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Want Dav Pilkey to show you how to draw dumb bunnies? Using the Internet to acquaint children with authors and illustrators of children's literature

As a former elementary school teacher of grades one, two and kindergarten, I made a special effort to include a great deal of children's literature in my language arts program. I found that focusing on a specific author or illustrator each week was an effective way to organize this effort. Just as adult readers have favorite authors such as John Grisham and Toni Morrison, children can also have certain authors or illustrators whom they prefer over others.

Each week I presented a well-known author or illustrator of children's literature such as Dav Pilkey, Audrey Wood, Jerry Pinkney or Eloise Greenfield to my students. I placed a picture of him or her on our author/illustrator bulletin board in the classroom and lined my chalkboard ledge with many books by that author or illustrator. On Mondays, I gave an introduction of the author or illustrator and told the children personal information and interesting facts about him or her. During storytime each day I read several books by the author or illustrator of the week.

REASONS FOR CONDUCTING AUTHOR/ILLUSTRATOR STUDIES

There are several reasons why I chose to integrate author and illustrator studies into my language arts program. Rosenblatt (1976) describes response to literature not as answering a series of questions but as a transaction between the reader and the text. The nature of this transaction depends on the approach the reader takes to the text, focusing the reader and making an impact on how he or she responds to the text (Spiegel, 1998). I wanted my students to connect with the books that they read and be able to respond to them in meaningful ways. For example, Marc Brown, the creator of the Arthur books, has three children named Eliza, Tolon and Tucker.

In all of the Arthur books except the very first one, Marc Brown hides the names of his three children in the illustrations. After I explained this to my students they began to respond to the Arthur books in a different way.

According to Spiegel (1998), students who participate in reader response approaches move from being passive readers who are relatively "curious" about text to readers who take the time to think about, wonder, and reflect upon what they have read.

Hepler (1989) wrote of working with a primary teacher who wanted to share the books of author/illustrator Donald Crews with her class. The primary teacher told her students basic facts about Donald Crews (ex. information about his family members, where he lives, etc.). Next she pointed out Crews' book dedications, a place where the author often mentions his family and other special friends.

EXAMPLES OF STUDENT RESPONSES
AS A RESULT OF AUTHOR/ILLUSTRATOR STUDIES

Her students then began looking for dedications on their own and tried to figure out what they meant. In the book, **Carousel** by Donald Crews, he dedicates the book to MAMANNINAMY. Because they knew something about Crews' family, the students were able to pick out the names of four special people: Mama, Ann, Nina and Amy. Donald Crews has a wife named Ann Jonas, who also is a children's book author and two daughters named Nina and Amy. The students were able to respond to this dedication because they knew something about his family. They started including dedications in the stories they wrote.

The students also discovered that Crews personalizes his books in other ways. He often includes the names or initials of family members and friends and even tucks himself into his pictures. In **Bicycle Race**, he pictured himself with his arm around his wife and in **Flying**, he appears with a newspaper under his arm. The students began looking at Crews' books more carefully and they developed an understanding and an appreciation of how he presents himself. When they came across new books by Crews, they read them eagerly in hopes of getting another glimpse of the man himself (Hepler, 1989).

Knowing personal information about authors helps children to make connections and construct meanings with texts that they wouldn't make otherwise. My students made connections with the Arthur books regarding the names of Marc Brown's children that they would not have made if I hadn't let them in on this secret. They also stopped being passive readers and became active readers who took time to think about, wonder and reflect upon what they had read. They noticed other names hidden in the illustrations of the Marc Brown books and they began to wonder if these people were family members or friends of Marc Brown.

AUTHOR/ILLUSTRATOR STUDIES
AND THE CONNECTION TO WRITING

I also used author and illustrator studies to help my students develop as writers. They used to frequently complain that they couldn't think of things to write about. I would explain to them that anyone who lives has plenty to write about and that they could write about things that happened in their own lives. After all, this is what many authors do. I'd tell them that Audrey and Don Wood got the idea for their book **Elbert's Bad Word** after their son used a bad word in preschool or that Steven Kellogg wrote the **Pinkerton** books, because he has a real dog named Pinkerton. Writing to authors and illustrators could also serve as motivation for writing letters. By writing letters to them, students would have the opportunity to express their ideas or questions and go through the steps of the writing process before mailing the letter.

HOW I CAME TO USE THE INTERNET

Before I purchased my own personal computer and went online, I would obtain information about authors and illustrators by writing letters to publishing companies, reading book jackets and using a series of volumes at the public library that contained information about authors and illustrators of children's literature. After I went online I started acquiring all of my information about authors and illustrators from the Internet. This sparked the beginning of my interest in author and illustrator Websites.

