Children's Literature in an Electronic Age

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Hidden treasures: Discovering new experiences with story on the Internet

*T*he Internet and other new forms of information and communication technology (ICT) have entered our worlds, changing the very nature of literacy (Leu, 2000a; Leu, 2000b). As you finished our first sentence, we suspect you may have been thinking something we hear nearly every day:

> "Of course a computer will never replace curling up on a couch with a good book on a cold, rainy day."

Embedded in your response is one of the more powerful and enduring images for any literacy educator. The image conjures up memories of moments spent with Virginia Hamilton, Katherine Paterson, Dr. Seuss, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Lois Lowry, Stephen King, Cynthia Voigt, and many other fine authors. We share these memories and we share this image. Nevertheless, we also know the world of story is changing in important ways, just as it has always changed in the past and will continue to change in the future. In this article we want to share a few thoughts about the changes we see taking place as story is redefined on the Internet.

Consider a few observations about the new worlds of literature available on the Internet:

◆ Today, one of the more widely read authors among first and second graders is Alex Balson, a young child in Australia. *"Alex who?"* you say. Many first graders know that Alex and his father have created a wonderful series of Australian adventures at *Alex's Scribbles* <http://www.scribbles.com.au/max/>. More than 4,000,000 visitors have explored Alex's stories in the past few years. The Internet empowers children as it provides special opportunities for us to learn from the stories of children.

◆ New forms of literature circles are emerging on the Internet as students from countries around the world exchange responses to a common work of literature via e-mail. These conversations create special learning opportunities for your classroom. Most importantly, students come to understand how one's culture shapes very different interpretations to the same work of literature.

◆ Many classrooms are exploring a powerful, new plug-in called *Shockwave.* This can be downloaded to any computer and allows your students to listen to talking storybooks freely available on the Internet at locations such as *Hiyah.com* <http://www.hiyah.com/main_page.html>.

◆ Some classrooms are using children's literature as the centerpiece for important social service projects. Visit Gino Sangiuliano's and Rebecca Reinalda's multi-grade classroom <http://booksontapeforkids.org/>. These teachers in Rhode Island have students select outstanding works of literature, prepare an oral reading on tape, and then send the book and the tape, along with photos and biographies of the readers, to children's hospitals in nearly every state in the U.S. Their young students learn important lessons about making our world a better place.

These are just a few examples of how the Internet is transforming the nature of story experiences. Many, many more take place each day as classrooms create new definitions of literature, exploring the opportunities the Internet provides for enriching their story lives.

"YOU CAN'T KNOW WHERE YOU ARE GOING UNLESS YOU KNOW WHERE YOU'VE BEEN."

When we think of story, most of us immediately think of a book, a work of children's literature. This has not always been true. The nature of story has changed throughout history. Children, listening to oral storytellers, were inspired by literature long before books appeared. Whether shared by bards in Europe or griots in Africa, people gathered to hear and be entertained by the very first form of literature-- oral literature.

When book technologies first appeared, traditional oral literature was challenged in important ways. For oral literature, the threatening technology was the printing press, enabling one to permanently embed a story in a form that transcended time and space. The challenge to oral literature presented by new technologies in the 1500's is somewhat similar to the challenge faced by book technologies today as the Internet continues to expand our definition of story with resources that enable us to appreciate stories in new and powerful ways.

What appears clear is that story adapts and, with time, the definition of story expands. Today, story can mean an oral story through a storytelling experience, a story enjoyed through a book on that couch, or a story constructed by a child in Australia and enjoyed by children all over the world on a computer. Story has more definitions than that which appears between the covers of a book. Just as we have discovered the joys to be found while reading a book on a couch, so too will we discover new ways to enjoy story with new technologies such as the Internet. In fact, we believe that story becomes even more powerful with Internet technologies in at least two ways: first, the Internet expands our story worlds with extensive resources immediately available to us and our students; and second, the Internet connects our story worlds in new and powerful ways.

THE INTERNET EXPANDS OUR STORY WORLDS

The Internet provides us with many more resources, immediately available at our fingertips, for creating powerful new ways to enrich our understanding of authors and their stories. These vast resources provide new opportunities for expanding our responses to literature, helping us to understand story in far deeper and more extensive ways.

The Internet contains many central sites (Leu & Leu, 2000) or portals for literature. These contain extensive sets of links to exceptional literature resources, organized logically so that you can easily find the information you seek. Here are several:

The children's literature Web guide
<http://www.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/index.html>

This is the best starting point for your exploration of literature resources on the Internet. David Brown, a librarian at the University of Calgary has created this wonderful resource for us all.

