

TEXTPROJECT

Marla Mallette

The editors of *The Reading Teacher* had the recent opportunity to conduct an interview with Dr. Elfrieda “Freddy” Hiebert (PhD, University of Wisconsin), President and CEO of TextProject. Dr. Hiebert has had a long and successful career as a literacy educator, beginning as a teacher’s aide and progressing to professorships at several universities, including the University of Kentucky, the University of Colorado Boulder, the University of Michigan, and the University of California, Berkeley. She has published numerous journals and books, continuously making research available to educators. In 2013, she deservedly won the American Educational Research Association’s Relating Research to Practice Award. In addition to her impressive background in academia, Dr. Hiebert has gone far and above the call of duty in her service to the field of literacy and advocacy for teachers, and her site TextProject (www.textproject.org) is a testament to that. TextProject is the only website currently in existence with high-quality student texts and teacher guides that are *all* available for free download. TextProject provides a world of open-access resources for teachers, teacher educators, parents, tutors, and students, including texts for students, vocabulary lessons and lists for teachers, and professional development modules and videos. We were honored to have the opportunity to speak with such a tireless advocate in the field of literacy and are delighted to have the opportunity to share our conversation and some sample TextProject resources with you.

Editors: When was TextProject started?

Dr. Hiebert: TextProject was recognized as a nonprofit public benefit corporation by the state of

California in June 2010 and was recognized by the Internal Revenue Service as a 501(c)(3) organization in May 2011. I had used the name TextProject.org to post information related to my work in the decade prior to this point, but the work of TextProject as a nonprofit began in earnest in mid-2010.

Editors: When you first began your work with TextProject, what was your vision? What did you hope to accomplish?

Dr. Hiebert: The demands of literacy in the digital age have increased, and available evidence suggests that many students are not acquiring the levels of literacy required for these demands (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

All of the critical questions related to the learning and teaching of literacy have not been answered, but a substantial amount of research is available for guiding practice. Much of the evidence doesn’t get to educational leaders such as instructional coaches, teacher leaders, school administrators, teacher educators, and professional development providers. Further, many of the products and programs used for literacy instruction are not based on evidence.

TextProject is a response to the increased demands of literacy brought on by the digital age. Specifically, TextProject aims to provide educational leaders with resources for professional learning based on the best knowledge available about the learning and teaching of literacy. A second aim of the nonprofit was to provide evidence-based resources for use with students.

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The digital age that brings higher demands for literacy also offers new platforms and opportunities for supporting the dissemination of research knowledge and the creation of evidence-based educational responses. The aims of TextProject are to use those opportunities in providing resources for professional learning and also providing evidence-based resources for student learning.

We build on the opportunities of the digital age by providing open-access resources. There are no subscription or product costs pertaining to resources. Every resource at TextProject is available for free download and all are available for educational use, as long as no money passes hands.

This commitment to open-access resources underscores an important part of our vision. We wanted to provide exemplars and prototypes of evidence-based resources. I use the term *exemplar* to indicate “examples,” not in the sense of “the solution,” as has been the interpretation of the text exemplars in Appendix B of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Our intent was not to compete in the marketplace but rather to illustrate the form that resources might take for specific needs. For example, pictures to support understanding of particular concepts are important, but a “vault” of good pictures for use in classrooms was not available when we began our Word Pictures in 2012. Our resources are not intended to be comprehensive programs

“We build on the opportunities of the digital age by providing open-access resources.”

but rather to focus on areas where resources are needed and to illustrate the form that these resources can take.

Editors: As you reflect on your work with TextProject, do you feel you have accomplished what you set out to do?

Dr. Hiebert: The answer to this question is yes and no.

On the “yes” side: If success is viewed in terms of quantity, we have been highly successful in achieving our goals. On two quantitative indices, we’ve been highly successful. We’ve gone from 21,564 annual visitors in 2010 to 159,226 in 2014.

