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# Children Should Be Seen and Heard On the Web

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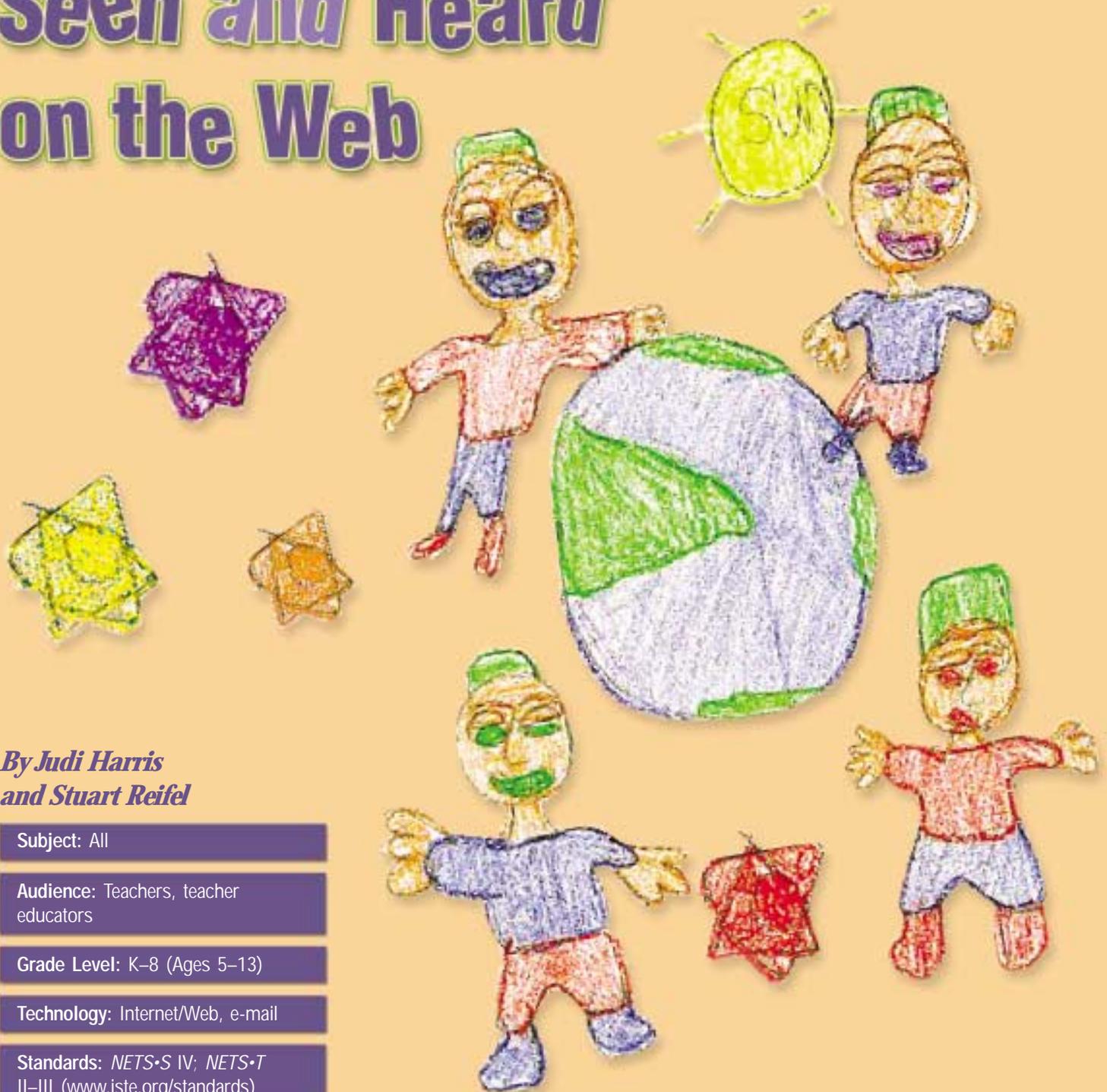
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# Children Should Be Seen and Heard on the Web



**By Judi Harris  
and Stuart Reifel**

**Subject:** All

**Audience:** Teachers, teacher  
educators

**Grade Level:** K-8 (Ages 5-13)

**Technology:** Internet/Web, e-mail

**Standards:** *NETS•S IV; NETS•T  
II-III* ([www.iste.org/standards](http://www.iste.org/standards))

Illustration from Cassidy Elementary School student Web page.

**W**hat can learners do with the Web? We can search it, as explorers of sorts—we can look for information to answer whatever questions we might have. Web-based technology allows us to be consumers in a virtual world. We can also use it to communicate with one another through e-mail, conferencing, and chat sites—the Web helps us reach out to others and learn with and from them. It also helps us play. The Web can give us access to games, shopping, and other forms of leisure.

