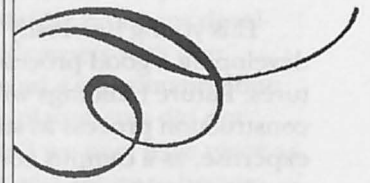# LIBRARIANS, PUT ON YOUR BOXING GLOVES: SOME THINGS ARE WORTH FIGHTING FOR

*by Julie Moline*

During a time when library budgets are being cut, it is very possible for librarians to give up the fight and focus their attention on acquiring only the "necessary" items. Some Indiana library media specialists (LMS) might determine non-fiction books to support research and enough Young Hoosier titles to participate in the Indiana Library Federation's recreational reading program as necessities. While at the same time, other LMS in our state are fighting in a larger boxing ring: one where the match is on an even more personal level. They are trying to convince administrators not to make them a part of the special teaching rotation because of the impact of flexible scheduling, or worse, librarians are trying to convince administrators that library media centers (LMC) do not reach their greatest achievement when librarian positions are axed and paraprofessionals administer the library.

While many librarians may feel that they have joined the ranks with Rocky Balboa, we as a profession must continue our fight. It is still important for us to spend our time and efforts forming collaborative relationships and purchasing beyond the necessities... purchasing cutting edge technology that enhances student learning.

Last year, I reached a place in my career as library media specialist at Kitley Intermediate School when I was ready to step away from boxing matches in media centers to return to librarianship in higher education. However, I grew excited when a colleague from the mathematics department approached me for help in writing a technology grant for one of the traditional "writing a technology grant proposal" assignments in her graduate course. This creative project helped me decide to get back in the ring; it seemed like a good way for her to complete her assignment, while I could spend some time considering what instructional technology my fifth and sixth grade school/Library Media Center really needed. While doing Internet searches for Indiana library grants, I found the Library Services Technology Act (LSTA) teaching with technology grant through the Indiana State Library. After reading through the eligibility requirements, I realized we could accomplish what we both desired: she could be a part of the grant-writing process, and I could be rejuvenated by some creative planning, while also forming a collaborative relationship with a rare user of the library and its services.

## OUR NEED

Because the school was only five years old, Kitley Intermediate was blessed in that some modern instructional technology was purchased for the opening of the school. After considering what we still needed, we focused our efforts on writing a grant for digital cameras.

Kitley's LMC owned four digital cameras for teachers to use among the 1,184 students. All four cameras were different brands, with different functions and different memory devices; all were intended for teacher use only. Because of these limits, teachers declined to collaborate with me on digital projects since there were not enough cameras even for student group work—and effectively teaching the functions of different camera brands would be confusing for students new to the technology.

Beyond desiring innovative technology, I wanted to link students to past and present heroes. This became my motivation to develop the "Go Digital with Biographies" grant proposal and unit. I injected a strong dose of specialized technology into what traditionally was a dreaded unit for students: biography. I wanted to lure my fifth and sixth grade students into this genre by giving them opportunities to make connections between their lives and those of the champions inside the biographies. I believed digital cameras would be the needed stimulus with which students could examine the lives of their chosen heroes.

I did not write the digital camera grant just to acquire more technology for our school; I wanted the cameras to help engage students in the biography book collection... and not just any student, but specifically reluctant readers. Lesesne completed a seven year study to acquire proof that students who label themselves as

"non-readers" enjoyed reading nonfiction. Her studies verified that "nonfiction matters to… less-than enthusiastic readers. Even though some of them read nonfiction regularly, [students did] not see themselves as readers because nonfiction [was] not as valued in the English classroom" (Jones, 2001, para. 2). In my LMC, I wanted it to be obvious that all reading was valued, nonfiction included.

I already knew that the reading curriculum did not give students the opportunity to draw comparisons between the LMC's biography collection and the research essays they produced in their English courses. The "Go Digital…" unit would give students an explicit opportunity to compare, contrast, and admire this genre. These are the activities, according to Scharer, Pinnell, Lyons, and Fountas (2005), that "not only contribute to rich understanding but also help readers become better writers" (para. 7). Although improving reading, writing, research, and technology skills were lofty goals for one teaching unit, I believed the "Go Digital…" project had the potential to improve student learning.

