Animating All Students
Back to School

One of the many challenges facing educators at this time of year is getting students back into the right behavioral mode for learning. It’s natural for students to slip out of “school habits” during the summer, but rein-stating good learning practices can be time-consuming and frustrating. Unfortunately, there’s now so much pressure on teachers to stick to the curriculum on a day-by-day basis that there’s little time to ease students back into the educational rhythm.

Terry Thoren, the former CEO of Klasky Csupo, Inc. — the animation studio behind Nickelodeon’s world-famous Rugrats and The Wild Thornberrys — is working with business partner Rudy Verbeeck to produce WonderGrove Learn an education website intended to be used in the classroom by educators to teach social skills, functional life skills and bilingualism.

“We produced the twelve new back to school lessons to help make the transition back-to-school easier for students and educators alike. Because teaching appropriate behavior during the first few weeks of school encourages better behavior throughout the entire school year, the lessons are a strong foundation for our year-round tool for success,” explains Thoren.

These back-to-school lessons address critical challenges that educators face when students transition to the first few weeks of a new school year. Each animated video models behavior for students in pre-K through second grade, such as “listening when the teacher is talking,” “using polite words,” “lining up quietly,” and “how to handle a bully.”

WonderGrove Studios is also applying its animation to language development. Its Dual Language Enrichment Solution includes 150

Gregory van Zuyen reports on the way Terry Thoren and Rudy Verbeeck are using cartoons to help teach language skills and learning habits in class.
instructional animations and 1,500 printable extension lessons in Spanish and English. “Young students develop language skills rapidly, and they quickly absorb whatever they see and hear in cartoons. This accelerates their understanding of new words in two different languages at an incredibly fast rate. Research shows when young children form an emotional connection with animated characters, they model the behavior of the characters. We’ve created engaging, age-appropriate characters who reinforce positive behaviors in Spanish and English,” adds Verbeeck, who speaks six languages and is the brains behind Wonder Grove’s proprietary animation software. The back-to-school initiative is only one element of the resources WonderGrove Learn offers educators. The instructional videos focus on important areas of learning such as social skills, life skills, health, science, nutrition, safety, and vocabulary. There are also unique “words of the day” episodes — in both English and Spanish — where animated characters teach words in the proper context in less than sixty seconds. The instructional animations come with printable extension lesson plans that align to 90% of the Common Core State Standards. The idea is to give educators a tool to engage students by showing animations during the school day and then extend each theme to printable extension lessons that address CCSS standards.

Thoren has spent decades studying the effects of animation on children. As CEO of Klasky Csupo, he was the executive in charge of production of 600 TV episodes. He oversaw the production of Rugrats when it was Nickelodeon’s number one animated show, as well as the popular cartoons Rocket Power, The Wild Thornberrys, and the Emmy-nominated As Told by Ginger.

“Cartoon characters are the biggest stars in entertainment. They are in countless TV series, in video games, and in Hollywood’s most profitable movies. Every waking hour before and after school, cartoon characters are prevalent in most children’s lives,” says Thoren. “However, between 8:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m., when students are in the classroom, there are no animated characters. The classroom is a wasteland for animation. There are very few animations that satisfy educational standards that can be used in a classroom today.”

To develop the lessons, Thoren went straight to the source — the classrooms. “We worked with educators to define the core intention of each lesson. Then we created storylines that used our age-appropriate characters to address each lesson. We produced instructional animations to bring the stories to life. Then, we tested the animations in the classrooms and made alterations and edits.” The finished product is the result of direct teacher and student feedback, addressing the needs of everyone in the classroom.

Janelle Vargo, an educator at Morrison Elementary in Dayton, Ohio, uses the lessons several times a day in her classrooms. “This is the first time I’ve ever seen anything that is literally at my fingertips all day,” says Vargo. “You never know when you’re going to need it.

“Even if it’s just adding a cartoon to your fluency group, or adding a cartoon to your behavior check-ins, it’s going to make a huge difference in your day and in your relationship with students,” she adds. “Videos that model appropriate social skills, like ‘respecting others on the playground’ and ‘asking the teacher for help’ are lessons that every student needs. But no one talks about them until you and the student are both frustrated, and this frustration never ends with a positive outcome. The nice thing about WonderGrove is that you can implement a video each day for only three minutes and know that the students are learning the right way to behave.”

Guidance counselor Joan Swank also understands the importance of the program. “Because I’ve been doing this for 28 years, I have resisted technology and animation. But when I watch how the kids relate to these characters, I feel they do have a way of reaching the kids that’s very different than anything else I’ve seen,” says
Swank. “The bottom line is that if students are going to be successful in school, they have to have good behavior and good social skills. And the stories featuring the WonderGrove Kids give me a great tool to cut right into what that skill is.”

Teacher Betsy Jones says her pre-K through fourth-grade classes are benefiting as well. “I was using the lesson ‘Using Polite Words,’ and we did some role playing after they saw the video. One of the students really struggles with using polite words, and you could see the light bulb go on when he knew what he was saying wasn’t nice. The videos help reinforce social skills by giving students an age-appropriate visual and by giving them ideas and strategies of what they should do. And they start acting that out in the classroom.”

Animation is particularly beneficial in bilingual classrooms, according to Verbeeck. “The lessons are both comprehensive and detailed, with a number of activities that take into account the academic and linguistic developmental growth of children who are still developing their native languages while adding second languages.

“It’s a valuable tool for biliteracy, because it targets children at the age when they are most receptive to developing language skills. Cartoons are a universal language that children consume day in and day out over and over again. Animation is a great way to model language acquisition because animated characters know no borders. No linguistic borders, no cultural borders, no gender borders. The WonderGrove Learn animations will stand the test of time because they can model positive, appropriate behaviors for young students everywhere.”

Animation can have a magical effect on young children and can help eliminate anxiety. Terry Thoren, Rudy Verbeeck, and their team are using animated magic to improve classroom behavior, and language acquisition and to keep children motivated to learn new ways to communicate.

Gregory van Zuyen is creative director of Language Magazine.