

# Students as living books — with stories to tell

An elementary school in Chilliwack draws on the experiences of the community and students to build a Living Library and a powerful learning tool.

by Leslie Dyson



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Lieutenant Governor Steven Point shares a story with rapt students at Chilliwack Central Elementary.

Scott Wallace, principal of Chilliwack Central Elementary Community School, can barely contain his enthusiasm about the school's Living Library, a relatively simple, but powerful learning tool. The Library is engaging students in this inner city school who had been showing an alarming degree of apathy, especially in the higher grades.

The school's Living Library, created by teachers Suzanne Bartel and Christopher Lister, is a collection of oral stories told by various community members and dignitaries and

soon some of the students themselves. They're recorded in front of an audience and then posted on a special website. It's easy to access the Living Library site from the school's website (<http://www.centralsharks.ca>).

"It's innovation, creativity and technology with a human face on it," he said.

Like many towns across Canada, Chilliwack allowed the development of gigantic malls on the outskirts of town. They were quickly followed by gigantic subdivisions. "Commerce in the downtown core was decimated,"

he said. Many of the residents left behind are struggling with tremendous poverty. Wallace said that every day he deals with the fallout felt by the students. "These kids have resilience that amazes me," he added. "It's incredible that they meet expectations and even exceed them."

The school is a hub for a myriad of programs under the umbrella of a Central Gateway for Families. The school halls ring with the sounds of babies, children and adults of all ages. The school is the centre for Better Beginnings, Nobody's Perfect, Families First, Family Literacy



It's not easy. "For many parents, school was not a pleasant experience," he said. In some cases, families are leery of giving out personal information or being judged. "Sometimes the parents are on the run," he added. "We support without judging" and the parents benefit when they see others are dealing with

"The Living Library is the piece that addresses the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century learner to a tee," Wallace said. "It's not just the use of technology, innovation and creativity, or that it involves individual, pairing and group work. It makes learning relevant.

"Many of the children here aren't paper and pencil kids," he stressed, "and levels of engagement aren't only an issue here. Other districts and schools are having the same discussions. Teachers spend countless hours dreaming up lessons that will make learning exciting for kids. But I have seen the apathy and heard 'What does this have to do with me?' There are lots of reasons for the disinterest," he added.

Wallace said there have been conversations about bringing in Aboriginal speakers to tell their stories about why they quit school before graduating, or why they went into

and childcare at all times of the day.

Wallace has been at the Kindergarten to Grade 6 school of 265 students for 10 years, the last five as principal. One-third of the students are Aboriginal and all of them are living off reserve. "To assist our kids we have to involve the whole family so that what we're doing carries over at home."

the same issues.

There still are "invisible families," he said, "but we are reaching more people because of word of mouth."

He's also discovered that, no matter what the financial circumstances, parents are "wired." Everyone's connected to the Internet. The school is experimenting with Twitter as a way to stay connected.



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an alternative program or their residential school experience.

“We have kids right now who are at risk of not finishing school. Many of our boys live to play soccer, wear their hats sideways and give me grief,” he said. “But I see them with these storytellers and read their blogs and they’re engaged!”

Oral tradition is rooted in every culture on the planet. The Living Library marries these traditions with technology so stories can be heard over and over again.

The website states that the Living Library is intended to help the students “realize that they too are Living Books with stories to tell” and features a quote from Craig and Marc Kielburger of the *Me to We* movement: “In all corners of the globe, storytelling is a long-standing tradition with significance that’s lost on no one. It’s vital to preserving culture. It speaks of moments of pride. It speaks of moments of injustice. It offers an opportunity to learn. Most importantly, it inspires us to create change for the future.”

Bartel and Lister started the program last September, first by recruiting storytellers from friends and family and then by setting up the website with the help of Google. “It wasn’t a difficult process,” said Bartel. “You just have to know the options are out there.” On the other hand, proper recording equipment and headsets haven’t been as easy to acquire. A cellphone records the stories and earphones are being scrounged from various sources.

Bartel said she got the idea from the UBC library that allows patrons to “sign out professors.” The website, just like a library, enables the students and their siblings and parents to “sign out” stories and listen to them over and over.

Fifteen people so far, including

Lieutenant Governor Steven Point and school board chair Doug McKay, have told stories to rapt groups of students who are eager to ask follow up questions. Wallace said the students are especially transfixed by older people who are seen as wise and having information to share.

The Lieutenant Governor held the students spellbound with a recent history story and a legend.

