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Creating the Early Literacy Classroom
Activities for Using Technology to Empower Elementary
Students

Jean M. Casey

2000
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Englewood, Colorado

To my mom, Marie, the best teacher

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Photo by Kathi Kent.

FOREWORD

Each year, as I watch a new kindergarten class line up for the first time, I am touched by how excited they are. This is where they will learn to read and write, just like the big kids, just like grown-ups. They have already taught themselves to walk, and they have already taught themselves to talk, and they have mastered many wonderful skills. They have every hope and expectation that they will be successful here; to join what Dr. Casey calls "The Literacy Club."

Restructuring learning environments to empower young learners lies at the very heart of Dr. Casey's work. From the earliest days of her career, Dr. Casey's own work with children, and her accounts of research and case studies, reflect her commitment to literacy for all young learners. She chronicles the reading and writing successes of early learners when they are engaged in meaningful activities and given access to technology. Across the globe, her accounts show the connections between technology and early literacy. Anyone who works with young children knows that when children are denied access to this club we call literacy, they are denied their future. Dr. Casey presents the success stories that confirm the power of technology to empower children, to initiate them into "the club."

As we watch our world being transformed by technology, we find ourselves preparing children for a future we can only imagine. We know that they will need to become lifelong learners in an increasingly complex society. Without the ability to communicate, to collaborate, and to act as global citizens, they cannot hope to share in the promise of this new century. The success of our efforts to educate them will depend on our ability to provide learning environments that allow them to engage in these behaviors. Dr. Casey connects technology, writing, and children; communication, collaboration, and meaning; the need to know, the need to share, and the need to be heard. These connections provide the keys to unlocking the door to the literacy club for each and every child who stands in that line that first day of school.

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JANUARY 24, 2000

PART I

CREATING A LITERACY CLASSROOM

Children who are excited about what they are doing tend to acquire the skills they need to do it well, even if the process takes a while. When interest is lacking, however, learning tends to be less permanent, less deeply rooted, less successful. Performance, we might say, is a by-product of motivation. (Kohn 1998)

"I can read!" shouts five-year-old Timmy on the first day of kindergarten. This statement would have sounded like educational fiction in 1970 when I began teaching. When a kindergarten or first-grade child came to us then and asked, "Teacher, when will I learn to read?" we had to say, "Not until we teach you the 325 skills from our district Scope and Sequence Chart." The child would dejectedly return to his seat. But today in every classroom that has a good teacher and a talking word processor this can happen on the first day or first week of school for every child.

Are the children smarter? Are the teachers better? Maybe all of those things but the tools for communication are also much improved, and our knowledge about how children become literate is based on replicable global research studies. The new tools for communication in the classroom are the talking word processor, meaningful interactive phonics software and interactive CD-ROM books. These replace the pencil as the tools for students' daily writing, empowering them to express the ideas in their minds that they never before were able to write by using the pencil. Motivated by writing about their own interests and thoughts and validated by the professional-looking computer printout, students permanently learn the many skills they require to be literate. The key to these new tools is that they put the children in control of their own learning; and with this control comes empowerment and success when accompanied by the support and guidance of a teacher like you.

Why Does the Computer Make Such a Difference for Early Writing and Reading?

To use a pencil well at age five requires a great deal of small motor coordination. Since eye-hand coordination is a developmental process that sometimes is not fully developed until they become seven or eight years old, many children have a great deal of difficulty with early attempts at writing. It also becomes a task equivalent to calligraphy when we require young learners to produce perfectly shaped letters on large lined paper another task that leaves many of them frustrated and discouraged. When they can't get their ideas out on paper like the peers they see around them or the teacher who is writing on the board, they get discouraged. They make false judgments about their abilities and think they are poor students who are dumb or failures at the task of reading. Every teacher I have ever met has had one or more students who feel like this in their classroom. In the past they were assigned to the low reading group and given drill work, which further convinced many that school was not the place for them. The activities in this book will provide you with a new way to empower each of your students and help them become authors and readers. It is important that you are aware of the many factors that affect the "Learning to Read" process. Figure 1 is a list of those factors; keep them in mind as you assess and work with each of your students.



