

# Author Studies: Developing Language Learning and Computer Literacy

By Jennifer Padua

## Hawai'i Department of Education grade 2 benchmarks addressed in this article:

### Benchmark LA.2.1.7

Read aloud a grade-appropriate text with fluency and expression

### Benchmark LA.2.3.1

Identify author's message or underlying theme in fiction

### Benchmark LA.2.3.2

Identify the story elements of character, plot, and setting

### Benchmark LA.2.3.4

State a personal opinion about a fictional selection

### Benchmark LA.2.4.1

Write in a variety of grade-appropriate formats for a variety of purposes and audiences.

### Benchmark LA.2.6.1

Use oral language to obtain information, complete a task, and share ideas with others

### General Learner Outcome #6—Effective and Ethical Users of Technology

(The ability to use a variety of technologies effectively and ethically.)

Uses a variety of technologies to access and manage information and to generate new information

## Children's Author Websites

### Robert Munsch

[www.robertmunsch.com/](http://www.robertmunsch.com/)

### Chris van Allsburg

[www.chrisvanallsburg.com](http://www.chrisvanallsburg.com)

### Beverly Cleary

[www.beverlycleary.com/index.html](http://www.beverlycleary.com/index.html)

### Patricia Polacco

[www.patriciapolacco.com/](http://www.patriciapolacco.com/)

### Dr. Seuss

[www.seussville.com/lb/home.html](http://www.seussville.com/lb/home.html)

### Mem Fox

[www.memfox.com/welcome.html](http://www.memfox.com/welcome.html)

In a grade 2 classroom, a student is reading *Zoom* by Robert Munsch. “ZOOOOOOOM! ZOOOOOOOM!!!” His classmates are balancing the art of laughing and listening simultaneously. The student continues to read, “Lauretta rode the wheelchair around the store really fast: ZOOOOOOOOOOOM, ZOOOOOOOOOOOM . . .” Again, laughter ensues. When the book ends, students initiate their own oral discourse without any teacher prompting. “That book was funny . . .”, “I like the part when . . .”, “Zoooooommm!” The teacher is amazed at how an author study has generated an increased amount of language learning.

Author study has been recognized as an effective instructional practice for many years. One of its purposes is to enable teachers to help students understand the relationship between reading and writing. The typical author study involves reading books by the author, discussing literary elements, and then learning about the author's writing craft. However, in this era of information technology, accessing information about authors of children's books has added a valuable skill: the ability to integrate language, literacy, and technology. Some authors have created personal websites, which makes possible the added benefit of students accessing the author themselves. This article will describe ways in which an author study develops print literacy (reading, writing), oral literacy (listening and speaking), and computer literacy (attaining skills and knowledge to operate computer tasks). (See sidebar for some of the Hawai'i Department of Education benchmarks that are addressed.)

## Print and Oral Literacy

Robert Munsch was the subject of the author study for the grade 2 classroom. The study began with read alouds of some of Munsch's books. After each story, the teacher discussed the literary elements (i.e., characters, setting, problem, solution), then eventually assigned students to write personal responses that also state the author's messages (e.g., “If I was Stephanie, I would be mad too if everyone copied me. Robert Munsch is saying, just be yourself!”). The teacher left the books in a plastic tub so students could read them on their own. She also encouraged them to go to the school library and borrow his other books; her class checked out all of them.

After a sufficient number of books were read, the students learned about Munsch's writing craft. Here are some attributes the students generated:

- His stories are humorous, except *Love You Forever*, which is sad.
- The main characters are children.
- There's always a problem and a solution.
- He repeats words and phrases.
- He uses expressive words.

To validate these attributes, students reread his books, worked in small groups, and wrote evidence on chart paper. A class matrix was developed and the class discussed what they noticed (e.g., “The words *Blam, blam, blam* are used in plenty of his books;” “Oh yeah, his main characters are children.”).

Later, the teacher discovers that some children are writing stories similar to Robert Munsch. One boy wrote,

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“A bear came out of the zoo and went to a house. The boy’s mom says, “Get out, get out, get out or I will hit you on the head. Her son came out and said, ‘Bring it on bear’.”

