
Meaning-making and literary literacy in digital classrooms: Student engagement with local literature

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ABSTRACT

Literature learning in digital classrooms presents opportunities and challenges for the development of literary literacy and student engagement. This study aims to explore students' literary literacy and engagement and understand their meaning-making processes when interacting with local literature in digital literature learning. The study employed a mixed methods approach with an explanatory sequential design. Quantitative data were collected through questionnaires administered to 78 eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 2 Dompu between March and May 2025 to measure literary literacy, student engagement, and perceptions of local literature. Qualitative data were obtained through interviews, students' digital written responses, and classroom observations, which were analyzed to elaborate the quantitative findings. The results indicate that students' literary literacy and engagement are at moderate to high levels, with affective engagement being the most dominant dimension, while critical reflection and cognitive engagement are limited. Qualitative findings reveal that the depth of students' meaning-making of local literature is correlated with their engagement levels and influenced by pedagogical design and multiliteracies practices within the digital classroom. The study highlights integrating local literature and reflective instructional design to enhance literary literacy in digital learning contexts.

Keywords: Literary literacy, student engagement, meaning-making, digital literature learning, local literature

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INTRODUCTION

The transformation of education toward digital learning environments has fundamentally reshaped how students engage with literary texts (Herda et al., 2023; Milyakina, 2018). On the one hand, digital classrooms offer opportunities for more multimodal, collaborative, and flexible literacy practices (Schmidt & Molin, 2024; Yap & Gurney, 2023). On the other hand, a growing body of research indicates that literature instruction in digital contexts often becomes overly oriented toward technical procedures and task completion, thereby limiting opportunities for reflective engagement and deep meaning-making with literary texts (Leproni, 2025; Simsek, 2020). This condition poses a significant challenge for the development of literary literacy, particularly at the lower secondary level, where students are at a critical stage of cultivating aesthetic sensitivity, interpretive competence, and critical reflection.

Literary literacy extends beyond the ability to comprehend narrative content and encompasses the capacity to interpret, appreciate, and critically reflect on textual meaning in relation to readers' personal, social, and cultural experiences (Smagorinsky, 2016; Sutriani, 2025). In digital classrooms, literary literacy practices become increasingly complex due to the integration of multiple representational modes, including digital texts, online written responses, and virtual discussions. The multiliteracies framework emphasizes that literacy learning in the digital era must attend to contextual diversity, multimodal practices, and learners' active participation in meaning construction (Alvarez-Valencia & Castro-Garces, 2025; Mcwilliam, 2009). However, existing studies suggest that student engagement in digital literature learning tends to be predominantly affective and participatory, while cognitive engagement requiring analytical and critical reflection remains comparatively underdeveloped (Bond et al., 2020; Capone & Lepore, 2022).

Within this context, local literature holds strategic potential as a contextualized and meaningful pedagogical medium. Local literary texts embody values, lived experiences, and cultural representations that resonate closely with students' everyday lives, thereby facilitating emotional engagement and more personal meaning-making processes (Firdaus, 2025; Kearney, 2012). Nevertheless, in digital learning practices, local literature is often marginalized by the dominance of canonical texts or widely circulated generic materials that are perceived as more universal and more easily accessible (Katili & Malik, 2025; Nurlaeli & Susilo, 2025). As a result, the dimension of locality, which should serve as a pedagogical strength in literature instruction, remains underutilized, particularly in digital environments that require context-sensitive instructional design (Fuad et al., 2020).

This study is situated within the context of Indonesian language instruction at SMP Negeri 2 Dompu, a public lower secondary school that has integrated digital learning into literature education. Dompu, as a region rich in local traditions and cultural values, provides a relevant setting for examining how local literature is interpreted by students in digital classroom environments. The inclusion of this local context is not intended as an ethnographic description, but rather as a pedagogical and theoretical justification for examining how cultural proximity between texts and learners influences student engagement and meaning-making processes (Kathy, 2010; Pacheco et al., 2019). In this sense, locality is positioned as an analytical lens through which students' experiences intersect with broader digital literacy practices.

