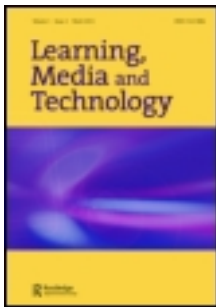


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Improvisation and strategic risk-taking in informal learning with digital media literacy

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The city provides a rich array of learning opportunities for young children. However, in many urban schools, often it can be logistically difficult to get young children out of the building. But when elementary children are encouraged to view the city as a classroom and use digital media to explore and represent their neighborhoods, they can be inspired by the unpredictable events of daily life to ask naïve, critical and sometimes troubling questions. This paper presents a case study of a teacher in an informal media literacy learning environment who worked with a group of 9-year olds in Philadelphia. It documents the experience of a novice teacher who, flummoxed by an accidental encounter between her students and a homeless person, transformed an uncomfortable experience into a teachable moment. Children's questions about homelessness became the organizing frame for learning experience, as the instructor helped children make sense of the information on the Internet, analyze popular culture films and news media, and conduct interviews with community leaders and advocates for the homeless. The inquiry process resulted in a collaboratively produced multimedia project, created by children. The case study has implications for pre- and in-service teacher education for digital and media literacy. This paper suggests that improvisation and strategic risk-taking must be conceptualized as a set of socio-emotional and experiential competencies that teachers need when using digital media in an urban community as a tool for learning.

Keywords: children; urban; informal learning; media literacy; elementary; popular culture; homelessness; engagement; digital media; teacher education

Elementary children naturally view their school neighborhoods as a place of discovery. When digital media is used to explore and represent their neighborhood, the unpredictable events of daily life can inspire teachable moments that can have lasting value for young learners. Consider the case of Rachel, who, in the summer of 2010, was determined to find a way to get her Grade 3 children out of the school building as part of a multimedia learning experience. Rachel

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was one of 13 instructors participating in the Powerful Voices for Kids program, a university-school partnership between the Media Education Lab at Temple University and the Russell Byers Charter School in Philadelphia.

With her students, she had begun exploring a simple media production software tool called Comic Life, where users combine language, photos and drawings to create graphic panels. Working with a small team, students had gone to Logan Square (sometimes called Logan's Circle), a small park only steps away from their school. They took photos of the historic Swann Memorial Fountain, a fountain sculpture by Alexander Stirling Calder, which features large Native American figures to symbolize the area's major rivers: the Delaware, the Schuylkill and the Wissahickon. Numerous bronze animals, including frogs, turtles and swans spout water toward the large water geyser in the center.

During one visit to the park, students took their Flip cameras to capture some final photos of the fountain to complete their narratives. While there, Delia, age 9, approached Rachel and pointed across the square. There was a homeless man, sleeping on a park bench, and just behind him, a shopping cart from a local grocery store filled with his clothing and other belongings. An elderly woman was digging through the bags in a furious manner while the man slept. 'What's going on, Miss Rachel?' asked Delia, age nine. She said, 'I think that lady is stealing from that homeless guy there'.

Although African-American and Hispanic children are among the most active of all American children in using television, videogames, music, the Internet and mobile phones (both in and out of the home) for more than 10 hours per day (Kaiser Family Foundation 2010), they are among the least likely to have meaningful opportunities to use media and digital technology in school or in informal learning settings. Although instructional technology has been part of the American educational landscape for decades, the integration of technology into classroom lags beyond expectations for its use (Cuban 2001), especially in traditionally underserved populations (Solomon, Allen, and Resta 2002). When computers are used in urban schools, it is typically used to reinforce basic skills through skill-and-drill practice or as free-play activity after schoolwork has been completed (Staples, Pugach, and Himes 2005). And although there has been a significant funding initiative by charitable foundations over the past 5 years to support the field of digital media and learning, these resources have by and large gone to support a few very small and highly intensive initiatives (including the development of games for learning) and not yet have had much impact on a large number of children in low-income and urban communities. Afterschool and summer programs reach only about 25% of low- and moderate-income children under age 14 (Wallace Foundation 2010) and typical activities center not around digital media projects, but around more traditional informal learning via sports, arts and crafts (Halpern 2002).

