

# Reading Groups For Children And Pre-Adolescents In A Digital Environment. From Classroom To Library

Dr Tasos Michailidis<sup>1</sup>

*Department Of Archival, Library And Information Studies, University Of West Attica, Greece*

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## **Abstract:**

**Background:** The paper discusses the role of reading groups of pre-adolescents (11-12 years old). Reading groups provide a social context that encourages their members to interact and create a sense of community. More specifically, such communities that are implemented by libraries help young readers to cultivate the love of reading because their members have the opportunity to discover new genres and authors, and through this exploration to enhance their appreciation for literature.

**Materials and Methods:** In this context, the paper describes the implementation of a reading project -Haiku poems- that was carried out by a reading group of 12-year-old students of a Greek Model Junior High School in a synchronous digital environment. The project combined teaching literature and the role of library on developing reading skills and creativity. The approach proposes ways of capitalizing on children's collections in Public Libraries in order to promote reading. It adheres to modern approaches concerning reader-literary text relationship, experiential learning, collaborative learning as well as distance learning through the Webex platform by Cisco.

**Results:** It suggests that the collaboration of teachers and librarians in the digital space of the library is decisive in encouraging children to read literature and develop creative writing skills during collaborative tasks in a digital environment.

**Conclusion:** The implementation of creative activities using the resources that the library offers can cultivate aesthetic literacy in learners and facilitate collaboration and creativity.

**Key Words:** *Literature; Haiku; Reading groups; Public Library; Distance learning; Creative Writing*

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## **I. Introduction. Benefits Of Distance Education In Developing Love Of Reading**

Contact with literature in reading groups is a way of emotional expression, self-development, development of linguistic flexibility, cultivation of aesthetic education, social release of the existential anxiety of subjects and groups and a means of social integration (Grosdos, 2014). Reading as an active process and creative act reinforces the subject's attempt to shape, control and ultimately redefine previous versions of himself (Sawyer, 2007). These dimensions of reading literature show why literature is a main subject of Greek primary and secondary education, as well as of University Schools and Departments in the field of Humanities. The way that the reading of literature is approached in this paper, therefore, complements the mediation of the literary discourse that takes place in the context of formal education. Taking into account the entertaining dimension of reading and its beneficial contribution to the development of the children's and adolescents' personality, the educational processes we describe seek to help young readers develop reading habits that will continue beyond the school environment and the local library (Gournas, 2011).

This educational project draws on the interdisciplinary approach to the reading process and on modern literary theories that highlight the creative intervention of the reader during the interpretative approach of the literary text (Iser, 1978). In addition, it applies theoretical tools that emphasize the aesthetic unity of the literary text (Jauss, 1982) and suggests creative activities that help readers develop their creativity and collaborate effectively in a digital environment (Martin, 2008; Reeve, 2013). However, it can be entirely carried out in a School Library, Children's or Public Library environment with the physical presence of the members of the reading group.

In general, distance education describes educational processes provided to learners without being physically present in a traditional classroom. They are provided with access to educational materials by interacting with instructors and classmates remotely via the Internet. It is clear that the pandemic has highlighted the benefits, as well as the challenges, of this type of education. First, distance education makes education accessible to a wide range of people, who can participate in activities by overcoming physical barriers. Thus, as will be seen later on, flexibility is one of its main advantages, while online platforms allow for a variety of resources and a self-regulated learning (Holmberg, 2005).

Based on the above, the present reading activities reveal the benefits of distance education, trying to maintain the creative interaction sought in reading communities. The design assumes the collaboration of different teacher specializations and the involvement of a librarian and follows the spirit of the new Greek Curriculum for Literature in Junior High School (2023) which propose the involvement of the library in the educational process and strengthen the role of self-regulation in education. At the same time, it aligns with the newest trends of modern libraries to focus on social interaction with the local community and especially with the young audience, seeking to contribute with their collections to the cultivation of reading sensitivity and digital literacy (Dressman, 1997). In this sense, they focus on creating reading communities that seek to expand the meaning of individual reading and develop social skills of participants through activities of creative expression (Karakitsios, 2011).

