspace digital debris. After we Google discussion topics together and consider the results projected onto the screen, I am later challenged to slow down their multiple streams of thought and to encourage students to probe deeper, to question what they’ve read.”

Rather than seeing technology as a trendy distraction from learning, most parents and teachers who wrote me suggested that the use of technology in the classroom can foster deeper engagement in learning, opening dialogue about media experiences while promoting more critical and imaginative thinking.

Interactive White Boards

Several emails commented on the use of *Interactive White Board* technology (or *IWB*) to make learning multi-sensory and to motivate passive boys to action. For those of you not familiar with *IWB* technology, these large computerized screens allow internet access, video and audio presentations, digital assessments using remote clickers, and the ability to record lessons and play them later. With an educator who is willing to learn along with students, *IWB* is just one form of technology that can help classroom-learning keep pace with the realities of the digital age.



A school administrator from Calgary commented on the power of *IWBs* to capture the attention of boys who would rather play a video game than listen to a teacher explain a concept. While observing a science lesson on sound waves with an *IWB*, she could not help notice that “those boys who frequently seem in another world during regular lessons instead waited eagerly and politely for their turn to manipulate sound waves in real-time.” She indicated that research backs up the hands-on engagement made possible by *IWBs*. The administrator mentioned that a study of students’ achievement in 200 classrooms that compared the learning results of those that employed *IWBs* with those that did not, Robert Marzano found significantly higher student achievement in classes that used the devices. We can surmise that the increased achievement was attributed to the ability of *IWB* technology to increase student motivation through active engagement.

This school principal cautioned that it is still important to remember that however dazzling *IWB* technology may appear it is still only a tool requiring an enthusiastic educator to use. She emphasized ‘enthusiastic educator’ in her comments, indicating that students take their cues from their teacher about how to respond to school activities. Technology, in and of itself, cannot replace a caring and skilled teacher, but can help to activate engagement among boys who so readily disengage.



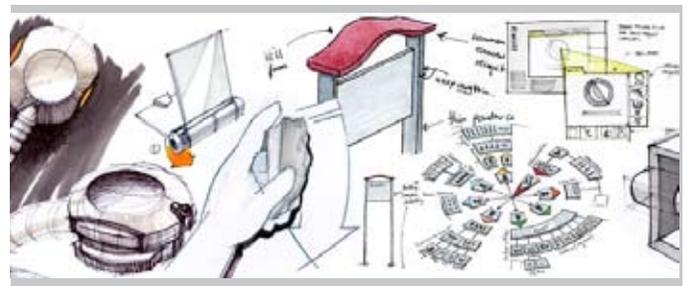
An Antidote to the Struggle with Writing It Down

It was refreshing to read one parent's comment about her son's newly kindled interest in classroom learning: "Grade 7 has been such an exciting year for our son Johnny. Each day at the breakfast table he describes his project plans for the day and the deadlines he has to meet. At first I was worried that he was going to miss important Grade 7 material when I learned that his teacher taught something she calls Project-based Learning, where she doesn't divide the day into different topics like Math, English, and Science. She mixes everything up into big projects that the students are in charge of. There are no tests, no essays, and no spelling lists. Don't get me wrong, it is not a free-for-all. Johnny knows that he has to demonstrate what he learned, but he gets to decide HOW he will present it... When I ask him about what the teacher does he says 'She is the deadline checker and helps us make our projects better'... My husband was against this new approach until he noticed how talkative Johnny became about his projects. He especially loves the final stages. He likes to direct his own movies... For many years Johnny completed his written assignments half-heartedly and never showed what he really learned. I do worry about what will happen next year though."

Parents and teachers everywhere are discovering how project-based learning engages and inspires students to develop initiative as they collaborate with others. Many

believe that students obtain deeper knowledge as they dig into topics, develop critical questions, and later demonstrate their learning in diverse, customized ways. Evidence also indicates that more than traditional textbook learning, students retain knowledge they gain through the projects they are personally invested in more than they do with traditional textbook learning.

