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The End of the E*LIT Era: Exploring Its Impact

by Marilyn P. Arnone and Jennifer L. Sullivan

E*LIT is a project of Syracuse University's [Center for Digital Literacy](#) and stands for "Enriching Literacy through Information Technology." Every year for the past six years, the E*LIT Competition has inspired students in and around Central New York to create technology-based projects about a selected living author's life and works. All the authors selected have dedicated their works to presenting the perspective of underserved populations. Projects represent collaborations between library media specialists, classroom teachers, special subject teachers (art, music, technology) and teams of students. The culmination of the participants' projects is attending a live presentation on the Syracuse University campus by that year's author that includes an awards ceremony recognizing outstanding projects [See photo on right with author Andrea Davis Pinkney standing far left with students and educators on stage]. Library media specialists (LMSs) and classroom teachers have adopted the project and made it a highly anticipated annual event in their curriculum. Laurie Lefevre, LMS at Frazer School feels it has helped her as well as the students.



"Working on an E*LIT project with my students and fellow teachers helps me to think outside of the box and reach outside the four walls of my library to work with many different people. It is good for the teachers and great for the kids!"

Syracuse University iSchool Professor Ruth V. Small began E*LIT in 2004 with funding from the CNY Community Foundation. When that grant ran out, the timing could not have been better. In 2006, Dr. Small was named a Laura J. and L. Douglas Meredith Professor. That prestigious title not only recognized her teaching accomplishments but also provided her with funding to continue the E*LIT project for another three years. This final year, featuring author and publisher Andrea Davis Pinkney, was the biggest yet. Dr. Small [photo below on left] recalls fond memories of the project . . .



"I conceived E*LIT after hearing classroom teachers identify their students as either "a reader" or "a techie," as if the two could not be complementary. E*LIT demonstrates that children can enjoy and be successful in both reading and technology use while, at the same time, providing role models in the authors we chose from Grammy-award winning singer/songwriter Joanne Shenandoah [photo on right], who enchanted students with her Native American stories to Myron Uhlig who writes about his childhood in Brooklyn, growing up with deaf parents to



this year's E*LIT author, Andrea Davis Pinkney who tells the stories of African Americans who have contributed so much to our country. Best of all, the students had the opportunity to showcase their wonderful technology projects in the presence of the author. (When it came time for this part of the program, I always needed a box of tissues.) Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't mention the outstanding graduate students from the Schools of Information Studies, Education, and Public Communications at Syracuse University who flawlessly planned and executed this project every year. While we're sad to see the end of E*LIT, we look forward to new and exciting campus-community collaborative projects."

In writing this article, the authors wished to explore the impact of the project on its participants and consider how the spirit of the project, enriching literacy through technology, might be continued in different ways. We went straight to the "primary" sources to discover what E*LIT has meant to those involved.

Impact on Participating Educators and Students

Erin McQuiston, Library Media Specialist for Grimshaw Elementary in Lafayette, NY, has participated in several E*LIT projects over the years. She has been a strong supporter of E*LIT from the beginning, and shares how her participation in E*LIT projects has impacted her standing in the school community.

"To me, the E*LIT impact has been huge. During the first 8 years of the 12 years in this position, my administrator seemed to regard me mostly as a provider of planning time. Once a well-respected classroom teacher highlighted what we could accomplish collaboratively, the year we got 2nd place, suddenly my value to her seemed to grow. I no longer had bus duty. Some other teachers have

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taken chances and worked more closely with me, although scheduling and access to computer labs is still a big issue. The Library Media Specialists made a presentation to the Board of Education on Tuesday, May 26, and they were very positive about our participation in E*LIT."

Elizabeth Angelastro, a Library Media Specialist who worked with McQuiston on this year's E*LIT project, said she was most impressed with how deeply the students invested themselves into the project.

"The students critiqued their own work with a harsher eye than I would ever have. During recording sessions the students would listen to their recorded parts and then say, 'Let's do it again. I know I can do better.' Everyone was so focused on doing what was needed for the project to meet the vision that the fact of this project being a competition faded from anyone's mind. It truly became a case of where the sum of the learning and experience was greater than any of the parts. . . I was especially gratified to see how the students were so excited to be at S.U. to receive recognition for their hard work. They dressed up and had the biggest smiles on their faces. Hearing Andrea Davis Pinkney was also inspiring. Pinkney showed the students how being an author is something that is within their reach."

