

**A Study of the Impacts of Literary Companion®
on Teachers and Their Teaching**



Report Prepared by

Dr. David L Silvernail

Director

Center for Education Policy, Applied Research and Evaluation

University of Southern Maine

July 2010

A Study of the Impacts of Literary Companion® on Teachers and Their Teaching

Dr. David L. Silvernail

University of Southern Maine

Introduction

Literary Companion® is a suite of online tools designed to link student learning, instruction, and assessment in vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and written analysis in the context of literature instruction. Developed for grades 7-12, Literary Companion includes a separate tool for each set of users:

- A **Student Edition** is designed to enhance understanding of classic and contemporary literature through the in-depth, interactive study of ten passages culled from each text in the Literary Companion library. For each passage, students must complete a series of vocabulary and reading-comprehension exercises, and then respond to a writing prompt. All activity is tracked by the program. Upon completion of the literature unit, students take a full set of final assessments.
- A **Teacher Edition** provides teachers with access to all of the activity and assessment data generated by the Student Edition. It scores all vocabulary and reading-comprehension exercises and quizzes automatically, while giving teachers the ability to score and comment on students' writing within each passage and on the final essay.
- An **Administrator Edition** which provides school- and district-level administrators with real-time access to the final-assessment scores in vocabulary, reading comprehension and writing in the Student Edition.

In addition, the program developers have created a centralized online scoring system (COSS) that allows teachers to submit their students' essays in Literary Companion for double-blind scoring by trained external readers.

Literary Companion has been developed and pilot-tested over several years by teachers and program developers. In 2009-10, Literary Companion was field-tested more systematically with a group of twenty (20) teachers. Dr. David L. Silvernail, director of the Center for Education Policy, Applied Research, and Evaluation at the University of Southern Maine, supervised this field test, collected and analyzed data, and prepared this report. Dr. Silvernail has over 30 years of experience conducting similar studies and research on a variety of programs, including over 10 technology-based programs.

Field Test Sample

At the invitation of the program developer, 20 teachers registered to participate in the field-test study. Approximately 65% of these teachers had been teaching over 10 years, and most were teaching either Advanced Placement or College Preparation courses during the field test. Six out of ten teachers reported they rated themselves as comfortable and functional computer users, over one-half reported using a web browser more than 10 times per day, and 85% indicated they believed computers are an important part of classroom instruction.

As part of the field test, teachers were asked to complete online questionnaires, which were designed to collect information about different components of Literary Companion and the usefulness and value of this tool to the teachers. Fourteen (14) of the teachers completed the Core questionnaire, and nine completed the Common Assessment questionnaire after using at least one of the common assessments.

Findings

The Core questionnaire contained 19 items clustered around several features of Literary Companion, including: (1) the usefulness of various features; (2) the value of various features; and (3) an overall rating of the program. Approximately two-thirds of the respondents indicated they used Literary Companion both in their classroom instruction and as student homework assignments. One teacher remarked, *“I find it a great companion for independent reading work so students can work at an individualized pace and then meet at certain junctures to discuss the book.”* Another said, *“In discussion groups, I often have students revisit earlier writing assessments to see if their opinion has been changed or is enhanced by further development of the text.”*

Over nine out of 10 teachers reported that it was extremely easy to set up Literary Companion for use with their students, and an equal ratio thought the Teacher Edition was easy to use. In terms of specific features, over 90% reported that they found the Class Report feature “Useful” or “Extremely Useful”, 10 of the 14 teachers rated the vocabulary exercises as a valid method for students to learn vocabulary, and over 85% of the teachers reported that the Reading Comprehension exercises and analysis increased student comprehension. One teacher remarked, *“I loved it. The questions are thought-provoking and hit a variety of learning levels. It can easily be differentiated. Not all kids have to do all the work.”* Equally, a large majority of the

teachers found that the Writing Prompt in each passage was both an effective means of formative assessment, and that its use helped students improve their writing.

Respondents were asked several questions about assessment components of Literary Companion. Over 90% reported that the Quick Quiz at the end of each literary passage was “Valuable” or “Extremely Valuable”, and a majority indicated that the vocabulary pre-tests and post-tests were easy to administer and valuable in assessing student progress.

Teachers were also asked about the final summative assessments. The Reading Comprehension final assessment was deemed as valuable and easy to administer, and the Writing final assessment was given similar marks by the teachers. In addition, teachers reported that the five-category rubric for the Writing assessment was useful and comprehensive, over 90% indicated the Final Writing assessment served as a valid summative assessment, and an equal percentage of the teachers thought that the formative writing assessments at the end of each passage helped improve students’ performance on the summative writing assessments.

Teachers who chose to submit their students’ essays to the COSS were asked to provide additional feedback by completing a second six-item questionnaire. Eight teachers completed the second questionnaire. Half of the teachers indicated they preferred a score for each of the five categories in the scoring rubric, and the remaining teachers would like an overall holistic score to complement the scores from each of the five categories. All thought the ability to submit to the COSS was a good additional feature of Literary Companion, and all of the teachers felt the scoring rubric helped them in differentiating instruction.

Finally, all of the teachers were asked to provide an overall rating of Literary Companion. All teachers gave the program good or excellent ratings. Typical teacher comments included:

- *“Our classes are heterogeneously grouped, so we need to differentiate for the high-ability students. This program is fantastic for Honors Challenges.”*
- *“This is great support for high achievers and average students as well. This program also has a great value for support classes and special education.”*
- *“I absolutely adored having the privilege to use Literary Companion! Immediate results of the reading analysis questions were incredibly helpful, and it was wonderfully facile to keep myself organized through the use of this program...”*

Over 90% of the teachers stated that they would definitely recommend Literary Companion to other teachers. Particularly telling was the fact that all the teachers rated Literary Companion as

“High” or “Extremely High” in its ability to improve their literature instruction, and their students’ learning.

Summary

In summary, the evidence from the field test of Literary Companion is very encouraging. Teachers reported that the program and its various components were easy to learn and use, and that the program improved and/or enhanced their curriculum and instruction. Most importantly, teachers felt that the program improved their students’ learning. Thus the evidence indicates that Literary Companion is an effective suite of online tools for improving both instruction and learning. It is a good example of the way in which technology may be integrated into classroom instruction, and because of its features, it is an excellent example of how technology may be used effectively in helping teachers improve their students’ learning.