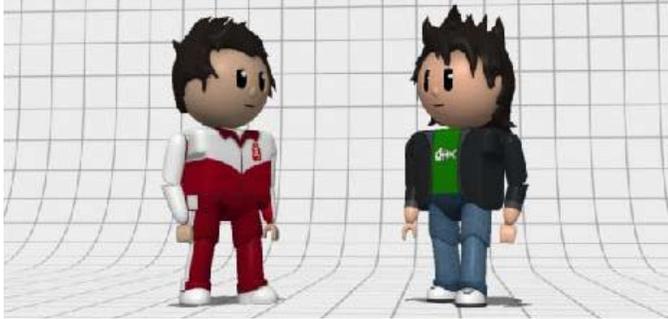
As I consider the boys who prefer to think like engineers, architects, or artists but who struggle to write, I think about the ones who have overcome challenges with written output. I consistently note that it is the combination of personalized learning and digital technology that works for these boys. An enthusiastic email from a parent in Vancouver drew attention to an engineer type of computer-aided design programs (or CAD) that facilitates students to think in three-dimensions and then to later bring their drawings to life with new 3D printing technology. Where 3D technology was once beyond the reach of school budgets, it is accessible today with open source 3D printers like the *MakerBot* or *RepRap Mendel*, allowing schools to build a dozen printers for a fraction of the cost, and even offering the added engineering challenge of building them as a learning project.



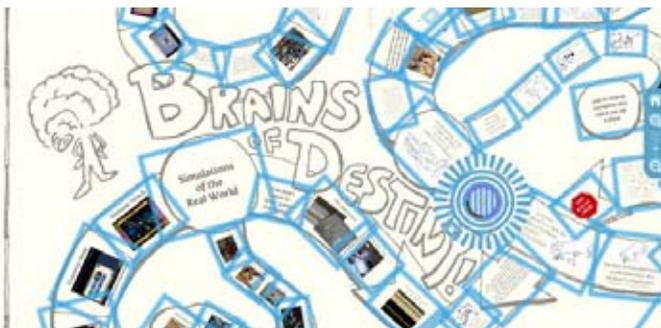
As the world becomes more visually connected, opportunities to express ideas through digital presentations, such as moviemaking and a myriad of other online websites become vital communications tools. The creation of digital and multi-media presentations can help boys who think in pictures and struggle with writing to overcome their fear and dread of the written word. As these boys create and compose with electronic media, they create online presentations that are much more dynamic and exciting than the posters of yesteryear.

Web-based Presentation Tools

While I suspect that many readers are familiar with Powerpoint and Keynote, I offer a few additional web-based tools that are designed to engage students as they take learning into their own hands:



Xtranormal is a free and easy to use online moviemaker application that allows students to generate their own text-to-speech computer animated video clips. Students can log onto the website to create videos by scripting the dialogue and choosing from a menu of camera angles and pre-designed characters and scenes. While it was originally developed for filmmakers to produce storyboards, **Xtranormal** has grown in popularity and scope. Now students everywhere can use avatars to explain why global warming is a compelling issue worthy of attention, or create a persuasive narrative to demonstrate how Japan's recent earthquake effects us globally.



Prezi is a storytelling web-based presentation tool that uses a single canvas instead of traditional slides like Powerpoint or Keynote. Students think out-of-the-box as they group together text, images, videos and other presentation objects on an infinite canvas that allows them to zoom around the canvas and create ingenious non-linear presentations. **Prezi** is free and offers a special education license for students and educators.



Wallwisher is a free online application that allows everyone to share ideas on a common topic easily with virtual sticky-notes. The sticky-notes can include media students use from images, videos, or websites, and they can add text. Each sticky has a 160 character limit for text. A **wall** can also be used for personal note taking on a private **wall** or noting feedback on a topic of interest on a public message board **wall**.



Wikispaces provide free online opportunities for students to collaborate digitally and become 'experts' in their topics of interest. They can even create a Google Doc or podcast and embed it on their **Wikispace** page. Parents can also log onto a classroom **Wikispace** website to download criteria and learning outcomes for a newly assigned project, or check out the centralized location for all assignments, due dates, and upcoming fieldtrips.



Wordle is plain fun to use; you just copy text, paste it into **Wordle** and it will sift through it and create word clouds.



Glogster EDU is a highly creative tool to assemble and display text, photos, videos, graphics, sounds, drawings, and data attachments to become a virtual poster, called a **Glog**. Using a drag and drop interface that is manageable for students of all ages and learning styles, a **Glog** promotes the imaginative use of multi-media and relevant internet resources to communicate powerful messages. The **Teacher's Dashboard** provides direct access to all student projects, allowing for feedback throughout the assignment and assessment of completed work.