In addition, they aim to enhance the acceptance of diversity and the promotion of the aesthetic character of literary reading through the heterogeneity of the interpretative approach, suppressing the traditional school framework that connects the reading process with school performance. Specifically, the teaching methodology described below is an attempt to combine Literature Theory, intersubjectivity, the teaching of different school subjects and creative expression in an educational environment that goes beyond the stereotypical traditional classroom, and this is the library. These fields interact in contemporary education, in order to encourage young readers to approach new knowledge and the educational nature of technology in an exploratory, experiential and creative way, while creative writing, in addition to being an aspect of Modern Greek Literature, is also an effective means for implementing interdisciplinary activities that showcase library's available educational media and its existing book collection (Cooper, George & Sanders, 1994).

The interpretative approach emphasizes creative expression activities and does not focus on text-centered exercises. More specifically, the participants -20 students-readers of a Greek Junior High School- through the reading of Haiku poems manage to realize the characteristics of the Greek urban, historical and geographical space, delving into its cultural and historical characteristics (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Holquist, 2014). At the same time, they understand the structures and specific characteristics of literary writing better, in order to experiment with the techniques and traditions of the literary code (Leahy, 2005).

Therefore, the educational goals of the reading activities echo the interdisciplinary nature of reading groups and are the following: a) to highlight the role of the reading club/group as an educational process that can contribute to the connection of formal education with libraries, b) to point out the importance of interdisciplinary planning in approaching the literary discourse in similar actions, c) to make the educational community aware of the extent to which creative writing is an appropriate medium to help young readers become emotionally involved and develop a positive attitude towards reading and d) to demonstrate the effectiveness of using digital tools to foster reading literacy in the era of distance education (Stauffer, 1970; Tilley, 2009).

## **II. Materials And Methods: A Reading Community With The Collaboration Of Educators And Librarians In A Webex Digital Class**

The lesson plan spans in 3 teaching sessions which correspond to 6 teaching hours (45 minutes each). It can take place entirely digitally, as well as in a blended learning environment: sessions can be held at school and the library component can be held on-line while the students are at school. In this sense, the use of the distance learning platform Webex is a realistic and effective way to familiarize students with the educational services of modern libraries (Keegan, 2013).

The lesson plan can, therefore, be implemented in various adaptations but always synchronously. It can: a) take place in the classroom or in the Informatics Laboratory, where the participants will be connected to the respective Public Library, so that they have access to its material, as well as to the expertise of the librarian, b) be applied entirely at the School Library, if there is one, and the teacher who coordinates it should also connect with the Public Library for use of further available resources - mainly because they can be properly supported by a specialized librarian, c) it is also possible for the group of students to have sessions at the nearest library, to experience what it is like to use a properly organized reading space and connect via Webex on their mobile phones to access the digital material their teachers (or the librarian) have uploaded or d) the whole process can take place exclusively on-line, after school hours, where every student (and the coordinating teachers) would be connected from their own home computer, while the librarian will be able to share relevant resources that are available in his/her library, as is the case in this paper (Martin, 2008; Loertscher & Achterman, 2002).

It should be mentioned here that Greek students are familiar with the use of Webex, since it was used as the main platform during the Coronavirus pandemic. In general, both the educational design and the specific digital educational environment lend themselves to a flexible pedagogical process, with the aim of providing the maximum possible reading experience. This particular teaching approach is aimed at readers with moderate to advanced reading performances for their age, but it increased creative readiness and familiarity with collaborative learning. It can be effectively adapted to audiences with medium to good language performance. It also foresees differentiated learning processes and therefore it can accommodate mixed-ability groups of participants regarding their reading interests and performances (Kotopoulos, 2013; Rosenblatt, 1994).

Regarding infrastructure, in case the project is implemented at school, it is necessary to have an IT Laboratory, or in case it is implemented by participants who do not share the same space, a PC/laptop with an internet connection. As regards the teacher specializations who will participate, it is necessary to involve a teacher of Modern Greek Language and Literature and an IT specialist, although several specializations could contribute: art teachers, historians, geography teachers, etc. On the other hand, the librarian must be trained in reading literacy techniques and the use of distance learning methods (Linell, 1998; Maingain & Dufour, 2002; Sumner & Tribe, 2008).

