

Chapter 13

Critical and Creative Thinking: Embracing Xtranormal

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Our role as teachers includes enhancing the repertoires of literacy and communication practices available to our students (Comber, Nixon, & Reid, 2007). As a result, I often strive to incorporate activities in my courses that are authentic and relevant to my student's lives and/or professions that can help develop their literacy and communication skills. Every fall, I teach a master's level course on children's literature. In this course, I really want my students to respond to literature much like they expect their own students to do in their own courses. I have tried to do this a number of ways over the years. Recently, though, I found a tool called Xtranormal that is enabling me to do this better than ever before. In the following paragraphs, I briefly explain what Xtranormal is, how I use it, and how you might use it in your own classrooms.

What is Xtranormal?

Xtranormal (<http://www.xtranormal.com>), according to its website, is a "revolutionary, real time, movie making software." In my own words, though, I would describe it as a free Web 2.0 application that enables users to turn text into a movie. So basically if you can type, you can make an Xtranormal movie!

You start by deciding how many actors you want, you then write the script, design the scene, and direct the action. In a matter of minutes, you can convert text into a movie and then share it with the world. And the best part, students seem to love it! For instance, I had one student say, "Wow, my husband wondered where I was because I got so involved in this website. I was intrigued for two hours." Another student created four Xtranormal movies when he was only required to create one. His comment, "It's so cool." So the bottom line is, Xtranormal is engaging, rewarding, and addicting!





How I Use Xtranormal

As neat as Xtranormal is, I wasn't going to use it in my classes if I couldn't find a meaningful way to use it that supported my learning objectives. I use threaded discussions a great deal in my online and hybrid courses for students to discuss certain topics. I like having students respond to the readings in threaded discussions. But over the years I have realized that threaded discussions can get boring and that I need to provide a variety of learning opportunities for my students.

So, rather than setting up a typical threaded discussion to discuss children's literature, one week I asked my graduate students to select a favorite children's book from our reading list and create a book talk using Xtranormal. [A book talk is a brief oral presentation about a book. Teachers and librarians use them to stimulate and motivate children to read and to generate interest in a book (Hillman, 2003).] I did not demonstrate Xtranormal to the class, rather I gave them two weeks to investigate the site and come to class with relevant questions. I then had them post the URLs to their Xtranormal book talks in a threaded discussion and then asked them to view each other's book talks. My students were intrigued by Xtranormal. They repeatedly expressed the entertaining aspect of creating a short movie clip using Xtranormal. There

are several of my favorite Xtranormal clips from the children's literature class in Table 1.

Table 1. Xtranormal Book Talks

<p>LIZZIE BRIGHT AND THE BUCKMINSTER BOY</p> 	<p><i>Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy</i> http://www.xtranormal.com/watch/5631103</p>
<p>GINGER</p> 	<p><i>Ginger</i> http://www.xtranormal.com/watch/5649815/</p>
<p>BOOK TALK</p> 	<p><i>Skippey John Jones</i> http://www.xtranormal.com/watch/5658057/</p>
<p>MAUS BOOK TALK</p> 	<p><i>Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy</i> http://www.xtranormal.com/watch/5668007</p>

Other Instructional Uses of Xtranormal

Based on my experience and students reactions to Xtranormal, I have considered additional instructional uses of Xtranormal. Since this is a new medium for me, I am just beginning to learn how this site might be used effectively for instructional purposes.

But the following are some ideas I have on how faculty can use Xtranormal for a variety of instructional purposes.

- **Developing one's "Writer Voice":** Xtranormal could be an excellent tool to use to teach writing. As I viewed the clips, I could hear my students' "writing voice." When writing teachers focus on including one's "voice" in writing, this site could help students develop their writing voice.
- **Summarizing Key Concepts:** Another way to use this tool is to have students summarize key concepts in their reading. This would be much more inviting than outlining key concepts from texts and it might encourage students to actually watch the reading summaries of others. Students could include a written text for those learners who need to follow along, but the visual would be a nice change and inviting for audio learners.
- **Group Presentations:** You could put students in a group and have them collaborate and develop a group presentation using Xtranormal.
- **Weekly Introductions:** You could also use this as a way to introduce a week or unit in an online course. I'm sure students would rather watch an Xtranormal movie than read a list of activities that are due for a given week

Conclusion

The bottom line is that Xtranormal is an interesting site that you will definitely want to visit. It may be too intricate for some students and just the right inspiration for others. Giving students choices is vital. The difficulty for some students to access the site was evident. Sometimes when students wanted to post their completed product, the site was down. This caused frustration. Given enough time, though, all of my students were able to create a product that they were proud of. And they were all interested in doing more with Xtranormal. I am certain you will think of additional ways to use Xtranormal in your courses. I cannot wait to play with Xtranormal some more! Enjoy!

References

- Comber, B. Nixon, H. & Reid, J. (Eds.). (2007) *Literacies in place: Teaching environmental communications*. Newtown, NSW, Australia: Primary English Teachers Association.
- Hillman, J. (2003) *Discovering Children's Literature, third edition*. Merrill Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, NJ.

Bio

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