Even more remarkable has been the number of downloads of resources. In 2014, we reached the 2 million mark (2,178,112) for downloads of resources. These numbers are phenomenal—but even more so when considered from the vantage point that a single text downloaded by a teacher could result in many students reading the text, or a single article downloaded by a teacher educator could be read by many teachers.

On the “no” side: We have a long way to go, not just as TextProject but as a field. Approximately 33% of fourth- and eighth-grade students continue to perform below the basic level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

We’ve provided webinars, blogs, and articles at TextProject that show that the problem for all but a small percentage of below-basic students is automaticity and comprehension of text, not word recognition. We’ve also provided many exemplar texts as well as recommendations for other texts at our Pinterest site (<https://www.pinterest.com/textproject/>) to ensure that middle graders engage in a sufficient volume

“The biggest challenge involves reaching educational leaders who can benefit from TextProject’s resources.”

of reading to become automatic comprehenders of text. Yet, in response to poor performances of middle graders in California (the state in which I live), the State Board of Education has called for intervention materials that include decodable texts that repeat the cycle of the 44 phonemes for struggling readers in grades 4–8 (California Board of Education, 2014, p. 14). A substantial number of California middle graders will be required to go through decodable texts that are very similar to the ones that were part of their instructional regimen in kindergarten through grade 3. This example illustrates that we have a substantial amount of work remaining to ensure that educational policies and choices are made based on evidence.

Editors: What is the biggest challenged you have faced in your work with TextProject?

Dr. Hiebert: The biggest challenge involves reaching the educational leaders who can benefit from the resources at TextProject. TextProject isn’t the vehicle of a professional organization or of a corporation. That means every single visit to the website and download of a product depends on getting the word out to educators. How to reach educators on whom numerous demands are

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placed and who have so many options to pursue on the Internet remains our biggest challenge at TextProject.

The second challenge relates to maintaining funding to keep TextProject a source for educators. TextProject is a family nonprofit, which means that it is funded entirely by my family and me. We have taken on this commitment consciously, as a way to give back to a field that has given so much to me. As a first-generation North American, I recognize that my accomplishments in life reflect the educational opportunities that I have had in public schools and universities. Balancing consulting activities (which fund TextProject) with research and TextProject undertakings can be challenging.

Editors: What has been the greatest reward in your work with TextProject?

Dr. Hiebert: My biggest rewards come from e-mails sent by educators who describe the usefulness of the resources at TextProject for student and professional learning. That means a great deal. I'd prefer to know that struggling readers are reading better or that the journey into reading for young children who depend on schools to become more highly literate has been made easier. But it would take a substantial amount of investment to conduct studies that tie TextProject products with increased performance of students.

Editors: Can you describe what you do (daily/weekly) in your work with TextProject?

Dr. Hiebert: First of all, let me make it clear that I don't do all of the work myself! The costs of TextProject relate to the staff that works on the website and products. A number of part-time individuals contribute specialized

services—a webmaster, an individual who manages the social media and also getting resources published on the Web (formatting and also the behind-the-scenes work of getting material posted), and several interns who do various tasks (e.g., identifying pictures for our current Core Vocabulary initiative). In all, the efforts of these individuals add up to two full-time positions.

My work on TextProject takes two forms. One involves creating and consuming research. Evidence-based resources are central to the mission of TextProject. I want to be clear that all of the research does not have to emanate from TextProject principals, but ensuring that we maintain our research focus is essential. Research is the means whereby questions are answered. For example, the magazine-like articles—*FYI for Kids*—emanated from studies on reading stamina that I conducted with colleagues Guy Trainin and Kathy Wilson (Trainin, Hiebert, & Wilson, 2015).

The second form of work involves creating, maintaining, and making visible to educators the resources on the website. The unit for this is “a year.” We have an annual meeting with our board of directors, who have been chosen to ask questions and present a variety of perspectives. At the meeting (usually in December), we provide the board with a summary of accomplishments and our intended goals for the next year. Discussions with the board result in revisions and refinements of goals.