**Criteria for selecting the literary genre.** The Haiku is a three-line poetic form of only 17 syllables (5-7-5 per line) with a tradition in Japanese literature -it initially appeared in the 13<sup>th</sup> century- and a wide spread in Western and domestic literature (Rimer, 1988). It was chosen for the specific educational context, since it is versatile and easy for familiarizing students with creative reading and writing in a digital environment. Its characteristics, such as having nature as a frequent subject, its very short length, its playful character are only some of the elements that highlight its educational benefits, to be used as a teaching tool. In fact, this poetic genre leaves room for an interdisciplinary collaboration and interdisciplinary approach. As mentioned above, a number of specializations of the school or even the local community (historians, archivists, artists, folklorists, musicians etc.) can be effectively involved. For example, with the help of a musician, the poems to be read and analyzed or the poems created by students could be set to music (Maingain & Dufour, 2002).

Implementing part or all of this reading project in a digital environment will improve students' digital skills, information literacy, locating and processing reliable information on the Internet. In this way, technology acquires a new dimension and the library becomes another essential part of the school community in an innovative way. In any case, student readers will have the opportunity to collaborate and create in a playful manner and perceive a different use of technology, connected to reading literature (Cooper, George, Sanders, 1994).

The 20 students that this project was applied to, were divided into 5 mixed-ability groups of 4 students, each member of which was given specific responsibilities. However, the whole project did not focus so much on the analysis of the literary form but implemented a more open and creative experimentation attempting to promote the power of literary speech.

According to the New Curriculum for Literature (2023) and following a simplified form of the Transactional Model and the model of Reader Response Theory, the lesson plan was divided in three stages. Therefore, collaborative learning and the Interpretive Circle was organized in the following three phases that correspond to the three teaching sessions: a) preparation and initial reader response, b) refinement of reader response and c) extensions. The above phases are the simplified version of the four-phase Transactional Model and enable inter-artistic dialogue and creative expression to be effectively integrated into all three teaching sessions (Rosenblatt, 1994; Iser, 1978).

During the implementation, in addition to cooperative learning, experiential learning was used, as students approached the theory of the form of this Japanese art, familiarized themselves with important haikus and composed their own ones, using images and paintings of Greek landscapes and presenting them to the plenary. The coordinators' role was to make students feel safe and so that the students themselves were able to co-shape and manage an atmosphere of creative and aesthetic experimentation. Below is a detailed description of the phases incorporating cross-curricular and creative principles. Additionally, it is noted that due to the short form of the Haiku poem, the text-cluster approach (co-reading) is followed (Eisner, 2002; Kotopoulos, 2013).

### Description of the teaching approach

**Phase A: preparation and initial reader response (2 hours).** This is the students' first encounter with the genre of Haiku, therefore it is important that they feel its special charm, with the contribution of the library's digital material. Expressive readings and sharing of the poems to be studied is used, so that the participants feel the interpretative possibilities that this short form allows. In this phase, the participants are informed about how this reading activity will be implemented (Kanakis, 1987). The librarian is introduced to the reading group and s/he introduces the history of this traditional Japanese poetry through a playful activity. The objective is to feel the rhythm and beauty of the genre by reading both classic and contemporary haiku poems -even those that do not adhere to genre rules (Henderson, 1958; Toumanoudis, 1995). Multimedia supports the readings through images and/or animation.

Table 1: haiku
1. An old, silent pond... (Furu ike ya), Author: Matsuo Basso
2. On the winter (Fuyu no hi ya), Author: Natsume Soseki
3. In the chirping of the cicada (Semi no koe), Author: Matsuo Basso
4. A World of Dew (Tsuyu no yo wa), Author: Kobayashi Issa
5. I write, erase, write again... (Kesho no koto), Author: Kobayashi Issa

Sample activities:

Activity 1

Each group chooses a poem from Table 1 and they are instructed to use the Webex breakout rooms to discuss the feelings created by reading it, as well as comment on their theme (15 minutes). Then, they present their conclusions to the plenary room, exchange opinions and select which of the five they prefer and why (15 minutes).

Activity 2

The first four of the sixteen haiku by G. Seferis from the *Exercise Notebook* are recited expressively and the participants are invited to comment in groups (break-out rooms) on the differences and similarities they notice compared to the classic texts of the genre they studied earlier (15 minutes). They report their views to the plenary through their representative and a free discussion follows about which one they prefer and why (15 minutes).