At that time, Kitley students were minimally engaged with non-fiction books, especially biographies. Although many librarians believe it is normal that fiction circulates in leaps and bounds above non-fiction, we must consider the cost. We know that passing ISTEP (the standardized test taken by all Indiana students) is emphasized, and students' comprehension and vocabulary are always assessed on this exam. When considering the vocabulary exposure and new ideas students gain by reading non-fiction books, it seems foolish not to make non-fiction a central part of our reading programs. The National Assessment of Educational Programs (NAEP) found that students reading stories, magazines, and informational books have the highest achievement rates on standardized testing. Their data also revealed that "students in the top third achieving schools reported reading more information books at school than students in the bottom third schools" (Dreher, 1998/1999, para. 2).

## PURCHASING THE BEST PRODUCT

After what seemed like a long waiting period, I received notification that Kitley had received the LSTA grant. I immediately began pricing cameras and styles, as the model that we listed in the grant proposal was no longer available. After meeting with many camera sales representatives, I found Jim Lauten, the assistant manager at the downtown Indianapolis Cord Camera, to be the most helpful of all camera representatives with whom I was in contact. He showed me a variety of different cameras, discussed the features that might confuse students, and was genuinely excited about the project. The price and warranty at his store surpassed all other options. After combining the grant funds with profits from our book fair, I had enough money to purchase 34 digital cameras, 17 rechargeable batteries, 17 chargers, and 34 memory cards from Cord Camera.

## PARTICIPANTS

I knew that gaining faculty support was crucial to making the grant a success. At the beginning of the school year, I sent out invitations to a special meeting informing teachers of the premise of the project. After this first question and answer session, I met with all attendees individually to discuss how the project could be completed including a time table and possible revisions that might be needed.

Because of these teachers and others that grew interested in the project as the school year progressed, we had 14 teachers complete the "Go Digital…" project from start to finish, and 5 teachers did an abbreviated version of the project. While a handful of students participated in the project more than once (science teachers had students read biographies and complete a "Go Digital…" project, while Language Arts teachers had students complete an interview of a family member and complete a separate digital project), our statistics note the following number of students participated in some form of the "Go Digital…" project:

| 5th grade | 6th grade |
|---|---|
| 384 students | 626 students |

In most cases, some version of the following activities were incorporated to carry out the "Go Digital…" project in about 48 different training sessions for students.

## THE PLAN

I developed lesson plans which directly supported the Indiana State Language Arts Standards, the Indiana Technology Performance Indicators, and the Information Power Standards. The lesson plans involved students selecting biography books from the library, familiarizing themselves with the purpose and structure of this non-fiction genre, writing research reports, and incorporating digital pictures into a creative project presentation.

A "biography dig," designed to familiarize students with the library's biography collection before rushing into a topic, kicked off the "Go Digital…" unit. Students entering the library were greeted by piles of books on tables. Upon my directions, each student dug through the piles of books to select something of interest. Once books were chosen, students had 4 minutes to read and "dig" through the facts about the biography. When time was called, students had 3 minutes to record facts to practice their note-taking skills. This series of "digging" through the biography collection, reading different books, and note-taking continued throughout the class

period. Instead of rushing into a topic or having a research topic selected for them, each student left the library with a biography book that they were genuinely interested in.

> *"A biography dig is when you have a bunch of books on the table, then you sit at it, and you have one minute to look at them, then pick one to read. Then you go to another table and do it again."*
> ~Tyler S., 5th grade student

After students selected a biography from the LMC, I introduced them to and evaluated them on traditional tenets of research including:

- Plagiarism/creating bibliographies
- Designing research questions to guide their research using the Inquiry Method
- Answering research questions in proper note-taking form
- The importance of gathering information from multiple sources

In addition to teaching the research process, I also prepared students for the future "prop museum" and "photo shoot." Soon after rough drafts were due for their research reports, students were required to link these biographies to their own lives by bringing in items from home that signified important events and accomplishments from the lives of the biographies they selected.

