Improving Program Quality
For more than seven years, USC ReadersPlus has been helping children in our neighborhood develop their reading and math skills and build confidence in themselves as learners. Yet even after seven years, we continually strive to improve the quality of assistance that we provide to our schools, teachers and students by implementing new strategies and techniques that we believe will help to make our tutoring sessions constantly better.

This semester, we asked our Readers and Math Mentors to self-reflect on the effectiveness of the lessons that they implement with their students through a newly designed Lesson Plan Evaluation. We would like to thank all of you who took the time to not only implement your lesson plans with the feedback from Cristina, Lene and myself, but also for your thoughtful responses to the usefulness of this tool to help us continue to strive to meet the individual learning needs of the students with whom we work. Nearly all of the feedback gathered was quite positive and supported, for us, the purpose of the lesson plan evaluation as is illustrated in the two following responses:

For me, personally, I remember filling out the evaluation and thinking about my lesson plan in a different light. How well did it go? Did my student enjoy it? It gave me the opportunity to reflect on it versus just moving on to a new lesson plan. It helped me to think about what to do for my next lesson plan.

--Kelly Fairchild, Weemes

I like the lesson plan evaluation because it forces us to reflect on what worked and what didn’t. Too often I think we as readers take our lesson plans for granted, either

submitting lessons that we have done with students before and are comfortable with, or new ones that may look good on paper but are too difficult for students. Knowing that we have to complete an evaluation following the lesson, therefore helps us to plan activities that are realistic for students to complete.

---Craon Rice, 2200 Street

I want to thank all of you for the commitment and dedication that you have given to your students and their teachers this semester. YOU make a difference with our children, and it is YOU who make our program a success. I wish you all the best this coming holiday season, and look forward to an equally successful spring semester in 2005!

Peace,
Tina

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Welcome New Readers & Math Mentors!

Tate Bejaryan
Alisa Cohen
Kruti Sheeth
Ryan Loughlin
Bawn LaMattina
Arlen Lipton-Cleper
Greg Gonzalez
Aleka Cooper
Gema Venegas
Ashley Hinrichsen
Sabina Spector
Dominique Woods
Kolapo Gadjirin
Bree Boselmann
Harlesa Ellis
Erin Stener
Lana Walling
Melanie Abrooian
Shane Summers
Joshua Linart
Kim Gilliland
Christine Walker
Alice Wong
Lauren Ball
Ross Lanvin
Banyelle Proano
Tim Graham
Afterschool SPOTLIGHT... Vermont

This past August, the Vermont USC Readers went all out in order to bring literacy to life for the second and third grade students in the Vermont After School Program. After reading The Great Kapok Tree, by Lynn Cherry, students participated in a Readers' Theater Production, in which they wrote out spoken parts, created costumes, masks, and scenery, and organized rehearsals. Each student was responsible for reenacting one animal's message to the wood-choppers. In addition, one outgoing student, Miguel Rivas, wrote out the narrator's script, which was then read by narrator Monica Miza.

Students were encouraged to invite their friends, families, and teachers to watch them perform the book on Friday, August 13th, the last day of the Summer Session. The performance was held in the USC Readers Room at Vermont, and even though it was crowded, it was a wonderful performance. All nine students became their animal, after donning handmade costumes and face paint. Our most reluctant readers got up on stage and read their parts confidently. Parents who rarely get to see their children's hardwork smiled and clapped as their students spoke.

Vermont has had an annual Readers' Theater for the last three years, and each time it has been a great success. This year was especially exciting because it was a large collaborative effort from the entire USC Readers Plus team, and the costumes and make-up really brought the book and the author's message about saving our rainforests to life. It was a literacy experience that will live in the hearts of the students and the Readers for a long time to come.

by Kristen Gathian

About the author:
Miguel Rivas is currently a second grader enrolled at Vermont Avenue Elementary School. He is seven years old and is in Mr. Rivera's classroom.

Miguel felt happy writing the narration for the story because he had "never wrote a story with acts before." His favorite part is when the tree frog (played by him) comes to talk to Señor (played by Reader Maureen Osborne). He had to write the acts and make the narrator parts for Monica Miza. He didn't really want to do it at first, but Kristen asked nicely so he decided to do it and now he is happy that he did. When he grows up he hopes to become a soldier.