Point was sworn in as Lieutenant Governor in 2007. Prior to that, he was a tribal chief of the Stó:lo Nation Government for 15 years. Central School is on Stó:lo territory. In 1999, he was appointed a provincial court judge. He said he’s chosen the promotion of literacy as a cornerstone for his tenure as Lieutenant Governor.

“I really enjoyed going out to the school and participating,” he said. “It was fun to hear the [students’] questions. They’re so honest and inquisitive. It’s just so uplifting. It’s one of the perks of the job.”

*My Favourite Chicken*, a humorous story he’s told at conventions, provided students with insight into what life was like for him as a child living in the area. A transformational legend about a naughty chipmunk child and her grandmother was about the common plight of children who don’t understand why their parents are so strict with them until much later.

He also explained that stories in his culture are told four times so that they will be remembered.

The online Living Library is “innovative and connects kids to our culture and the broader community,” he said. When children hear a story repeated, “it takes on different meanings as they grow up ... There’s nothing like seeing it first-hand but if they can hear it again and again, as kids like to do, I think that’s tre-

mendous.”

He also added that he didn’t learn how to read until he was in Grade 4. “You know, kids fall through the cracks [but] it’s a big handicap.” He said he believes education is the way to help Aboriginal people overcome tremendous problems such as poverty. He’s been visiting schools throughout the province, handing out books and promoting the importance of getting an education.

Some of the online stories are funny, some are sad. They are posted on the same day. Max, a Grade 5 student writes amazingly succinct and insightful synopses that appear with each story.

“I write the book reviews on Google docs and share it with my teacher and he puts it on the website,” said Max. His favourite story is *The Summer of ’58* by McKay. “It was told really well, with lots of detail, hand gestures and changes in expressions and tone of voice.” He added, “I think the Living Library is a good idea because if students are away from school and miss it, they can go to the website and listen to it as many times as they want.”

The students are eager to have their own stories recorded. Bartel said, “They’re developing their writing techniques so they don’t just get up there and finish in one minute.” For students who have difficulty writing their thoughts down, “it’s definitely going to be a challenge,” she said, but they will be encouraged to write their stories in point form. “But there are those who are fantastic writers,” she added, and they will have to learn how to refrain from just reading what they’ve written.

All the students who wanted to be interviewed for this article, answered in well-articulated, full sentences.

Lakota, Grade 5, said he’s looking forward to telling a story about

his family in the smoke house. He said storytellers “have to speak with a clear voice, not mumble or talk about a lot of boring things or you might lose your audience.”

Whitney, Grade 5, said she might tell a story about going to Kelowna for a photo shoot. “Everyone can tell a story,” she said. “For me, it should be really funny and definitely catch the audience’s attention. You should wait a couple of seconds until you catch all the kids’ eyes,” she advised.

Samantha, Grade 5, said, “it’s all about how you tell your story. You can’t just say ‘this happened, and then this happened.’ You have to practice — you can’t wing it — and you have to change your tone of voice.” To overcome her fear of the audience, she said “you should tell your story to someone in the audience who means a lot to you, but you have to move your eyes and look at the whole class.”

The Living Library “was created to prove to us we all have a story to tell,” Samantha added. “I knew I had experiences, but I didn’t know you could turn them into stories you can tell.” She said she’s also discovered that when she tells her friends stories, they share their stories in return.

“The simplest ideas are usually the best,” said Wallace, “and the kids are lined up wanting to do it. The level of engagement is heightened, not just by the technology but by others in the community—by hearing their grandpa, uncle or neighbour telling stories. It’s a paradigm shift and it’s helping these kids develop skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.”


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*Jameel Aziz, continued from page 2*

3. Students need and want a teacher both to connect with and as a guide as they work through the curriculum.
4. Schools will never be able to keep pace with the rate of technological development, nor will they be able to always provide state-of-the-art technologies to students.
5. Many of the skills students need to learn to be productive citizens will not come from technology.

Principals have a dilemma in trying to determine what and where to invest both their resources and time. We have a responsibility to work with our school communities to determine the right fit for our context and then work to support that vision, knowing that things will need to be re-examined on an annual, or more frequent, basis. We cannot determine a technology strategy on our own, nor can we let technology address issues that we know are human issues. We also have to help our communities understand that not all aspects of learning now occur within the walls of the school and that a lot of student learning will occur at home or other non-school environments.

The school’s priorities should not be how to attain or make use of technology. The focus has to remain how can technology enhance the experience of the learner and lead us to better student achievement. 

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