## Computer and Oral Literacy

At the computer lab, the teacher models for students how to access the Internet using a teacher developed guide. Computer-related vocabulary, such as *log in*, *user name*, *password*, and *Internet address* (i.e., uniform resource locator [URL]), are used. More computer vocabulary is spoken, “Move your *cursor* over the Internet Explorer icon on the bottom of the screen, then *click once* using your *mouse*.” Using these vocabulary words in a computer context translates to a different meaning for these students. “Move your *cursor* to the box with the word address at the top. In the white empty box, type in Robert Munsch’s website address: *www.robertmunsch.com*.”



Photo by Jennifer Padua

Authors’ websites allow students to learn more about the author while developing their computer literacy skills.

After the whole group model, the students locate a computer to work on. Some students use the guide, while others do not. Many of them do not arrive at the website. A slight panic erupts, and children call out that they followed what the teacher said and it didn’t work. A quick lesson compares print and computer literacy. When writing, students have become accustomed to leaving a space after every word. The teacher explains that when typing in an Internet address, students should not leave spaces or they will not be directed to the website. The BACKSPACE and DELETE

buttons are introduced for those who need them. When the issue is resolved, the students proceed to the website in search of information about Robert Munsch’s life.

The purposes of today’s session were to expose students to information on how to access a website independently, increase knowledge of computer terminology, and learn about Robert Munsch’s life. During the closure, the teacher orally debriefs with the students about what computer skills were learned: (*WWW means World Wide Web; You don’t put spaces when you type in the address.*) and what they now know about Robert Munsch (*He was a storyteller; He lives in Canada.*).

## Integration of Print, Oral, and Computer Literacy

On another occasion, students brought copies of Munsch’s books to computer class. The purposes of this session were to have students understand what it means to read with fluency and expression, how to access websites independently, and how to download files. On Munsch’s website, the students were able to listen to audio files of Munsch reading his books (He provides this as a free service with conditions.). As the audio played, students followed and read along with the book. Again, at the end of the session, the teacher informally assesses if the lesson objectives were met. One student shared that “Robert Munsch always changes his voice and reads from slow to fast and from soft to loud”. When asked, “What does that mean?” The student elaborated, “I have to change my voice to express the character’s feelings.” Another student also explained that he noticed when the printed words are in capital letters and dark (bold) print you change your voice too. One girl adds, “Yeah, and when the words are stretched out, you keep saying the sound, like maaaaaake up” (text from *Makeup Mess*). The teacher summarizes the discussion by saying that what Robert Munsch is doing is reading with fluency (i.e., quickly, accurately, and with proper expression). In the following days, she notices that students reading Munsch books are doing what they learned.

## Learning From the Author

Though some authors have biographies, not many students or teachers may have copies of them. An author’s website opens up the life of the author. Students learn about the author’s personal life (e.g., where he or she grew up, how he or she decided to become an author). It can also offer lessons that help teachers validate concepts they are trying to teach students. For younger students, some of them are still learning the concepts that writers write for a purpose (e.g., to entertain, to share information) and that writing involves a process (i.e., planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing). In the Munsch study, students noticed that his book *Love you Forever* is sad, a lot different from his other books, which are humorous. On his website, Munsch explains his personal tragedy and how the idea of this book came about. Chris van Allsburg, another children’s book author, shares on his website that it takes 7–9 months to write and illustrate his stories. Students are shocked when they learn this. But it validates the concept that quality writing is a process and it does take time.

## Final Thoughts About Author Studies

The Robert Munsch author study ended with the students learning how to write personal letters and sending them to Robert Munsch. The class is studying a different author now. Students ask, “Can I read his book to the class?” “Does he have a website?” “Are we going to write him a letter just like Robert Munsch?” Author studies create opportunities for students to be excited and motivated about literature. They generate language learning and language use that students may not initiate on their own, and, now, in the informational technology age, they give any student, struggling or advanced, an opportunity to learn computer skills in a literacy context.

*Jennifer Padua, Reading Specialist, PREL, may be contacted at paduaj@prel.org.*

