



DRUSCILLA AND OTHER HEROES - CASE STUDY

Hero Books across the Curriculum

First steps towards integrating psychosocial and curriculum based outcomes - building on the experience of a primary school teacher

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REPSSI is a regional capacity building organization working in 13 countries in East and Southern Africa to enhance the psychosocial wellbeing of children, families and communities affected by HIV and AIDS, poverty and conflict.

Khanya is a project of the Western Cape Education Department (WCED). Its purpose is to assist schools to acquire Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for the purpose of curriculum delivery, concentrating on bridging the digital divide by giving special attention to poor schools.

Molotech is a South African non-profit organisation that supports the effective use of information and communication technology (ICT) for development by providing ICT-enablement services to local civil society organisations, educational institutions and government.

The Center for Digital Storytelling is a California-based non-profit arts organization rooted in the art of personal storytelling who assist young people and adults in using the tools of digital media to craft, record, share, and value the stories of individuals and communities, in ways that improve all our lives.

For more information, visit the Digital Hero Book Project website: <http://www.digitalherobook.org/hero-stories>, www.repssi.org, www.molotech.org.za, www.storycenter.org, www.khanya.co.za.

Introduction

Druscilla van Niekerk, a seasoned primary school teacher in South Africa, has always worried beyond the call of duty about the wellbeing of the children she teaches. She understands the many psychosocial issues that get in the way of effective learning and teaching. If only she could address these, her life would be easier, and she could alleviate the obvious worries carried by her learners. Her goal: A class full of playful, but attentive and eager to learn children. The obstacle: 40+ children, many of whom act out their problems (living in communities often plagued by violence, alcohol abuse, poverty, poor health, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of appropriate services, – fighting, bullying, unable to sustain attention, absenteeism, attention seeking, disrespect – in the classroom).

Enter hero books. This is a story not only about a tool that Druscilla discovered and is shaping to bring her closer to her goal, but also about several other heroes, all involved in the development of hero booking.

REPSSI and paper bound hero books

Hero books are one of REPSSI's many different tools and approaches to empowering individual children and families as well as entire communities. In early 2007, as part of a pilot project involving REPSSI, Molotech, and Khanya, hero books were introduced into several Cape primary schools.

A Hero Book is a document, and a process, in which a child, youth, or adult is invited to be the author, illustrator, main character, and editor of a book that is designed to help them set goals, and give them power over a specific challenge or obstacle in their life. Through Hero Bookmaking, groups of individuals are led through a series of drawing and autobiographical storytelling exercises. Via carefully governed informed consent processes, each person makes a choice around the preferred balance of working alone, sharing in pairs, group sharing, and eventually, sharing outside of the group, none of which are obligatory. Hero booking can also be described in terms of community mobilization whereby the author, having reflected on the limits of his or her internal problem solving

skills and knowledge, is assisted with identifying, strengthening, and mobilizing a wider circle of external support and resources.

At the end of the process (25 exercises that on average take an hour each to complete), each person has a hand-bound storybook of their own making which is a kind of solution focused mission statement but also documents, heralds, and reinforces their problem busting strategies and hero-survival-resilient abilities. The first draft of a Hero Book is made purely as part of a confidential therapeutic process and is explained to the participant as such. Participants are however offered the opportunity to think about “publishing” their Hero Book by hand-making or photocopying second editions, and /or by digitizing portions of their books to be published, for example, on a website or on a CD/DVD. In these instances, the participant has the opportunity (if desired) to change identifying information and is assisted in doing so.

A mini-library refers to a cluster of hero books made by a group of people who live in the same community, or by a group of participants who live far apart but are facing similar circumstances. The process can unfold in community-based settings or in schools. Hero Booking is for everyone, the writing and drawing activities emphasize that to have problems is normal, as is the wish to want to find ways of overcoming them. In this vein, problems are presented as obstacles that stand in the path of our wishes, hopes, and dreams.