The reading zone of the Internet public library
<http://www.ipl.org/cgi-bin/youth/ youth.out.pl? sub=rzn0000>

A great resource for exploring interviews of authors, books, online stories, resources for parents and teachers, and much more. Stop by and browse a bit through this online library.

Kay Vandergrift's children's literature page
<http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/special/kay/childlit.html>

Maintained by Rutgers University children's literature professor, Kay Vandergrift, this site provides links to children's literature and exceptional literature and learning connections.

The children's book council
<http://www.CBCbooks.org/>

This is a useful resource for exploring information from publishers about their works of children's literature.

As teachers explore these new resources for story in their classroom, they almost always find author and illustrator sites to be especially useful to them in the classroom. These provide information for *Author Talks* and extension activities after reading a story in your classroom. You may wish to visit some of these sites to see the great resources that authors are now making available to extend your students' story experiences:

Jan Brett	<http://www.janbrett.com>
Eric Carle	<http://eric-carle.com>
Virginia Hamilton	<http://www.virginiahamilton.com/>
Patricia Polacco	<http://www.patriciapolacco.com/home.html>
Katherine Paterson	<http://www.terabithia.com>
Avi	<http://www.avi-writer.com>
Authors and illustrators on the web	<http://www.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/authors.html>

Especially useful are the many new sites that help us enjoy the most traditional of story experiences, oral storytelling. The Internet is causing a resurgence of this traditional story form, providing us with new ideas for incorporating storytelling into our classroom curriculum. Take a few moments to explore some of these exceptional resources:

The art of telling stories
<http://www.seanet.com/~eldrbarry/>

This site provides ideas about useful techniques for learning how to tell stories. Contacts with online story resources and websites, storytellers, and associations devoted to oral literature are available at this resource developed by Barry McWilliams.

Black storytellers alliance
<http://www.blackstorytellers.com>

The purpose of this site is to maintain the art of storytelling as a primary source for positive instruction and reinforcement of the rich beauty embodied in the telling of oral tales.

Resources for storytellers
<http://www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/rstory.html>

Part of the *Children's Literature Web Guide*, this site brings together many links to online stories, storytelling resources, and tips for storytelling.

IASL: Storytelling resources on the Internet
<http://www.hi.is/~anne/storytelling.html>

Developed by the International Association of School Librarianship (IASL), this site provides storytelling resources for school librarians.

Story arts online
<http://storyarts.org/index.html>

Created by storyteller and author, Heather Forest, this site includes information on storytelling in the classroom, lesson plans and activities, articles on storytelling, and a curriculum ideas exchange.

Finally, there are several sites that contain complete activities ready to be immediately integrated into your classroom. For K-12 literature experiences, the best of these is **Cyberguides: Teacher Guides and Student Activities** <http://www.sdcoe.k12.ca.us/score/cyberguide.html>. This site is organized by grade level around exceptional works of literature. Each contains links to Internet sites, classroom-tested lessons, activities, and evaluation strategies. Each lesson contains four Internet experiences for students to complete that lead to a deeper understanding of the story they are reading. This is a wonderful resource for every teacher, and provides the best model we know for appreciating the evolution of the story experience on the Internet.

THE INTERNET CONNECTS OUR STORY WORLDS

Just as surely as the Internet expands our story worlds by putting new resources at our fingertips, the Internet also connects our story worlds. It enables us to construct new opportunities to connect with others engaged in story experiences and, in the personal communication that results, enriches our lives in new and powerful ways. Traditionally, stories have been shared within small, local communities and have been a means for maintaining parochial, social bonds. With the Internet, story is a vehicle for discovering the entire world through the people that inhabit our planet. It enables us to forge new understanding and new social bonds that transcend family, local, regional, and even national boundaries. With the Internet, the potential exists for story to be the basis for establishing a truly global community.

Perhaps the most remarkable example of this may be seen at *Book Raps* <http://rite.ed.qut.edu.au/oz-teachernet/projects/book-rap/>, a location in Australia that coordinates discussions of literature experiences between classrooms around the world. Cherrol McGhee, a teacher at the Hillview State Primary school in Queensland, puts you together with other classes reading the same work of literature (K-12) so that you can exchange responses. As you do so, you and your students come to understand how other cultural experiences lead to very different responses for the same work of literature. At *Book Rap*, story is the starting point for discovery about others in many parts of the world.