My digital camera lesson plans included the following student learning outcomes:

- Students will be comfortable turning the digital cameras on and off.
- Students will learn proper camera handling techniques.
- Students will learn how to use the special effects to take the best picture possible.
- Students will learn how to select a camera setting including: head, action, landscape, and night vision shots.
- Students will consider the "backdrop" of the pictures and create an aesthetically pleasing scene for each prop photographed.
- Students will learn how to use the timer to take photographs without a person operating the camera.
- Students will learn how to review photographs that were taken and saved to the memory cards.
- Students will learn how to delete unwanted photographs.

- Students will learn how to download and integrate photographs in a variety of digital projects.

After I taught them how to use the common and advanced features of the digital cameras, the newly certified photography experts snapped pictures of their props. These digital images were then incorporated into a variety of projects, including PowerPoints, comic strips, and title pages.

> *"During our project, Mrs. Moline let us use digital cameras to take pictures of our props, which was very fun. Using the cameras made me feel like school wasn't so boring. "*
> ~Christian C., 5th grade student

The prop museum and photo shoot weren't just fun, technological opportunities, but were designed to motivate students to inventory what they owned and to consider how their belongings and life related to their selected biography. In "Becoming an Engaged Reader" (Scharer, Pinnell, Lyons, &Fountas, 2005), the authors contend that the best teachers of literacy instruct students to "draw on their own knowledge and experience to make sense of what they are reading. [Effective readers] make connections to their own lives" (para. 7). Additionally, I wanted this connection to be the fuel for igniting an interest in the biography collection, which would help students become better readers, writers, and researchers.

## ASSESSMENT OUTCOMES

Throughout the research process, I gave formative and summative assessments. My first assessment was a student research journal. The research journals allowed me to monitor the students' understanding of and response to the concepts taught, assess their progress on the unit, and shape my review sessions. This two-way communication spearheaded valuable conversations and feedback that strengthened my relationship with students, increased their understanding of the taught concepts, and also informed my future revisions for the "Go Digital…" unit.

> *"We had research journals, and we had to write in them everyday."*
> ~Jessie W., 5th grade student

> *"When we did our biography journals, Mrs. Moline didn't just grade them. She told us what we needed to do to improve and gave us encouragement."*
> ~Eda S., 5th grade student

Below are some of the questions I posed in the biography research journals.

Journal Entry #1

A. After your biography dig, consider what new things you learned. Name one fact you learned about someone's life.

B. Why does this fact stand out among the many things you read (surprising? funny? sad?)? Explain your reason.

C. What similarities/differences do you see between yourself and the person you read about?

Journal Entry #2

A. What did you learn from today's lesson about research questions?

B. What confused you from today's lesson about research questions?

C. Why did you select this person to research?

Journal Entry #3

A. What two things do you need to do... when you want to use another person's art? (i.e. books. paintings, music, movies, etc.)

B. Why is it important for researchers/writers to use multiple sources to gather notes and get information?

Journal Entry #4

A. How did you use the table of contents, index, and the bold-faced headings inside your book(s) to help you find the answers to your research questions?

B. If you didn't use them, how did you find the answers to your research questions?

Journal Entry #5

A. What research questions are you struggling to answer?

B. What other sources do you need to help you answer these questions (books, reference sources)?

C. How will you go about acquiring these sources (school library, public library, home computer, etc)?

Journal Entry #6

A. Now that you've found new sources to help you answer your research questions, how responsible have you been with your bibliography form?

B. Describe what you've done or what you'll need to do to remain an ethical researcher.

Journal Entry #7

A. What have you accomplished as a researcher during this project (notes cards, graphic organizer, rough draft, bibliography)? Summarize your efforts and accomplishments.

B. Are you ahead of schedule, on schedule, or behind schedule?

C. If you are behind, what actions will you take so that you will be eligible to use the digital cameras on Friday?

My second student assessment was a pre- and post-skills inventory. I measured students' knowledge of digital cameras before and after I taught the digital camera sessions. The evaluation revealed a direct increase in learning in all areas assessed.

My knowledge and ability with the digital cameras proved to the students that I was "technically savvy." After their digital camera lessons, students felt comfortable seeking me out to help answer other technology questions. I used these discussions to lead into conversations about students' interests. After each conversation, I had almost all the information I needed to connect reluctant students with literature that they could enjoy.

