

# Panwapa: Global Kids, Global Connections

Ilene R. Berson and Michael J. Berson

**Children have access to many** online social environments that allow them to transcend time and space. In an increasingly interconnected world, children are exposed to diverse people and cultures at an early age. Today, young children need new skills and perspectives to constructively participate in these global settings. Primary grade teachers have a wonderful opportunity to prepare a new generation for democratic participation in civic processes that take place online. “21st century children live in the global village from the moment they are born. The sooner they learn to think of this as a wonderful, fun adventure, the better global citizens they will grow into.”<sup>1</sup>

Young children are part of complex social networks that include parents, siblings, extended family members, neighbors, playgroups, peers, nonrelated caregivers, and teachers. Important skills in the social studies focus on how individuals develop a sense of identity and become connected to others within the larger community. These tasks take on additional complexity when considering children’s social networks in digital spaces and the influence of these interactions on the development of geographic literacy, global awareness, and communication skills.

There are a growing number of virtual environments that are geared toward young children under eight years of age.<sup>2</sup> These websites tend to provide games and social networking. Several sites are specifically designed to provide young learners with experiences that scaffold skills needed for community building and civic engagement. Such technology serves not only as a means to showcase specific concepts or spark interest in the students, but also to provide hands-on, interactive experiences that allow the students to apply, reinforce, and/or demonstrate what they have learned. Thus, learning happens within the social processes that take place in the virtual world.

## **A Friendly Webspace**

Panwapa, created by the Sesame Street Workshop of PBS, is

an example of an initiative on the Internet designed to enhance students’ learning by exposing them to global communities (SIDEBAR, page 30). Panwapa means “Here on Earth” in Tshiluba, a Bantu language spoken in the Democratic Republic of Congo. At the Panwapa website, [www.panwapa.org](http://www.panwapa.org), children, aged four to seven are empowered to act as responsible citizens within a global digital playground. Diverse media within the website reinforce skills and knowledge development. These building blocks provide a foundation to inspire young children to engage in positive change in their communities while participating in cross-national and intercultural exchanges. Within a safe virtual world this website can compliment and enhance curriculum and engage primary students as they learn about their world and become global citizens in the 21st century.

At the Panwapa site, students can design an avatar (a cartoon figure to act as their “representative”) and the house in which it will live.<sup>3</sup> Students also create their own Panwapa flags, which express their individuality. They find students in another country who share their interests, and collect “Panwapa Cards” throughout their journey. Students view various mappings of the world according to categories of interest to children (i.e., all those whose favorite food is pizza, or those who love cats). The information on these maps is created from data provided by young Panwapa participants across the globe. Such activities help children develop appreciation of the things we have in common as well as differences among people throughout the world.

## **Natural Resources**

In collaboration with preservice teachers, we developed and implemented activities that, over the course of three days, made effective and appropriate use of the synthetic world of Panwapa to teach a social studies concept. In a first grade classroom, children “identified natural resources” and participated in the “production of goods.” Panwapa offered a digital com-

munity of learning that inspired the students to use materials in unconventional ways, to use both indoor and outdoor spaces, and to use both real materials and virtual information—thus broadening their learning environment.

We decided to build on the students’ interests in games and toys as we planned an introductory lesson to a unit of study about renewable resources (like trees and corn) and nonrenewable resources (such as petroleum) around the world. The lesson introduced resources that have been used to make familiar items in the classroom as well as more unusual items. As an introduction to the unit of study, the children prepared for their “trip around the world.”

### Preparing to Travel

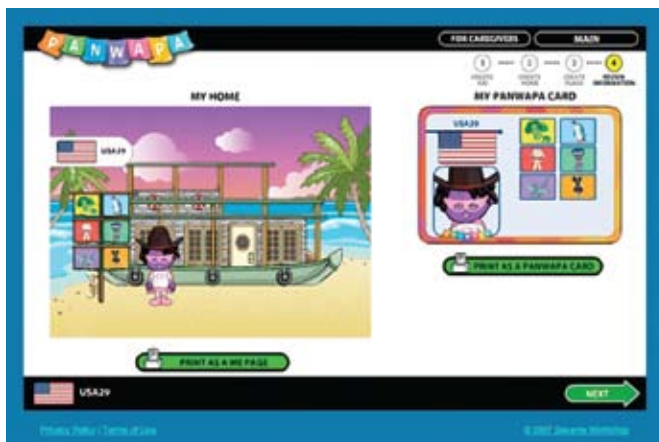
(Time required: 45 minutes) Before the class arrived, we sectioned off a portion of the classroom using a bed sheet, hanging it from the ceiling. This part of the room became “Bangladesh.” We posted pictures on the walls of things to see in Bangladesh, which we obtained from National Geographic.