- a. Drip in the lake...
- b. In plain zero ...
- c. In the museum garden...
- d. Be the voice... (author G. Seferis)

Activity 3

Creative speech production activity. The students in each group (via break-out rooms) are asked to create their own poems by completing the first two verses from the next 5 haikus by G. Seferis, so that they are related to Greek nature (15 minutes).

- E) ..... / ...../ look: corals.
- F) ..... / ..... / in the mirror.
- G) ..... / ..... / And you are bleating.

Then, the groups recite their poems in plenary and the other groups attempt to interpret the texts of their classmates, as well as commenting on how faithful they are to the structure of the particular form (15 minutes).

In general, suitable activities for the first session could be giving the opening line as an engaging beginning for the participants to continue or showing images in order to apply a variety of activities appropriate for the beginning, eg a small or bigger change to a poem or alternative solutions to a given idea (describe, for example, humorously the heat of the Greek summer) (Souliotis, 2012).

**Phase B: refinement of reader response (2 hours).** At this point students have already adapted to the interpretative approach with the support and encouragement of their teachers in the digital environment and they have understood the library's contribution to the process. They are given access to available resources and the librarian expertise that enhances the reading experience by offering useful information and access to multimedia. Participants are aware of the interplay between literature, nature, history, architecture, art history and society. So, in this second session, the participants will creatively approach a new series of interesting haiku poems with a variety of themes. Using paintings and images of various type of landscape (natural, urban, historical), the coordinators will help them to be get inspired and express themselves aesthetically (Kearney, 1998).

1. The light of a candle... (Kesa no hikari), Author: Yosha Buson
2. First dawn of autumn... (Hatsu aki no hi), Author: Matsuo Basso
3. An empty cicada shell ... (Kare-eda ni), Author: Kobayashi Issa
4. At times... (Toki wow koe), Author: Matsuo Basso
5. Three friends were playing ..., Author: Giorgis Pavlopoulos
6. Sketch the world and..., Author: Argyris Chionis
7. The mask is..., Author: Frosoula Kolosiato

At this phase the aim is to make young readers realize that nations as cultural systems are in a continuous interaction, since the evolution of the various art forms are a single continuum. With the activities of the second phase, a meaningful dialogue needs to be developed about how specific literary genres and works of literature maintain an open channel of communication with our own era because of their aesthetic value. It is important for the participants to experience the degree of expressivity of the genre and the humorous dimension that each creator can give it. The facilitators should incorporate nature-related audio-visual materials to spark the group's creativity (Dressman, 1997; Linden & Renshaw, 2004).

Sample activities:

Activity 1

Each member of the group chooses a poem from Table 2 and tries to synthesize a new poem made up from this and another member's chosen poem. Then, each pair reads their works aloud to the plenary or work with the other pair of the group to create a longer poem based on the theme or lyrics of the two (30 minutes with in-between feedback).

A major objective of such a process is the ability to analyze and synthesize a poem, a key feature of working on the poetic text. This approach constitutes a way of experiencing how significant each language choice is for the production of the aesthetic effect, without the stress of a school test or exam (Tilley, 2009).

Activity 2

The groups write one haiku poem of their own for each landscape category suggested by the four paintings of Greek landscapes that have been shared on the screen (see suggested images below) (20 minutes). The groups read their poems and discuss in plenary (20 minutes).



M. Economou, *The fisherman's house*, 1928 Hatzikyriakos-Gikas, *Athens*, 1940



Plaka, Athens

Mystras, Peloponnese

Activity 3

With the help of the librarian, participants choose the appropriate background music for each one (20 minutes).

Creative expression using various forms of art follows the cognitive and literary theories found in the common principle of accepting creativity as problem solving, which gives not only an aesthetic dimension to self-expression, but also a social one (Kalogirou, 2019).

**Phase C: extensions (2 hours).** In this final phase, participants are encouraged to read the produced texts individually, while they are motivated to continue exploring the haiku poems on their own initiative. Students are already warmed-up through key-word or semi-structured and variation activities based on well-known poems in the previous phases. Now, they are guided towards freer activities based on their reading experiences during the past sessions (Rosenblatt, 1994). Again, it is crucial they feel that literature is a means of shaping their ideas and reality.