The goals for the coming year are parsed into quarters, months, and weeks by the time the New Year begins. On a weekly basis, I do a review of where we are in terms of our goals. This review leads to daily interactions with staff to ensure that activities are on track. I spend lots of time journaling—all done with a pen and pad of paper—as I review and

identify strategic activities. Just as readers need to be strategic to comprehend complex text, the president of a nonprofit needs to be strategic in identifying how best to ensure that students and teachers receive the support that is needed to bring students to high levels of literacy.

TextProject: Sample Resources

Due to the sheer number of resources available on TextProject, it is not possible to share them all in this piece. We encourage you to visit the site to see all that TextProject has to offer. However, to truly understand the power of this site, we wanted to highlight some samples of these resources. Thus, we asked Dr. Hiebert to select a few resources to share with the readership, along with a brief explanation of each item selected.

FYI for Kids



FYI for Kids (textproject.org/classroom-materials/students/fyi-for-kids/), a collection of engaging and high-quality magazine articles, is an exemplar of the texts that TextProject offers. Magazine articles are an essential part of the repertoire of classroom reading materials. These articles can be a source of

engagement for students and simultaneously support the development of the background knowledge that underlies strong comprehension.

FYI for Kids consists of complex text that covers critical content areas (art and music, human interest, language studies, science, social studies; see Figure 1), but the articles featured in *FYI for Kids* are different in one important way from most magazine articles: The texts vary in the percentages of rare (and likely unknown) vocabulary. The *FYI for Kids* texts are available in five complexity levels that have different percentages of rare words. Students can get more automatic with core vocabulary while developing background knowledge.

Word Pictures



Children, like adults, learn concrete words more readily than abstract words. A way to close the vocabulary gap for students (especially English learners and students of poverty) is to support

them in connecting written words and the concrete objects these words represent. TextProject's Word Pictures resource (textproject.org/classroom-materials/textproject-word-pictures/) provides a vault of carefully chosen pictures to assist educators in making such connections.

There are three types of word pictures: Core Vocabulary, Literature, and Content Areas. Figure 2 illustrates one of the Core Vocabulary sets, Places and Dwellings. The core vocabulary may consist of function words (e.g., *the, of*) and general academic words (e.g., *compare, relate*), but there are also prominent concepts in the core vocabulary that are picturable. A topic begins with a semantic map of the content within the topic (Figure 3).

Figure 1. An Illustration of a FYI for Kids!

Working Dogs

volume 1
issue 4



Dogs make great pets. You can run with them. You can play ball with them. You can teach them tricks. One of their most important jobs is to make you happy.

Some dogs, though, have real jobs. Their work is to help people do things they can't do on their own. One type of working dog is the Seeing Eye dog. Seeing Eye dogs are specially trained to help people

who are blind. The dogs help people lead independent lives by keeping them safe on the streets.

Seeing Eye dogs begin their training when they are puppies. They live with a volunteer family for about a year. In that time, the family gives the puppy lots of love and teaches it basic commands. The family also takes the puppy to many different places to help it feel comfortable with new people and in new places.

After they are about a year old, Seeing Eye dogs begin their training. They learn how to walk in a harness and how to safely lead a person. They learn to stop at

curbs, stay away from things that might trip a person, and keep the person from bumping into others.

Seeing Eye dogs also learn not to obey a command that might lead a person into danger. For example, if a person tries to walk in front of a car, the dog will stop or put his or her body in front of the person.

When a Seeing Eye dog is wearing a harness, it is working, so you shouldn't try to pet, feed, or talk to it. The dog needs to focus on keeping the person safe. If you would like to pet the dog, ask the person if it's okay.

These dogs help people who are blind live and travel about on their own. They help people hold jobs, shop, and visit others.

They help people lead independent lives. Seeing Eye dogs do a very important job.



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For more information about TextProject and *FYI for Kids*, visit textproject.org. v.1.0 © 2013 TextProject, Inc. Some rights reserved (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/>).