Sharon Oliver, LMS at Salem Hyde Elementary, said that her students were also inspired by Pinkney. During her presentation, Pinkney [*photo on right*] shared that she had begun writing when she was a very young girl. This brief statement gave students the confidence they needed to try and write their own stories. The opportunity to visit the campus made a huge impression on Oliver's students. When asked to write about their experiences at this year's E*LIT, the majority of students expressed a strengthened desire to attend college and earn a degree as expressed by one of students.



"I think that after I went to SU I wanted to go to college even more. College is hard work but it's good to get educated."

It is a reality in Oliver's school district that many students live their entire lives in Syracuse without ever setting foot on the Syracuse University campus. Oliver noted that the students were awe-struck by the size of the campus, the library and the Carrier Dome.



At McKinley-Brighton School in Syracuse, NY, Library Media Specialist Bonnie French [*Pictured on far left in side photo with Carol Iwanicki and students*] believes that the E*LIT program has been vital in helping her students become leaders in their school. Carolyn Bonner, classroom teacher, agreed and added that it also fostered community building.

"Students were very cooperative when working together. They expected each member to do their job. Students viewed the assignment as fun! They were very proud of themselves."

The sentiment expressed above was seconded by William, a student who worked on one of the school's three projects. He opined,

"I liked working in groups because everyone had different ideas and we got to choose which ideas were the best and then everyone agreed on the best ones."

For one student at least, meeting Pinkney fulfilled "a lifelong dream of mine to meet an author." Another student added, "It's a day I'll never forget."

For Frazer School Library Media Specialist, Laurie Lefever, participating in E*LIT through the years has helped her connect to others in her school community. She states,

"This contest has pushed me to collaborate simultaneously with teachers from multiple content areas. For example, this year I worked with the entire 4th grade team, the music teacher and the art teachers. We even had a couple of local high school students help design the Web site we put our project on."

Some of Lefever's students were asked about their favorite memories of this year's event. They included, "meeting the author in real life and taking a picture with her" because she was "cool, nice, creative talented, and she liked to dance"; "learning about people from history, like Duke Ellington" (whom Pinkney writes about in her picture book biography of the same name); and "working together to learn."

At Bellevue Elementary in Syracuse, Library Media Specialist Monica Minion has participated in E*LIT from its inception in 2003. Monica finds that the E*LIT projects are valuable because they offer an outlet for creativity that her students might not have elsewhere in their classes, especially in the area of technology.

"I'm always trying out new or different technologies – things that I might not try otherwise".

Through the years, Minion has employed everything from digital cameras and VHS tapes to wikis and glogs. For over a month, the students are immersed in the project. Minion meets with them anywhere from 3 – 5 times a week. Students look forward to working together.

"Their enthusiasm is contagious, and I find that a real bond develops between the students as they work together. Teachers remark on how much the students get out of the project. Each year they look forward to seeing who the author



is and what the project will be. I try to work with a different teacher each time, and find that they are always willing to work with me to be sure that we have the time to complete the project and do a good job on it."

Using Glogster.com Bellevue and McKinley-Brighton students created a terrific [interactive poster](#) that includes children's questions and interview responses from Andrea Davis Pinkney.

Impact on Graduate Students Who Lead the E*LIT Effort

Over the years, a number of graduate students have assumed the job of leading the event. This challenging organizational task (that includes everything from researching possible authors, publicizing to schools, collecting projects and supervising their evaluation with a panel of judges, to arranging the facilities and luncheon for the big event) begins early in the first semester of the school year and doesn't end until after the event which usually occurs in May. Organizing such an event has given students valuable practice for taking on leadership positions in their future careers. Many of these graduate students are now practicing library media specialists or public librarians.



This article's co-author, Jennifer Sullivan [Second from left in photo above with Ruth Small, Andrea Pinkney and graduate student Kate Shanahan on far right], led the final E*LIT event in May. Below, she reflects on her experience and what E*LIT is has meant to her.