Despite the substantial growth of research on literary literacy, student engagement, and digital learning, studies that explicitly integrate literary literacy, text-based meaning-making, and the use of local literature within digital classroom contexts remain limited. Much of the existing research prioritizes technological affordances or quantitative learning outcomes, while giving insufficient attention to how students actively construct meaning when engaging with literary texts rooted in their own cultural contexts (Baddane & Ennam, 2024; Dahlstrom, 2022). This gap underscores the need for research approaches that not only measure levels of literacy and engagement but also examine the meaning-making processes underlying these outcomes.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore students' literary literacy and engagement in digital literature learning and to examine how students construct meaning when interacting with local literary texts. The study seeks to provide a comprehensive account of the relationship between students' engagement levels and the depth of their meaning-making processes. Therefore, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) How do students demonstrate literary literacy and engagement in digital literature learning? (2) How do students construct meaning when interacting with local literary texts in digital classroom environments? (3) How is the depth of students' meaning-making related to their levels of engagement in digital literature learning? Theoretically, this study contributes to the field of digital literary literacy by integrating reader-response perspectives with the multiliteracies framework. Practically, the findings are expected to inform the development of more reflective, contextualized, and literacy-oriented designs for digital literature instruction.

METHOD

This study employed a mixed methods approach using an explanatory sequential design, in which quantitative data collection and analysis were conducted in the initial phase, followed by qualitative data collection and analysis to explain and elaborate the quantitative findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This design is particularly appropriate when researchers seek to use qualitative data to provide deeper explanations of initial quantitative results. It aligns with the purpose of the study, which is not only to identify students' levels of literary literacy and engagement in digital literature learning, but also to gain an in-depth understanding of students' meaning-making processes when interacting with local literary texts. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data was carried out at the interpretation stage to generate a comprehensive and contextualized understanding of literary literacy in digital classrooms.

The study was conducted at SMP Negeri 2 Dompu, a public lower secondary school that has integrated digital learning into Indonesian language and literature instruction, during the second semester of the 2024/2025 academic year (March - May 2025). In the quantitative phase, 78 eighth-grade students were selected through purposive sampling based on their active participation in digital literature learning, as indicated by consistent attendance, timely submission of digital assignments, and active engagement in online discussions. Purposive sampling is appropriate when participants are selected based on specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives. This sample size is

considered adequate for descriptive survey-based educational (Tleubay et al., 2025). In the qualitative phase, 12 to 18 students were purposefully chosen based on their engagement levels (high, moderate, and low) identified in the quantitative results. Additionally, two to three Indonesian language teachers who were directly involved in digital literature instruction participated as informants to provide complementary pedagogical perspectives.

Quantitative data were collected using a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire designed to measure students' literary literacy and engagement in digital literature learning. The literary literacy instrument covered interpretive understanding, aesthetic appreciation, and critical reflection, while student engagement was measured across cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions (Baddane & Ennam, 2024). The questionnaire also included items addressing students' perceptions of the use of local literature in digital learning, particularly regarding text relevance and cultural familiarity. The instruments were developed through an extensive literature review and were subjected to content validity evaluation through expert judgment. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with coefficients of 0.70 or higher indicating acceptable internal consistency.

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with students and teachers, analysis of students' digital written responses to local literary texts, and classroom observations of digital literature instruction. The use of multiple data sources enabled triangulation, thereby enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Coleman et al., 2021). Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns of literary literacy, student engagement, and perceptions of local literature, which were then used to classify students into engagement categories for the qualitative phase. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following several systematic stages. First, all interview transcripts, students' digital written responses, and classroom observation notes were transcribed and organized to enable familiarization with the data. Second, initial open coding was conducted to identify meaningful units related to students' engagement, interpretation, and responses to local literary texts. Third, similar codes were grouped into broader categories to generate preliminary themes. Fourth, these themes were reviewed and refined by comparing patterns across different data sources, including interviews, written responses, and classroom observations. Throughout the analysis, particular attention was given to aesthetic and efferent responses based on Reader-Response Theory as well as multimodal literacy practices within the multiliteracies framework (Morgan & Nica, 2020).

