

Introduction

We wrote this book because we have discovered that children of all ages can learn vital competencies when it comes to literacy, media, and technology. By sharing our experiences, we hope you'll be inspired to bring these ideas to the children and teachers in your community.

HOW WE CREATED THIS BOOK

This book is part of the Powerful Voices for Kids initiative developed by Renee Hobbs and Laurada Byers, who collaborated in a university-school partnership involving the Russell Byers Charter School in Philadelphia and Temple University's Media Education Lab. Co-author David Cooper Moore began as a teacher in the program, then took on increasingly significant roles as a program manager, teacher educator, curriculum developer, and researcher. The program developed with support from grants from the Wyncote Foundation, the Otto and Phoebe Haas Charitable Trusts, and the Verizon Foundation. We're especially grateful for support from David Haas, whose generous support made this project possible. A partnership with the National Writing Project (NWP) helped us expand the reach of the program regionally and nationally, and we learned along with NWP teachers and leaders, including Elyse Eidman-Aadahl, Paul Oh, Sam Reed III, Troy Hicks, Danielle Nicole DeVoss, and Christina Cantrill.

Components of the program included the following:

1. *Summer Learning Program.* Children ages 5–13 participated in a monthlong summer program that combined play and learning about media, popular culture, and digital technologies. More than 150 children participated in the program in the summers of 2009 and 2010. They learned about the different purposes of media messages—to inform, to entertain, and to persuade. They critically analyzed a wide variety of media genres, including news, advertising, drama, music video, documentary, reality TV, and online media. Children used Flip brand video cameras (which we

refer to in the book as FlipCams) to create hundreds of videos and used simple wiki software to create web pages. Children increased their confidence in using digital technology as tools for learning, and felt increased comfort in expressing their ideas and working in a team.

2. *Staff Development.* Over a period of 5 years, we offered a variety of professional development programs to teachers. More than 150 school leaders, elementary educators, school library specialists, technology educators, artists, community activists, media professionals, and parents participated in a wide range of programs through which they learned how to use digital media, mass media, and popular culture to build connections between the classroom and the child's daily life as a media user.

3. *In-School Mentoring.* In pioneering an approach to staff development that we call *elbow-to-elbow* support, we engaged someone with expertise in media literacy and technology integration to work directly in the classroom with a teacher or a small group of faculty to support a particular unit of instruction or media production project.

4. *Parent Outreach.* When parents have the opportunity to learn from other parents, they deepen their sensitivity to the explicit and implicit choices that occur each and every day when it comes to music, TV shows, news and current events, movies, video games, the Internet, and social media. In these workshops and discussion groups, families explored the uses of media and technology in the home.

5. *Multimedia Curriculum Development.* In collaboration with classroom educators and summer learning instructors, we created a variety of lesson plans that activate numerous learning outcomes. These lessons are effective with a variety of young learners in both "low-tech" and "high-tech" classrooms. You will find these lessons at the end of each chapter and on our website at www.powerfulvoicesforkids.com.

6. *Research and Assessment.* Using observation, data collection, and interviews to understand children's media and technology uses in the home and at school, we explored teachers' motivations for digital and media literacy and examined how children's conceptions of author, audience, and purpose shape their reading comprehension and academic achievement.

In this book, we share stories from all of these experiences. We identify what we learned from helping instructors and classroom teachers discover how to develop children's critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication skills in response to the complex messages offered to them through news and current events, advertising, popular music and music videos, celebrity culture, movies and TV shows, video games, the Internet, and social media. But first, you should learn more about us, the authors.

Here's a brief description of our stories, our backgrounds, and how we came to collaborate to write this book.

