

Different kind of storytime

*By Adam Klinker
Recorder Associate Editor*



In a few years, when she's a college student hunkered down in an out-of-the-way alcove in the library stacks, feverishly getting through another term paper, Nicole Kotrous will think back on the 50-page book she wrote as a sixth-grader and say: "I got this."

Nicole is one of five students at Blumfield Elementary School who are taking part in the Nebraska Department of Education's Nebraska E-books Project. The program has asked elementary students to research, write and design e-books for use in the state's fourth-grade Nebraska history curriculum. The project is being piloted in Ralston and Blair and the first student-published books will be available for download on the department's website on March 4.

"We've been learning a lot," said Nicole, a sixth-grader whose book is about the American Plains Indians. "I kind of came into this knowing a lot because I'd become interested in the Indians in fourth grade, but you learn even more as you keep researching."

Tami Brookhouser, the high-ability learners teacher at Blumfield, first put out the call for her most talented writers at the beginning of the school year. Since then, the students have met every Thursday after school for a three-hour period dedicated to the research and writing and now, in the weeks running up to publication, editing and finalizing the e-books on the iBooks Author software platform.

Brookhouser estimates that, including time the students have spent on Thursdays and working on their own, each budding author has spent upwards of 80 hours on their books.

"It's a full day on Thursday," she said. "We've lived on pizza and sandwiches here. But they're all very dedicated. I knew I had a talented crop of writers, but to have seen them doing all the research, all the writing, it's been an impressive project for me to witness as an educator."

Since the books are in an electronic format — and will be available to download via iPad — the students have also expended time on making their texts interactive.

Lindsey Johnston, a fifth-grader whose book will be about Sitting Bull, the Lakota Sioux Chief, has included videos of herself in the guise of Annie Oakley, a colleague of Sitting Bull's on Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show.

She also created an "About the Author" video and has imbued her e-book with games, puzzles and quizzes.

"I'm so glad I did this," Lindsey said as she clicked through the different features in her text. "I'm going to be a published author before I'm 11 years old. Not many people can say that. It's a great, amazing feeling."

All but one of the Blumfield writers in the project said they've long held aspirations for expanding their writing.

Adia Johnson, a sixth-grader working on a book she's entitled "Life on the Oregon Trail," said she wants to one day pursue a career in writing and felt doing the Nebraska E-book Project has been a great start.

"When I was younger, I used to write stories all the time," she said. "But I never finished them. Now I am finishing a story. I've always wanted to be an author. Now I will."

The same is true for sixth-grader Josie Brady, whose book will look at education in the 19th century.

"When I was in fourth grade, I remember learning about all this, but I knew there was a part of it that I wanted to look into a little more," Josie said. "When I was able to get out on my own and do some research, that's where I decided what I wanted to write about. I love writing and being able to write about school in the 1800s is something I've thought about for awhile."

For one author, however, the writing bug didn't quite bite at first.

Noah Talmadge admits he had an open disdain for writing not long ago. But now, the fifth-grader is tackling not just one e-book for the project, but two — a text on Nebraska pioneer John C. Fremont and another on prairie settlement.

"I love writing," Noah said.

"Doing this project has helped me learn how to do it better. Now, even when we get a long writing assignment in class, it seems short, because we've been working on this so hard."

There's been research, writing, a demonstration of technological savvy on the project, and some lessons learned the hard way ("We learned the most important four letters are S-A-V-E," Noah said), but there's also been a bit of the intangible yoked with the lessons.

"If you're going to do this, you have to be committed and dedicated," Nicole said. "I'd say we all are."

Brookhouser agreed.

“It’s been a great exercise in persistence,” Brookhouser said. “They won’t probably have a project requiring this kind of effort, this kind of perseverance, until college.”

Later this month, the students will present their nearly completed works at a conference of teachers at the Nebraska Association for the Gifted. They will also speak to another gathering of teachers in March, shortly after their e-books’ publication. March will also wind up with a book release party where the five will be feted at Educational Service Unit No. 3.

The five admitted the hardest part of the project will probably be in making those presentations to the educators.

“I’m a little nervous to be in front of teachers,” Josie said.

But the five also know they’ve blazed a trail for other students and teachers to come after them, and there’s a good chance their work will be in fourth-grade hands in the next school year.

The Blumfield writers’ work, along with some e-books by professional authors already available on the Nebraska Department of Education website, have formed a template for other teachers of high-ability learners who want to direct their students in a book project.

Moreover, the fourth-grade curriculum is now tinged with the work of students who just freshly underwent the lessons.

“We weren’t really knowing where the bar was when we started this,” Brookhouser said. “I think the kids are surprised at how far we went, given how young they are.”

To view the Blumfield students’ e-books and other works by authors in the book project, visit http://www.education.ne.gov/nebooks/ebook_library.html.