Finally, data integration was conducted at the interpretation stage by comparing and connecting quantitative and qualitative findings. Integration at the interpretation level is a common strategy in explanatory sequential mixed methods designs (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Patterns of engagement identified in the quantitative phase were further explained through qualitative analysis of students' meaning-making processes and digital instructional practices. This integrative approach allowed the study to explain how and why different levels of student engagement are associated with varying depths of meaning-making in interactions with local literature, thereby producing a holistic and contextualized understanding of literary literacy in digital classrooms

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The results begin with quantitative findings to describe general patterns of literary literacy and student engagement in digital literature learning, followed by qualitative findings aimed at explaining and elaborating these patterns through an analysis of students' meaning-making processes in relation to local literature.

Literary Literacy and Student Engagement in Digital Literature Learning

Descriptive analysis of questionnaire data indicated that literary literacy and student engagement in digital literature learning were at moderate to high levels. Overall, students exhibited higher affective engagement compared to cognitive engagement, suggesting that digital literature learning effectively fostered interest and emotional connection, yet did not fully promote deep analytical and critical reflection.

Regarding literary literacy, interpretive understanding and aesthetic appreciation received higher mean scores than critical reflection. These findings suggest that most students were able to interpret basic textual meaning and appreciate aesthetic elements, but still faced limitations in developing critical

reflection on the social and cultural values embedded within the texts. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for literary literacy, student engagement, and perceptions of local literature in digital learning.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Literary Literacy, Student Engagement, and Perceptions of Local Literature

Variable	Dimension	Mean	SD
Literary Literacy	Interpretive understanding	3.74	0.62
	Aesthetic appreciation	3.81	0.59
	Critical reflection	3.48	0.67
Student Engagement	Cognitive engagement	3.55	0.64
	Affective engagement	3.89	0.56
	Behavioral engagement	3.72	0.61
Perception of Local Literature	Relevance to students' lives	3.92	0.53
	Cultural familiarity	4.01	0.51

Students' perceptions of the use of local literature, specifically Doro Tambora, Doro Bata, and Danau Satonda, in digital learning were positive, particularly regarding the relevance of texts to their daily lives and their cultural familiarity, indicating that local literature was perceived as contextualized and meaningful within the digital classroom.

Based on engagement scores, students were categorized into high, moderate, and low engagement groups, which served as the basis for participant selection in the qualitative phase. The distribution is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of Students by Engagement Level

Engagement Level	Number of Students	Percentage
High	26	33.3
Moderate	31	39.7
Low	21	26.9

Students' Meaning-Making of Local Literature in Digital Classrooms

Thematic analysis of qualitative data obtained from student and teacher interviews, students' digital written responses, and classroom observations generated several themes representing variations in students' meaning-making processes when interacting with local literary texts in digital classrooms. Three major themes were identified: (1) aesthetic - reflective meaning-making, (2) limited interpretive meaning-making, and (3) literal task-oriented meaning-making. These themes corresponded closely with students' levels of engagement identified in the quantitative phase. Consistency across multiple data sources strengthened the credibility of the findings through triangulation.

Theme 1: Aesthetic - Reflective Meaning-Making (High Engagement)

Students with high engagement tended to construct aesthetic and reflective meaning when interacting with local literary texts. They actively connected events, characters, and values presented in the stories with their own personal experiences and broader social realities. In this pattern of response, local literature functioned as a reflective medium that enabled students to negotiate meaning between the fictional world of the text and their lived experiences.

Several students expressed emotional resonance and personal reflection when discussing the narratives. Their responses demonstrated that literary meaning was constructed not only through comprehension of textual events but also through the integration of personal memories and cultural understanding.

Data 1:

"This story reminds me of my family's experiences, especially how they face difficulties in life."
(Student S8)

Data 2:

"The values in this story are still highly relevant to life in my community."
(Student S14)

Students with moderate engagement generally demonstrated interpretive understanding, but critical reflection and connections to personal experiences were not consistently developed. Meaning-making tended to stop at general message comprehension without deeper social or cultural elaboration.

Theme 2: Limited Interpretive Meaning-Making (Moderate Engagement)

Students with moderate engagement generally demonstrated interpretive understanding, but their meaning-making processes remained relatively limited. They were able to identify the main message or moral value of the story; however, deeper reflection and personal connections were not consistently developed. Meaning-making at this level tended to stop at general comprehension of the narrative message without further elaboration of its social or cultural implications.