Listening to children in formal and informal learning environments

In the classic book, *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938, 1998) laid out the organic connection between education and personal experience. Educators have a primary responsibility not only to be aware of how the physical and cultural environment influences the child, ‘but . . . also recognize in the concrete what surroundings are conducive to having experiences that lead to growth’. Dewey insists that educators should ‘know how to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worth while’ (45).

Much recent work in digital and media literacy in early childhood education is informed by work in the sociology of childhood, or childhood studies (Kehily 2004) where children are seen as people whose ideas, approaches to life, choices and relationships are of interest in their own right. For these reasons, listening to and understanding young children’s perspectives of their daily encounters with people, places, events and situations is a vital instructional strategy (Clark 2005; Clark, McQuail, and Moss 2003). The work of Carlina Rinaldi, former head of the preschool services in Reggio Emilia, Italy, has been particularly influential in promoting this approach. She speaks of a pedagogy of listening. Listening is understood to be an active process of communication involving hearing, interpreting and constructing meanings. Rinaldi explains, ‘As listeners interpret, they give meaning to the message and value to those who are being listened to’ (2001, 4).

A review of afterschool learning in the USA shows a historical trajectory as programs offer increasingly more structure to support the needs of traditionally underserved children and youth. In providing children and young people with ‘productive’ (and often remedial) learning experiences, instructors and program managers must address the sometimes chaotic and unpredictable issues that arise in working with large number of children from impoverished backgrounds (Halpern 2002). In public urban life, for both adults and children alike, the opportunity to encounter ‘the other’ is simultaneously the most pleasurable and the potentially most dangerous aspects of the contemporary city. Stevens (2007) notes that encounters with strangers define the most public dimension of play for both adults and children in urban environments. Everyday social encounters with strangers contain elements of strategic risk, yet offer many opportunities for spontaneous and serendipitous learning experiences in the context of both formal and informal learning with urban elementary children.

In early childhood education, neighborhood tours have been used to involve young children taking researchers or other adults on a guided walk around their community (Clark and Moss 2001), where children are in charge of the direction of the tour but also of how the experience is recorded. By taking photographs, maps, making drawings and audio-recordings, children express their views and experiences. In a sense, children are invited to position themselves

as urban anthropologists or sociologists, examining an aspect of cultural life by studying the complex and multivalenced relationships that are part of urban life (Hannerz 1980). Cameras and photographs have been used in several projects with young children, including activities where children have taken their own photographs of important places and people (Ewald 2002), using photographs as a representation of children's experiences which might not be easily articulated in other ways. Projects like this that use digital and mass media with young children can be especially important in supporting communication skill development, critical thinking, problem-solving and creative expression (Hobbs 2010).

The uses of digital technology in urban classrooms

Research on technology integration with urban elementary teachers finds that, in general, teachers are given a wide latitude to decide whether, when and how to use technology and digital media in the context of the elementary school classroom. In a series of case studies of elementary teachers' use of technology, Staples, Pugach and Himes (2005, 296) found that 'Teachers used technology in ways and at times that seemed sensible to them given their instructional goals and technology knowledge. If technology was perceived by them to increase the power of their instruction, they used it; if it did not, they chose not to use it. Teachers were not required to use technology for any predetermined length of time or manner, nor were they expected to document or publicly display their students' progress in this area'. This study found that elementary schools often had one active technology-using teacher who initiated most projects.

As a form of internal leadership, the 'star teacher' model features a teacher who may use technology in a variety of ways: as a replacement for paper-and-pencil tasks, as a reward, or as a tool for pursuing questions, developing critical thinking or creative skills, or engaging in forms of small-group collaboration. Often, such elementary teachers work relatively independently of their colleagues and experience a mixed bag of administrative support, where the school principal might shower a teacher with materials and technology resources (including hardware, software, video cameras, etc.) but not offer guidance around 'a common mission or thread to connect initiatives' or 'support to ensure that projects were carried out as they were intended' (Staples, Pugach, and Himes 2005, 301).

For elementary educators in both formal and informal settings to make optimal use of digital media to promote children's literacy, cognitive and socio-emotional growth, they have to get the pedagogy of digital learning and the use of the technology tools both right. Researchers have recognized the difficulty of 'asking many teachers to make two substantial and simultaneous leaps in their practice: to embrace a student-centered curricular mindset and to face the challenges (crashing computers, keeping students on

task, unpredictable Internet access) inevitable in technology integration' (Hofer and Swan 2006, 50).