Some of the problems that children and youth have unmasked using the Hero Book method include stigma, gender based violence, lack of support, and bullying. The Hero Book process allows for critical exploration of how these “oppressions” might operate and what their root causes might be, as well as explorations of how their effects might become internalized and experienced as mental or emotional problems or deficits. The range of “problematized” entry points a child might want to consider when beginning a solution focused Hero Book might include behavioral, emotional, social, and political problems, which are all seen to be interrelated rather than separate. Behavioral problems might include bedwetting, poor concentration, and aggression. Emotional problems might include depression, sadness, grieving, and anxiety. Social problems might include having to look after the cattle and therefore not being allowed to attend school, bullying, or being subjected to abuse in the home. And political problems might have to do with the fact that existing legislation and/or its level of enforcement leaves the child unprotected, unsupported, and vulnerable to a range of challenges of the types listed above.

For a fuller list of the steps involved in Hero Booking, see Appendix 1.

Voices of the DHB Partners

This collaboratively written case study centering around the experience of Druscilla van Niekerk, at teacher at Eikendal Primary school in South Africa, seeks to document some of the emerging lessons and themes drawn from a pilot study – the Digital Hero Book Project - involving REPSSI, Khanya (Dept. of Education, W. Cape), Molotech, and the Center for Digital Storytelling.

The Digital Hero Book Project

Digital hero books are digital versions of traditional paper-based hero books, which can be stored and viewed electronically on a website or disc (CD or DVD). These digital versions can be simple – made up of a few scanned images and text – or more complex, such as a short video that includes an audio narration of the maker reading a portion of her/his hero

book script, illustrated with photos, scanned drawings from the book, a music soundtrack, and even video clips.

“Going digital” is good for a few reasons: it is much cheaper and faster to copy a digital hero book than to print another paper book. Secondly, it is much easier to share a digital hero book with many other people (as long as they have the right equipment, such as a computer with an internet connection, on which to view it). And thirdly, when young people create digital hero books, they learn new skills such as word processing, scanning, image editing, and maybe web publishing or digital video production. For example, a hero book maker might create a web page of their hero book and email a friend to invite her/him to read it. This is cheaper, faster and easier than photocopying the paper hero book and posting it to a friend. Young people might also meet other young heroes on the web and share their digital hero books with each other. These are all skills that are important for youth today: being able to create digital content and communicate online. It’s also important for youth to know their rights and responsibilities on the internet, and how to recognize danger signs, such as a stranger wanting to know their confidential information. The digital hero book making process offers an opportunity to teach youth about these issues as well.

REPSSI, Molotech, the Center for Digital Storytelling, and Khanya are collaborating under the banner of the Digital Hero Book Project to train youth in the production of digital hero books. This is currently a pilot project that involves getting learners in grades 6 and 7 in IT-enabled schools in Cape Town, San Francisco (USA), and New Delhi (India) to create digital hero books and put them on a website. Only the learners and their teachers have access to the password-protected website, so young people can safely and securely share their stories and connect with other heroes from around the world, affirming one another by recognizing their common challenges and exploring ways to overcome them. The learning goals are improved basic computer, digital media, communication, and life skills, as well as a deepened cross-cultural awareness.

As the project develops, a toolkit will be produced to make it easy for anyone to begin digital hero booking at their school or community centre. The project is open to anyone who would like to join and meet other heroes online. Young people can create a simple digital hero book, or, depending on the availability of trained facilitators, a short movie, including images, video, narrative audio, soundtracks, and text. By exchanging positive youth stories created in digital format, in a safe online environment, the youth heroes participating in the project will meet new and far away friends and learn new skills. And the best thing is, they’ll always have their own, original paper-based hero books with them, even when they’re not at a computer!

The decision to make a digital hero book does not necessarily mean that the maker wants to publish the hero book, digitally or otherwise. When and if a paper hero book maker decides to publish a non-confidential version of their hero book, they can put their story on the password-protected website for other digital heroes, or they can publish it on a website that is open to the public, where anyone in the world will be able to see the story. Some stories are meant to be shared so that they can help and inspire others; these are the kinds of stories that are published openly on the web.

Perspectives of Khanya

The Khanya Project is being carried out within the Western Cape Education Department (WCED). Its purpose is to assist schools to acquire Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for the purpose of curriculum delivery, concentrating on bridging the digital divide by giving special attention to poor schools.

In the Khanya Business Plan, approved by the Provincial Cabinet of the Western Cape, the very ambitious goal of the project was described as:

“By the start of the 2012 academic year, every educator in every school of the Western Cape will be empowered to use appropriate and available technology to deliver curriculum to each and every learner in the Western Cape.”