I purchased a Gateway 2000 computer in the summer of 1997 and I spent most of that summer online. I was so excited about all of the bulletin board ideas and lesson plans that I was locating on the Internet. Then I came across Eric Carle's Website. After I found his Website, I learned how to do Yahoo searches to look for other author and illustrator Websites. I used much of this information the following year as a kindergarten teacher, even though I didn't have access to the Internet in my classroom.

The following year my principal decided to move me to the second grade. This was the year that our school got hooked up to the Internet. At first I was devastated to have to move to another grade, but now that I look back on the year that I had with my second graders, I am really glad that my principal decided to move me. I don't think that I could have done as much with the Internet with kindergartners as I did with second graders, since they are so much more independent. Kindergartners need so much more help from adults than second graders.

THE INTERNET AS AN INSTRUCTIONAL TOOL

According to Leu (1999), the Internet is an instructional tool that can be used in classrooms to make students' worlds richer and more meaningful. It was certainly used during my last year as a teacher to enrich my students' worlds and to make reading and writing activities more meaningful. At first, I was somewhat concerned about the easy access that my second graders could have to negative information on the Internet. However, I realized that if I book-marked numerous interesting Websites for the students to browse, that I probably wouldn't have to worry about them getting into Websites with disturbing information or pictures. I didn't have one negative incident throughout the entire year. I was correct in that if students were given a wealth of good Websites to browse, they wouldn't even consider looking for harmful Websites.

SHOWING STUDENTS
HOW TO USE THE INTERNET

For the first three weeks of school, I took the time to work with students in small groups for thirty minutes to show them how to get into the Websites that I had book-marked. I demonstrated to them how to move around within a Website and I showed them how to print pages off the Internet, so

they could do this independently throughout the year. After the first three weeks, students were allowed to work at the computer independently, but I checked on them and was available in case they needed any help. Because I only had one computer with Internet access, I had to allow students to use it in groups of three. When I placed students into groups of three, I made sure that at least one of the students was familiar with how to operate within a Website, so this student could help the other two.

Each week when we studied a new author or illustrator, if the author or illustrator had a Website, I book-marked it and made sure to inform the students on Monday when I gave my introduction. I also placed the author's or illustrator's name and Website address on my weekly homework assignment sheet that students took home every Monday. This allowed students to use the Internet at home with the help of their parents. Many of them did visit the author and illustrator Websites at home and would come to class and share information they had found out and sheets that they had printed from the Website.

Dav Pilkey
At school, my students enjoyed the Websites of these three authors in particular: Dav Pilkey <www.pilkey.com>, Audrey Wood <www.audreywood.com> and Robert Munsch <www.robertmunsch.com>.

Dav Pilkey's Website was the absolute favorite of all my students. Dav Pilkey is the popular author of the book, **The Dumb Bunnies**. The dumb bunnies do really silly things like blowing on their porridge when it's too cold and putting it in the microwave when it's too hot.

As soon as Dav Pilkey's Website opens a sign reads: *Warning: This Website contains scenes and material which may be considered too silly for grown-ups, small animals and many varieties of houseplants. If you are a grown-up, a small animal or a houseplant, we strongly urge you to seek the permission of a kid before entering this site.* Within this Website, my students learned how to draw dumb bunnies as a result of step by step instructions from Dav Pilkey. They could also read **Dumb Bunny** jokes, make paper airplanes, print mazes and word searches and read biographical information about Dav in a cartoon-like format. There is also a *Boring Teacher Stuff* section which gives teachers suggestions on how to integrate Dav Pilkey's books into their language arts program.

Audrey Wood
Audrey Wood's Website allows its visitors to sign up to receive the *Smart Piggies Newsletter*, which updates readers on her current and upcoming projects. Her Website also has pictures of Don and Audrey Wood as young children. My students liked the *Top Secret* section which gives readers interesting information on Don and Audrey Wood's work, such as the fact that it took Don Wood two years to create the illustrations for the book, **Heckedy Peg**. My students also found out from the *Top Secret* section that the Woods used their own home as a model for the house in the book, **The Napping House**.

Robert Munsch
Robert Munsch's Website was a favorite of my children because he responded to e-mail within a day or two. One Friday during show and tell, one of my students named Hannah stunned us all by presenting a copy of her e-mail response from Robert Munsch. I had included his Web address on my homework sheet and Hannah had e-mailed him at home. He responded to Hannah by telling her how he liked her name because even when spelled backwards it remained the same. He also told her the name of his most recently published book. Hannah's experience persuaded many other students in my class to e-mail Robert Munsch. Four other students e-mailed him and he responded to all four by the next day and he even provided his address and promised them an autographed picture if they sent him a letter by snail mail.