Elementary teachers face particular challenges when using digital media and technology because of the variety of classroom management issues that may arise as a result of the freedom, creativity and collaborative learning approaches that may not provide appropriate levels of structure, scaffolding and support (Hobbs and Cooper Moore 2013). Both teachers and school leaders have concerns about mayhem and loss of control that may interfere with digital media projects. In one study, researchers observed an elementary teacher whose Grade 5 students created a video documentary for a social studies project, noting that over the course of the 2-week experience, the teacher was stretched far outside of her pedagogical comfort zone. While the teacher acknowledged the many positive aspects of the project, which she initiated with support from university partners, she perceived that this project wreaked havoc on the standards-driven, text-based, chronologically-sequenced curriculum on which she had come to rely. From the teacher's point of view, the project was seen as simply too 'unpredictable' and 'exhausting' to repeat. For these reasons, it may be important to distinguish between 'best practices' and 'realistic practices' in understanding optimal relationships in university-school partnerships (Hofer and Swan 2006).

In the case study that follows, we explore how one young instructor used improvisation and strategic risk-taking to create a learning experience from an unpredictable situation, involving children's encounter with a homeless person. The case study invites readers to wonder how these competencies may be cultivated among those who work both in the informal learning sector and in public urban education.

Research method

This qualitative case study included field notes and journal entries, interviews, a timeline and chronicle of classroom activities. As part of a larger research project, parental consent was obtained to collect data through classroom observations, interviews and review of student work samples. Children's names are pseudonyms. IRB approval was sought and received for this study. Data were collected in the summer of 2010.

Rachel, the participating teacher, was interviewed multiple times during the project, including during the development, implementation, and evaluation stages. The teacher also kept a journal about her reactions to the project, changes she made in the instructional process, and personal assessment of the overall project. Some classroom sessions were videotaped by a documentary filmmaker and transcripts of these tapes yielded classroom observational data. Teaching materials and samples of student work products also were collected at each stage of the process, which are available at www.powerfulvoiceforkids.com.

Because the participating teacher, Rachel, is the author's adult daughter, informal interviews were a distinctive feature of the inquiry. For this reason, this study is particularly inflected by a dense interweaving of personal narrative and professional relationship that characterize work environments inhabited by parents and their adult children. While no attempt is made to generalize beyond this case study, I do aim to document a specific instructional context and intervention in order to open up theoretical inquiry on the nature of instructor skill development in managing unpredictable and serendipitous learning environments in both informal and formal learning.

Context

Rachel was one of 13 instructors hired to participate in the Powerful Voices for Kids program in the summer of 2010. The 4-week summer program reached 83 children from ages 6–13 who were enrolled in the Russell Byers Charter School in Philadelphia. The mission of the Powerful Voices for Kids program is to strengthen children's abilities to think for themselves, communicate effectively using language and technology tools, and use their powerful voices to contribute to the quality of life in their families, their schools, their communities, and the world. Table 1 shows a list of competencies emphasized in the program. The program encourages independent learning, leadership, and community involvement by exploring children's complex media worlds—how to understand them, and how to use media technology to take action. The project is a university-school partnership that developed over 3 years through collaborative research and planning, supported by grants from the Wyncote Foundation, the Otto and Phoebe Haas Charitable Trusts, and the Verizon Foundation.

Case study

As Rachel experienced it, the process of developing this project was entirely improvisational: throughout the experience, she was not at all clear how the learning trajectory would play out during the process of implementation. Each day, she devised an initial plan that got revised during the course of the day, followed by reflection on what worked and projection about what might happen next. Looking backward, it is evident that the timeline of the case study can be characterized in five phases that correspond to the writing process: discovery, research, composition, revision, and distribution, as shown in Table 2. But it's important to note that, as the novice instructor experienced it, the teaching process was an organic, open process.