Coming soon: The Nutcracker as presented by the Vermont Afterschool Program.
The Polar Express
an exclusive Reading Rockets Interview with Chris Van Allsburg

RR: What was your inspiration for writing The Polar Express?
VAN ALLsburg: When I wrote that story, the image in my mind's eye was a train waiting for me, waiting for a boy. But whenever I'm imagining a story and the protagonist of the story is a young boy, that's me. So the train was waiting for me in the winter, with the steam coming out of it, and that's all I saw. And it was snowing. In this habit of interrogating myself, I said, "Well, where is the train going?" I tried a few destinations out, and then it occurred to me, "Well, it's winter. Where would you want to go in winter if you were a kid and you could get in a train and it could take you anywhere? What if it's, say, December? No, well, wait a minute. What if it's December 24th, and there's a train out there, waiting for you? Where would you want to go?"
When I was writing The Polar Express, I just knew, "Well, we're going to leave. And let's see where we go." I knew we were going North, by the way, but I didn't know what was going happen there. I didn't know what the boy was going to ask for there. And even when I read it now, when I read that the boy was longing to hear a bell, and then he had an opportunity to choose the bell - usually, when you see stuff like that, you understand, "Well, that was contrived by the author". But this story didn't happen that way. This story was one draft. And the reason I say this- it seems like a kernel of truth, once again- is because it seemed like I was recovering a memory. I wasn't pushing forward, looking for where the ideas were next. I just sat down, that's where we went, and that's what happened. We came back home. And even the sort of coda at the end, where only the boy can hear the bell- that was all there.
The final page, where it turns out that his sister can't hear it any longer, I felt had to be there; because it didn't seem right to end right here, and for me, as an adult writing that story, there's the whole idea of parents caring about children believing in it, and then the transformation that they undergo as they grow older and they stop; but their parents are hoping they don't, because that's a kind of a passage in life they hate to see their children give up- because they aren't kids anymore. You know, when kids still believe in magic, it makes the whole house at Christmastime different.
So, that little thing at the end was just a reflection on how precious that time is, when you can still believe in it.

RR: Is it inevitable that people lose that childlike sense of wonder as they get older?
VAN ALLsburg: Well, let's face it. If the kid gets to the seventh grade and word gets out that they still believe in Santa, or the Tooth Fairy, or anything like that, they're stigmatized by it, because you have to grow up. Part of growing up is knowing how the world really works. And it doesn't work like that. But the value in trying to carry at least some of it is to remember how you felt on that night, and that when you're laying in bed on Christmas Eve and you actually think, "He's actually coming down from the North Pole." That you could actually believe that is preposterous. But you did. And you might have believed it until
you were eight or nine. But the world seems to be so filled with a kind of potential at that point in your life. And then a year later, you figure out that things like that can’t exist. December 24th is never going to feel that way again. But if you can try to remember and sort of savor what it felt like- just to lay in bed like that and believe not just that Santa was coming, but that the world included things like that- I mean that’s what you lose when that happens, but I think it’s possible in some ways, and maybe that’s part of the challenge of the artist- to try to persuade people, well, that the world still does include things like that. They don’t have the reality that we require as adults for things. But I mean, that’s the world of the poet. There are things unseen that are as relevant to your psychological and spiritual life that are just as important as paying your taxes. But they have real importance, you know, feeling that way about the world. It’s like an enigmatic aroma or something. Sometimes you can just get a little whiff of it, and then it goes away. But when you’re a kid, you can just stick your nose in a flower and stay with it.

**RR: Tell us about the upcoming film, The Polar Express.**

**VAN ALLSBURG:** The Polar Express is mostly done. Though because of the kind of film it is, it’s hard to say what part of the process has been completed. All the actors have committed their performances not to the camera, but the motion-capture device; because they do their performances with little metal things all over their body and all over their face, their hair, and hands- everything. The motion-capture device is capturing a digital map of what they’re doing. And then that performance goes into the computer, and then they cloak this performance in a specific kind of skin. The director, Bob Zemeckis, said to me, “You know, Chris, I want to film this just like the book.” Usually, that’s something that a director will say as a way of reducing the anxieties on the part of an author; or even to say it kind of metaphorically, that “this is going to be a film which is like the book”- as much as a film can be. But he meant it almost literally, which is that he wanted the quality of the film to be like a drawing- not like a photograph. Because the standard for filmmaking is a moving picture *a* moving photograph. But he wanted to make something that looked more like a moving drawing, instead of a moving photograph. So, that’s why this has all been done digitally, and has a very complicated software that tries to reconsider the world as if it had not been created in a computer by the kind of hardcore, hard-edged digital animation, but appears as if it was a world that was created in the mind of an artist who used pastel, crayons, and watercolor- and the other things that I used to make The Polar Express. I’ve seen some tests. It’s pretty unusual. So, we’ll see about that. I have high hopes. It should be great.

to see the entire interview visit: www.readingrocks.org, and find the November issue
# Reading Games

Next time you need a quick lesson, use one of these activities that are fun and promote literacy!