Boys Need More Than Technology Alone

Despite the appeal of visual technologies for boys, many frequently report to me that the support of caring adults trumps technology. I recall a Grade 10 boy who, while visiting my office, praised his P.E. teacher for using cell phone technology to keep track of students' body mass indexes. He smiled widely as he described his teacher: "It's so wicked how we use a cool app to keep track, but it's even more wicked that he knows my goals and pushes me. I don't know how he does it, but he keeps track of us all."

Just today a younger boy in Grade 7 commented, "When I'm online I read blogs and YouTube comments a lot. What adults don't get is that I learn a lot when I read online, more than if I just listened to my mom or my teacher. Being online lets me learn from smart people from around the world."

Last February, at a teachers' conference, I had the pleasure of catching up with Shannon Gillespie, an energetic Grade 7 teacher in Nanaimo who understands that not all boys like to read in traditional ways. As she spoke passionately about her students and courageously described the chaotic ups and downs of teaching an all-boy classroom, I knew that her students were in good hands. Far

from taking refuge in the cliché that *boys will be boys* Shannon welcomed their varied literacy needs, and the challenges presented to her day by day.

Last week, Shannon relayed a successful classroom experiment that promotes engagement and does not involve technology: "After attending your workshop I started thinking in new ways about how to help the boys in my Grade 7 class who are so disorganized, how much their stuff was a distraction to them, and how our over-stuffed classroom gave them less space to move about. The boys were constantly stuffing food and old assignments into their desks, and many extended their desk clutter further afield into other spaces, leaving our classroom bursting at the seams and in constant chaos. I was reading your *Boy Smarts* chapter on *Organizing a Classroom for Boys to be Successful* and reflected on how some boys can be totally distracted by their things. Rather than simply take time again to organize and clean their desks, I decided to take it a step further. We packed up everyone's desks and moved them into a storage locker and replaced with a variety of tables, chairs, high school style desks, and standing tables. We developed a communal classroom space for binders, books, and writing tools and moved everyone's personal stuff into lockers. The boys were horrified at first, but now a month and a half later, it is working beautifully. The boys have more space to work, they have a chance to sit or stand, depending on their needs for movement, and our class has way more space for them to be their energetic selves. Like any Grade 7 classroom we are still working through typical challenges, but organization isn't a headache anymore, and the bonus is that my boys have more space to MOVE and to be more ACTIVE as they learn."

Just this week I was reminded that we do not always need the honey of technology to attract boys to literacies. The day after the final hockey game between the Vancouver Canucks and the Chicago Blackhawks, I approached several young boys in a school hallway standing in awe—completely mesmerized—before a life size poster of Roberto Luongo, the celebrated Canucks goaltender.

The librarian had attached a book to his hockey stick with a note. The note proclaimed: *Luongo Reads!*

Recently, I received an invitation from Cambridge to read to boys at a weeklong literacy event held at Our Lady of Fatima School. Bryan Cinti, the vice-principal, told me that men throughout their community come together annually to read to boys and celebrate literacy. Everyone is invited: fathers, grandfathers, uncles, neighbours, nurses, shopkeepers, sport coaches, gardeners, fire fighters, office workers, engineers, police officers, local government officials, and even hockey players. Currently they have about 150 men committed to supporting the event. Boys everywhere need male role models to foster a soft spot for literacies.

I can still remember vividly a moment from my boyhood when my Boy Scout leader, reading aloud to us about survival from our scouting guidebook in preparation for a winter camping trip, suddenly exclaimed, “I love this book!” As a boy who grew up without a father in my life, I remember how his appreciation of the guidebook impressed me. With a flashlight under the covers I read nightly curious about winter survival.

Today, I am grateful for the efforts of this man and other men who showed me that reading was useful and pleasurable. That it is an important pursuit, fit for men.

I am also grateful for all men and women who share their love of literacy with the next generation.



As our ideas about literacy are altered in astounding ways, boys everywhere benefit when we help them to take delight in the many literacies that surround them, and to be selective and thoughtful about the unedited flow of information and media in their lives.