In the discovery phase, Rachel and her students had a serendipitous encounter with a homeless person that resulted in an emotionally intense moment for all. During July 2010, Rachel had begun working at the summer program with a group of about 10 children ages 8 and 9. Children were exploring a simple media production software called *Comic Life*, where users can combine

Table 1. Powerful voices for kids: digital and media literacy competencies for young children.

Access

- Listening skills
- Reading comprehension
- Using appropriate technology tools
- Asking questions
- Gathering information using multiple sources
- Applying information to solve a problem

Analysis

- Understanding how symbols work and how they are used
- Recognizing particular types (genres) of messages
- Identifying similarities and differences in how people interpret symbols
- Identifying authorship, message purpose and target audience with a variety of texts
- Recognizing evidence of quality and credibility in different types of messages

Composition

- Speaking to an individual and demonstrating listening skills
- Speaking to a large group and responding to feedback
- Communicating a personal reaction and expressing a point of view
- Selecting messages and texts to use-respond-to-remix-combine in a creative way
- Composing writing and images to inform, persuade and entertain
- Composing in a variety of formats, including email, review, reports, film scripts, music lyrics, webpage, nonfiction, fiction and other literary genres
- Composing for a variety of audiences, including peers, family, educators, special interest groups, government leaders, and members of the general public

Reflection

- Recognizing and valuing relationships and engaging in socially appropriate behavior
- Brainstorming and contributing ideas
- Staying on task and following directions
- Using good judgment and social responsibility when communicating with others
- Exercising leadership, integrity and accountability
- Offering feedback, helping and teaching others

Taking action

- Participating in a creative community, sharing and expressing ideas with others
 - Being aware of and sensitive to differences among people
 - Making connections between current events, the community and the self
 - Generating ideas in order to improve a thing or an event
 - Collaborating on solving a meaningful real-world problem
-

language, photos and drawings to create graphic panels. One day, she took the children on a short walk to a nearby city park only steps away from their school to take photos of the historic Swann Memorial Fountain. During the visit to the park, students took their Flip cameras to capture some final photos of the

Table 2. The teacher's timeline: exploring a day in the life of a homeless person.

Discovery

Day 1. We talked about our many questions about homelessness and some of the children described their previous experiences with homeless people. We discussed how the comic form can tell fictional stories or tell true stories and I showed examples of different types of comics and graphic novels. We then brainstormed ideas to create a homeless comic that would teach people about homelessness. Children worked in groups and wrote down some things that they were interested in learning about the homeless. After reviewing the entire list, teams of children decided what topics they wanted to explore in their section of the comic.

Research

Day 2. Each group read or viewed a short book, article or video that I found for them. Each group took notes on the material and began writing 10 sentences (with their partner) to capture the main ideas. We discussed the similarities and differences of the materials we were using to gather information.

Day 3. We finished writing our 10 sentences and then did a whole group feedback, edit and revise session. We made sure that sentences did not repeat ideas or say trivial things (half of the groups had at least one sentence saying: the homeless do not have homes). Students then attempted to make story boards, but this went very badly due to lack of preparation on my part. I did not structure it well and it is not a good idea to start something like this at the end of the week.

Composition

Day 4. I found about 30 images online of homeless people and projected them for the class to see. We discussed them and children selected which ones they wanted to be in their comic. All the children wanted to have their own drawings in the comic as well as photographs so today we began drawing the images. The rules for drawing images: no narration, no speech bubbles, because both will be added in when we put the whole thing together using the Comic Life software. They gained a sense of pride in learning to use the software tool to create their comic panels. The class was split into groups for this – so half the class drew while the other half worked with me on the board thinking up questions to ask the homeless shelter representative. We also worked on some simple story boarding, where the students were asked to draw out the panels they wanted on their two pages, and put narration boxes in the panels, and plan out what image they looked at or what drawing they were going to use in the panels.

Day 5. Tuesday: We met the representative from Project H.O.M.E. who read a story about a homeless snail and then children interviewed him with the questions they wrote yesterday. It went on well. The representative had some good things to say, and the kids were able to expand on their questions a little by carefully listening. We then continued to edit our sentences so that they reflected some things he had told us (especially about what we can do if we see a homeless person who needs help). Then children completed the drawings from Monday and began working in Comic Life to put together the comic.

Day 6. Wednesday: children work on producing their comic panels.

