Q&A with Gabriel Salazar, Global Digital Program Associate

With a degree in Child Adolescent Development and extensive experience working in education technology, Gabriel Salazar spoke to us about the diverse resources and offerings of Literacy Cloud, his vision for the platform, and his excitement for the growing role digital learning tools play in literacy education. Our conversation has been edited for clarity and length.

Q. What inspired you to work in education?

A. While a student in high school, I was drawn into the education space by leading the after-school program at my former elementary school. What was so great about being a part of the after-school program was that I had a great initial sense of accomplishment by helping students with their homework and connecting with them enough to give them a sense of comfort in seeking help and facilitating a no-pressure environment between facilitator and student.

When I went into college, I was originally a business major, realized I didn't like it, then turned to studying child development and learning the cognitive aspect of students and children in general. My studies gave me a better understanding of how to work with kids on an interpersonal level, which later helped my methodology of teaching. Education is not supposed to be a stressful, overwhelming information overload. It is meant to be enjoyable and engaging, and this outlook on education escalated into technology integration for me.

Q. What made Room to Read stand out to you? Why are you excited to work here?

A. What caught my attention was Room to Read's mission and vision. From previously working at an education technology company that helped educators integrate educational technologies into classrooms, I had a vision for my new work venture to continue helping educators and students in areas globally that don't yet have the necessary learning resources. I gravitated toward Room to Read's Literacy Cloud as a tool for children to access books and learning resources, and I really wanted to be a part of this project to provide greater accessibility for students and teachers.

Q: What is Literacy Cloud?

A. Literacy Cloud is a digital resource library for children with a primary goal of exposing literacy globally. It is also a hub for teachers to access 2,000-plus books categorized by different reading levels. With digitized books published by versatile authors and illustrators along with recorded read aloud videos, there are many ways to engage young readers.

Q. What does your new role at Room to Read entail?

A. I am overseeing Literacy Cloud and developing strategies with user experience, which includes working with Room to Read's Country Offices to learn what types of content they are hoping to have for students. As well, I'm refining the back end of Literacy Cloud to improve internal reporting of uploaded books and videos. And, of course, the largest part of my role is being a contributor to the organization's goal of reaching 40 million children by 2025.

Q. What makes Literacy Cloud stand out in the literacy education space? What resources does LC offer for students, parents, and teachers?

A. Technology brings accessibility, collaboration, and inclusivity. Literacy Cloud is promoting all of these, especially inclusivity where you are getting books from cultures around the world and students can learn from these in addition to watching read aloud videos.

While accessibility is not foolproof, as we are still trying to figure out how to make technology more accessible in areas that lack infrastructure or Internet connectivity, the fact that Literacy Cloud offers hundreds of books at the click of a button shows one of the great things about technology as a catalyst for expanding reach to students and providing resources that can be downloaded and shared with others.

Students can use Literacy Cloud to read and collaborate with their peers, parents, or teachers. All these aspects of Literacy Cloud are very essential to literacy education.

Q. What growth do you envision for LC?

A. Literacy Cloud has the potential to share not only literacy resources but also professional development resources such as recorded webinars that could teach viewers how to promote literacy in classrooms. I think we can take advantage of authors and illustrators and potentially teach some of their skillsets.

We can even offer videos to teach children how to create their own storyboard, and then include ways for teachers to apply these lessons to their curriculums. Literacy Cloud can really be a hub for all audiences. Although students are top priority, LC can be super helpful for teachers and even be used to give governments a better sense of our work and what we are trying to promote so they can push these agendas to schools as well.

The read alouds are great too and can be beneficial to special education. There are techniques that we can promote to assist special education students and attract diverse groups of students.

Q. How are books selected to be featured on LC?

A. Currently, we are working with Country Offices to learn what books they feel are the best representation of their specific countries. We want to give Country Offices autonomy to choose books because those offices are the most immersed and knowledgeable about the realities of their communities. We ask each of the Country Offices what books they are most proud of and what books teachers will gravitate toward. We then try to make the Literacy Cloud website an immersive reading environment for students and teachers.

Q. Are there any new elements on Literacy Cloud that excite you?

A. I think many users will be excited about the Story Viewer aspect. Even though Literacy Cloud is a digital platform, we still want users to have as much of the same feel as if reading a physical book and flipping the page and viewing high quality, vivid images. We also are incorporating the ability to like the book and save it to your digital library, and offer future book recommendations to hopefully inspire more engagement with the reading materials.

We hope to put the human behind the book and have students learn more about their cultures by adding books created by diverse authors and illustrators. For example, if there's a book that highlights a specific country's unique holiday, we want to promote this on our homepage to be as culturally inclusive and aware as possible.

Q. What role do you see digital learning tools like Literacy Cloud playing in the future of literacy education?

A. Honestly, I think we are seeing the future play out now with the pandemic. Numerous schools are offering alternative digital learning opportunities outside classrooms or through hybrid learning curriculums.

Digital learning is already playing a prominent role today, so our goal is then to look at how we can improve upon what we have and how we can provide greater accessibility to these resources and technology devices for children. While there are so many digital learning platforms out there, our next big step at Room to Read is striving to ensure that every child can access, receive, and utilize these resources.

Q. How does Literacy Cloud optimize its global audience, and how can there be more opportunities for global reach?

A. There are more opportunities to promote Literacy Cloud, whether through social media or even through print and television ads in different countries. Our close contact with Country Offices helps to expand the Literacy Cloud name to schools and governments. With the rise of digital media, the attention span is so short, and we want to make sure that we stand out to our different audiences, especially by featuring beautiful illustrations and culturally relevant books.

Thank you, Gabriel!

Like this interview?

Share *your thoughts on social media with the hashtag #RtRBookClub*