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# Skype chat adds new dimension for young readers

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TOPSHAM — As seventh grade students at Mt. Ararat Middle School finish reading a memoir by a former Afghan refugee, they had an opportunity to delve deeper into the narrative Friday by communicating electronically with one of the key characters via Skype.

Using Skype, an online videoconferencing tool, the students conversed with Alyce Litz, who plays a prominent role in the book “The Other Side Of The Sky: A Memoir” by Farah Ahmedi. The book was previously published in 2005 as “The Story Of My Life, An Afghan Girl On The Other Side Of The Sky.”

Students from all three of Mt. Ararat Middle School’s seventh grade teams filed into the Orion Performing Arts Center at around 11 a.m. Friday, took a cushioned seat and faced a projector screen that allowed them to simultaneously hear and see Litz as she answered their questions.

Her answers usually included an anecdote, such as the time Ahmedi was invited to the White House to meet former first lady Laura Bush. Litz recalled that the invitation brought her to tears when she realized it had only been three years ago that Ahmedi was in a refugee camp asking God to die, and now she was standing next to Bush in the White House.

After the nearly hour-long interview session, Courtney Belolan, a literacy specialist at the middle school, talked to The Times Record about the technologically supported interplay that had just taken place.

She said Ahmedi met Litz in the mid to late 1990s after Ahmedi and her mother came to the U.S. through a World Relief program. The two escaped from Afghanistan and were accepted in the program to relocate from a refugee camp in Pakistan. They landed in the Chicago area and Litz, through her church, became the lifeline for Ahmedi, Belolan said. Ahmedi lost her leg to a land mine as a child.

Seventh-graders are reading the book as part of a study unit on world citizenship, “so they spend the first part of the year learning what it means to be a citizen and civic action (and) civic duties,” Belolan said. “The second half of the year they explore world cultures, and they spend most of their time learning about the Middle East. As part of that experience, they read this book.”

Questions students posed to Litz ranged from why she and Ahmedi developed such a special connection, to whether it was difficult for Ahmedi to decide what to include in the book, to whether she and Ahmedi — now married with a child — plan to travel to Afghanistan.

One student asked Litz to describe the greatest challenges she encounters while working with refugees.

“That’s a really good question,” Litz said, “because most of the refugees have come from the camps where they’ve been for 12 to 13 years. And if you can imagine if somebody told you, you had to be out of your house and had 10 minutes to get on your way, you’d be thinking, ‘Well what would I take with me?’”

She talked about how she met a man who had lost an arm, illustrating that refugee camps weren’t safe places to be. And when coming to America, “they do really need to learn some English, and it’s hard for them to get jobs,” Litz explained. “The housing is very expensive so they may be eight people living in a two-bedroom or one-bedroom apartment.”

Litz emphasized for students the importance of being patient and being an advocate for the refugees she helps.

Belolan said, “Any time you can integrate the curriculum or connect what students are reading and writing about to other parts of the curriculum — and even to what’s happening in the world — the easier it is for the students to connect to the book and the more meaningful it is, and the more they get out of it.”

Teachers have the responsibility, Belolan said, to introduce students to quality literature and texts they need some help understanding. That, in turn, helps students find themselves as readers, she said.

“The kids enjoy the story so much and really get into the book,” Belolan said. “The questions they ask and the discussions we have are just so high level and powerful, that we’ve really made it a corner piece of the curriculum, and that’s something that we’re attempting to do at all the grade levels, is find texts and books, or options for books that mean something other than just a good story.”

She hoped communicating via Skype with Litz would provide students an opportunity to ask questions and learn more about the story and learn more about Litz and Ahmedi. Litz is very dedicated to community service and helping people, something Belolan and teachers hoped students could learn more about as well.

Mid-coast Maine is not a culturally diverse area, Belolan said, so schools can teach the students about different cultures and to be sensitive and accepting, “but hearing real-life examples of how that works is very inspiring.”

For example, students read this book, then learn about the five themes of geography and look at the climate of Afghanistan and how it affects the way people live there.

“So they’re learning all those things kind of out of context of anything, and then they read this story and they can picture what Kabul looks like, and they understand the culture a bit more, so the story is just easier to understand,” Belolan said. “That, in turn, enhances their understanding of the geography.”

The language in “The Other Side Of The Sky: A Memoir” is difficult, Belolan said, but the students have had a chance to talk with Litz and hear her speak about concepts in the book — of refugees and refugee camps, and descriptive stories and examples. So now when they read about it in the book, “their brain is putting it together like LEGOs.”

From a basic educational standpoint, any time students can make direct connections to the subjects they study, the skills transfer with a much higher success rate, according to Belolan.

Seventh-graders and eighth-graders have laptops through the Maine Learning Technology Initiative, and with technology being incorporated into the curriculum, “we can make our classroom experiences that much richer for our students,” Belolan said. “I call the computers the magic answer box ... Your access to information is unlimited. We can pull up pictures of places for students; we can pull up past (television) shows,” such as a 20/20 news report on a subject students are learning about in the classroom.

Financially, Skyping with Litz, who was in Ohio, cost the school nothing. Some of the students have finished the book and others are near the end, “so they’re reading about this woman right now, and here she is on the screen talking to them. It’s amazing. That could not have happened without a great deal of coordination and money in the past.”

Belolan said some students, after speaking with Litz, will be motivated to read the rest of the book, or to go back and re-read passages. The main thing, Belolan said, is that “students will be inspired.”

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