Revision

Day 7. Thursday: As a large group, we look at all the children's panels and do a feedback, edit and revise session. Children are working hard to make their panels compelling and attractive. We decide to add author information at the top of each page so the child are visually represented as the authors of their pages.

Day 8. Friday: We develop the cover page by thinking about our target audience and our purpose and then deciding on a title and a central image. Children practice reading aloud from the 14 pages of the comic, standing in front of the image projected on a screen, as they prepare to give a final presentation about what we learned.

Day 9. We discuss the concept of target audience and predict how parents, teachers and other adults will respond to the comic. Children offer each other warm feedback about what they valued about other members of the team. It was a very warm session. Each child receives a copy of the completed comic to share with family members and children place copies of the comic in the mailboxes of the school leaders and teaching staff.

Distribution

Day 10. Children make a short presentation about their comic in an all-school assembly.

fountain to complete their narratives. It was then that one child spotted a homeless man, sleeping on a park bench, and just behind him, a shopping cart from a local grocery store filled with his clothing and other belongings, where a woman was rummaging through the cart in a somewhat furious yet furtive manner. When a child called Rachel's attention to the situation, she admitted the incident did seem a bit unusual. In the flash of the moment, Rachel had little time to ponder her options. She was feeling the burden of teacherly authority to make sense of the situation for her students, many of whom were now also looking at the curious incident. She could tell the children to look away and ignore the ongoing scene – but then, would not she be encouraging her students to be callous bystanders? She did not want her students to see the world as a place where we just turn our heads when we encounter other people's troubles. Strategic risk-taking was an option. Rachel went over to the homeless man's encampment in Logan Square and asked the lady who was digging through the shopping cart what she was doing. She said she was the wife of the homeless man and that she was trying to find her cigarettes. 'He'll be OK in a couple of hours', she said about the man lying on the park bench. Rachel returned to the tight cluster of children across the park and they walked back to their classroom. There, the children had many questions. Rachel listened carefully. Children were engaged, so within a few minutes, Rachel began listing their questions on the blackboard: Why was he sleeping in the daytime? Was the lady really his wife? What was in the shopping cart? Could it have been dangerous for Rachel to approach them? Why are they so dirty? How do people get to be homeless?

While listening to the students, Rachel wondered aloud to her students and shared her doubts about whether she had done the right thing by approaching the couple.

In her reflective writing, she explained:

The moment after I spoke to her [the homeless woman] I realized that this was a huge mistake, I was not modeling good behavior. I should not have risked

confronting her in front of the kids. No matter how safe I feel in that park, that was not acceptable behavior. When I got back to the bench with the kids on it they talked about how weird that was, and how much they hate smoking (one kid told me a story about her uncle who smokes). When we all got back together as a group in the classroom I explained to the class what happened during the incident. I told them that I was not comfortable confronting the situation, but I was also not comfortable ignoring a situation where one person could be getting taken advantage of. I explained that I did not model good behavior, because what I should have done was either look harder for a park ranger or policeman, or I should have ignored the situation. I apologized to each student personally, telling them that I feel incredibly bad about this and that I made a mistake and that I was sorry that I did this. I explained that sometimes we do things that we shouldn't, and then we feel bad. We feel like there is a weight in our chests, and it hurts. At this point the kids are all looking sad, some of them are touching their chests and nodding. I asked if anyone else has ever felt this way, the whole class raised their hands and some of the kids explained that sometimes we do things that aren't safe, smart, or responsible, and when we recognize our failure we feel awful. One girl said that she feels bad because I feel bad about this situation, she shares my feelings of sadness. I explained empathy, and then one kid says, "Is this a life lesson?" I told them that this is a life lesson, this is part of how we learn about what to do and what not to do in certain situations. The kids explained to me that they understand why what I did was not the safest choice, and they explained that sometimes dealing with homeless people in the city is complicated. Then one kid told me what he would have done, and this started the whole class talking about what we should have done.

She acknowledged that it might have been a dangerous thing to do, but that she felt a need to investigate and be of assistance if needed. With her students listening with rapt attention, Rachel acknowledged to her students that she could not answer any of the children's questions because she did not understand the problem of homelessness herself. At the end of the day, she announced to the children, 'Maybe we can learn more about homelessness tomorrow'.