The standard Khanya laboratory consists of P4 learner workstations with Office XP and educational software, 17” monitors (x half the number of the largest class in the school), 1 x LaserJet printer, 1 x scanner, 1 x teacher workstation, and 1 x server.



In terms of tangible deliveries, Khanya had by 24 August 2006 achieved the following (for the latest figures, see Khanya website at www.khanya.co.za):

- **575 schools** have been provided with technology facilities, typically computer laboratories consisting of between 25 and 40 computers each (LAN networked and internet linked)
- A further **276 schools** are in the process of infrastructure preparation for installation next year
- A total of **22 721 PCs** have been deployed in these schools
- **14 993 educators** have received basic IT training and are receiving ongoing training through the Khanya process of using skilled facilitators
- **496 207 learners** are benefiting from using the technology on a daily basis

Khanya works with a dedicated team of facilitators who visit their assigned group of schools on a regular (weekly) basis, to pursue the goal of making sure that all the educators are completely comfortable and empowered to use the technology optimally. Any means of integration of ICT into curriculum is embraced within Khanya, and the Digital Hero Book Project is seen as one of these platforms.

Druscilla’s Experience

In February 2007, as part of the digital hero book project, Mrs Druscilla Van Niekerk, a senior English and Science teacher at Eikendal Primary School in Cape Town, began to do paper based hero books with her entire class of 40 grade 7s, average age 11-13 years. Druscilla decided to integrate hero booking into and across the curricula rather than to run an additional process after school and add to her already heavy work load, even though this meant working with 40 children. She had a REPSSI hero book digital resource that includes the facilitators’ manual, 2 x 15 minute films about hero booking, and some digitized examples.

Druscilla did hero booking in her class, on and off for a month -- wherever it seemed to fit in. These are here reflections on the process ...

“When the manual introduces the basic building blocks, goals, obstacles, problems, seeing the problem clearly, etc, I made them pull out their dictionaries, and we did dictionary work. For the part where they must identify their big goals and the small goal – the reason for making this hero book and how they hope it will help them in the next few weeks, I built this into life orientation. When they had to retell their hero stories, I used this as a formal assessment for orals.

In outcome based education we have all these codes for different outcomes, and we are always being asked what code is that, and what code is that? I really feel that with hero books we can report on lots of outcomes.

I didn’t push it all the way. Next time I do it, I’ll brief the history teacher to take the same hero books my kids are working on and ask him to do the family tree, and I’ll ask the geography teacher to do the community map, and the maths teacher to do the net, where we fold the page in half and half again etc to come up with 16 squares.

What I liked about the hero book process was the fact that kids got to determine their own goals in life. They looked at their strengths, identified obstacles, and looked at how to deal with them and overcome them. I enjoyed the interaction with my learners on a totally different level and basis and got to know them in a different way.

It has always worried me that so many of these kids come from troubled backgrounds and homes, and this interferes with both learning and teaching. But I’ve never known really how to address it. I see how hero books helped these kids and their emotional and behavioral problems to settle down, so we could get on with learning and teaching.

I got to know their backgrounds and social problems, and I was forced to interact with children one on one when they did their obstacles and early memories, especially where there is grieving and loss of the father from home.

The hero books absolutely helped all of us with conduct and emotional problems, even with the number of visits to the sick bay and absenteeism. Instead of saying they are sick and going to the sick bay, or being absent, which is often just them crying out for love, they could express so much via the hero book. It makes them more open to discussing their problems with me. Somehow now they feel more of a sense of freedom with me. I think it helped them to trust me more.

It was hard work, but it wasn’t really a burden. I liked the way kids wrote without me having me forcing them to write. This kind of creative writing is very unusual; always I have had to push them, but this time I just stood back and saw them writing and writing. When it came to sharing they also spoke easily, unlike during most orals.

I want them to keep working on their books throughout the year and beyond, so that it can be a motivation throughout out their lives. They can take it with them to high school and become life long learners.”

