

The Write Stuff: Coming Soon, Publish It! Online

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Establishing strong literacy skills, stimulating curiosity and encouraging creative thinking at an early age lays the foundation for creating lifelong learners. And lifelong learning is what Dr. Jane Baskwill's research and development program is all about.



Dr. Baskwill is an Associate Professor and Literacy Coordinator at Mount Saint Vincent University (the Mount). She is also an internationally recognized family literacy expert, and has recently developed a project for parents to help their children enhance their reading and writing skills.

The Publish It! Family Literacy Program is based on the idea that writing can be a shared family experience with a range of benefits for the educational, social and emotional well being of children, parents and community members.

In partnership with the Valley Community Learning Association (VCLA), Publish It! started out as a word-processor based tool that allowed families to write their own stories and publish them into books. Parents and children would use their school's computer lab to work on their books after school or in the evening, with the help of project facilitators. The books were then "published" on-site and copies became part of the classroom, school and community libraries, and families would receive a copy to take home.

Observing the popularity and positive effects of Publish It!, Dr. Baskwill wanted to find a way to expand the program to make it available in more schools and to more families. She approached Gina Funicelli, Director of the Industry Liaison Office at the Mount, looking for suggestions on funding sources.

Funded by Springboard Atlantic, Funicelli's position is part of a special collaboration between Saint Mary's University and the Mount, allowing both universities to benefit from her commercialization expertise. Springboard Atlantic is a network that encourages the transfer of knowledge and technology to the region's private sector. When Funicelli heard about the project, she saw a much broader potential for Publish It!

While the concept behind Publish It! is fantastic, the original version could only be delivered in person through workshops or in the classroom.

"The development of an online version of the program will reach more people, by allowing them to participate anywhere and anytime," says Funicelli. "There are also tools available online that can easily enhance the program, such as providing the option to write books in other languages and creating an online catalog to make books accessible through search engines, for example, by title, theme or author."

Using Springboard funding, Funicelli enlisted the services of Media Mechanics, a Halifax-based company that specializes in interactive design and development. Working closely with Dr. Baskwill, Media Mechanics brought Publish It! to life, creating a simple, dynamic website that empowers families to easily write stories, format text, add images and publish their own e-books. The site even features an online library that allows for sharing of e-books among users.

"When a community writes together, they help encourage children to write, which in turn sends a strong signal to children that writing is valued," says Dr. Baskwill. "The commercial evolution of Publish It! to an online program is thrilling to me as it will allow access by families around the world and for children everywhere to discover the freedom and opportunity that comes with literacy."

Presently, the prototype of the online version of Publish It! is being tested by VCLA. Based on user feedback, Media Mechanics and Dr. Baskwill will refine and improve the program while Funicelli works toward commercializing it through a license agreement with a private company who will market to government, libraries and community groups.

For more information or if you are interested in partnering with the Mount please contact Dr. Jane Baskwill at 457-6189.