On entering the classroom in the morning, each child received a “passport,” modeled on a graphic at the Panwapa website. Students designed “suitcases” out of poster board, and began to prepare for their trip overseas. Each child decorated his/her luggage and searched through magazines for images of appropriate clothes to pack for the trip, which they cut out with scissors and taped to the inside of their suitcases. An accompanying science lesson had focused on exploring the weather in the Indian subcontinent, so warm weather clothes and raingear were in order.

Once they had prepared for their trip (15 minutes into the period), students brought their packed suitcase and passport to the sectioned area of the classroom for their “flight” to Bangladesh. Behind the sectioned area, a computer was hooked up to a projection screen so the children could watch a video on Bangladesh during their flight. Students documented their observations in travel journals. On “arriving” in the country, students paired up on the class computers and had their avatars visit “Panwapa kids” from Bangladesh to explore their interests.

### Hand-made Toys

(Time required: Two hours) In the Panwapa video, a Bangladeshi girl makes a bracelet out of a banana leaf, and her friends make a spinning toy and a pair of costume glasses. The class briefly discussed the film, and then the teacher invited students to explore their own school grounds for natural resources with which to construct toys. Each child filled a brown paper lunch bag with their treasured resources, such as dry leaves, sticks, and wood chips. Using scissors, markers, string, and glue, they used the found objects to create toys such as dolls, trucks, and jewelry. The teacher guided the children in recording in their notebooks the resources they used as well as all the steps in the process of constructing the toy (SIDEBAR 2, page 31).



### Creating a Video

(Time required: Two hours) The teacher split up the class into groups of five students and asked each group to prepare a presentation where students told their names, where they live, the name of the object they created, and what materials were used. Each student also described how to make the toy and demonstrated its use. The teacher recorded each group’s 2-minute presentation with a digital video camera. The class watched all of the videos, and after each one they discussed the resources that students in that group used. A couple of the objects were selected to be placed in the discovery center (an interactive, hands-on learning area in the classroom) with a box of materials so that other students could create them as well.

# What is Panwapa?

Children today live in an increasingly interconnected world full of opportunities and challenges that require them to develop new skills and perspectives. To meet this need, Sesame Workshop, the nonprofit educational organization behind Sesame Street, and the Merrill Lynch Foundation have created Panwapa, a Worldwide Kids initiative launching today.

Panwapa, which means “here on this earth” in the Tshiluba language, aims to foster the foundation for global citizenship and community participation in young children, ages 4 to 7. Featuring an entirely new group of Muppet characters, Panwapa consists of an interactive website, [www.panwapa.com](http://www.panwapa.com), a DVD, and print materials that are available in five languages: Arabic, English, Japanese, Mandarin, and Spanish. Panwapa is free on iTunes ([www.iTunes.com](http://www.iTunes.com)), video-on-demand (VOD), and via PBS KIDS Sprout, the 24-hour preschool network for kids ages 2-5 and their parents and caregivers. Additionally, Panwapa games and information are available at [SproutOnline.com](http://SproutOnline.com).

The website, [www.panwapa.com](http://www.panwapa.com), is the center of the initiative. The experience begins on “Panwapa Island,” a floating island that travels the oceans of the world, where children and their caregivers will enter the virtual Panwapa community and meet newly created Muppet characters such as “Athena the Owl” and “Azibo the Monster.” Children will be able to safely travel around the world and visit with Panwapa kids from other countries, watch interactive movies, learn words in other languages, and collect Panwapa Cards by going on international treasure hunts.

A team of international cultural experts, early childhood researchers, educators, and media specialists from nine countries and organizations such as Oxfam, UNICEF, and the World Bank first developed the idea for Panwapa in 2005. Multinational teams from Merrill Lynch and Sesame Workshop worked with the advisors to create content for the program, focusing on messages of global citizenship for young children.

The international advisory board developed five broad educational goals for the project:

- *Awareness of the Wider World:* An understanding of the linkages between local neighborhoods and communities and national and global issues.
- *Appreciating Similarities and Differences:* An understanding of and respect for similarities and differences among the people of the world and the interconnectedness of the world’s systems.
- *Taking Responsibility for One’s Behaviors:* An awareness of one’s actions and one’s impact on others, the willingness and desire to take responsibility for one’s actions, and an effort to seek ways to make the world a better place.
- *Community Participation and Willingness to Take Action:* A desire to participate in and contribute to one’s community locally and globally, as well as a willingness to take action around persistent issues and work through them to effect meaningful civic improvement.
- *Understanding of and Responsiveness to Economic Disparity:* An understanding that all people share certain basic needs and disparities in resources affect individuals’ abilities to fulfill these needs—and a desire to address these disparities.

— from [www.panwapa.org](http://www.panwapa.org)

## Creating a Book

(Time required: One hour) The students also created a book that contained photos of the toys and resources. Each page featured a photo of the item and a list of steps followed in constructing the object. (See **SIDEBAR**, page 31). Students wrote out the steps, and the teacher assisted them in capturing freeze shots from the digital video recording.