Although she did contemplate moving on to her planned curriculum project, that evening, Rachel made a plan to take children's questions seriously, to put their questions and their lived experience in the park that day at the center of her own interests in teaching them. Rachel had not grown up in an urban environment and had difficulty imagining exactly what the experience might mean to children. She wanted to demonstrate that she was actively listening to them.

This prompted her to launch the research phase of this teachable moment. She had made the decision to take children on a journey of learning about homelessness, even though she had very little background knowledge or understanding of this issue herself. Rachel spent a couple of hours using the Internet to read about homelessness and reflect on how to explore the topic with young children. She selected a variety of resources for children to examine, including websites, newspapers and videos. The following day, Rachel shared what she learned about the number of homeless people in Philadelphia and children were surprised to learn that many thousands of children are homeless (Project HOME 2011). Children

learned that homelessness occurs when people lack jobs, housing, and health care, when they are victims of domestic violence, or have problems with alcoholism, substance abuse, or mental illness. Rachel felt awkward describing these difficult subjects with young children, but she noticed that they seemed to recognize the seriousness of the subject matter and were eager to learn.

Children responded to Rachel's presentation with sharing a lot of information from their own experiences in their neighborhoods. One child talked to her mom who told her that homeless people could sometimes be dangerous if they did not have proper medications for their mental illness. Another child explained that even people with good education could become homeless because he had seen the movie, *Pursuit of Happyness*, where Will Smith plays the part of an entrepreneur whose bad investments financially break the family part, leaving him and his young son homeless, sleeping in a subway station and a homeless shelter. In the movie, we see that he is finally able to get a job and find a house for his family.

For several days, children's questions about homelessness became the organizing frame for the classroom, as Rachel helped them learn more about homelessness by using a variety of print, media and online sources. However, she did not feel comfortable having children work independently on research tasks or use the 'open Internet' to explore this topic. According to Rachel, there did not seem to be enough 'child-friendly' resources that would be easy for children to find, understand and use. So Rachel selected resources, displayed them on the data projector or made print copies for the children to read.

When she invited an advocate for the homeless to come to the school to be interviewed by the children, he brought along a children's picture book about a snail who loses its shell. Actually, the book was a little 'young' for children who had, by this time, already delved quite deeply into the topic. The homeless advocate had not anticipated that children would have already learned so much about homelessness and was surprised at the quality and depth of the children's questions.

In the next phase of the project, the composition process was initiated. When children were ready to share what they had learned, Rachel assigned children to work with a partner, selecting partners so that children with different kinds of ability were placed together. Each pair was responsible for composing a comic page about one of the topics children had generated through their research inquiry process. For example, one group explored the issue of media stereotypes about homelessness in the movies. Another group looked at why people are homeless. Still another group examined the ways in which children could help those who are homeless.

During the revision process, Rachel encouraged children to think from the point of view of the target audience. Children had decided their comic book would be aimed at other children (younger and older) in the school, their parents and their teachers. The instructor used a process of encouraging warm and cool feedback to help children discover how their work was being

understood by other readers. When partners had drafted a page using Comic Life software, Rachel displayed their work to the large group and engaged children in a peer review process, using the concepts of warm and cool feedback. Warm feedback invites readers to offer information about features of the creative work that are valued and appreciated. Cool feedback offers ideas and interpretations about confusing or unclear elements of the creative work, enabling the creator to generate ideas about how to revise his or her own work. When warm and cool feedback is incorporated into multimedia composition, it promotes awareness of the interpretation process and motivates the revision process (Hobbs and Cooper Moore 2013).

Helping children understand and value the revision process is a fundamental early literacy competency. When the writing and revision process is understood as merely making written comments on texts, it is possible to overlook the context of the relationship between the author and the audience (Lee and Schallert 2008). The particular quality of the caring relationship, as Noddings (1984) has shown, influences how feedback is produced and interpreted. Promoting a climate of authenticity, respect and trust is essential to nurturing the reciprocally dependent relationship between student and teacher that supports the learning process (Noddings 1984). Finally, the comic was produced and color copies were distributed to parents, teachers in the school building, and school leaders. The resulting pages came together in a comic entitled *The Life of a Homeless Person*, which uses a combination of photographs, original drawings, dialogue and writing. Figure 1 shows a single page from the collaboratively produced student multimedia project – it is a 14-page nonfiction comic book, created with a digital camera and a simple multimedia production software. It was shared with their peers, their families, school leaders, and the school community.

