

Foreword

By Linda Rief

Last October I was on my way to a yard sale in Rowley, Massachusetts, with my son and his family. Harrison, my eight-year-old grandson, was riding with me. Earlier in the week I had noticed that Harrison had a lump on his head and a black eye. “What happened?” I asked him. Harrison told me how he had found a skateboard at the recycling center and set up a ramp in the barn to test it out. He explained what had happened as he tested out the skateboard. It was a great story, filled with his joy at finding a free skateboard, the exhilaration of the jump, and the *thwack* and *slap* as his entire contraption fell apart when he tried to skate down the ramp on the barn stairs.

As we rode in the car that day I asked him, “Did you write down that story about the skateboard you told me last week?”

“No,” he said. But within seconds he had pulled out his iPod touch and begun typing rapidly with his thumbs. I wasn’t sure what he was doing until he said, “Done. Want to hear it?” He read the story to me as I drove.

THE SKATEBOARD

Chapter 1

I was just going to the dump when this all started. It turned into a monster. I was now at the dump. Yes, just looking at the swap shop. I had seen two nice UNH Wildcats basketballs, so I took them. Then when my dad went to empty some oil, he saw it—the thing that I was waiting for, an old skateboard, so . . . [He read this as “so, dot dot dot.”]

Chapter 2

So, as you probably know, what any kid would do is take it home with them, so I did just like any kid would do. When I got home I went out to the barn. I skateboarded for at least an hour then my mom and dad came and said that

I was going out to dinner right when I was getting all the stuff in the right spot. Something popped in my mind. I wanted to do one last trick. So I was doing the trick and the skateboard flung up into my head and that is how I got the lump and mark on my eye.

“Harrison, I really like the part where you said the experience turned into a ‘monster,’ and that you did what any kid would do if he found a skateboard at the recycling center: ‘take it home.’ I like the way you kept us in suspense by not telling us what happened until Chapter 2. I also love the way you said ‘something popped’ in your mind.

“You know the part where you said you put ‘all the stuff in the right spot’? I was wondering what kind of contraption or ramp you built and how you placed it on the stairs. I was also wondering what it felt like, or what you were thinking, as you tried to do the trick and the skateboard flung up into your eye. Do you think you might want to add that information to the piece?”

“Not really,” he said. (So much for moving the story forward with an eight-year-old, I thought.)

“Well, I would love a copy of your skateboard story just as it is.”

He clicked the iPod keys a couple of times and said, “Done!” The story was waiting for me in my e-mail inbox when I returned home.



Harrison’s iPod touch made it possible for him to write his story right there in the car, and the e-mail function allowed him to send his work to me (and potentially others) easily and quickly. However, the story didn’t go where it could have gone if Harrison were in a class taught by a teacher who had read Lisa Miller’s book, *Make Me a Story: Teaching Writing Through Digital Storytelling*.

When Lisa’s editor, Toby Gordon, asked me if I would be interested in reading *Make Me a Story* and writing a foreword for it, I asked, “Are you sure you want me to do this? I know nothing about digital *anything*.” After reading this book, however,

I realize I am the person to whom this book is addressed—the teacher who is intimidated by the prospect of incorporating technology into her classroom but is open to the possibilities.

I will never catch up with my students. I will never be as fluent as they are with these twenty-first-century tools. And I will never catch up with Harrison. He will always be far ahead of me when it comes to using technology as a natural way to tell his stories. But if I want to continue to teach, I have to learn how to use some of the tools my students are using. I must be open to learning. In the past I've been totally intimidated by technology—afraid to use it if I didn't know enough about it. All of these technologies that seem to change daily are frightening. I often don't know what I should even try to learn. What tool should I use? Where do I begin? Will it be outdated before I've learned it?

Frank Smith admonished us years ago to let kids into the “literacy club” via real reading and writing, and now I have to join the twenty-first-century version of the club. At the very least, I have to let my students show me (and teach me) how they use these tools to enhance their learning.

I'm not surprised when students forget to bring pens or pencils to class—those are no longer the tools that come to mind when I ask them to write. Reading methods have changed as well. Paul, one of my eighth graders, carries all of his books in his backpack—on his Kindle. Another student, Charlie, can find definitions, synonyms, and histories of any word we have a question about in a matter of seconds using his cell phone, long before any other student could locate the dictionary or thesaurus on a shelf in the room (if they even know the answers can be found in a book).

We have to remind ourselves constantly, however, that the focus in our classrooms is reading and writing. The focus is not technology. The *tool* does not deliver the meaning; the tool may enhance the meaning and make it more engaging, but we cannot let technology itself be the message. Lisa Miller shows us that the message—the writing—is what matters. Digital stories are built on the writing and thinking that students do.

Lisa shows us how to teach writing, but she also shows us that writing is enhanced and becomes more engaging to both the writer and the audience when it is delivered

through a digital medium. This is the world in which our students live. They have grown up with technology, which makes them fearless with these tools. This is what Don Murray taught us about writing: Play with it. Don't be afraid to put words on the page. Digital storytelling allows kids to play, but it also teaches them to be meaningful in that play.



As soon as Harrison was done writing his story, he was *done with his story*. I wonder how the story might have taken shape if he had added pictures, video, or sound. I can imagine Harrison's skateboarding experience as a digital story. He would have engaged in all of the sophisticated thinking necessary to build such a story. His thinking would not have stopped once he delivered it to my e-mail inbox.