## A Showcase of Inventions

(Time required: One hour to assemble the display) After “traveling the globe” and visiting other Panwapa kids, our project culminated with a “show” of the inventions created by our own students and enjoyed by the students’ families and other children in the school. The show featured dolls, trucks, jewelry, and musical instruments, all invented by the students, and created with natural materials that might be found on the grounds of any typical school in the United States. Students saw the potential of the resources within the natural environment around them.

## Collaboration

Using Panwapa, students made new connections to their local community and to the larger world. Such investigations are a part of global citizenship. The children saw how resources available in their immediate environment can be used creatively. They gained a sense of pride in their accomplishments. Global connections with the children in Bangladesh who inspired our students’ creativity highlighted opportunities for collaborative engagement across geographic distances. Moreover, the children became aware of some of the similarities and differences between their immediate environment and that of other young learners around the world.

Panwapa helps young children explore the world around them. It facilitates a culture of innovation and collaborative learning. By communicating over the Internet, students became active participants in a global exchange. We hope that such activities might lead young people to value diversity, civic responsibility, and community participation—and to search for creative solutions to challenges they will encounter. Panwapa

is an example of an Internet resource that joins communities of learners together as they explore concepts, share experiences, and express themselves in an international setting. 🌐

**Notes**

1. Virtual Worlds News, [www.virtualworldsmanagement.com/2009/youth-01-26-2009.html](http://www.virtualworldsmanagement.com/2009/youth-01-26-2009.html).
2. Sesame Street Workshop, [www.sesameworkshop.org/newsandevents/pressreleases/panwapa](http://www.sesameworkshop.org/newsandevents/pressreleases/panwapa).
3. “Avatar” is a Sanskrit (Hindu) word meaning a supernatural being incarnated in human form. It also means a person who embodies a concept (like wisdom or beauty). Recently, the term has been used to describe any computer-generated figure that assists the user or represents him or her in an online social setting.

**ILENE R. BERSON** is an associate professor of early childhood education at the University of South Florida. She can be contacted at [iberson@coedu.usf.edu](mailto:iberson@coedu.usf.edu).

**MICHAEL J. BERSON** is a professor of social science education at the University of South Florida. He can be contacted at [berson@coedu.usf.edu](mailto:berson@coedu.usf.edu).

## Steps in Making a Doll

1. Go outside and find resources (materials)
2. Glue maple leaves on the big stick (body) for a dress
3. Glue left over small sticks on body for arms
4. Glue the 2 brown small leaves on legs to form feet
5. Glue blue berries on rock for eyes
6. Glue small red berry for a mouth
7. Glue dead flower on top for hair
9. Glue 4 pieces of grass in hair for “highlights”



## Am I Advocating for the Social Studies?

### In My School

- I display student work for students, teachers, and parents to see and enjoy.
- I share resources and ideas with other teachers in my school.
- I inform my principal of social studies special projects, student accomplishments, and future plans.
- I volunteer to do a mini social studies lesson at a faculty meeting. (Often principals like to include a curriculum piece in a meeting.)
- I work with my colleague to design activities that are integrated across the disciplines (social studies with language arts, math, science, music, and art, for example).
- I organize an October 31 Historical Parade, inviting students to dress like historical figures.
- I nominate my social studies colleagues for local, state, and national awards.
- I place copies of *Social Studies and the Young Learner* in the teacher resource or meeting room.
- I advise members of the student government and help resolve problems that arise in school.

### In My Local Community

- I work with community members to create service-learning opportunities for my students.
- I alert the PTA, school board, and local media when my students complete a special assignment or project.
- I invite local officials, parents, and notable persons to visit my class and read a book aloud, describe their job, or address a historical topic or current issue.
- I help students use local resources such as the library, historical society, and museums.

### In My State

- I have joined my state council for the social studies and attend meetings when possible.
- We keep abreast of state educational legislation and communicate with our representatives regularly.
- I participate in online groups promoting social studies advocacy and teaching in my state.

### In the Nation

- I have joined the National Council for the Social Studies and attend the National Conference when possible.
- We keep abreast of national educational legislation through the advocacy webpage ([www.socialstudies.org/legislative](http://www.socialstudies.org/legislative)) and the NCSS legislative listserv.
- We communicate with our representatives on a regular basis.

### How do YOU advocate for social studies?

Tell us about your activities by sending an e-mail message to [ssyl@ncss.org](mailto:ssyl@ncss.org).

### Advocacy Resources

1. Tina L. Heafner, Katherine A. O'Connor, Eric C. Groce, Sandra Byrd, Amy J. Good, Sandra Oldendorf, Jeff Passe, and Tracy Rock, “Advocating for Social Studies: Becoming AGENTS for Change,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 20, no. 1 (September/October 2007): 26-29.
2. Legislative updates from NCSS and Washington Partners, [www.socialstudies.org/legislative](http://www.socialstudies.org/legislative).