Amy and the digital hero book experience with the Eikendal children

In March, 2007, Amy Hill, who is the Community Projects Director for the Center for Digital Storytelling (one of the partners on the Digital Hero Book Project), traveled to South Africa to facilitate a number of health and human rights projects. The timing was perfect for the Project. Even though the specific methodologies for the digital component are still being developed, it was clear that digital storytelling will be an important ingredient in the mix. Following are Amy’s reflections on the digital storytelling workshop that she led for a small group of seven of Druscilla’s learners.

“Over a period of 4 days, we met in the Khanya laboratory at the school. Present were 7 learners, myself, Jonathan, Druscilla and several Khanya facilitators who offered back up support. We began by dedicating time to carefully negotiating an informed consent whereby it was made clear that while the first version of their hero books was confidential, they were now being invited to make a digital version that they would like to publish, and that they now have the opportunity to change or edit any identifying information if they choose.

Our standard digital storytelling curriculum assumes three full days of hands-on computer time and storytellers who are mature enough to self-motivate. Because we didn’t have this much time for the DHBP workshop, because we were working with 12 and 13 year olds, and because we were adapting our process to fit with paper-based hero bookmaking, we went into the session with open minds and a willingness to be flexible.

We started out by showing the kids some digital stories from some of my previous work in the United States, including the story of a 14 year old girl who loves soccer. Based on their completed hero books, I then began to work with the children to write a carefully crafted 2-300 word script for each hero, which would then be recorded.

The children scanned drawings from their hero books as well as any personal or family photos if these were on hand. Using Adobe Premiere, they then imported these images into a project file and placed them along a timeline, to match up with their recordings. We also showed them how to zoom, pan, and fade into and out of images. The net result was seven beautiful digital hero books as well as seven kids who had been introduced to high end IT skills.

Working with everyone involved in the South Africa pilot of the DHBP was a breath of fresh air for me. The hope and optimism expressed by the learners as they struggled to share their own painful life experiences and struggles really solidified my sense that storytelling can be a powerful tool for youth development and psychosocial support. The commitment of Druscilla and the Khanya folks, and the dedication that Jonathan brought to the process made for a smooth and very successful workshop.

At the end of it all, we celebrated together. We had learned on the first day that one of the learners had never had a birthday party, so we planned one for her, complete with cake and gifts. After screening the stories, which were received with loud and lengthy applause, we surprised this young woman and honored each learner for what represents an incredible achievement: being among the very first group of public school students in South Africa to complete digital stories! The finished work can be seen on <http://www.digitalherobook.org/hero-stories>

Perspectives of some of the children

Galiah

It was a wonderful experience to work with Amy and Jonathan. I also had fun. I also learned out of my mistakes and obstacles. It was an experience, sharing my story with them. It was amazing to see how we were working. We had a lot of support from our teacher and friends. The hero books were very exiting to make.

Cafton

It was an experience of a lifetime, and I learned many things. It wasn’t just hard work, it was actually very fun too. Something that really touched me was how the workshop helped me to overcome my problems. I am able to talk in front of people without becoming nervous. I’m grateful for that. I learned a lot of computer skills too, helping me to make a complete digital hero book. Amy was the one to make time to show us the skills we have now. The one with all the information was Jonathan, showing us and giving all the

explanations. The communication we had was amazing. They gave us ways to overcome and even try to see our obstacles, so that we could achieve our goals and dreams. The workshop was full of supportive and caring people, and I'm thankful for that

Wuanitle

It was a fascinating and astonishing event. The workshop gave me self-confidence to overcome my obstacle. I never knew I could overcome my obstacle, but the workshop helped me to be strong and to stand on top of it. Amy our instructor told us about other children's "HERO BOOKS" and how they overcame their problems; through that I learned a lot. Jonathan was the one who explained every situation and listened to our conversations; he really played a big part. This whole workshop had an impact in my life. It helped me to express my feelings and emotions I faced.

Morne

At the workshop I learned how to put a story script on the computer, and I made new friends with the other grade 7s. I made peace with sadness by telling my story to other children. I hope my story will teach other children to respect themselves and to appreciate what they have. Jonathan and Amy both told us we should use tricks and tactics if an obstacle stands in your way, and I learned that you should respect yourself in order to prevent an obstacle from standing in your way. Thank you very much.