This pattern suggests that although students were cognitively involved in reading and responding to the text, their engagement did not fully extend to reflective or critical interpretation.

Data 3:

"I understand the story's message, but I haven't thought about connecting it to my own life."

(Student S22)

Students with low engagement tended to construct literal, task-oriented meaning. Their responses focused on recounting story content or completing assignments within the digital platform, without reflective exploration.

Theme 3: Literal Task-Oriented Meaning - Making (Low Engagement)

Students with low engagement tended to construct literal and task-oriented meaning. Their responses were primarily focused on recounting the content of the story or completing assignment requirements within the digital platform. In these cases, literary texts were approached mainly as academic tasks rather than as opportunities for reflective interpretation.

Students' written responses often reproduced basic narrative information without deeper analysis or personal engagement with the text.

Data 4:

"This story is about a character who struggles for their family."

(Student S31)

Data 5:

"I wrote answers according to the assignment questions."

(Student S35)

These responses indicate that students with low engagement interacted with the text at a surface level, emphasizing task completion rather than meaning negotiation or reflective interpretation

Teacher Perspectives and Multiliteracies Practices in Digital Literature Learning

Interviews with Indonesian language teachers and classroom observations indicated that the digital learning environment mediated students' meaning-making. The use of digital texts, online written responses, and digital discussions enabled multimodal engagement and student dialogue. However, the effectiveness of these multiliteracies practices depended heavily on instructional design.

All three Indonesian language teachers observed that cultural proximity in local literature enhanced students' initial interest and engagement, but did not automatically result in critical meaning-making without structured guidance. Representative statements from the teachers are presented below:

Data 6:

"Students are more interested when the text relates to their lives, but critical reflection still needs to be guided through planned questions and discussions."

(Indonesian Language Teacher 1)

Data 7:

“While students enjoy culturally familiar stories, guiding questions and discussion are essential to help them critically analyze the text.”

(Indonesian Language Teacher 2)

Data 8:

“Engagement is higher with local stories, but reflective meaning-making does not happen spontaneously; instructional scaffolding is required.”

(Indonesian Language Teacher 3)

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The integration of findings showed that patterns of engagement identified quantitatively aligned with variations in the depth of meaning-making revealed qualitatively. High affective engagement served as an initial trigger for aesthetic meaning, while cognitive engagement played an important role in promoting critical reflection on local literary texts. Local literature functioned as a catalyst for engagement, whereas multiliteracies practices in digital classrooms determined whether such engagement developed into reflective meaning-making or remained at a literal level. Table 3 summarizes the relationship between engagement levels and students’ meaning-making characteristics.

Table 3. Relationship Between Engagement Levels and Students’ Meaning-Making of Local Literature

Engagement Level	Dominant Meaning-Making	Response Characteristics
High	Aesthetic-reflective	Connects texts to personal experiences and cultural context
Moderate	Limited interpretive	Understands general message with implicit social reflection
Low	Literal task-oriented	Focuses on text content and assignment completion

Summary of Findings

Overall, the findings indicate that literary literacy and student engagement in digital literature learning were at moderate to high levels, with affective engagement being the most dominant dimension. Cognitive engagement and critical reflection were relatively lower. Qualitative findings showed that variations in student engagement correlated with the depth of meaning-making, ranging from aesthetic-reflective to literal task-oriented interpretations. Furthermore, the digital classroom environment and multiliteracies practices mediated whether student engagement developed into reflective meaning-making or remained superficial. These findings provide an empirical basis for further discussion of the theoretical and pedagogical implications of literary literacy in digital classrooms.

Discussion

Building on prior research in digital literature learning and student engagement (Alhebaishi et al., 2025; Coyle & Meyer, 2023; Kack, 2019), this study situates itself within the ongoing academic conversation on how digital classrooms mediate literary literacy and meaning-making processes. The findings of this study indicate that students’ literary literacy and engagement in digital literature learning are at moderate to high levels, with affective engagement emerging as the most dominant dimension. This pattern aligns with prior research suggesting that digital environments are more effective in stimulating students’ interest, emotions, and participation than in promoting deep cognitive engagement (Li et al., 2024; Mujallid, 2024). The predominance of affective engagement in this study suggests that digital literature instruction at the lower secondary level has successfully fostered students’ emotional connection with texts, while challenges remain in developing critical reflection and more complex literary analysis.