"I was honored to have led the E*LIT program this year. From the onset, I felt a moral obligation to find an author who the children could see themselves in and one who could inspire and motivate students to believe in their dreams and work hard to achieve their goals. When I came across Andrea Pinkney's profile in an SU alumni publication, I felt in my heart that she was the right person for the task. Pinkney is a successful woman who rose to the top of her field as a result of her own hard work and determination. She takes great pride in her education and in obtaining her degree from Syracuse University's S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications. She was my choice from the very beginning, and she didn't disappoint. In fact, she exceeded my expectations. Pinkney drew the largest crowd ever for E*LIT, with 13 schools from in and around Syracuse submitting more than 20 projects. For the first time ever, the results of the project evaluations were so close, and all of the submissions were of such high quality, that we decided to make every entrant a winner. It made for a grand and celebratory occasion. I am filled with pride when I think of all the effort put into this year's event- from those who entered the competition and worked on the projects to those who volunteered their time to help organize and host the event. I couldn't have asked for a more rewarding experience.

The best part for me was hearing the students talk excitedly to each other about Pinkney as they boarded the buses to go back to their schools; one of the girls said, 'I want to be her [Pinkney] when I grow up;' a most perfect ending to a wonderful day."

Keeping the Spirit Alive

While the E*LIT Era itself may be over, Dr. Small hopes that previous participants will be able to keep the spirit of the competition alive in different ways and even that readers of this story, whatever their geographic location, may be inspired to find creative ways to enrich literacy through technology in their own schools. We asked some of our previous participants to share some ideas on how the spirit of the competition may be kept alive in other ways...



Bonnie French, Library Media Specialist from McKinley-Brighton School in Syracuse, thought of several ways to continue in the spirit of E*LIT with other student-created projects. One idea involves the use of an internet-based research project, where each participating class could choose a topic that's in their grade level curriculum and create an online project around that topic. All projects could be housed on a wiki site that SU students create. The E*LIT evaluators could judge the entries, and the first place winners would be featured in an article written by the local Post-Standard. Everyone participating could receive a certificate through email. The only cost would be the time invested by SU students and volunteers. French fervently believes that the SU and K-12 school connection should continue beyond E*LIT.

McQuiston thought schools could try to get their local School Library System to choose an author or theme. Schools could then submit entries and the products could be shared virtually if funding will not allow for a big public event.

Angelastro would like to see schools take the initiative and celebrate an author or a milestone and create projects to share at the end of the year.



"The culmination could be tied into School Media Week and be on display at the Carousel Mall, for example. Connecting projects to SLMC advocacy could only be a positive, while still celebrating student achievement."

Ideas for future project topics were shared by students in Beth Peppone's class from McKinley- Brighton School. They include: history and biographies of people, slavery, segregation, global environment (global warming), the North Pole, inventions, solar system, animals of various biomes, and ancestry.

Minion posited that the schools could use their areas' cultural and historical resources as a basis for research-based projects. Students could select a historical event or person from *[their local area]* to research and create a project to teach others about the topics they chose. While conducting their research, students would have the opportunity to explore the various primary and secondary source documents, pictures, and other media available in their communities. Minion feels that this type of project could foster important connections between the schools, different historical associations, and the local community.

Conclusion

We hope this article has triggered some ideas in readers for creative ways in which they can enrich literacy through technology in their schools and communities.

*Thank you to all the library media specialists who contributed to this article. For a list of all winners in the final E*LIT event, select NEWS from the side menu.*

About the Authors



Marilyn P. Arnone *[Photo on left]* is a Research Associate Professor in the School of Information Studies at Syracuse University. She is director of educational media for the Center for Digital Literacy (CDL) and serves as principal investigator for one of the Center's signature projects, *S.O.S. for Information Literacy*. Marilyn serves as founding editor for the *Educators' Spotlight Digest*. She has authored several books including *Motivational Design: The Secret to Producing Effective Children's Media* published by Scarecrow Press. She is also the creator and author of the *Curious Kids* series of storybooks with guides for educators (guides are co-authored with Sharon Coatney) published by Libraries Unlimited; the series is used to stimulate curiosity for research and to introduce information literacy skills to children in the primary grades.

Jennifer L. Sullivan *[Photo on right]* is about to enter her final semester at the School of Information Studies at Syracuse University. She will earn her MSLIS- School Media degree in December, and has enjoyed every minute of her education. When not involved in class work, Jennifer can often be found in the Center for Digital Literacy, where she works for Ruth Small, the Director of the research center and of the School Library Program at SU. Jennifer looks forward to joining the field of Librarianship. Wherever her career takes her, she hopes to have a positive impact on the community of people she serves by providing the environment, tools and skills to help them be self-sufficient, successful, confident citizens of the world. She hopes to help young people find who they are and what they believe through information and books that inspire them, entertain them, connect to their souls, and strengthen their voices. Jennifer currently resides in Liverpool, NY.