A couple of years ago, Al Stuart—the technology education teacher at the middle school where I teach—and I decided to collaborate on the idea of letting kids make animated cartoons from personal narratives they had written in my class. Here's how complex the collaboration was:

AL: I'll order twenty-two copies of a program called Frames.

ME: I'll ask my teammates if I can remove twenty-two kids from their regular classes for an entire day, and then I'll rewrite the remaining schedules for the week.

AL: Do you know anything about digital storytelling?

ME: Not a thing. Do you?

AL: No. Let's try it.

Of course the kids had already done so much of what Lisa Miller explains they need to do in this book—develop story ideas from questions they want to answer, construct storyboards that organize their ideas with compelling beginnings and surprising endings, and understand that the best stories have a hook that appeals to an audience as well as to the writer.

We sat the students down at computers and gave them six hours to tell their stories digitally. We found that none of them wanted to leave the computers—they were totally engaged and engrossed in all they could learn and produce. Adolescents,

and even younger kids, do not need to move every seven minutes, as some “experts” insist, as long as they are genuinely interested in what they are creating (especially when using the tools that are so natural to them).

Lisa Miller shows us exactly how we can teach Harrison, or any student, to “make me a story.” *Making* should be a key practice in all of our classrooms. Our students are already using technology. It is our job to help them *make meaning* with that technology.

What I love about this book is that Lisa alleviates a lot of our fears by showing us *one* aspect of technology: digital storytelling. She demystifies the process of incorporating technologies into our classrooms by letting us concentrate on the one thing that all of our students are good at—telling stories—and then shows us how to take this natural ability and turn it into what makes us literate in this century: the ability to think and learn and express ourselves through our words, our chosen images, and our actual voices. Like Don Murray, she is teaching us *how* to play, but how to play meaningfully. Throughout the book I am reminded that Lisa does far more than teach digital stories. She teaches us how to teach writing. Digital technology is the tool that makes the stories come alive.



Several years ago I was working with Hunter, Harrison’s older brother, as he struggled with a piece of writing in the third grade. He told me he didn’t like writing.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because, because . . . it’s so quiet,” he replied. “You have to do it by yourself, and then it just sits on the paper.”

Through digital storytelling, Lisa shows us how to help our students bring their writing alive, to a place where their images and voices come bounding off the page. This is thrilling work for kids. And still the kids have to do the work of a good writer—they have to find a story that “answers some question that drives the writing forward” in a way that is appealing to themselves and to an audience. Lisa shows that, by weaving together writing and digital storytelling, we teach our students the

strengths of both as they maneuver back and forth in an organized, strategic way to tell their stories.

This is complex work. In the process of crafting a digital story, students must constantly consider and reconsider ideas, organize information, synthesize, analyze, synchronize, evaluate, and assess. It is a recursive process that involves decisions about point of view, beginnings, endings, choice of words and images, voice and tone, mood, purpose, and audience. Lisa guides us meticulously through all of it. She shows us that our students have to solve real problems by complicating, yet enriching, their ideas as writers and storytellers. Through the digital stories the kids create, we see how sophisticated and genuine the process is, and how rewarding the results can be.

Among the many things I learned from Don Graves, professor emeritus at the University of New Hampshire, one of the most important concepts was that we should be teaching deeper, not wider. Lisa takes us deep into digital storytelling. What I realized as I read this book is that we teach students so much more when we concentrate on one thing to teach them well, instead of jumping from project to project or topic to topic without ever giving them time to really develop and apply their ideas and understandings. In *Make Me a Story*, Lisa invites, encourages, and instructs us to teach one thing—digital storytelling—deeply and thoroughly.

Students get to participate in a complex process that Lisa makes accessible, practical, and joyful. By relating her classroom experiences, she guides us through the ways we can teach our students to think, talk, write, and craft stories that are meaningful to them in a way that will make them meaningful to others as well.

We are in a different place with writing than we were just twenty years ago. The writing itself has not changed—it still needs to make us think, or feel, or learn something. However, the tools with which it is crafted and delivered to others have changed drastically. The students I teach in eighth grade were born into this digital age. They have played with technology their entire lives. They cannot believe that anyone who is still living today was alive before television was invented. (That would be me.) I have to find ways to help them compose their writing, interview others, write book reviews or trailers, and read others' writing using technology—either the school's or their own. If we don't have the tools of technology in our classrooms, we have to find ways to use the tools students carry with them.

Make Me a Story is for all teachers at all grade levels. Lisa teaches us the process of real writing for real reasons for a real audience using twenty-first-century technologies. We have to listen to the stories and learn all about the tools that bring those stories to life.



For years I have wanted to take Lisa's digital storytelling course at the University of New Hampshire, but our schedules have always conflicted. Don Murray often used to say to me, "You have to meet Lisa Miller. You have so much to learn from each other." From this book I have learned how to really teach digital storytelling. From this book I have also learned what Lisa has learned from the students with whom she has worked—how to listen for stories, how to teach writing, how to quietly wait to be surprised. Don Murray would be so pleased that we have finally *met*.

Linda Rief is an eighth-grade teacher at Oyster River Middle School in Durham, New Hampshire. She is an adjunct instructor in the University of New Hampshire's Summer Literacy Institute. She is the author or editor of numerous books, including *Inside the Writer's-Reader's Notebook*, *Vision and Voice*, *Seeking Diversity*, and *Adolescent Literacy* (Eds. Beers, Probst, and Rief)—all of which are Heinemann publications—and *100 Quickwrites* (Scholastic). She has participated in her first Webinar and learned to take pictures on her cell phone (just don't ask her how to get them off of there) but is not yet willing to give up her overhead projector.