Michael

It was something I had never done before, and I met new people and learnt new things. I listened to other children's stories. We helped each other at the workshop with our problems or obstacles. The workshop helped us to form a group and to share what's personal in our lives. Amy showed us how to make our normal handwritten hero books into digital hero books, which we read into a little microphone. Jonathan helped us with our obstacles and problems by tricks and tactics. Thanks a lot.

Lessons learned from the pilot and priorities for future research

Khanya noted

Khanya noted that most teachers do not have time to do hero booking as a separate add on activity, and that life orientation and other teachers need to incorporate the process as part of lessons (as pioneered by Druscilla). They also drew attention to the need to discuss this with the Life Orientation and other curriculum advisors.

The Center for Digital Storytelling noted

The workshop made a number of things very clear -- that young people are eager to share their stories, even the ones that might give rise to tears; that it's important to create a safe space in which they can do so, and to offer lots of unconditional love and support in order to meet and contain their feelings; that teachers on their own may not have the necessary training/experience to do these things; and that teachers will need thorough grounding both in facilitation process and technology use, in order to offer such workshops. As we move forward with the DHBP, we'll continue to work together to figure out the best way to make digital storytelling a part of it.

REPSSI Mainstreaming PSS into schools

UNAIDS (2006) estimated that by the end of 2005, there would be approximately 16,285,000 children orphaned by AIDS in the 13 countries in which REPSSI currently operates. Apart from and overlapping with those children orphaned by AIDS, there are millions of other children who are not orphans but who are also made vulnerable by HIV, poverty, and conflict.

In REPSSI's strategic implementation plan (2005-2011), the organization via its 100 partners has committed to mitigate the psychosocial impact of HIV and AIDS, poverty, and conflict among at least 5 million children and youth in 13 countries affected by HIV and AIDS, poverty, and conflict.

By concentrating psychosocial support efforts targeting only individual counseling sessions, family counseling, parenting courses, or even structured group therapy like approaches and kids clubs, we are just not going to succeed in terms of scale. The most sustainable and powerful psychosocial support transpires in families, friendships, communities, and schools -- not behind the closed doors of counseling rooms delivered by professionals or paraprofessionals, but in the fabric and the everyday lives of communities and children. School is part and parcel of the everyday life of the vast majority of children. The only way it might be possible to reach a significant number of children will be by focusing our efforts on family and community support, and by mainstreaming PSS into schools.

Mainstreaming hero books into schools, either with or without the digital component, marks an exciting step in the right direction. We will continue to pursue this effort, paying particular attention to safety issues and to making sure that children feel safe when it comes to sharing stories and books in and beyond the classroom.

Appendix 1 – list of the steps involved in hero booking

The basic formula or map of the territory to be explored in these externalising and solution focused “conversations” is:

- 1) Problems are normalized and introduced as obstacles we meet and bump up against along the path to our hopes, wishes, dreams, goals (within a rights based perspective whereby rights and the degree of local / national protection they offer are considered).
- 2) Both a long term goal and a goal for making the hero book are identified.
- 3) The child identifies a hero in their life
- 4) The child is helped to locate his or herself within a series of circles of support, taking into account that family, extended family and community circles of support might be ruptured or in a state of disorganization
- 5) The obstacles to the child’s hopes, dreams, wishes and goals are brought into sharper focus, rendered visible and named, so the child can see them as separate from who they are, and can then develop strategies to manage them, and/or to move past them along the path to their goals
- 6) A “shining moment”, “unique outcome”, or “exception” is identified in which the person experienced, however fleetingly, some power over, or hope in the face of the obstacle-problem
- 7) A participatory appraisal-like, community mapping exercise, in which the child begins to shift focus to the root causes of the problem and the relative influence of the problem / obstacle in various places and amongst various people
- 8) There is an unpacking of some of the things (personal and political/ psycho and social tricks, tactics, solutions) the person can do, or has begun to do, to achieve a measure of control over the problem.
- 9) With these hero qualities and skills, the child is asked to imagine themselves in 5-10-15-20 years time
- 10) Sharing books in small groups with consent
- 11) Making a title and a cover
- 12) Thinking about publishing and changing identifiable information
- 13) A child planned, child controlled, celebration that marks a milestone in the hero book process (the completion of early drafts) designed to reinvigorate and strengthen the child’s community connections and to mobilize community support.