From the perspective of Reader-Response Theory, variations in students’ engagement levels directly correspond to the depth of meaning-making processes they construct when interacting with local literary texts. Students with high engagement tend to produce aesthetic and reflective responses, wherein textual meaning is negotiated through the interplay of personal experiences, cultural values, and the fictional world presented in the text. These findings support Rosenblatt’s assertion that literary meaning is not inherent in the text but emerges through an active transaction between reader and text within a specific context. Conversely, students with low engagement tend to position literary texts as task objects,

producing responses that are largely literal and efferent, as also observed in studies of task-oriented literature instruction (Kack, 2019).

Local literature played a significant role in this study as a catalyst for affective engagement and initial meaning-making. The cultural proximity of local literary texts to students' lived experiences facilitates emotional resonance, strengthening their connection with the text. These results support the argument that texts rooted in learners' cultural contexts have greater potential to foster personal and reflective meaning-making (Coyle & Meyer, 2023; Rapanta et al., 2021). However, this study also contributes to the theoretical understanding of Reader-Response Theory by showing how cultural proximity and students' engagement levels dynamically interact to produce varied meaning-making outcomes in digital classrooms. However, the findings also indicate that cultural proximity alone is insufficient for producing critical meaning-making. Without structured pedagogical guidance, high affective engagement may plateau at surface-level appreciation rather than developing into deeper social and cultural reflection.

Within the multiliteracies framework, the findings underscore that digital literacy practices do not automatically result in meaningful literature learning. Although digital texts, online written responses, and virtual discussions create opportunities for multimodal engagement, their effectiveness largely depends on pedagogical design and instructional intent. This aligns with Cope and Kalantzis' argument that multiliteracies require deliberately designed learning experiences that integrate modes, contexts, and reflective practices, rather than mere technology use (Kalantzis & Cope, 2024). The findings further support critiques of digital literature instruction that overemphasizes technical or administrative aspects, thereby reducing the potential of literature as a space for dialogue and negotiation of meaning (Leproni, 2025).

Theoretically, this study extends the scholarship on digital literary literacy by demonstrating how student engagement, meaning-making processes, and textual locality interact in digital classrooms. The integration of Reader-Response Theory and the Multiliteracies Framework enables a more holistic understanding of how students construct literary meaning within contextualized digital learning environments. Practically, the findings imply the need for digital literature instruction designs that not only utilize local literature as textual resources but also explicitly foster critical reflection through open-ended questioning, dialogic discussion, and guided multimodal literacy activities. In this way, digital literature learning can function not only as a means to enhance engagement but also as a platform for strengthening reflective and meaningful literary literacy among students.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that students' literary literacy and engagement in digital literature learning are generally at moderate to high levels, with affective engagement emerging as the most prominent dimension. These findings indicate that digital classroom environments have the potential to foster students' emotional connection with literary texts, particularly when the instruction incorporates local literature that resonates with students' personal experiences and cultural contexts. However, the results also reveal that students' cognitive engagement and critical reflection remain relatively limited, suggesting that meaning-making in literature has not yet fully developed to a deeper and more reflective level.

Qualitative findings show that variations in students' engagement levels correlate with differences in the depth of meaning-making regarding local literature. Students with high engagement tend to construct aesthetic and reflective meanings, whereas those with moderate and low engagement exhibit more limited or literal interpretations, primarily oriented toward task completion. These results underscore that local literature serves as an initial catalyst for engagement and meaning-making, but its effectiveness is strongly influenced by pedagogical practices and instructional design within the digital classroom.

Theoretically, this study contributes by reinforcing the relevance of Reader-Response Theory and the Multiliteracies Framework for understanding literary literacy in contextualized digital learning environments. Practically, the findings imply the need for designing digital literature instruction that consciously integrates local literature, reflective activities, and structured multiliteracies practices to promote cognitive engagement and critical meaning-making. Although the study is limited to a single school context, the findings provide an empirical foundation for future research and the development of digital literature pedagogy that is more sensitive to cultural contexts and learner needs.

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