

## Power of the Arts and Technology in Collaborating with an Aboriginal Teen

What happens when you pair a teacher-librarian with an Aboriginal teen? When the teacher-librarian has written a story and the teenager is a self-taught Wacom artist synergy happens. The result is a dynamically illustrated children's book that is uniquely Canadian. Jayce Lamontagne, fourteen years old at the time, illustrated my manuscript about a Western Canadian climate phenomenon - the Chinook. With her brilliant, Manga-style illustrations, the book [Chinook and Winter](#) came to life.

### Collaboration

Collaboration is a keystone of any teacher-librarian's repertoire. When two or more individuals come together to work on a project, whether it is to discuss, create, or innovate, it is often ultimately more powerful than working alone. A myriad of research is available to reinforce this belief. Collaboration can occur in many forms: peer to peer, teacher to teacher, and teacher with students. We know that collaboration can be very effective through Web 2.0 platforms or by social media as the illustrator and I did. In schools, collaboration is also a form of active learning, and memory retention is vastly improved with such learning.

### Teacher-librarian

The writing of *Chinook and Winter* came about as a result of background experiences. As a teacher-librarian in an elementary school, I was responsible for teaching library classes from kindergarten to grade six. This was a time when our school division in Alberta embraced the Keith Curry-Lance studies and ensured there was a teacher-librarian in every school. The time and funds allocated were justified by assigning a teacher educated in library sciences a fixed time that then enabled preparation time for other teachers. Although not ideal for collaborative work with teachers, the library lessons allowed students to receive help with research and exposed them to all kinds of reading including non-fiction and excellent literature.

One of my favorite lessons was introducing the Dewey Decimal System. Inevitably, in the next library class, the students would stampede for 567 - Dinosaurs. I'll never forget Cassidy, now a university educated young man, who every week would peruse the 629 shelf. Because of his, "Do you have any books about trucks?" that section was well stocked before I left the school, probably much to the bewilderment of the next librarian

The opportunity to read excellent literature to the students was invaluable. I looked forward to the times when classes would pile into the library, drag their mats to their chosen location and listen intently to whatever was selected that day. My assistant would giggle with the children, grimace when I attempted songs and smother laughter with my mispronunciations or mangled sentences. Because of her reactions, it was apparent which books actually resonated with the students.

The library lessons were a time of peace. A time where students could just be children with no cares or worries. They could learn and explore without fear of being evaluated and compared. Didactic writings were avoided and entertainment was stressed. Books were selected to reflect

the world and Canada and to help students become aware of all cultures and the diverse nature of Canada and the world. One book that resonated with my assistant, the children and me was *My Grandma Lived in Gooligulch* by Graeme Base. Here was a book uniquely Australian and yet all students loved the rollicking tale with the vibrant illustrations. Students also loved a repetitive verse that they could chorally join in when being read to.

After being immersed in so many brilliant stories, a story began to form in my head. Like Base's book, my imagination focused on something unique to my country and to my province in particular. Living in southern Alberta with what can be cold winters, we look forward to Chinooks with dread and delight. Those of us who suffer headaches from them, dreaded the strong winds, but we also delighted in the respite from winter. The Chinook is a strong, warm wind that rises from the Pacific Ocean in winter and blows up and over the Rocky Mountains and across southern Alberta and sometimes as far as Saskatchewan. (Hunter, 2016, p. 39) The winds create a welcome relief from the frigid temperatures of winter for a few days and melt snows to almost bare ground.

One year came to be very significant as I trudged through snow up and down the coulees while walking my dog. I longed for a Chinook, but no matter how often the meteorologists suggested a Chinook arch was forming, it never fully formed into a warm wind. The coulees are ancient and vast and lend themselves to imaging long ago Aboriginal encampments and buffalo jumps. It seemed only natural that my walks in the coulees and my longing for a Chinook that didn't come would evolve into a story that came out on paper.

After a couple attempts at publication, the manuscript was put aside for a few years. With a move to another house, the manuscript came to light and I decided to attempt a self-publishing venture and began searching for an illustrator.