Appendix 2 – Evidence Base

Some preliminary steps towards building an evidence base for Hero Books have been taken. REPSSI, University of the Western Cape, Oxford University, and Cape Town Child Welfare engaged in research collaboration entitled, “Investigating the Impact of the Hero Book Intervention, indicators for future research.”

A preliminary study does suggest that the large of majority of children to whom the intervention was delivered in 2006 (200 children) reported that it was associated with a decrease in the seriousness of their problems and helped them in terms of overall psychosocial functioning. The same study however, also highlights that unless the safety precautions in the manual are followed, the possibility exists that the process might further traumatize children who are already particularly vulnerable, distressed, or traumatized.

As a result of this study, the Hero Book manual has been altered so that from the outset, children understand that they have the opportunity to

- a) not make a Hero Book at all
- b) make a Hero Book but not share it with anyone in the group
- c) have complete control over who sees the Hero Book
- d) make a Hero Book about a made up character rather than a Hero Book about themselves
- e) make a Hero Book about themselves but change identifying information
- f) publish the Hero Book under a made up name

This amendment -- in particular the option to fictionalize the Hero Book -- is expected to be particularly helpful for school settings, where teachers / facilitators typically work with large groups of children in the classroom, and where all children might not feel safe enough to explore a private , real and distressing psychosocial problem. In effect, unless a child explicitly sets out to tell a true story, all Hero Books must be read and treated as fiction, thus removing the dynamic of disclosure.

For the full reports, see REPSSI, Oxford University & Cape Town Child Welfare collaboration, evaluation of hero book intervention: report on qualitative data, compiled by René Brandt, and report on quantitative data compiled by Lucie Cluver, and a summary of the quantitative and qualitative findings on www.repssi.org

Further evidence for hero booking can be found in a report, “Hero Books from the perspective of young people using the intervention.” (Noble, Beth, May 2006)

Appendix 3 – Steps in Creating a Digital Hero Story

Following is a brief review of the basic process of creating digital stories based on the paper Digital Hero Books. These steps presume an intensive workshop process, but they can also be stretched out over a number of days and broken into shorter units. Any process of facilitating the production of digital stories does require facilitators who are extremely well versed in the software being used, and in managing a group production process. The DHBP is currently exploring ways to implement broad teacher training so that teachers will be prepared to facilitate the creation of digital stories, once the paper Hero Books have been completed.

- 1) Young people are introduced to the concept of digital stories by watching examples created by other youth.
- 2) Next, the Youth Hero Book makers are assisted in selecting a portion of their story they feel comfortable sharing publicly, and crafting it into a short, written script (approximately 300 words).
- 3) The youth participants then share this written script with a group, in a process called a “Story Circle.” They receive input from one another and from facilitators, and are then able to refine and finalize their scripts.
- 4) Each participant is assisted in recording her/his script into the computer, using a microphone and software such as Audacity, Garage Band, or Sound Studio.
- 5) The youth select drawings from their paper Hero Books, as well as photographs they have been asked to bring from home, and are assisted in scanning these into the computer.
- 6) A storyboarding process, follows, whereby the young people match images they’ve selected up with their written script, making notes in the margin/between the lines of their script to indicate which images will go where.
- 7) Facilitators then conduct a short tutorial in using digital imaging software (such as Photoshop Elements, iPhoto, gimp, etc.) to rotate, crop, and touch up their images. Youth follow along on their own computers and are then assisted in preparing their own images.
- 8) If the participants need additional images to illustrate their stories, facilitators take photos and/or short video clips of them, to fill in gaps.
- 9) The facilitators conduct a short tutorial in using editing software (such as PowerPoint, iMovie, Windows Moviemaker, Premiere Elements/Pro, Final Cut Express/Pro, etc.), and students follow along, each on her/his own computer.
- 10) The participants go through the steps of editing their stories on the computer, with facilitators offering guidance and assistance as needed, particularly with titles, effects, music, etc.
- 11) Once the stories are completed, a group screening is held, so that everyone can admire the work that has been done and so that the youth can celebrate their achievements.
- 12) Following the story creation process, stories can be uploaded onto the DHBP web site, for sharing with other young people and to generate discussion, connections, and learning.

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