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<tr>
<th>Concentration</th>
<th>Go Fish</th>
<th>Old Maid</th>
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| **To Make:** Select five to ten words from a book (or books) the child is reading. Print each word clearly and boldly on separate 3x5 inch index cards, making pairs of each word. (The child may be able to help you by copying the words you write.) | **This game is good for early fluent to fluent readers.**

**To Make:** Select ten to 20 words from a book (or books) the child is reading. Print the words clearly and boldly on separate 3x5 inch index cards, making pairs of each word. (Children may help by copying the words you write.) Two to four players can play this game. | **To Make:** Select three words per player from a book (or books) being read. Print them clearly and boldly on separate 3x5 inch index cards, making pairs of words. Choose one more word without a match that will be the winning card.  

**To Play:** Shuffle the cards and place them face down in neat rows. Take turns turning up two cards at a time and reading the words aloud. If the two cards match, the player keeps them and takes a second turn. If they do not match, the cards are replaced face down and the next player takes a turn. Play until all the cards are matched. The player with the most pairs wins. If the child has trouble recognizing a word, say the word – do not ask the child to “sound out” the word. The purpose of this game is to build *automatic* recognition of whole words.  

**Variation 1:** Instead of matching pairs, you can use rhyming pairs: look, book; dark, park.  

**Variation 2:** This game can also be used to build letter recognition and letter / sound association. Paste or draw simple pictures on one set of cards; and on the other set, print initial consonants to go with the pictures. For example, paste the picture of a dog on one card, and write the letter "D" on a matching card.  

Instead of matching words, rhyming words can be used. At the end, the child can earn extra points by dictating or writing additional words that rhyme with the base words, or creating "silly" sentences using the rhymes. |

**To Play:** Shuffle and deal three to six cards to each player. Players take turns drawing a card from a dealer to their left. If a player draws a card that matches one in his or her hand, he/she reads the two matching words in order to keep the pair. Play continues until all the cards are matched, except for the one odd card. The player who holds that card at the end wins the game.  

**Note:** These games can be adapted to use with older children, or more advanced readers: variations can include vocabulary practice such as using homonyms, (words that sound alike but are spelled differently and have different meanings: cent/scent; dear/deer, etc.) or contractions, (can’t; cannot, etc.). |
MONOPOLY

This is a great game to help teach word families and spelling patterns. This should be used with children who write fairly comfortably, usually second grade or older.

To Make: Create a game board with four or five squares on each side. Prepare word cards with families of words that emerge from the child's reading: night, light, tight; went, bent, sent; hat, cat, bat. (For beginning readers or younger children, make sure the patterns are not too similar: mat, sat, rat; man, can, ran; met, set, bet.) Color code each word family and each side of the game board.

Place the words face up around the board in sets. To add to the element of chance, have other game directions on the board, such as "take another turn", "go back 2 spaces", etc. Prepare score sheets for each player with color-coded headings for each word family.

To Play: Role dice or use a spinner to move around the board. Wherever a player lands he reads the word, then writes it in the appropriate "word family" category on the score sheet. Extra points can be earned by dictating or writing sentences with the rhyming words.

RHYMING GAMES

Play rhyming games to teach about the patterns in words.

First, choose a word.

Introduce a poem or rhyming story with words in the same rhyming pattern. For example, Dr. Suess's Green Eggs and Ham.

Encourage the child to point out words in books that have a similar spelling pattern.

Help the child think of other words that have this pattern, then have the child read the whole word and underline the repeated part of the word.

Using magnetic letters or Scrabble pieces, form a word with the pattern. Ask the student to change the first letter of the word to make a new word. You should be sure to provide a limited number of letters (two or three at first) for the child to choose from.