A third assessment was implemented with a control group and an experimental group. The control group completed a traditional biography essay without technology, while the experimental group completed the "Go Digital..." technology project and essay in its entirety. The teacher and the LMS remained the same. While there was no significant difference in the grade performance between the two groups on the essay, there was a great difference in the excitement level among the experimental group. The experimental group completed the project earlier than the control group, and often discussed it outside of class. The control group "got word" about the other students using cameras, and began complaining to teachers about the boredom they experienced while completing the traditional biography assignment. One of the reasons this assessment might not have worked as an evaluation indicator was because the classroom teacher "felt sorry" for the group working with the traditional assignment and admitted to possibly inflating their grades.
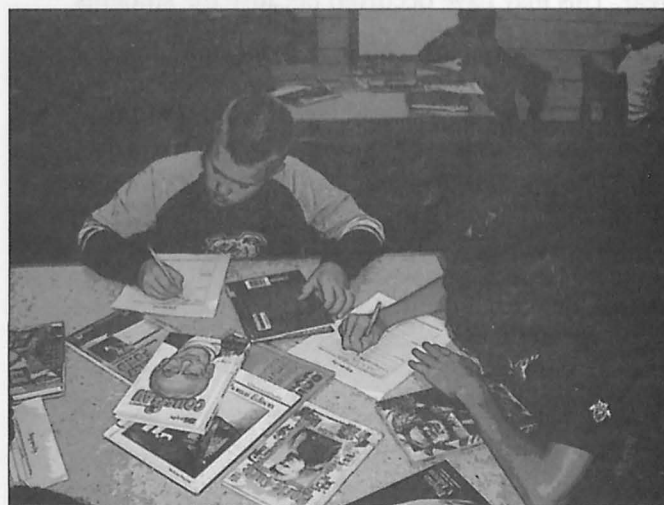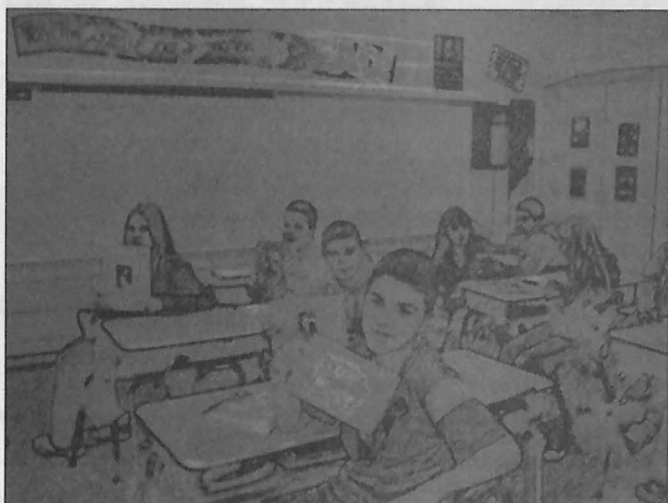


Students fill in their "Biography Dig" sheets to practice fact-collecting for their research. The Biography Dig is designed to help students slow down their process of selecting a topic.

| 1. Students were asked if they knew how to take pictures using a digital camera. | |
| --- | --- |
| *Before digital camera sessions* | *After digital camera sessions* |
| 4% had **never** used one<br>21% had a **little experience**<br>43% were **pretty good** but could still learn<br>32% were **so experienced** that they could teach another student | 4% had **never** used one*<br>2% had a **little experience**<br>18% were **pretty good** but could still learn<br>76% were **so experienced** that they could teach another student |

| 2. Students were asked how much they knew about the advanced settings on a digital camera (i.e. zooming in and out, changing pictures to black and white). | |
| --- | --- |
| *Before digital camera sessions* | *After digital camera sessions* |
| 25% had **never** used them<br>36% had a **little experience**<br>22% were **pretty good** but could still learn<br>17% were **so experienced** that they could teach another student | 6% had **never** used them*<br>8% had a **little experience**<br>26% were **pretty good** but could still learn<br>60% were **so experienced** that they could teach another student |

