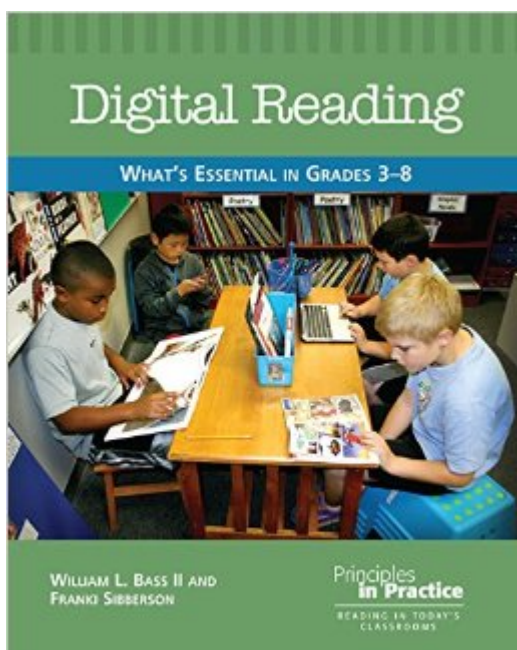


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Review of *Digital Reading: What's Essential in Grades 3-8*

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Have you ever wondered how to thoroughly integrate technology into your literacy curriculum? In *Digital Reading: What's Essential in Grades 3-8*, [William Bass](#), a school technology coordinator, and [Franki Sibberson](#), a third-grade teacher, offer readers ideas and strategies for using digital tools to help students become stronger readers of traditional and digital texts alike. Despite some problematic assumptions and elements, which I will discuss at the end of this review, this text is an excellent resource for teachers who want to support their elementary- and middle-school students' developing digital literacy skills and could also serve as a useful textbook for undergraduate- or master's-level education courses.

The book begins with a prologue of sorts: "[Reading Instruction for All Students: An NCTE Policy Research Brief](#)" (henceforth called "NCTE's Brief"), an overview of the stances that the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has taken on instructional policy, formative assessment, and professional learning for teachers in the realm of literacy education. This brief lays an important foundation for the book as a whole by stressing the importance of reading instruction for students in all grades – not just those at the elementary level – and clearly stating NCTE's commitment to helping teachers foster students' developing reading skills as well as their motivation to read. For example, NCTE encourages rich professional learning opportunities for teachers; implementing diverse methods of assessing students' literacy learning; and supporting students' developing skills by modeling reading strategies, reading a diverse range of literature, and – most importantly with regards to this book – exploring digital texts and multimodal ways of reading. Overall, this document is a clear source of inspiration for *Digital Reading*, and readers should be sure to closely examine this section before they delve into the rest of the book.

Chapter 1 delves into the definition of digital reading and the blending of traditional and digital literacies with a vignette about Julia and Marissa, two of Sibberson's third-grade students. On one hand, Julia is clearly comfortable engaging with digital texts – reading a variety of online texts frequently, regularly trying new digital tools,

trouble-shooting, and even publishing her own blog. On the other hand, Marissa, Julia's best friend, seems to enjoy using technology but simply imitates Julia's actions by reading digital texts superficially and hopping from one online activity to another with no clear direction or intention. How, the authors ask, do teachers help students like Marissa, who seems intrigued by the sparkle of technology but do not engage with digital reading in meaningful ways, acquire digital literacy skills like Julia?

After summarizing NCTE's brief, Bass and Sibberson (2015) state that teachers must use what they know about beneficial literacy pedagogy to seamlessly incorporate digital reading into more traditional literacy instruction practices. Furthermore, they insist that in order to integrate digital reading into literacy instruction, teachers must understand that digital reading is "ongoing and embedded, about understanding, active, intentional, flexible, and about choice" (p. 8). Doing so in grades three through eight, they argue, can deepen the literacy skills students are developing by solely reading traditional texts and help students become more critical consumers of digital media. The authors then wrap up the chapter by outlining three "anchor" terms (p.13) that will guide the following chapters: authenticity, intentionality, and connectedness.

Having established the definition of digital reading, Bass and Sibberson approach the practice of digital reading workshops in Chapter 2. The authors build on [Penny Kittle's](#) (2008) reading workshop model – a model that emphasizes 1) providing students with plenty of time to read in class, discuss their reading with classmates, and gauge their progress; 2) encouraging students to read texts that interest them across a wide variety of genres; and 3) scheduling regular student-teacher reading conferences for assessment, reflection, and support. Digital reading workshops expand on Kittle's model by allowing students to choose digital texts in addition to traditional texts. Students may also use digital tools – such as online discussion boards, [Google Docs](#), and e-book annotations – to respond to texts. Throughout the chapter, the authors include several charts clarifying the differences between traditional and digital reading workshops,

the roles that digital tools play in the workshops, and questions that teachers can ask students to deepen their understanding of their digital reading practices.