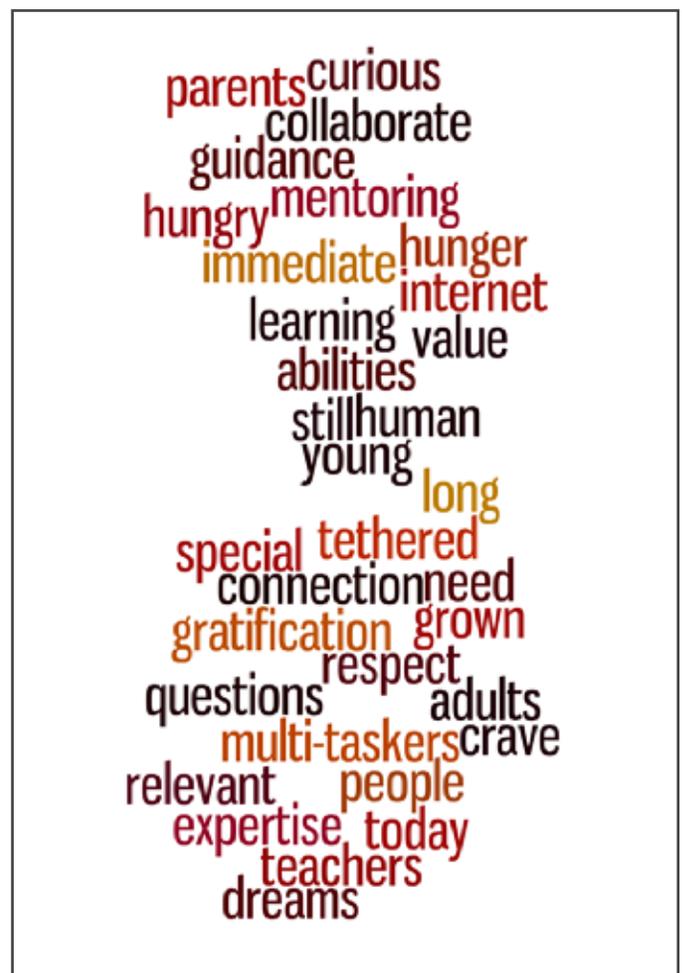
While we power up our homes and classrooms, as we begin to embrace—or at least try out—new media platforms—it’s important to remember the thing that matters most:

Sometimes boys need the most simple thing of all—

Maybe to have you read aloud to them, or listen as they read aloud.

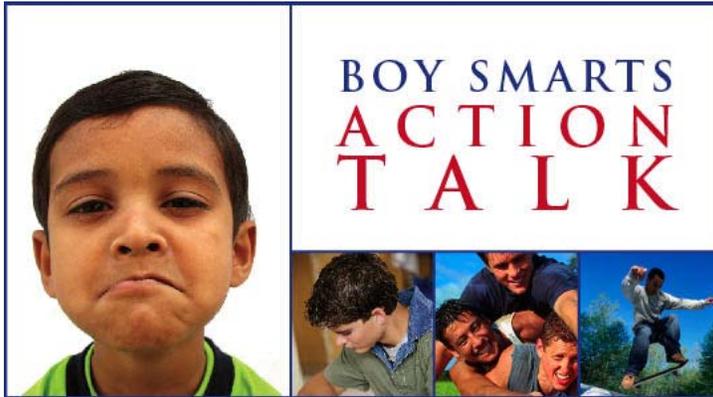
Maybe just the quality of your caring human presence. ● ● ●

Barry MacDonald
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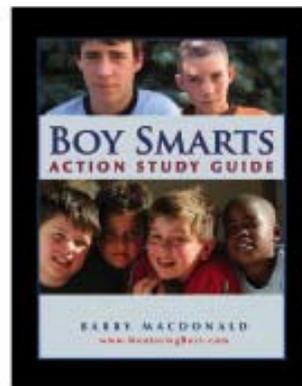
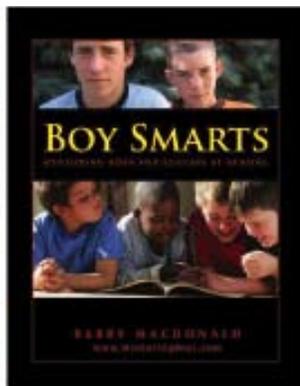
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