Figure 2. An Overview of a Word Pictures Topic

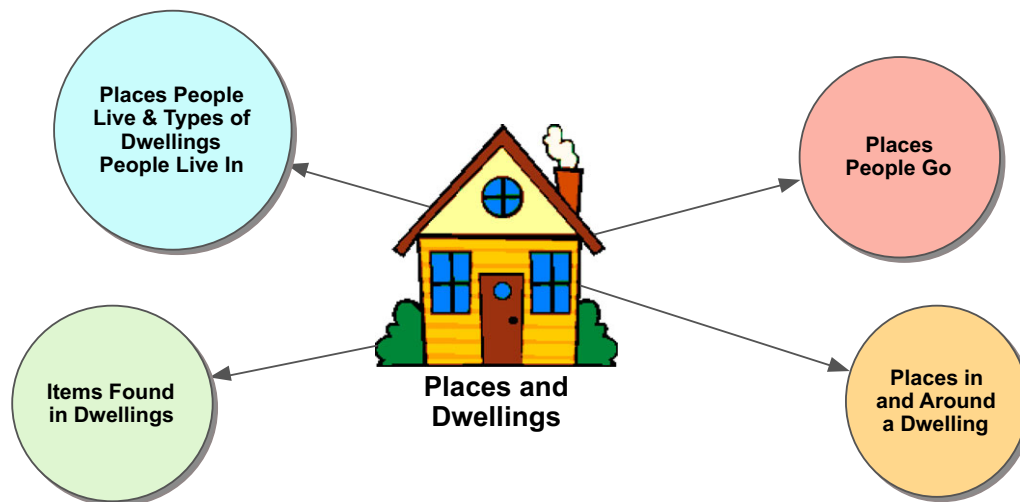
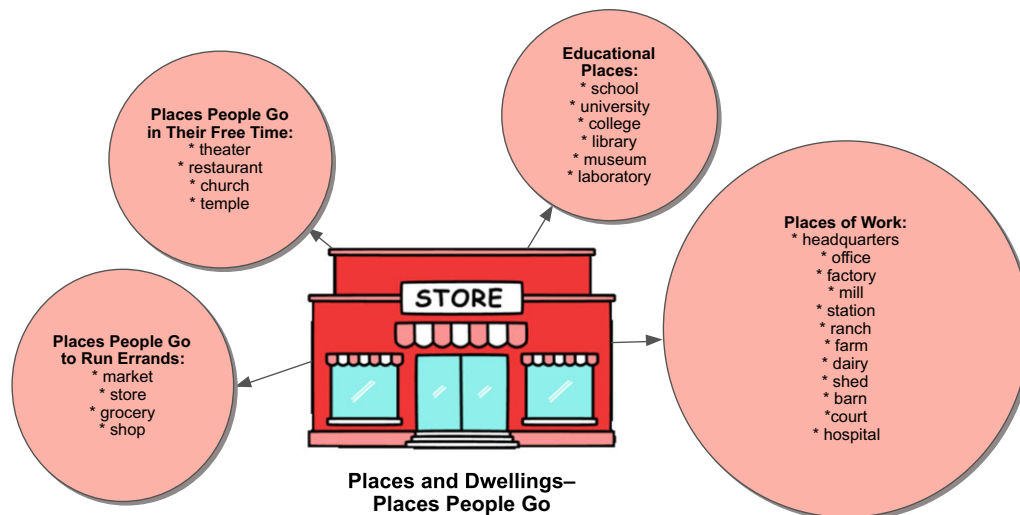


Figure 3. An Overview of a Sub-Topic within a Word Pictures Topic: Places of Work



Each of the nodes of a topic such as “Places People Go” has its own semantic map, followed by pictures for each of the words on the map, as exemplified by the Word Picture for *mill* in Figure 4.

