



## FEATURE SPEAKER: JENNIFER ESTRADA

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### Jennifer Estrada (UK), LitWorld

The WLS is pleased to have Jennifer Estrada presenting at the 2014 World Literacy Summit in April. We caught up with Jennifer recently to discuss her work and experiences around literacy and its power to change.

#### How have you worked with literacy in the past, and what are some of your achievements in this field?

I have always gravitated toward working deeply over working broadly, and was lucky enough to get involved with a wonderful nonprofit, [LitWorld](#), as it was launched that allowed me to work in a variety of setting and positions as the organization grew over time. With LitWorld I spent time working developing education programs that reimagined literacy education beyond phonics and fluency to explore the connection between storytelling and social emotional learning. I created and then was given the exciting and challenging task of overseeing the international expansion of a program that taught concepts of resilience, empowerment and community through stories and storytelling.

I have also designed and led research on ways to monitor and evaluate programming to capture growth in reading and writing identity, confidence and reading and writing communities. In this role I researched participant perceptions of program impact, then presented my findings to the program leadership. Together in collaboration with the program leadership and experts on nonprofit M&E, I designed and tested a new tool for M&E of a combined literacy and social emotional learning program.

I am now endeavoring to translate the learning programs I have been developing over the past 5 years into a format using tablet computers and apps. This process has been an incredible learning experience for me, as I have always relied on traditional tools and was primarily focused on working in communities where this level of technology was not readily available so not relevant to the work I was doing. It has been fun and exciting to create and monitor this pilot project, and to learn about what is available to teach storytelling and reading concepts with 21st century tools. There are so many resources that are free and easy to use and make literacy come alive in the most meaningful ways for young and mature learners alike!

#### Are there any areas of literacy that particularly interest you?

I am especially interested in how literacy skills can be leveraged to create a sense of freedom, connection and empowerment in vulnerable communities. I have always seen literature as a vehicle for personal growth as well as forging bonds between learners, and in communities where there is a high level of isolation this can be especially meaningful.

I am also fascinated by how literacy programs are measured and the purposes they are given. My experience on the research and M&E side allowed me to learn a lot about this area of literacy education and also develop my own definition of meaningful measurement. I am a strong advocate of measuring what we care about, not just what is easily translated into numerical data.

I also just love picture books! They have so many amazing lessons and are visually stunning. I actually wrote a children's book that is being published digitally as a part of a set of curriculum resources for Kindergarten teachers in the US. It was really fun to create a book that was intending to thoughtfully teach toward specific learning goals while maintaining a fun, engaging storyline for young readers. I was also able to give design input to the illustrator which was exciting to see come to life. What do you love about working in literacy?

As you may have guessed, I love stories, storybooks, storytelling and the power they have to connect humans and overcome differences. I have found that when all else fails to allow for mutual understanding, a well-chosen story can do just the trick. To enter into a story is to actively see the world from another's perspective, from the perspective of the characters, the perspective of people in the story's point in time or circumstance. Stories allow for incredibly joyful moments of empathy and compassion, exploration and comprehension. They break down barriers by creating common language and shared experiences, because the experience of the right story in the right moment can be as meaningful as one from your own life.

I also really believe that literacy skills are transformational. Working in literacy education for me is about sharing new possibilities for self-expression that in turn broaden learners' abilities to share who they are, what they think, what they care about and what they need, to the world around them as well as the world at large. From my first experience as a literacy educator, working as a teacher's assistant at a residential treatment center for boys within the NYC foster care system who had experienced emotional or psychological trauma, I have seen how literacy skills can give a voice to members of our community who have felt particularly voiceless. From accessing others' stories to sharing their own, my very first students taught me how liberating and how illuminating a strong command of literacy can be.

#### Do you have a story about literacy's power to change? We'd love to hear it.



Jennifer Estrada

One story that comes to mind is the journey of a little girl I met in Kenya named Diana. When she first started in our reading and writing club she was so timid. She would whisper her answers to our questions and would never share the stories she wrote during workshops. When she began, she was 10 years old and felt so desperately alone, living with her father and stepmother. Her mother had died a few years ago from AIDS-related illnesses and her stepmother was very hard on her. She carried around a photo of her mother and if you looked, you could see her holding it inside her pocket during workshops. We read stories about little girls who were leaders, little girls who were brave, little girls who were amazing friends and little girls who grew into women who changed the world.

As we read together, and wrote stories about similar moments and feelings and hopes and dreams in our own lives, Diana's world opened. She began to walk taller, she began to speak louder, she began to stand in the front of the group, in the front of the room. At our first year-end celebration, Diana was the first girl to volunteer to read her story to everyone who had gathered. The audience was made up of other girls in her reading and writing club, her group leaders and school teachers, leaders in the Kenyan nonprofit and my own colleagues from the US.

My colleagues are the ones who sent me the video of Diana's share. This little girl, who a few months ago would not look at you when she spoke, looked each person in the eye as she shared the words she had written. Her words, her story, a story that began with loss and pain, sadness and isolation, and became one of learning and love, friendship and hope, this was the experience she chose to share. She was able to share it, because of the transformation she experienced in her literacy identity, from listener to speaker, from reader to writer, and shared it with a poise and poignancy inspired by her mentor texts and role models in the room. This, to me, is what literacy can do. It can show each of us the full scope of what is possible and give us the courage to share what is inside of us with the world.

Interview by [Kate McMahon](#)

## Jennifer Estrada at the 2014 World Literacy Summit

Jennifer will present at the 2014 World Literacy Summit in April in the category of 'New Technology and Literacy'. Her topic is 'LitWorld's Story21 Model - Bridging the Digital Divide for Lifelong Literacy'. [Register now](#) to see Jennifer present at the Summit. [Join us in a global campaign for change.](#)

### About Jennifer

Jennifer is a career literacy advocate and educator who has worked with children and youth in communities throughout North America, Europe and Africa. She has worked with LitWorld, a literacy empowerment and advocacy non-profit organization, since its founding in 2007 in program development, implementation and evaluation. Find out more about Jennifer and other WLS presenters on our [speakers page](#).

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