This same technology that makes it possible for us to *use* Web-based resources can help us *create* them. The Web is not only a resource for our knowledge needs and pleasure, it is also a virtual canvas on which we can leave our own marks. Web sites are an opportunity for human expression, and as such they offer us a forum for saying who we are and what we have to offer.

We each can author a piece of the Web. The seemingly unlimited virtual space is waiting to be appropriated. When we author Web pages we are communicating—expressing ourselves in a new medium—saying who we are as learners and human beings. We have a new way to tell our stories, exchange ideas, reach out to others, and hear others. The democratic Internet allows voices to be heard in ways in which they might not have been heard in the past.

As Maxine Green has written about other forms of text, on the Web there is the need to create an “audibility to numerous voices seldom heard before” (1988, p. 127). The Internet is there for *all* voices—including all classes, ethnicities, genders, and ages. Why is it especially important to make children’s voices heard?

### Voices Online

Children can use the Web to express their ideas in many forms: written, pictorial, static, dynamic, monologic, and interactive. The variety of expressions that can be posted is great, and the potential for listening to and hearing these voiced expressions is unprecedented. Children’s works traditionally have been posted on refrigerator doors, on school bulletin boards, or in class newsletters. Now they can appear on computer screens around the world. Children’s works reflect the voices of those who create them, and when the “virtual refrigerator door” is viewable worldwide, children’s voices can be heard with renewed ease and sincerity.

Voice is a notion that comes to us from diverse fields of scholarship, such as literacy and critical theory. Some writers refer to voice in terms of the ways classes or ethnicities ought to be heard and understood (e.g., Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), while others include voice as a necessary part of deconstruction that can lead to an understanding of power relationships (e.g., Cannella & Bailey, 1999; Viruru & Cannella, 2001). For some, voice is a means of raising consciousness about ourselves in relationship to others—we find our voices in our stories, as a way of filling the silences that keep humans apart (Greene, 1994). In all cases, the stories that could appear on the Web can be seen as empowering children to explore and express who they are as children, as members of social groups, as classmates and learners—in sum, as members of diverse communities they are beginning to understand.

How are children’s voices expressed on the Web? How can children contribute what they wish to express in this virtual forum? What should be our

goals as we support children’s efforts to express themselves online? Answers to these questions can be constructed by considering four dimensions of the ownership of children’s works as they appear on the Web: the speaker, the focus or content, the idea, and the structure.

### Ownership

When we ask children to create works (e.g., stories, pictures, models, songs, skits, dances) as part of their schoolwork, the guidance we provide reflects our estimations of how much and what kinds of support we think they need to be successful. The specifications we provide as educators contribute to—even shape—the children’s works, so that in the end, what children have produced is, to some extent, “jointly created,” and therefore (even though we usually don’t think of it in this way) “jointly owned.” Though we refer to the products of students’ schoolwork as “theirs,” in any work, there are actually at least two voices being expressed: a student’s and a teacher’s. The more a work reflects the student’s own ideas and choices, the more we hear the child’s voice over the teacher’s.

Why is this distinction important to consider? If we wish students to assume intrinsically motivated responsibility for their own learning, we must provide them with authentic opportunities to know their school-based works as truly their own: their ideas, their structures, their content. If the ideas, structures, and content expressed in children’s work come primarily from the teacher, then the “jointly owned” work reflects more of the teacher’s voice than the child’s voice. Moving toward students owning their own work means teaching in ways that encourage teachers to cede

ultimate control over the ideas, structures, and content of student work to students.

The extent to which we “hear” students’ and teachers’ voices in children’s works can be conceptualized on four distinct but intersecting continua. These can be represented by answers to the following questions:

1. Whom do we hear “speaking” in the product itself?
2. Who determined the content or focus of the activity that inspired this work?
3. Whose ideas are being expressed in the work?
4. Who structured the work?

For any particular product of a learning activity, the answers to each question can be placed on a continuum between “teacher” and “student,” as shown in Figure 1.

Considered together, the placement of the marks on these continua can suggest the extent to which students’ and teachers’ voices are being expressed in a particular learning activity product or byproduct.

Let’s take a look now at some student works currently published on the Web through the lenses of these four criteria.

### Ownership Criteria

**1. Who speaks?** In the Learning About Bridges and Towers project Web site, five teachers from five different schools in three different areas of Alberta, Canada, described how they “connected their classrooms to challenge their students to build a bridge that

would span a minimum of 60 cm and carry a load of at least 5 kg.” (*Editor’s note:* See the Resources section at the end of the article for the Web addresses for sites mentioned.) Teachers posted Web pages from participating classrooms showing and describing the children’s works—that is, the bridges they created. On most of these pages, we “hear” the teachers’ voices summarizing and celebrating the children’s engineering and design successes.

