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## Boys, Books, and Blogs

Technology offers a way to enhance reading, especially for young adolescent males.

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by Terri Hebert, Jeff Whittingham, Stephanie Huffman, and Steve Ward

*Today a reader, tomorrow a leader* –W. Fusselman

My eyes rest on a small boy perched on top of a desk in the long hallway. He has a book in his hand. The light streams in around him, but he is unaware of me or of the sunlight. He sees only the characters in his book.

This is a memory of a 4-year-old boy who loved to read books of all kinds and loved being read to. However, as he progressed through the grades, his love for reading diminished. By the time he graduated from high school, he rarely picked up a book except to move it from one location to another.

In today's society, the image of readers usually conjures up females. Where are the male readers in our culture? Where are the images, the role models that would provide encouragement to boys as they develop their love of reading? Why do teachers—even male teachers—struggle to engage boys in reading? And what can be done to reverse this disturbing trend?

### What the Research Says

Research documents that male children tend to fall steadily behind their female peers in school. The 2001 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, reported that fourth-grade girls consistently scored higher in reading literacy than fourth-grade boys. Other studies, including the National Assessment of Education Progress (Institute of Education Sciences, 2005), have reported similar findings.

Beliefs surrounding these discrepancies surface whenever teachers or librarians engage in the conversation. According to Smith and Wilhelm (2002), a comparison of boys and girls highlighted several key factors:

- Boys take longer learning to read than girls;
- Boys read less frequently than girls;
- Boys have difficulty comprehending narrative and expository texts;
- Boys place a lower value on reading as an activity;
- When boys do read, their choices are much different than those selected by girls; and
- Boys prefer to act out a scene or to make something as a response to their reading rather than talk about it.

Their action-oriented and competitive style of learning often works against boys in traditional classrooms. Teachers expect children to read quietly and librarians often ask patrons to keep noise to a minimum because others are trying to read.

In his book, *Guys Write for Guys Read* (2005), Jon Scieszka provides a collection of essays and short stories written by male authors especially for males. They include a plethora of “boy” topics, ranging from the joys of public flatulence to eating toenails. Scieszka attempts to explain what it is like to think and act like a male, while giving permission to his audience to explore their own maleness.

Scieszka also has tackled the issue of engaging boy readers by creating a Web site called Guys Read ([www.guysread.com](http://www.guysread.com)). It is an online literacy program that connects boys with the books they would like to read. The site contains a section titled Guys Read Voters, where visitors can recommend books. Scieszka's belief is that, with the appropriate incentive and

encouragement, boys will become better readers, which will result in them becoming better students and—ultimately—better guys.

The notion of integrating technology with reading recently piqued the interest of a group of faculty members at the University of Central Arkansas. This led them to conduct an in-depth study that includes an examination of the impact of an Internet blog developed for boys at a local middle school.

#### **Developing the Reading Blog**

As a middle school language arts teacher for a number of years, Steve Ward understood that requiring students to respond to statements such as, “This book reminds me of...” or “The character that I liked the most was...” served only to drain their creativity and reduce their involvement with the text. Without a list of prompts, students complained of not knowing what to write about. He recognized that many of his students were merely going through the motions—especially boys who already had been identified as reluctant readers.

The blog was his attempt at revving up the interest of male readers. “I knew my students were motivated to use the Internet,” he explained, “and I wondered if I could tap into that motivation to fuel reading and writing about the text they were engaged with.”

Ward’s idea seemed simple enough at first glance: find a group of willing middle school boys, gather the necessary copies of an interesting novel, get all the participants reading, and use the blog as a location for their responses. A volunteer book club, which included boys, was already in existence at the school. Once a week, for approximately 15 minutes, students would share books of interest with their peers and suggest titles for future readings. The blog seemed a natural extension for this activity.

No one could have anticipated the challenges that awaited Ward and his students. In the end, online security issues proved to be too much for the project. Because the participants were minors, parents had access to the blog’s contents. This resulted in considerable uneasiness among the student participants, and many were reluctant to share their thoughts openly and honestly with others.

Another major setback was the district’s unwillingness to allow students to access the blog during school hours, forcing them to log in from home. However, some did not have Internet accessibility while others simply refused to take the time outside of school. Although it is unfortunate that Ward’s effort (<http://guysbookblog.blogspot.com>) was not successful, it does provide a model for other educators who may find themselves in better circumstances.

Technology offers much to enhance the reading experience, especially for young adolescent males. Educators must continue to work to find and provide opportunities for them to connect with written text—to visualize the written word through art and drama and the visual images found on the Internet. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) note that boys who recognize the relationship between books and life are more likely to engage in, and respond positively to, reading.

#### **A Challenge for the Future**

In reflecting on the earlier image of a young boy reading in the hallway, I wish that his experiences in school could have invited him to explore the world of reading in a manner aligned with his male learning style. As an adult, given the opportunity to connect with books of his own liking, he found his way back to reading. However, how much more could he have gained if his teachers had understood the needs of the male reader?

Let’s not lose any more young readers in our zeal for maintaining the status quo. We must seek to engage all—both girls and boys—in the reading process.

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**Terri Hebert** is an assistant professor in the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Technology at the University of Central Arkansas. His e-mail address is [terrih@uca.edu](mailto:terrih@uca.edu).

**Jeff Whittingham** is an associate professor in the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Technology at the University of Central Arkansas. His e-mail address is [jeffw@uca.edu](mailto:jeffw@uca.edu).

**Stephanie Huffman** is an associate professor in the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Technology at the University of Central Arkansas. Her e-mail address is [steph@uca.edu](mailto:steph@uca.edu).

**Steve Ward** is a middle-level adviser in the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Technology at the University of Central Arkansas. His e-mail address is [stevev@uca.edu](mailto:stevev@uca.edu).