According to the instructor, the production of the homelessness comic helped children to recognize that informational messages can come in many forms: fiction and nonfiction books, TV documentaries, video stories, and even youth media productions. Children developed an understanding of the role of research and information gathering. The cycle of feedback and revision was absolutely central to the success of the homelessness comic. Through using warm and cool feedback, children understood the role and skills of the editor. They felt more comfortable taking creative risks in front of their peers, supporting student confidence and self-esteem.

Discussion

Sadly, few children are likely to have had the kind of frank, authentic and complex conversations about homelessness in the context of the typical elementary curriculum as the children in this summer program experienced during the summer of 2010. Children who live in the city may have contact with social problems like poverty, mental illness, and substance abuse. But there may be

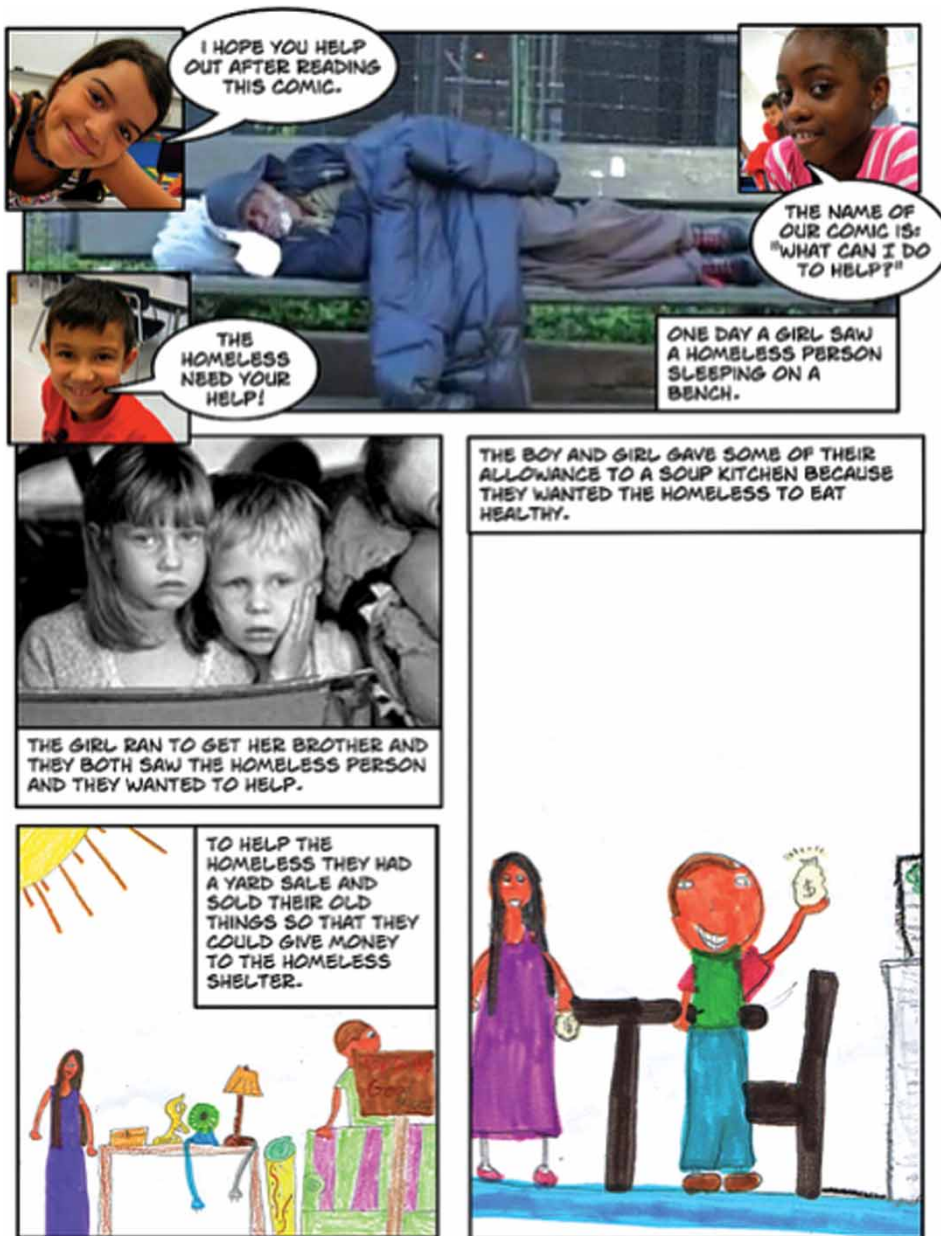


Figure 1. Sample page of children's comic.

few adults in a child's life who have the confidence and integrity to address these issues with them. Many educators and parents cling to comfortable notions of child innocence that enable us to keep a comfortable distance from difficult topics that children may encounter accidentally in the course of daily life. When Neil Postman wrote *The Disappearance of Childhood* in 1982, he

reflected an authentic parental longing to protect children from the disturbing features of contemporary society as a means to promote children's sense of confidence, optimism, agency, and idealism. He argued that childhood, by its very nature, was 'under threat from adult culture' (145) as a result of the changing epistemologies brought about by the rise of televisual culture and the decline of book culture. While book culture required literacy which served as a barrier of sorts between the adult and child worlds, the rise of television culture made it increasingly impossible to keep children away from ideas and information about the messy realities of contemporary society. But arguing that childhood and needs are to be honored as a place that separates children from the complexities of the adult world is particularly middle-class conceit. It neglects the reality of how many children in low-income and minority communities experience daily life: where concerns about family finances, job security, illness, housing, transportation and other basic needs create a high level of day-to-day stress among adults and children alike.

