The virtual landscape has shown us that by working together and building relationships we can bring books and the love of reading to students with more opportunities for collaboration than ever before.

Connecting Authors to Young Readers

USING THE VIRTUAL LANDSCAPE TO BRING NEW, DIVERSE, AND INCLUSIVE BOOKS INTO YOUR SCHOOLS

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Like most of us, I spent the better part of the pandemic trying to will it away. When I signed the book deal for my middle-grade fantasy debut Rea and the Blood of the Nectar in January 2020, I was over the moon. It had taken me upwards of a decade to call myself a “published author.” I won’t lie: I lived on the hope that by mid-2021, the pandemic would largely be behind us, and my debut would have the bells and whistles of a “beforetime,” in-person book launch with family visiting for the big day and lots of celebrations.

But by the time June 2021 arrived, we remained knee-deep in the pandemic. Most events were virtual. My family from India couldn’t fly down. My husband, my three-year-old daughter, and I were the only ones present for my book launch. I felt defeated. I had waited a long time for this.

I’d been doom-scrolling when I chanced upon a quote from Wanda Sykes: "When life gives you lemons don’t make lemonade, make pink lemonade. Be unique."

It was my a-ha! moment. Living through a pandemic meant we physically couldn’t meet each other, but we could virtually “see” everybody! It was time to make my pink lemonade.

The benefit of debuting in year two of the virtual climate was that publishers, bookstores, librarians, teachers, and young readers had gotten used to Zoom calls, Google Meets, and ring lighting. As our world revolved around the internet more than ever before, physical boundaries blurred, bringing authors closer to readers, booksellers, and educators.
As author visit requests trickled in, I researched how to create engaging presentations, focusing on my journey to become an author and giving students a behind-the-scenes look into the book production process from manuscript to final copy. The presentations were a hit, but I still felt one major element missing—student engagement. Keeping in mind the interactive features—polls, chat, raise hand—on platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet, I incorporated interactive exercises to stimulate student participation.

My most-popular exercises were getting students to come up with their own plot ideas by using a few simple steps and then creating a character profile together with a class. The result: No more lolling heads or bodies slumped in chairs; instead an engaged class that had learned a vital tool in creating well-rounded characters!

But I wondered, “What happens next?” For debut books, most of our patronage is friends and family. How was I going to get my book into the hands of young readers? How was an educator going to discover my book with schools and libraries being closed?

Taking a deep breath, I dove head-first into the virtual waters. If I wanted to get my book into the hands of more readers, I had to step out of my comfort zone and build relationships with gatekeepers and educators, understand the nuances of virtual school visits, and learn the ropes of making an effective presentation to keep screen weary 8- to 13-year-olds interested.

As my first step, I became active on Instagram and Twitter. It’s where the children’s book community is most active. Every Monday on Twitter at 9 p.m. EST, I participated in #MGBookChat, a chat where authors of middle-grade books and teachers and librarians congregate virtually to discuss new releases, ways to include diverse and inclusive books in classrooms, methods to captivate the interest of reluctant readers. The topics of discussion are wonderful and endless.

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Kids would come up to the camera saying they couldn’t wait to read my book, and those that had read it asked when the sequel would be out!

To teachers and librarians: Authors are eager to connect with young readers. If there’s a book that’s perfect for your students, reach out to the author. When searching for new, diverse, and inclusive books, a quick and effective way is to look up hashtags on Twitter such as #MGBookChat, #the21ders, #Bookallies, and #Bookposse, to name a few. You’ll find #the21ders, #Bookallies, and #Bookposse, to name a few. You’ll find a plethora of books across genres from novels-in-verse to historical fiction, contemporary, nonfiction, and fantasy books to add to your collection.

Payal Doshi has a Master’s in Creative Writing (Fiction) from The New School, New York. Having lived in the U.K. and U.S., she noticed a lack of Indian protagonists in global children’s fiction and one day wrote the opening paragraph to what would become her first children’s novel. Born and raised in Mumbai, India, she currently resides in Minneapolis, Minnesota. When she isn’t writing or spending time with her family, you can find her nose deep in a book with a cup of coffee or daydreaming of fantasy realms to send her characters off into. Rea and the Blood of the Nectar, the first book in The Chronicles of Astranthia series, is her debut middle-grade novel. For more information, visit <www.payaldoshiauthor.com>, or follow her on Instagram @payaldoshiauthor and on Twitter @payaldwrites.

Educators can also discover authors and their books from free conferences like Middle Ground Book Fest on YouTube, or they can create a Flipgrid account and invite authors to make videos for their students to watch. Subscriptions to middle-grade blogs and websites such as Kidlitsix.com, a six-minute weekly show inspiring kids to explore the exciting world of reading and participating in programs like #Kid-NeedMentors where authors get paired with classrooms to create deeper and more meaningful connection with students, are fantastic resources too.

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So, when life gives you lemons, I say, don’t make lemonade, make pink lemonade garnished with sprigs of lavender and fresh mint!

I’ll leave you with a few tips for creating an engaging presentation:

• Use bright backgrounds. I use Canva to create my presentation slides—they are versatile and customizable. Once I’m done, I drop the images into a PowerPoint presentation.

• Use a lot of pictures.

• Make your presentation personal.

• Include at least one interactive exercise that can be “played.”

• Leave room for questions at the end.

• Arrange for a tech-test before the presentation to iron out any technical glitches.

Let’s be creative and get collaborating!

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