ADVANTAGES OF USING THE INTERNET WITH AUTHOR/ILLUSTRATOR STUDIES
There are many advantages to learning about authors and illustrators through their Websites. When my students were browsing the author and illustrator Websites last year, they were not only reading, writing and learning about authors, they were also learning about technology through hands-on practice. In order to browse a Website, you must learn know how to go back, how to move forward and how to click on hot spots. El-Hindi (1998) writes: Being literate involves integrating reading and writing, navigating through information sources, discriminating between important and unimportant information, responding to e-mail, or engaging in electronic chat sessions. In short, it means being able to communicate in what Reinking (1995) calls a "post-typographic" world. (p. 695)

My students were learning to communicate in a "post-typographic" world and at the same time acquiring a wealth of information about the authors and illustrators of the books that they were reading.

The Internet is a powerful tool for fostering meaningful learning experiences (El-Hindi, 1998). Hannah's learning experience with Robert Munsch was certainly meaningful to her. The capacity of the Internet to link children to an author simply by the click of a button provides a wealth of opportunities for them to use reading, writing, and technology in authentic contexts.

When I used book jackets and the volume series that contained information about authors and illustrators, oftentimes, the facts were old and outdated. The information in the author and illustrator Websites was much more likely

to be current. Many authors such as Dav Pilkey frequently update their Websites and include new information. The pictures of the authors and illustrators on the book jackets and in the volume series tended to look formal, but in the Websites the pictures of the authors and illustrators appeared to be more informal. When I look at pictures of authors and illustrators in their homes or as children growing up, I feel as if I'm looking through a photo album.

Young children tend to be anxious and like to get responses back quickly. In previous years, I had never sent off letters to authors. It was difficult to find their home addresses and I was afraid that if I sent letters to their publishing companies, it would take months for my students and me to get a response. E-mail is so much quicker. My students who e-mailed Robert Munsch got personalized responses from him within a day or two. I would suspect that an author would much rather go online to check his or her e-mail, write one or two sentences and click send. This is much easier than opening a letter, writing a response, placing it in an envelope, addressing the envelope and taking it to the post office.

When I gave my brief introductions of authors and illustrators on Mondays, I only gave students a little information about them. When my students visited the Websites of the authors for themselves independently, they could read whatever piqued their individual interests. I found it fascinating that Dav Pilkey developed from a hyperactive child with learning disabilities into a successful author and illustrator of children's books. My second graders were more absorbed in the fact that Dav Pilkey and Cynthia Rylant were dating and lived on the same street. They also were thrilled to learn how to draw dumb bunnies.

CONCLUSION

As a result of browsing the Websites of authors and illustrators, my students and I were able to respond to their books in meaningful ways. We made connections that we wouldn't have been able to make if we hadn't visited their Websites. I had a new appreciation for the book, **Heckedy Peg**, after finding out on the Woods' Website how long it took Don Wood to complete the illustrations. I noticed the fine details in the illustrations. When we read books by Cynthia Rylant later in the year, my students referred to her as Dav Pilkey's girlfriend and they even commented that the illustrations in her book, **Dog Heaven**, were somewhat similar to Dav Pilkey's illustrations. They guessed that since they were dating and probably spent a lot of time together, that Dav Pilkey had taught her how to draw pictures.

I believe that acquainting children with authors and illustrators of children's literature not only helps them to respond to literature and become active, reflective readers, it also motivates them to read. When students become acquainted with a particular author and like their style of writing, sense of humor or illustrative techniques, they will be more likely to read other books by that author. Children should not just be taught how to read. They should be taught to love to read. Why not motivate children to love reading by acquainting them with authors and illustrators while teaching them to use the Internet at the same time? McKeon (1999) writes that "Teachers can no longer afford not to provide experiences involving technology for their students. We must equip our children with the skills they will need to use technology productively and confidently in an ever-changing advanced technological world (p.705).

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Wood, A. & Wood, D. (1988). **Elbert's bad word**. Florida: Harcourt Brace.

AUTHOR/ILLUSTRATOR WEBSITES

(Here are just a few to get you started. There are many others!)

Arthur (Marc Brown)	<www.pbs.org/wgbh/arthur/>
Jan Brett	<www.janbrett.com>
Eric Carle	< www.eric-carle.com>
Mem Fox	< www.memfox.net/>
Virginia Hamilton	<www.virginiahamilton.com>
Robert Munsch	< www.robertmunsch.com>
Katherine Paterson	< www.terabithia.com>
Dav Pilkey	<www.pilkey.com>
Patricia Polacco	<www.patriciapolacco.com>
Audrey and Don Wood	<www.audreywood.com>