

Literacy in the Making

Showing how the ‘maker movement’ has a place in all disciplines

by Laura Fleming

In most people’s minds, the “maker movement” in education is associated with STEM-related concepts and technology-based activities. There is good reason for that; it’s an approach to project-based learning (PBL) that encourages experimenting, building, and playing with different concepts. However, my entry point into this hot trend has been primarily through the unusual route of literacy.

This maker movement isn’t necessarily something new. For years in my library, I have allowed opportunities for my students to play and tinker with reading and writing. As a library media specialist, I felt that I had the scope and the affordances to make that possible, to enable activities that were outside of the sometimes strict classroom regimen. Those early experiences were my first attempts at creating a maker culture.

I have always regarded myself as a student of learning. I started collecting secondhand education books during my first years of teaching. I learned early on that educational theories and practices are cyclical and things once old are eventually new again, often reappearing under the guise of a new name. One of my favorite books in that collection—and the one that led me to tinkering with literacy—was called *If You’re Trying to Teach Kids How to Write, You’ve Gotta Have This Book!*

by Marjorie Frank. The playfulness of the writing is reflected in its whimsical graphics and nonlinear structure. The author herself writes about the “joy that fooling around with words” has added to her life. I remember distinctly how just looking at this book made me want to have fun with reading and writing with my students.

Putting it into action

Students are most accustomed to stories in a linear structure. To expose them to a different way, I often read children’s books with nonlinear narratives to my elementary students. One of my favorites is *Black and White*, written by David Macaulay. Picture books such as this have their own logic. After examining texts that don’t need to be read sequentially from beginning to end in strict order, students become more aware of the innovative possibilities for their own writing.

Another favorite of mine is *Inanimate Alice*, written by Kate Pullinger and produced by Ian Harper. This “born-digital” story has an “open text” construction and deliberately allows opportunities for student co-creation. The story unfolds in episodes that can either be read individually, sequentially, or in any order. My students enjoyed creating their own next episodes by crafting their own narratives, using various tools and resources, print and digital, or even remixing the *Inanimate Alice* assets to tell an original story.



Students at work during Fleming’s session of the Mozilla Maker Party (photo courtesy of Hive NYC Learning Network)

The maker movement encourages children to imagine, create, and build. My students did this during our “choose your own adventure” unit, which was based on the video game *Roller Coaster Tycoon*. We kicked off our unit by going on virtual roller coaster rides. We then read a book based on the game and had fun picking our path and choosing our endings. The participatory nature was highly engaging. Students then used websites to design and test their own roller coasters. Some used the app Inklewriter and others chose to write their stories in print. No matter the medium, students thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

The perfect example of a story that moves through the continuum of creating, but with literacy as the inspiration, is *Skeleton Creek*, written by Patrick Carman. This hybrid text is told half in print and half in video. Similar to *Inanimate Alice*, it tells stories across multiple media platforms. This transmedia story helped to move my students from consumption to creation and sparked a mash-up of experiences. The process became less about the task of writing and more about telling stories by leveraging traditional elements and new technologies to shape their narrative. Students designed multimedia reading experiences that fused a story with video, games, and puzzles.

Embracing a growing trend

Following these experiences, I decided to formalize the concepts into a makerspace learning experience. Last year, I was invited to participate in the Brooklyn Storymakers Maker Party organized by the Brooklyn Public Library and Hive NYC Learning Network. At the event, kids had the opportunity to create online comics, design video games, make stop-motion animation, and more. The event was a part of Mozilla Maker Party—one of hundreds of events around the world where people become makers.

With *Inanimate Alice* as our mentor text, we worked with students to create postcards that characters

in the story might send to the main character Alice. Using the Mozilla Webmaker tool Thimble, kids remixed postcards using digital media and the Web. The tool allowed the children to remix their favorite digital postcards by modifying HTML and CSS right in their browser. Instantly, they were able to see the results of their work. Each postcard was written as a #25wordstory, a process of writing created by Kevin Hodgson that lent itself well to our activity. The kids’ creativity was awesome and they were all proud to share it through social media. Many left that event excited to read further episodes and try out other tools such as Popcorn Maker and X-Ray Goggles.

It was after this event that I decided to designate an area in my library as a makerspace. Unveiled last school year, it includes a 3-D printer, Legos, electronics to experiment with at the “Take Apart Station,” and more. A string of imaginative experiences led up to this and set the stage for creativity and making. I believe this maker movement is one that all educators need to embrace. The incredible affordances of new media allow for opportunities to create a “maker culture” in our schools like never before. This is true whether you have a formally designated makerspace in your school or not.

The word makerspace for me is really simply a metaphor for enabling opportunities for your students to create, imagine, and build, and what better springboard for that than stories? Stories fuel and ignite the imagination. ■

Laura Fleming (larfleming@yahoo.com) is a library media specialist at New Milford High School in New Jersey. A K–12 educator for 16 years, she focuses on the development of interactive and transmedia storytelling, and runs the blog www.worlds-of-learning.com.



The makerspace created by Fleming in her New Jersey high school