Improvisation and strategic risk-taking must be conceptualized as a set of socioemotional and experiential competencies that teachers need when using digital media in an urban community as a tool for learning. Five features of this instruction made the learning experience powerful for children: (1) an improvisational decision to use the teachable moment to structure instruction; (2) the teacher's openness to address children's naïve, difficult, uncomfortable and unexpected questions; (3) a clear focus on the research and information-gathering process as a means of learning; (4) well-structured use of child partner teams in the process of writing, creative media production, feedback and revision; and (5) composing in a medium that combines language and images in sequential order with an easy-to-use software tool. As a case study in digital and media literacy, we see how a pedagogy of listening supports improvisation and strategic risk-taking in responding to unpredictable situations in ways that benefit children and liberate teachers to function more effectively. Digital and media literacy education with young learners can create the kind of rich, original moments of child-centered talk which makes it impossible to use the so-called 'recitation script' where brief recall answers and minimal (and often superficial) feedback are the norms (Lee and Schallert 2008). Dialogic pedagogy, the kind based on active listening as described in this paper, is especially important in counteracting these unproductive routines, helping instructors find the sweet spot of student motivation and engagement, as children discover the explosive rush of delight that occurs when they to think for themselves, using the city and community as inspiration for authentic learning that promotes civic engagement.

Taking strategic risks and taking advantage of those unpredictable moments in social interactions with children are competencies that enable educators to address the socialization processes involved in building character. According to Cohn (1996), 'People who report high levels of well-being and life satisfaction, even in difficult circumstances, are those involved with something beyond

themselves – such as helping others, or working towards a social ideal. When people develop into compassionate, caring human beings, society benefits and individuals experience personal happiness and higher self-esteem’ (43). Children who have the capacity to be empathic and caring toward others, and have the motivation and courage to stand up for what they believe is right, perform better socially, academically, and in their adult careers. They contribute ideas to a meaningful issue that many people choose to ignore. Children increase their feelings of empathy and reduce their fear of homeless people.

Although the experience emerged as the result of an accidental encounter, witnessed by students, between their teacher and a mentally ill homeless person, the instructor recognized the value of the intensely emotional experience in activating children’s interest, motivation and intellectual curiosity. By gathering and analyzing information and representing what they learned, children were empowered to see the city as a place where learning happens. By creating a document to share their learning, children developed a sense of civic agency by individually and collectively addressing an issue of public concern: the causes and consequences of homelessness.

Notes on contributor

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