As a teacher-librarian, I was always eager to embrace technology and use it for educational purposes. When I transferred to a high school, my knowledge and use of technology increased and became embedded in lessons. Face book was embraced as a communication tool as well. Through Face book, I reconnected with an old friend from when I had taught in Northern Saskatchewan. Maryanne informed me her daughter was an artist, should I like to use her services for the book. Although I was intrigued, I also was aware that parents often have an inflated opinion of their children's abilities. Although I had no expectations, I was willing to take a look at her daughter's work.

The then fourteen year old, Jayce Lamontagne, sent me a link to her Youtube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC-5mBQBpquRELN-9WyclQyQ>

She did indeed have talent! Her self-created vibrant creations were astounding. Jayce had her own characters and had a goal to become a graphic artist. Even better, though email contact, she agreed to illustrate my manuscript.

### Jayce Lamontagne

Jayce and her mother have been on their own since the divorce when Jayce was just a baby. Although her mother struggled financially, she encouraged Jayce's passion, enabling her artistic ability by ensuring she had the technology to continue exploring her talents. I can only imagine what her mother sacrificed in order to help and inspire her daughter.

I have so much respect for parents. They want what is best for their child and hope that the school system does as well. There were hardships, but Jayce was given a [Wacom](#), an interactive pen and tablet. Jayce said it was a struggle to learn on her own, but she persisted and has now become an expert. Even the computer teacher at her Regina high school could no longer give her any more instruction as she had excelled at the requirements of his class. How different might her story have been without a supportive mother, an encouraging school and an FNMI liaison teacher.

Although email is not a preferred communication tool for teens, Jayce acquiesced with our first forays into communicating. I was so pleased when this busy high school student so graciously agreed to give up her free time to help out a much older teacher-librarian with her first children's book. The pictures in my head were of an Yvette Moore style picture book, with realistic drawings and horizontal lines and big skies. When Jayce Google doc'd her first representation of my words I was blown away. The illustrations were entirely different from anything I had imagined. The pictures were vibrant and bright and so reflective of today's generation.

Jayce had deliberately chosen this style. As she had discussed with her mother, she wanted something that children would feel excited about. Her manga-style illustrations certainly achieved what she set out to do. I was so thrilled with her depiction and so astounded at what she had created from my words. *Chinook and Winter* developed characteristics and came to life. Through email we discussed her choices, made a few changes, and let Jayce bring the story to life. She was a mature, assured and confident young woman though her email exchanges.

When we completed the book, I knew we needed to expose her wonderful talent to Alberta and Canada. Our book was so entirely Canadian. It amused me that it was about weather, Canada's typical ice-breaker topic of conversation. And it was illustrated by one of, what should be, our venerated Aboriginal citizens. Such a beautiful collaborative manuscript was all that was needed for possible publication, but we are also fortunate that our government has Canadian Council of the Arts grants to assist artists. [Pemmican Publications](#), based in Winnipeg, uses grants to produce books created by those of Aboriginal ancestry to ensure they have a voice in our Canadian community. We were thrilled that they selected to publish our book.

Once Pemmican published *Chinook and Winter*, Jayce and I met in person. She was a quiet and shy young teen. Without technology to express herself, she may have been dismissed or had her wonderful talent overlooked, but I knew what passion and depth lay beneath her soft exterior.

## Conclusion

Such collaboration does not have to be limited to a serendipitous connection. This type of collaboration can occur in all schools and across the curriculum. Schools can encourage this type of collaboration. If students are given guidelines and freedom, they have the chance to go beyond expectations to create and be creative. Technology is a vital tool to help students emerge from their isolation and help reveal the internal persona and talents. We must continue to let students take the lead in their own education and help them discover their talents and interests. Learning is increased and internalized because it is vital that students become experts in whatever they study when they collaborate. With Jayce Lamontagne and me, immersion in books and immersion in technology came together for a final, fantastic product.

## References

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