Remember to choose a word pattern that is useful and important to the student and that relates to something that he or she has read or will read. If possible, start with a word he or she already knows in the word family. After reading a book about being sad, for example, start with the word "cry" and then follow with "fry", "try", and "wry".

Be sure to give the student a chance to go back to a book, poem, or other texts where he or she can apply this new reading skill. Poems, nursery rhymes, and jump rope jingles are a great resource for early readers.

FISHING FOR SOUNDS

This is a game for emergent readers and writers.

To Make: Find and cut out small pictures of familiar objects from magazines, old workbooks, catalogues. Try to find several pictures that start with the same letter, such as book, bed, basket, boy; snake, sun, skate, slide...etc. (The child can help; this is a good language activity too.)

Cut out 12 - 15 fish shapes and paste or draw one picture on each fish. On individual 3x5 inch index cards or on an 8x11 inch piece of paper or cardboard, print consonant letters with a key picture for each group of pictures found. For example, print the letter "S" with the picture of a sun to represent all the words beginning with that letter. (If using a sheet of paper, print only two or three letters per sheet.)

To Play: Select two or three sets of fish pictures that start with the same letters and mix them up. Place face down on a table and take turns "going fishing." As each fish is turned over, the child names the picture and places it in the appropriate pile under the key letter / picture. When all the fish are caught and placed correctly, have the child "read" the pictures under each heading. If necessary, read along with him or her, saying the letter name and stressing the initial sound of the word.

To add excitement, you can play as opponents, each player having one or two categories and key letter / pictures. Take turns fishing, and discard those fish that belong to the other player.
We asked: What have you learned about the neighborhood community and its members during your time with our program? What have you learned about the school community your work and its members?

And you said...

I have learned that this is a fascinating and diverse community full of strong families and individuals. This community faces many demeaning stereotypes that are, for the most part, completely untrue. While crime and safety is an issue here, I believe that this community is a powerful community filled with caring people dedicated to making this a better place. Likewise, in the community at my school, I have seen the same thing. 32nd Street is filled with dedicated and concerned teachers, administrators, and parents committed to making a difference in the lives of these children. This community has really shaped my experience at USC.

~Bryan Weiner~
32nd St. School~

I have learned that just because a community falls into the low income bracket, it doesn't mean they are lazy or "dangerous". Coming to USC, I heard so much about the community and how this is a very dangerous part of LA. After moving here and working with the students and families, I came to realize that the people in this community are trying to give their children all they can. I have gained a huge amount of respect for this community. More specifically, I feel like a member of this school community. Teachers say hi when they see me, on or off campus, and all the students, even ones I don't know, flock to me on the playground. I feel like a member of the Vermont family.

~Maureen Osborne~
Vermont Elementary

Coming into this position freshman year, I believed that the students I would be working with would be very apathetic to the entire educational process, and my effort as a tutor would be futile. However, in the past couple of years, I have learned that almost every student at this school is extremely interested in learning the concepts that I attempt to teach. My students come to each lesson enthusiastic and willing to do any activity I present to them. Being part of the after-school program, I have seen that numerous parents want to see their children in the program to receive homework help, as well. Finally, the teachers at 32nd Street School care about their students. They simply don't just give me the student, but rather they make sure I'm doing helpful activities that correspond to the class activities.

~Ryan Thompson~
32nd St. School

The Lowdown on J.E.P.

So, you've all seen the house, and have maybe heard a presentation in class, but what is JEP, really? The Joint Educational Project was founded in 1972, and is one of the oldest and largest service-learning programs in the country. Participation in JEP offers students at USC the unique opportunity to combine academic coursework with experiences in the community surrounding the campus. Each year, some 2000 students from over several courses receive academic credit for their participation in JEP.

JEP is led by its undergrad Program Assistants, who coordinate assignments with schools and USC students, and are responsible for monitoring student's progress throughout the semester.

There are four types of JEP assignments: mentors, teaching assistants, mini-teams, and special assignments. The mini-teams are groups of students who lead lessons in classrooms, and special assignments offer programs such as music, or art lessons, not otherwise available to students at the participating elementary and secondary schools.

Participation in all JEP, and JEP affiliated programs, requires an eight week time commitment, two hours per week, two mandatory training sessions, weekly reflective journals/responses (lesson plans for mini teams), and a final analytical paper (if not required by professor). The student is then graded by their P.A., and will receive extra credit for their course, if they receive a passing grade.