RENEE'S STORY: WHY I CREATE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS IN DIGITAL AND MEDIA LITERACY

I learn best by doing and making things. My research lab, called the Media Education Lab, helps fulfill my interest in improving the quality of digital and media literacy education through research and community service. Most of my work has focused on children and teachers in Grades 7–12. But back in the 1990s, I worked with the Norrback Elementary School in Worcester, Massachusetts, to explore what media literacy might look like in urban elementary education. Then the Discovery Channel and the Maryland State Department of Education invited me to create *Assignment: Media Literacy*, a comprehensive K–12 curriculum for media literacy. In 2006, thanks to support from the U.S. Office on Women's Health, I got to create MyPopStudio (www.mypopstudio.com), a creative online play environment to introduce media literacy concepts to girls ages 9–13. And in 2007, the Powerful Voices for Kids program enabled me to craft a long-term university-school partnership, one that could truly be a “win-win” for researchers, teachers, and students.

Looking back, much of my career can be viewed as developing a series of informal experiments: I like to create new programs and projects as a form of learning. The process of initiating, implementing, and assessing media education programs in K–12 schools helps develop new knowledge to advance the field. With this particular project, I was looking for opportunities to work with younger children and involve graduate students in the process of teacher education and curriculum development.

There's no substitute for hands-on experience as a way to generate new ideas for writing and research. While living in Philadelphia, I was deeply aware of the real need to provide direct service to poor and minority children. So when I met Laurada Byers, the inspiring leader who created the Russell Byers Charter School, we decided that a summer learning program for young children might be perfect as the cornerstone for launching the Powerful Voices for Kids program. During the spring of 2009, we reached out to parents to encourage them to enroll their children in the program. We emphasized the hands-on nature of the program with a list of activities, including making movies, producing music, creating video games, and going on field trips. We emphasized academic skills, including language arts, writing composition, research and technology skills, public speaking and citizenship, collaboration and teamwork, and health and nutrition.

All the members of the Powerful Voices for Kids program were invited to keep an online journal of reflective writing about the learning experience. In the first week of the program in the summer of 2009, I wrote:

I think that each team member is a gem—what a great group we have! However, I am worried about both the scope and the quality of the work—will there be the right balance of analysis and composition? Will we meet the requirements of the funder, who thinks we’re exploring the topic of advertising and persuasion? Are my expectations too high? Is this too much to ask from this group of young people, most of whom have never had any formal exposure to media literacy education as a subject of study? What about the first week, when I am juggling 25 elementary teachers in a professional development program—I will really need to be able to depend on my team to manage the mentoring process. Will it be controlled chaos or just chaos?

As you can see from my reflections on the process at the very beginning of the journey, I was struggling with some real challenges. The management practices to keep the whole enterprise running were substantial. It took many meetings to develop a shared understanding of what might be possible. I needed to spend time in the Russell Byers Charter School, meeting with the assistant principal, observing children and their teachers, and sitting in on staff meetings. My school partners needed to better understand our capacities and our limitations as faculty and students at a university; they also needed to appreciate and respect the core concepts and instructional values that underpin digital and media literacy education. My graduate students needed to understand that *learning-in-action* calls for demanding levels of creativity and intense focus combined with a robust spirit of self-reflection, courage, and openness to inquiry.

For years, communication scholars and education theorists of all stripes have called for innovative educational programs to support children’s “critical viewing” or media analysis or Internet evaluation skills, urging teachers to offer creative media production opportunities for children to write a school newspaper, create videos, and build web pages. It sounds pretty easy. But education scholars have long recognized that one of the primary reasons for the failure of school reform initiatives is the unwillingness of the partners to commit to collaboration over an extended period of time.¹ One scholar notes, “It takes so long just to develop trusting relationships based on respect that to think improvements in school or useful research can be produced quickly is at best naive.”²

My experience working in long-term relationships with school districts in Massachusetts had taught me that such programs didn't magically happen overnight. It takes time for teachers to develop the knowledge and skills they need to open up meaningful conversations about mass media and popular culture, to learn how to organize a simple media production project from start to finish, and to navigate the complicated terrain involved in building connections between media culture and school culture.

