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Author Visits Can Spark a Sense of Wonder and Enhance Content Areas

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As a kid, I spent lots of time outdoors learning about nature by experiencing it. When I picked tomato worms off tomato plants and fed them to the chickens on our farm, I learned about the cycle of life and organic farming. When I collected frog spawn and watched tadpoles hatch and become frogs, I learned about metamorphosis. I'm still someone who prefers to learn about the world by experiencing it. However, there are many aspects of the world I cannot experience firsthand, which is why I mostly choose to read books that shed light on a topic, culture, life experience, or situation I cannot know about on my own.

The books you choose to share with children, and the authors or illustrators you invite to your schools, can open new avenues of wonder. While most educators recognize the value authors and illustrators

can bring to an English language arts classroom, I have a particular fondness for authors and illustrators who connect their work to other content areas.

When it comes to my writing life, I am drawn to creating books that send me down a rabbit hole in search of new content that intrigues me. Instead of "writing what I know" (a common mantra in writing circles), I prefer to write about topics that fascinate me and make me wonder. I love to go deep into a subject and share what I learned with kids.

This is the pattern I followed with my book *Flying Deep*. I will never be an *Alvin* pilot, but through intense research, I learned enough to write a book about this deep-sea research vessel. When I visit schools, I describe how to become an *Alvin* pilot and talk about various aspects of the job. I also bring exciting props

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to engage students. For example, to demonstrate the intense pressure *Alvin* withstands, I show a Styrofoam cup that has been shrunk to half its size after traveling to the sea floor (see figure 1). I share a piece of titanium, the metal used to build the sphere that protects *Alvin's*



passengers from the pressure, and a piece of syntactic foam that gives *Alvin* buoyancy, so they can return to the surface. And I don't shy away from showing and discussing a H.E.R.E. (Human Element Range Extender). There is no toilet in *Alvin*, so passengers use specially designed bottles. Kids love learning insider details that bring science to life.

My program includes both English language arts and STEAM content. Even when I'm focusing on writing skills such as research and revision, I weave in STEAM details along with facts and stories that didn't get into the manuscript. This sharing further enriches students' knowledge of the science while demonstrating choices I made as a writer. For example, my early drafts contained no mention of the music played in *Alvin* during dives, but two different pilots I interviewed brought it up. My researcher antennae went up; there's something

unexpected and important here. So now, readers of *Flying Deep* learn that music is played in *Alvin* and are asked to think about what kind of music they'd choose to play.

Authors and illustrators are experts on subjects they write about, so when they talk to students, their programs can do double duty: they bring their expertise as a writer or illustrator, and their expertise on the subject of the book. They share content that students might not be able to experience on their own. Then, teachers and school librarians can connect material from the presentations to multiple aspects of the curriculum.

Here are examples of other authors whose school visit programs address multiple content areas.

Traci Sorell is an enrolled citizen of the Cherokee Nation. Her debut

picture book, *We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga* (Charlesbridge 2018), highlights a modern Cherokee Nation that is grateful for blessings and challenges that each season brings. "During school visits, I share how families and communities balance our realities as dual citizens of both the Cherokee Nation and the United States."

www.tracisorell.com

Figure 1. Cups that shrunk from ocean's pressure.



Author Andrea Wang says, “I purposefully set *The Nian Monster* (Whitman 2016) in modern-day Shanghai to show that China isn’t a backwards country where people live in dirt-road villages and dress in what Westerners call ‘pajamas.’ Chinese kids also live in apartment buildings with all the amenities.” During school visits, Wang asks students to consider how the lives of kids in the United States are similar to and different from children in Shanghai. After *Magic Ramen: The Story of Momofuku Ando* (Little Bee 2019) is published in March, Wang plans to emphasize the scientific method since Ando used it to invent instant ramen. <<http://andreyawang.com>>

Hannah Holt is a children’s author with an engineering degree. Her book *The Diamond and the Boy* (HarcourtCollins 2018) tells the story of natural diamond creation side-by-side with a biography of H. Tracy Hall, inventor of a revolutionary diamond-making machine. “In presentations, I use familiar objects as transitions to new scientific ideas. For example, I invite children to teach me about building with Legos. From there, I launch into

a discussion about graphite and diamond, and how items made with the same pieces can have different strengths.” <<https://hannahholt.com>>

Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow, author of *Mommy’s Khimar* (Simon and Schuster 2018), touches on a variety of social studies topics when she talks to kids. “Depending on the audience and venue, I have had children think about community as well as familial, cultural, racial, or religious identity.” <<https://jamilahthewriter.com>>

All of these talented authors enrich the reading and writing curriculum by sharing information about their work as writers, but they also add value to other content areas such as social studies and science. They provide an inside look at cultures, jobs, and experiences that are an important part of the curriculum.

You can find more information about their virtual and face-to-face school visits on their websites.

Michelle Cusolito is a former fourth-grade teacher, curriculum developer, and National Board Certified Teacher. She facilitates workshops and consults with authors and illustrators to help them develop engaging school visit programs. In 2016 she won a PEN New England Susan P. Bloom Children’s Book Discovery Award for the manuscript for *Flying Deep*. Since its publication, *Flying Deep: Climb inside Deep-Sea Submersible Alvin* (Charlesbridge 2018) has received excellent reviews from Horn Book, Booklist, School Library Journal, and a starred review from Kirkus. It was also a Junior Library Guild selection and one of the Washington Post’s “Best New Books for Children and Young Adults” in spring 2018. *Flying Deep* is on the Kirkus 2018 “Best Informational Picture Books” list and the NSTA 2019 “Outstanding Science Trade Books for Students K–12” list. To learn more, visit <www.michellecusolito.com>.

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