Similar experiences may happen if you visit other classrooms, discovering the story experiences they present on their classroom Web pages. Often this leads to e-mail conversations about these experiences or the use of their story resources in your own classroom. Consider, for example, the case of Maggie Hos-McGrane at the International School

in Amsterdam. Her sixth grade class embarked on a study of creation tales and myths using the Internet and other resources. In their journeys, students met many other students around the world and discovered many outstanding resources which they posted at their project site *Creation Stories* <http://www.best.com/~swanson/creation/cstorymenu.html>. Now, classrooms from around the world visit their Web page and use this curriculum resource in their own work. Nearly every day, Maggie's class receives an e-mail message from students and teachers who use their Web page. It has initiated many new friendships and conversations about the role of story in one's life.

Maggie's experiences are not unusual. We see it happening every day on the Internet as students post their projects at a classroom Website and as others encounter these resources. The Internet helps us to learn from one another. Story is often the vehicle for this learning.

If you wish to see additional examples, simply visit classrooms of teachers such as these: Fred Roemer's fifth grade class in Florida <http://www.pb5th.com/index.htm>; David Leahy's fourth grade class in Beaverton, Oregon <http://www.beavton.k12.or.us/Greenway/leahy/leahy.htm>; or Terry Hongell and Pam Taverna's second grade class in the Hudson River Valley of New York <http://www2.lhric.org/pocantico/tubman/tubman.html>.   At each location, you will see the power of story at work, connecting others around the world in wonderful ways.

Another way in which the Internet serves to connect our story experiences is through an instructional model called Internet Project (Leu & Leu, 2000; Leu, in press). One of the most popular Internet Project is Flat Stanley, a project developed by Dale Hubert, a Grade 3 teacher in London, Ontario, Canada <http://flatstanley.enoreo.on.ca/>. This project is based on the book, **Flat Stanley** by Jeff Brown. In this wonderful story, a young boy, Stanley Lambchop, discovers the special advantage of being flat after he has been flattened by a falling bulletin board--he can be mailed in an envelope and visit any place on Earth. This leads to all kinds of wonderful adventures.

In most Flat Stanley projects, small groups make a Flat Stanley on paper and contribute several entries in a journal about his experiences. Then they arrange with a collaborating class to receive their Flat Stanley by mail. The recipient class adds several journal entries describing Stanley's experiences with them and return Flat Stanley and the journal back to the sender. Sometimes, a class will plan a route for Flat Stanley with several classes in a chain hosting Flat Stanley, reading the previous entries, and creating their own journal entries before sending Stanley on his way. After visiting a host of locations, Flat Stanley returns home.

Many classrooms send Flat Stanley journal entries by e-mail to all classrooms participating in the project. Thus, a new journal entry arrives each morning via e-mail describing the adventures Stanley had the previous day. Similar projects have emerged with stuffed animals that travel between classrooms. Each is a special opportunity to forge new relationships around story.

Another model for Internet Project has been developed by Susan Silverman in New York. Susan forms collaborative teams of classrooms over the Internet to build a Web project together, often around a story. Students in each classroom create projects and share them with their participating classrooms. Susan coordinates the development of these resources, bringing new meaning to the saying, *"Many hands make light work."* After the project is completed, any classroom can use the curricular resources that have been constructed. If you are reading **Stellaluna**, for example, you may wish to visit Susan's work at *Stellaluna's Friends* <http://www.kids-learn.org/stellaluna/index.htm>. The full range of the literature response projects developed by Susan is available at her home page (http://kids-learn.org/>.

Finally, we should also point out what is probably the largest single project, built around story and linking hundreds of thousands of children in classrooms around the world, *The Read In* <http://www.readin.org/mainmenu.htm>. The Read In Foundation organizes an annual celebration of story, putting authors and children together after extensive preparation by all parties. It is an amazing demonstration of the power of the Internet in transforming and enriching traditional story experiences with the new literacies of our children's future, connecting each of us to one another through story experiences.

LEAVING OUR COUCHES

Throughout history, story has transformed lives. At the same time, we have also transformed story through the manner in which we present it and through the technologies we have used to exchange it. From oral storytelling to published books of children's literature, to the new experiences with story on the Internet, we have shaped story experiences as much as they have shaped us. In each era, the definition of story and the response opportunities that exist expand in important ways.

Today, the new technologies of the Internet make possible even richer story experiences than we have previously enjoyed. It is not that the Internet replaces our book reading experiences on that metaphorical couch we all cherish. Instead, the Internet may entice us off our couch to discover new aspects to our story experience and to share those experiences with others around the world. If you leave this article and begin to explore some of these wonderful resources, we will have succeeded in our task. We believe the Internet increases the potential for story to transform our lives, providing us with new opportunities to understand ourselves and to understand others around the world.

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