Table 3: haiku
1. Seaweed from memories..., Author Tasos Korfis
2. Let me travel..., Author Antonis T. Papadopoulos
3. An oak tree..., Author Maria Hourdaki
4. Seats and prism..., Author Giorgos Rouskas
5. It's getting dark now..., Author Eleni Mousiadou

Sample activities:

Activity 1

Participants observe the two images of Greek landscape in their group and match the poems in Table 3 to each one, justifying their choice. Alternatively, they can create their own short story about one of the images in which at least one of the above poems is included as part of the story (30 minutes).



**Steni, Evia**



**Arahova under snow**

Activity 2

Participants create their own video-poem<sup>1</sup> per group (with the help of IT teacher and the librarian) or find images that will match one of the poems in this session (30 minutes).

Activity 3

Participants compose two haiku poems of their own, using the following words once, in order to highlight the features of Greek nature that they love the most: seagull, ruins, plain, swallow, pebble, rain. Alternatively, they can compose two haiku poems of their own about their birthplace or their village (30 minutes). These activities could be shared on their social networks.

### **III. Results**

The implementation of the lesson plan shows that the use of Webex and its tools, e.g. reactions, are useful to keep students interested, as long as a climate of trust has been cultivated. Most crucially, for each activity, appropriate time should be provided both for the activity to be finalized by the students but also for constructive feedback and positive reinforcement in the plenary. As a conclusion to the implementation a discussion about the role of literature and the usefulness of the library needs to be incorporated. Groups are also given the opportunity to digitally fill out an evaluation form regarding the whole process and how they experienced it. The librarian is a major asset in the application of this lesson plan, as s/he is the one to share additional resources for those interested in further reading the about haiku (Arvaniti, 2008).

Undoubtedly, the role of each facilitator (educator or librarian) in this approach to the interaction of literature and social experience is important, in order to develop a positive attitude towards reading. The interdisciplinary approach to the written text, and especially to the literary text, must be entertaining and psychotherapeutic for young readers. Ultimately, the implementation of creative activities in reading communities is linked, as seen in the case above, to the cultivation of a range of different linguistic, social and cognitive skills (Cooper, George & Sanders, 1994).

The role of the librarian and the effective collaboration with the educators even remotely in such a synchronous digital environment is critical to fostering participants' autonomy and self-expression. Especially in a distance learning environment the team of facilitators needs to adjust the interpretative approach to smoothly and constructively connect the individual readings with the collective discussion. Each educational technique for mediating a text is in a mutually complementary relationship with the rest of the teaching techniques and none of them can be a recipe for success in itself. Each has positives and negatives, and may be appropriate or less appropriate, depending on the subject, the participating facilitators and the learners (Sawyer, 2007).

The implementation presented adapted a reading group's sessions to the digital environment of Webex, because it is a familiar educational environment for Greek students, giving another dimension to the love of reading approach. Also, such a design facilitates differentiated learning techniques by exploiting heterogeneity as a positive factor. At the same time, similar ventures show that the learning – and teaching- remotely, despite its benefits, creates challenges (need for self-discipline, technological equipment etc.) that the face-to-face approach overcomes rather more easily. This shows that blended learning may be more appropriate for complex educational processes, such as creative reading and writing.

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<sup>1</sup> Video-poem is a poem in video form, a visual poem.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

At a time when School Libraries are not adequately staffed in the Greek education system, distance-learning initiatives allow for connecting schools with the institution of library. In this sense, the classroom extends its boundaries beyond the school premises and student-readers practise finding creative solutions and familiarizing themselves with the versatile useful space (physical or digital) of the library.

Children's libraries are specialized spaces within Public Libraries or independent libraries that specifically serve the needs and interests of young readers. Generally, they are designed to promote reading in a pleasant environment and cover a wide age range from infants to teenagers. In this sense, it is understood that love of reading does not begin with literacy, but with literary and other discourse stimuli through listening stories or even acknowledging the materiality of the book. And in this case, the interaction and connection of literature with other arts (e.g. music, drama) is important, because it can form increased internal motivations for visiting the library and reading literature. Although these play a very important role in the mental development of young readers, their use in Greece is not as frequent as it could.

The implementation of the lesson plan analyzed in the article suggests alternative ways in which the school community can connect with environments that promote reading and have the appropriate spaces, staff, and collections to support young readers' interests and bring out creative inclinations not possible to be entirely implemented in the classroom. The library space does not come to replace, but to complement the educational activities that begin at school, giving them a more social and dynamic character.

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