In contrast, KIDLINK’s Multi-cultural Calendar Project Web site contains hundreds of children’s descriptions of how holidays are celebrated in their families, towns, and countries. Children are clearly heard “speaking” in this project, as shown in this excerpt from nine-year-old Megan Christian’s description of “Take Your Daughter to Work Day,” which occurs in the United States each April:

We got up at 5:30 AM and we drove to Aunt Kathee’s office. There I met two new friends, Chris and Spence, both in the eighth grade. After that I met some people around the office and then I went to breakfast. After breakfast of a muffin, bagel, and orange juice, we split up into two groups. Chris, Spence, and I were all in the “red” group. The first station we learned about the Y2K and what people can do about it. Y2K means the Year 2000 computer bug. Some people talked about computers. Some talked about computer games. One woman talked about what the Y2K bug could do to

the computers. The room where the women were talking looked like a fancy doctor’s office. It had a couch and a big chair.

**2. Whose content/focus?** The International Peace Museum is a good example of how a teacher-conceived content focus for a learning activity—what peace means and how it is expressed—can be responded to in many different ways by children through their artwork, poetry, and stories. Seven-year-old Andre and six-year-old Candace from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, express their ideas, for example, in a picture and poem (Figure 2).

The content of Australian and Indonesian children’s communications with each other in the Hobart-Malang Electronic Mail Project, by contrast, was clearly conceptualized by students and facilitated by their teachers. Though the teachers suggested the overall learning goal of “sharing information and learning about each others’ cultures,” the emergent nature of the topics that were discussed (e.g., comparisons of school schedules, folktales, and traditional dress) reflect the interests and thinking processes of the children more so than their teachers.

**3. Whose idea?** Constructivist pedagogy suggests that it is important to help students generate and act upon their own ideas for learning in school. In many learner-centered educational activities, students create original responses, alone or within groups, to teachers’ relatively open-ended prompts. The Virtual Museum of Music Inventions, for example, is a Web-based gallery of children’s mu-

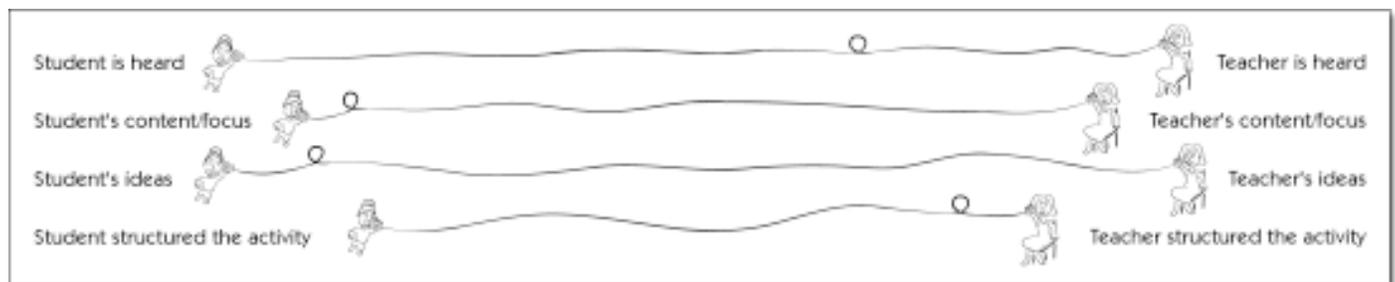


Figure 1. A continuum representing whose voice is being heard in a particular activity.

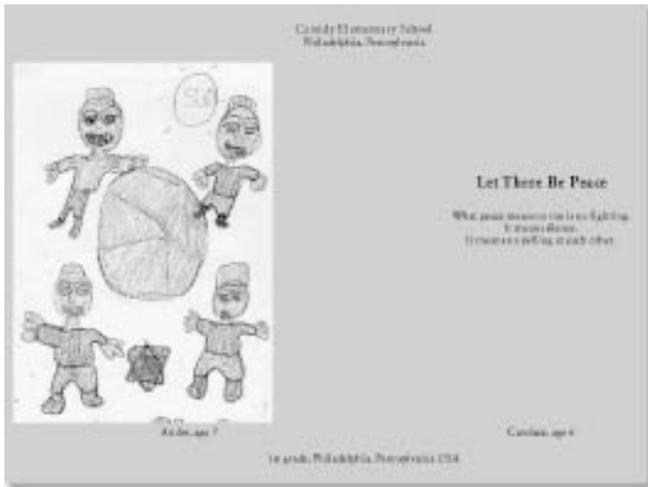


Figure 2. A student poem and drawing from the International Peace Museum Web site. (Reprinted with permission.)



Figure 3. A student-created musical instrument from The Virtual Museum of Music Inventions Web site. (Reprinted with permission.)

sical innovations. Participants are asked to create musical instruments from commonly available objects, test the sounds they make, then describe the process used to conceive and create the instruments and their resulting sounds as contributions to the online exhibit. Cathy, for example, invented and described the “Bing Bang Joe” (Figure 3), which is exhibited along with her classmates’ instruments created at the Holmes School in Oak Park, Illinois.