First, could we establish long-term relationships with the school by engaging an ever-changing cadre of graduate students to “get their feet wet” through experiential learning as teachers and researchers? Second, would this process also simultaneously support the creation of new knowledge in the field? Finally, could the fruits of our labor result in the development of the social, intellectual, and emotional needs of young children? Juggling these three priorities seemed a near-impossible task. That's why it was just the right project for me.

DAVID'S STORY: FROM TECHIE TO TEACHER

I came to media literacy as a self-professed film geek and professional filmmaker. I was often enamored of gear—lenses, high-definition cameras, and trucks full of tripods, Steadicams, sandbags, dollies, gobos, and snoots. (I was a sucker for the ones with silly names.) But it was not until I worked with younger children that I began to realize and clarify my own interest in media production and analysis as a broader component of more fundamental literacy skills. I knew—or thought I knew—that children brought a wealth of unique knowledge and insight to subjects that adults often take for granted. I also knew that their media worlds were even more complex than my own at the dawn of the digital age.

I had my “aha” moment about why digital and media literacy mattered in elementary classrooms in the summer of 2009. As a new instructor in the Powerful Voices for Kids program, I was thrilled to work with Renee, with new peers who went on to find roles of their own in PK–6 education, and with an amazing co-teacher, Angela Carter. We worked with sixth-grade students for 4 hours a day, 5 days a week for a whole month, and it was one of the most memorable teaching and learning experiences I've ever had. I noted in my teaching journal—a sprawling document that was part observational and part confessional—what “clicked” on Week 1, Day 3:

Worked on our websites. Angela had half of the students in the computer lab to work on research, and I had half the kids in

the room to work on web design on the website Glogster. The researchers were far more productive, learning a lot about online sources and how to use multiple strands of information to make a single argument. I would call this a more explicitly media literacy lesson—we were asking students to synthesize print, visual, and audio information into an argument that they would express first in print (on oversized note paper) and then visually on their websites. They had to understand complex messages and then turn them into their own unique message to communicate to the rest of the world online.

In Chapter 4, you will see that “going online on paper” by making “paper websites” with younger students is, in fact, a great strategy for helping students focus on the learning process as they explore design and aesthetics.

How could I continue to help good teachers figure out how to connect elementary students’ media worlds, as messy and complicated as any classroom, to meaningful learning experiences? It was only later, as the program director of Powerful Voices for Kids, that I also learned how crucial the respect of teachers is to changing the way kids learn. I am not a classroom teacher, although I know that it is classroom teachers, not technologies, school design, or funding alone, that will change learning in the most profound ways. I’m glad to see that some research has started to bear this observation out by suggesting that feedback, high expectations, mentorship, and more time for instruction—all of which involve the effort and skill of educators—are indispensable characteristics of effective classrooms.³

Having too often blamed institutions, social contexts, and parents for the “state of education” myself as an armchair education pundit, I discovered in working directly with younger students and, just as important, working beside classroom teachers how messy, complicated, and powerful classrooms really are. I only hope that by sharing some of our experiences with Powerful Voices for Kids, we can help others continue to learn and relearn what it means to be a powerful *teacher*.

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

This book is divided into four parts:

In Part I, we offer an introduction to the context and background of our work and share what we have learned about the many different kinds of teachers who have participated in the Powerful Voices for Kids initiative.

We learned that teachers' approach to digital and media literacy depends on their existing attitudes and beliefs about media, popular culture, technology, and their big-picture goals of teaching and learning. You'll get a chance to reflect on your own values and priorities as a teacher and consider how these values shape the choices you make in bringing digital and media literacy to young learners.

In Part II, we share our experiences working with children ages 9–11 by offering stories about how teachers and students explored a variety of topics. We learn about the ways that young children can become powerful communicators by using their creativity and collaboration skills to address real issues in an urban community—homelessness and littering. Teachers show us how they helped students experience the power of authorship by using a range of technology tools, from simple to more complex, that included PowerPoint, screencasting, and video production with young children. We also examine the impact of students asking questions about celebrity culture and social media, finding that teachers' ability to manage the unpredictability of classroom conversation is a key factor in creating a robust learning environment. Finally, we look at the development of children's critical thinking skills about popular culture and advertising and learn about what we observed in the development of children's active reasoning skills in responding to popular media like television, music, and video games.