The concept of authenticity in literacy instruction shapes Chapter 3. When it comes to both traditional and digital reading, Bass and Sibberson assert, students “have learned to jump through the sometimes meaningless hoops of school, doing things for the sake of school rather than for the love of learning” (p. 28). To make reading more authentic with digital texts, students must have opportunities to choose what they read, bring out-of-school reading practices *into* school, and use reading to learn about topics that interest them and are relevant to their lives. These principles apply to digital tools as well – young learners must utilize them “in the midst of learning experiences, not as a separate experience” (p. 29). Meanwhile, teachers should also be transparent about their own digital reading practices. Sharing and modeling these practices for students can help them learn new ways to apply digital tools and also see that their teachers engage in meaningful reading practices as well. The chapter concludes with a “Voices from the Classroom” section, in which real teachers share their experiences with authentic digital reading, and the authors also introduce and describe several digital tools (e.g., interactive e-books, [Padlet](#), [Twitter](#), and many more) that students can use to respond to texts.

Chapter 4 explores intentionality, the careful consideration “not only about *what* [readers] choose to read, but also about *how* [they] choose to read it” (p. 46, emphasis in original). When interacting with digital texts, students are often faced with new and different tools and strategies that can be utilized to aid comprehension and response. To make the most of these texts and tools, students must learn to make deliberate choices about how to engage with them. Teachers should therefore guide young learners through a variety of strategies, “scaffolding [the] intentionality” of text choice and digital reading choices and tools (p. 48). Bass and Sibberson continue by examining the concept of connectedness in Chapter 5. Connectedness refers to readers’ understanding that the act of learning is a social and intentional partaking in communities of learning. In classrooms, connecting with others to support learning can take many forms. For

example, students can join with authors, teachers, and other learners around the world through social media like [Skype](#), class blogs, Twitter, and [Goodreads](#) book reviews, while they can also extend their thinking about reading by making text-to-text connections between traditional and digital texts. In both Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, additional “Voices from the Classroom,” descriptions of helpful websites, and charts of common digital text attributes and popular digital tools provide specific illustrations of activities and teachable moments that can support students’ developing intentionality and connectedness.

Having covered each of the three “anchor” terms, Bass and Sibberson turn to the topic of assessment in Chapter 6. When it comes to digital reading, teachers must be sure to assess whether their students are reading in authentic, intentional, connected ways while making sure that they are not simply assessing students’ proficiency in using “isolated technology skills” (p. 92). However, doing so does not need to be taxing, and teachers can rely on many of the same strategies they use to assess students’ traditional reading development. For example, the authors recommend interviewing students about their traditional and digital reading practices at the beginning of each school year – How much do you read (books, magazines, internet texts, etc.) every day? What kinds of traditional and digital texts do you read? Do you use e-readers or audiobooks? Formative assessments throughout the year – such as holding one-on-one student-teacher reading conferences during which students discuss their successes and challenges with traditional and digital reading – are also crucial. After explaining these and other assessment strategies, the authors share even more digital tools that can help teachers gauge their students’ progress.

Digital Reading wraps up by elaborating upon how technology can help students develop their literacy skills both at school and at home. While traditional schoolwork is “confined to the space of the classroom or the time constraints of the school day,” technology can help students continue learning at home and give parents better access to classroom activities. Additionally, schools can organize parent outreach events, during which teachers and administrators share information about digital learning tools, online safety, digitally mediated family-teacher communication that

can enhance home-school connections. Finally, the authors conclude by reminding readers that there is no magic formula for integrating digital reading into classrooms – teachers must experiment with the ideas and strategies presented in this book to find the right digital fit for their school contexts.

Overall, this book provides readers with a wealth of information about smoothly incorporating digital reading into elementary- and middle-school curricula. Vignettes from Bass, Sibberson, and several other practicing teachers explore the various successes and frustrations that can occur while helping students develop their digital literacy skills, providing readers with helpful examples of the rewards and challenges they might face, while the inclusion of specific websites, digital tools, and apps can provide educators with a multitude of ideas for classroom use. I also appreciate the authors' expanded definition of literacy – rather than arguing that we replace traditional reading with digital reading, Bass and Sibberson acknowledge the importance of both and insist that we must include both in literacy curricula. Meanwhile, they also stress critical media literacy, an important skill that students must hone in order to evaluate the constant stream of digital information they encounter every day. One of the most appealing features of *Digital Reading*, however, is its accessible writing style and handy tables, charts, and figures, perfect for busy practicing teachers or pre-service teachers approaching the world of digital literacy education for the first time.

Despite these positive points, certain aspects of this book gave me pause. First and most striking is the authors' [assumption that students and families everywhere have easy access to technology](#) – computers, e-readers, Internet, etc. Nowhere in *Digital Reading* do Bass and Sibberson acknowledge current research demonstrating that many families around the United States may not have digital tools or Internet access in their homes, nor do they allude to the reality that many schools around the country do not have enough digital devices for their students to share (Barrett, Moore, & Slate, 2014; Martin & Robinson, 2009; Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010). If students are not able to engage in digital reading at home or at school, how will they develop the important skills discussed throughout this book? Another problematic element is the index of digital tools that Bass and Sibberson recommend throughout the text. Although these tools might be helpful today, technology becomes outdated very quickly, meaning that readers who approach this book in five years may not find it very helpful. However, provided that NCTE releases updated editions of *Digital Reading* and readers engage with the text critically and ask themselves difficult questions about access to technology, I believe this book can still be a beneficial addition to any pre-service or in-service teacher's library.

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