In a few online efforts, teacher involvement occurs only in response to student-initiated and -conceived project work. The most well-known example of such a student-directed learning activity is ThinkQuest, an international telecollaborative effort in which teams of students create publicly available educational Web sites for other students to use. In ThinkQuest, teachers act as coaches for these development teams, and are involved in the activity only in response to student team members’ invitations.

**4. Whose structure?** In the Fairy Tale and Folk Tale CyberDictionary project, students are asked to retell, in words and illustrations, classic stories that their teachers share with them, using a literacy-building technique. In the retold versions of the stories, the children are challenged to begin at least one word of the retold story with each of

the 26 letters of the alphabet. The students then illustrate the sentences containing these words, and display the pictures, along with the sentences as captions, at the project’s Web site. The stories can then be enjoyed, with alphabetically organized hyperlinks leading to the individually captioned illustrations. Though we “hear” the students speaking in these retold stories, the structure for this educational activity is clearly the teacher’s.

Alternatively, in the Just Ducky project, students determine both the content and the nature of its presentation on the Web. In this parallel problem-solving effort, participating classes hatch duck eggs in their classrooms, sharing their predictions, observations, ideas, thoughts, experiences, and wonderings as they do. Each class contributes what they consider to be important and interesting information about the eggs and ducklings (in text, photos, illustrations, sounds, and/or video clips) on their portion of the Web site. Online communication by e-mail among participant groups in different schools is encouraged, as is active and regular exploration of other classes’ Web-based “ducky information.”

### The Case for Student Voices

How can Web-based displays like the examples above empower learners? We

can see one answer to this question in the degree to which children are given choices and responsibility for what appears in the displays. The childlike joy in sharing what they are thinking is apparent in these playful works that no adult could create. A second answer is rooted in the communities of peers that Web-based displays make possible. When we see children exchanging their thoughts through their works posted on the Web, we are witnessing the emergence of a new, more expansive level of classroom community. In such exchanges, children can see and feel the power of their ideas because they are shared with their peers on a larger scale.

Teachers can now celebrate children’s voices in new ways. Yet using the Web to do this introduces new questions about these new opportunities for expression. When are children ready to share their ideas, structure their expressions, and create communities beyond those in their own classrooms? Teachers can use Web publication of children’s works as a new way to understand their students’ progress both individually and collectively, but these new questions about when children can fully benefit from such activity must be carefully considered.

Using the four suggested dimensions of expression to analyze children’s digi-

*Voices continued on page 59.*

*Voices continued from page 53.*

tal works—the speaker, the idea, the content/focus, and the structure—can help us see how and to what extent children's voices are represented in what they share on the Web. Many educators—especially those working with students in early childhood—urge us to incorporate learning activities in which children's voices are heard clearly, regularly, and with respect. When created according to this advice, Web-based displays of students' works can help empower children as learners, rather than serve as mere repositories for the products of their learning efforts. Yet, as Dyson and Genishi (1994) warn, "This intermingling of voices . . . can only happen in classrooms where stories themselves are allowed and, just as critically, when they exist within a larger classroom context of diverse story models, appreciative, respectful listening, reflective talking, and playful ways with words" (p. 6). It is up to us as educators—the primary architects of school-based learning opportunities—to make sure that students' voices are invited, incorporated, and valued in developmentally appropriate ways. We can promote this approach by providing opportunities for student-created, student-centered works to be shared on the Web.

## Resources

- Fairy Tale and Folk Tale CyberDictionary:  
[www.op97.k12.il.us/instruct/ftcyber/index.html](http://www.op97.k12.il.us/instruct/ftcyber/index.html)
- Hobart-Malang Electronic Mail Project:  
[www.fahan.tas.edu.au/indonesia/indo.html](http://www.fahan.tas.edu.au/indonesia/indo.html)
- International Peace Museum:  
[www.ih.k12.oh.us/ps/peace](http://www.ih.k12.oh.us/ps/peace)
- Just Ducky: <http://projects.cbe.ab.ca/ict/nlbrown/ducky2001>
- KIDLINK's Multicultural Calendar Project:  
[www.kidlink.org/KIDPROJ/MCC](http://www.kidlink.org/KIDPROJ/MCC)
- Learning About Bridges and Towers Project:  
<http://msnhomepages.talkcity.com/LibraryLawn/wnroom2/index.html>
- The Virtual Museum of Music Inventions:  
[www.op97.k12.il.us/schools/longfellow/lrexford/base](http://www.op97.k12.il.us/schools/longfellow/lrexford/base)
- ThinkQuest: [www.thinkquest.org](http://www.thinkquest.org)

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