In Part III, we share our experiences working with the youngest children in the primary grades. We take a close look at teachers who are working to develop children's understanding of language and other symbol systems, like photographs, animation, and drama. We explore the primary theory behind our work: learning about concepts like author, audience, and purpose in conjunction with familiar texts like TV shows and advertising supports children's comprehension skills and academic achievement by increasing motivation and engagement, and activating critical thinking skills that transfer from one symbolic form to another.

In Part IV, we reflect on the staff development models we used and outline the learning that resulted from field-testing. Powerful Voices for Kids program strategies aimed at developing and implementing a comprehensive approach to digital and media literacy education for K–6 teachers. You'll learn more about the variety of programs we offered: one-on-one tutorials, weeklong summer institutes, and intensive programs where small groups of teachers in a single school gathered monthly over the course of an entire school year. At the back of the book, in Resource A, you'll find a list of learning targets for each of the five competencies—Access, Analysis, Composition, Reflection, and Taking Action—framed

up specifically to align with the developmental needs of primary and elementary children. In Resource B you will find a glossary with digital and media literacy vocabulary words for children ages 5–12. And for teacher educators and scholars, in Resource C we’ve listed many of the concepts and ideas that are unique to this book as we advance theoretical ideas through describing and reflecting upon our practice.

On our website (www.powerfulvoicesforkids.com), we are creating an online community with educators who are teaching and learning media literacy. You’ll find a wide variety of video excerpts that document the instructional practices described in the book. We also offer additional lesson plans and resource materials, and showcase samples of student creative work. On the website, educators share their own ideas about how to bring digital and media literacy to young learners.

If you’re a teacher in a formal or informal learning environment, after reading this book and viewing our website, you’ll be able to experiment with some of the lesson plans at the end of each chapter and explore these activities with your own students. If you’re a teacher educator or curriculum specialist, this book and companion website give you the tools you need to lead a staff development program to share ideas from the Powerful Voices for Kids program with your colleagues. If you’re a researcher, activist, artist, media professional, or student, you can use what you learn in this book and on the website to implement a Powerful Voices for Kids program in your community.

Our fundamental challenge in writing this book was the sharing of the complex results of an inquiry that we still only partially understand ourselves, a process we have called *messy engagement*. Indeed, we are rather limited by our perspective, as stakeholders and change agents in initiating the Powerful Voices for Kids program. Like other scholars and practitioners with interests in media education for young learners, including people like Anne Haas Dyson, Lisa Guernsey, Faith Rogow, Cyndy Scheibe, Rebecca Hains, Jeff Share, Amy Jussell, Petra Hesse, Janis Kupersmidt, Erica Scharrer, Jordi Torrent, Rhys Daunic, Jesse Gainer, Donna Alvermann, Margaret Hagood, Glynda Hull, Wendy Ewald, Damiano Felini, Carol Craggs, Cary Bazalgette, and many others, we have been learning through engaging in practical work with elementary learners. For this reason, we may not see the value of our ideas as clearly as our readers do. With your critical thinking and active reading strategies, you will examine the importance of this work—and its many limitations—adding your insight on what we’ve tried to accomplish here. For you, we are grateful.

NOTES

1. Sarason, S. (1971). *The culture of school and the problem of change*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
2. Noguera, P. (1998). Toward the development of school and university partnerships based upon mutual benefit and respect. *In Motion Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/pnsup1.html>
3. Dobbie, W., & Fryer, R. G. (2011). *Getting beneath the veil of effective schools: Evidence from New York City* (National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 17632). Retrieved from <http://nber.org/papers/w17632>