- | | |
|--------------|---|
| PHYSICAL | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Vision: near point, far point, I-r tracking, eye movements: ABCs of vision difficulties, Snellen Test, tele-binocular, color blindness, visual discrimination, visual perception 2. Hearing: auditory perception, auditory discrimination, auditory memory, auditory acuity/Audiometer 3. Muscular coordination: large- and small-muscle control; hand-eye coordination 4. Consistent hand preference 5. General health, vigor; fatigue, diet 6. Speech 7. Neurological: endocrine imbalance |
| INTELLECTUAL | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Language development 2. Listening skills 3. Knowledge and concepts 4. Academic interest 5. First-hand experience |
| EMOTIONAL | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Self-concept 2. Birth order 3. Pressures from home, school, peers, community 4. Maturity, security, temper 5. Motivation 6. Attitude and outlook 7. Family support-personal problems (divorce, sibling rivalry) |
| SOCIAL | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Home background/Aspiration environment 2. Parental attitudes 3. Parental expectations 4. Teacher attitudes and expectations; other adults 5. Cultural difference 6. Sex and rank in family 7. Peer-group attitudes/ability to socialize, relate to peers |
| EDUCATIONAL | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teacher 2. Poor instruction 3. Study habits 4. Inadequate vocabulary 5. Primary language preference 6. School administration 7. Class size 8. Methods/materials 9. Absences 10. Philosophy of school 11. Legislative factors 12. Risk-free supportive environment/technology support |

OTHER
CONSIDERATIONS

Literacy Environment: The classroom must be a place where literacy is modeled by the adults, where books, materials and writing tools are present and students are allowed to write and read daily. This environment needs to also be supported in the home, s close communication with parents is vital. This is a place for Authors and Readers
I am an author and a reader! A MEMBER OF THE LITERACY CLUB!

Now add your own factors: What other factors affected how you learned to read? Recall as much as you can and list important factors for you.

Figure 1
Factors That Affect Learning to Read

Why Should the Word Processor in Your Classroom Have Speech?

We learn through seeing, hearing, touching, moving. We all have our unique styles and strengths of learning. Many students profit from the auditory reinforcement they get when the computer reads back the words they have written. This auditory feature also helps with memory. It is an important feature to have in your classroom when you are trying to meet the needs of all your students.

You can read about research supporting the ideas that are the basis for the activities listed here in the revised edition of *Early Literacy: The Empowerment of Technology* (Casey 2000). *Creating the Early Literacy Classroom* will give you practical suggestions for designing your own writing, publishing room. Yours can be the best.

For the children who have not been successful in the reading method being taught, the procedure in schools often is to place them in special education. The numbers of occupants in these classes continue to grow. There's nothing wrong with our methods, so it must be the children, right? Wrong. We must abandon the attitude of blaming the child and instead focus on understanding that each human being is capable of learning. It is our job to create the best environment and empower students each to achieve their own potential. In special education, the search for devices to assist in communication has always been a concern and much of our educational technology has developed from that source.

According to the national definition of a balanced reading program, your classroom reading program must provide support for phonemic awareness, phonics instruction as well as comprehension skills and lots of writing and reading daily for all your students. (See Figure 2.)

A complete software program to accomplish many of these goals and provide appropriate support for each of your individual students would be to combine one of the available talking word processing programs with the best software available that presents phonemic awareness, vocabulary building, sentence building strategies and interactive CD-ROM books. Have a full classroom library, technology resources and you as the literacy model, and the writing,

reading, speaking and publishing in your class will begin. This book suggests activities for using many types of programs. You can substitute other software programs that you find at the software clearinghouse; just keep in mind all the components listed here of a balanced reading program and try to make sure you have technology support for each area.