Topics

Our resources are available as specific products (e.g., student texts such as *FYI for Kids*), but they have also been organized around general topics. Organizing resources based on topic is especially

useful for teacher education and professional development contexts in which the discussion explores a specific focus. The following are TextProject’s eight topics:

- Common Core State Standards
- Beginning Reading, Reading Automaticity/Fluency, and Core Vocabulary
- Comprehension, Close Reading, and Assessment
- English Learners and Literacy

- Knowledge and Informational Texts
- Reading Volume, Stamina and Silent Reading, and Summer Reading
- Text Complexity
- Vocabulary and Morphological Awareness

We’ve created a guide that gives an overview of the topic pages so that users have all of the resources in one place (textproject.org/library/)

Figure 4. An Illustration of a Word Picture from Places of Work Sub-Topic: Mill



Figure 5. An Illustration of a Topic Overview: Text Complexity

TextProject
Strategies, tools, and texts to bring beginning readers and struggling readers to high levels of literacy

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Text Complexity

Being able to read increasingly more complex texts has always been a driving goal of reading instruction. Often this goal has not been directly addressed in state standards and assessments. Things are different with the Common Core State Standards. The Common Core has paid increased attention to this feature of reading instruction by devoting an entire standard to text complexity—Standard 10.

As the name TextProject indicates, appropriate texts for reading instruction are at the center of our efforts. We have been studying texts and their effects on students' reading achievement and engagement long before the recommendations of the Common Core. There are numerous resources related to text complexity available for educators and we will continue to provide the most current answers to questions about text complexity.

Visit our [Pinterest board on Text Complexity](#) for an overview of our resources.

Text Complexity: Definitions & Distinctions

- 77 sec on [Text Complexity: What Makes a Text Complex?](#) (YouTube)
- [TextProject Answers: Text Complexity](#) (Text Matters)

Text Complexity & Instruction

- 7 actions teachers can take right now: [Text Complexity](#) (Text Matters)
- [Knowing What's Complex and What's Not: Guidelines for Teachers in Establishing Text Complexity](#) (Research Article)

Text Complexity & Vocabulary

- [Core Vocabulary & the Challenge of Complex Text](#) (Research Article)
- 77 sec on [Text Complexity: Accessible and Dumbed-down Text](#) (YouTube)

Text Complexity & its Measurement

- [Using Quantitative Measures of Text Complexity in Classroom Instruction: What's Appropriate? What's Not?](#) (Webinar)
- [The Text Complexity Multi-Index](#) (Text Matters)

professional-development/guides/textproject-topics-an-overview-of-top-resources/). The resources listed for a topic are not the only ones available at TextProject but are resources that are especially useful. The overview of one topic—Text Complexity—appears in Figure 5. The resources listed here illustrate well the material available at TextProject.

Text Matters



Text Matters (textproject.org/library/text-matters/) is a digital magazine for educators. The magazine consists of short articles that are written in an accessible style. Each article provides critical evidence and practical ideas for instructional implementation.

TextProject on YouTube

On our YouTube channel, TextProject offers well over 60 videos for professional learning (www.youtube.com/user/TextProject). The most popular playlist is the 77-second series. (textproject.org/library/videos-and-slideshows-2/videos-and-slideshows/77-seconds-on-literacy/). Each video covers the essential theme about a topic in reading education (e.g., What makes a text complex?) in 77 seconds.

Modules

What features influence text complexity for beginning and struggling readers? This module is part of a series of five lessons on text complexity and the Common Core State Standards (textproject.org/library/professional-development/teacher-development-series/) for use by

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Figure 6. TextProject CEO/President
Elfrieda (Freddy) H. Hiebert



educational leaders in preservice or inservice professional learning. This resource is the result of one of the collaborative relationships that we aim to foster at TextProject. Two outstanding teacher educators, Thomas DeVere Wolsey and Dana L. Grisham, were instrumental in creating the modules.

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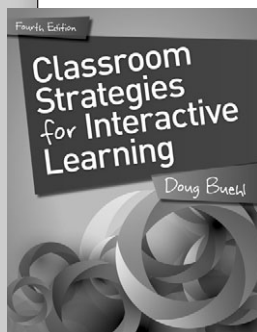
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