| 3. Students were asked how much they knew about uploading pictures to a computer program such as Microsoft Word or PowerPoint. | |
| --- | --- |
| *Before digital camera sessions* | *After digital camera sessions* |
| 57% had **never** done it<br>18% had a **little experience**<br>14% were **pretty good** but could still learn<br>11% were **so experienced** that they could teach another student | 24% had **never** done it**<br>15% had a **little experience**<br>25% were **pretty good** but could still learn<br>36% were **so experienced** that they could teach another student |

| 4. Students were asked if they knew any faculty members at Kitley Intermediate that could help them use digital cameras/import pictures. | |
| --- | --- |
| *Before digital camera sessions* | *After digital camera sessions* |
| 39% knew **no one**<br>21% had someone in mind, but **weren't sure**<br>19% had someone in mind, but **weren't sure if they'd ask**<br>21% knew and **would** feel comfortable **asking for help** | 7% knew **no one**\*<br>3% had someone in mind, but **weren't sure**<br>17% had someone in mind, but **weren't sure if they'd ask**<br>73% knew and **would** feel comfortable **asking for help** |

*A possible explanation could be that students who were absent during the digital camera sessions still took part in the survey.*

**A possible explanation could be that some students participated in projects that required direct printing from the camera.*

My records also indicated that a particular lower-scoring, unmotivated class collectively performed higher on their written biography report than on any other writing assignments they produced that school year. This may have occurred because the students were excited about the incorporation of technology, and it affected their willingness to perform and complete the assignment.

My final data assessment came from the circulation statistics of the biography collection. The circulation of the LMC's books in the biography collection increased dramatically.

- 2004-5 usage without the "Go Digital…" project = 1,650 books were checked out

- 2005-6 usage with the "Go Digital…" project = 2,435 books were checked out

Even after the "Go Digital…" projects were completed, biographies remained popular at Kitley Intermediate School. This could be explained in a number of ways: it is possible that the "Go Digital…" unit helped students discover a new reading option. Another reason could be explained by the very nature of nonfiction books. They are considered a "custom fit for tighter schedules: for reading on buses, before bed, between classes, or even during TV commercials" (Jones, 2001, para. 7). My



Some students created scrapbooks as a part of their final research paper.

students began to see biographies as a viable genre whether or not they considered themselves readers.

## CONCLUSION

I recognize there will always be battles in our profession. And, I recognize that some fights are more important than others. Librarians shouldn't spend their time writing grants for items that many librarians would consider "extra" resources, while their research books grow old and out of date and their recreational reading programs cease to exist. However, when we motivate our most unmotivated students to become better readers, writers, and researchers and when a large chunk of our student population knows they can go to their library media specialist with their technology questions, then the benefits of technology help us avoid the negative alternatives: students who approach research projects with fear and trepidation; empty LMCs with no certified librarian; a biography collection that doesn't see much circulation; students who don't know how to use modern technology; and teachers who do not collaborate with the LMS on technology projects.

But, now, a new challenge faces Kitley Intermediate School and Franklin Township Schools. Now in its second year, the Digital Biography project has created students who know how to use the minute details of digital cameras; teachers have seen students who showed little interest in academics become excited about participating in the prop museum and digital camera sessions. I have observed their excitement produce something very valuable: success in biography research. Most importantly, I have witnessed students demonstrate a love of learning. We know the project is working, but we also know what happens after students leave Kitley Intermediate School: from the 7th grade to high school, students do not have access to digital cameras for projects. So where does this knowledge and excitement go? Unless parents purchase digital cameras for students, it is possible that these students' digital camera experiences occurred inside a Kitley Intermediate vacuum. While I am pleased and proud of the accomplishments the students made with learning and using digital cameras as fifth and sixth graders, I am burdened with the idea that only in my LMC will Franklin Township students have this opportunity. Many of the students have a gift with cameras; they have a new perspective on learning from behind the lens of the camera. But what will happen to their gift and desire to express their creativity once they leave the doors of Kitley?

*Ding:* In these moments, I hear the referee ding the bell. I realize that it's time for all of us to put on our boxing gloves and head back out to the center of the ring because student learning and productive media centers are worth fighting for.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julie Marie Moline is a library media specialist at Kitley Intermediate School in Indianapolis. She is currently training for a bike race at the Major Taylor Velodrome where she will complete against all of her students who have read eight Young Hoosier Books or more. She also teaches courses at IUPUI in the Writing Department and University College.