Engaging Children in Science Inquiry Skills With Interactive, Digital Comics

Overview

Transmissions: Gone Viral follows a group of youngsters—Maria, Rani, and Eduardo—who investigate a virus plaguing animals and humans in their neighborhood. The youngsters discover birds that have inexplicably died. They then learn of a mysterious illness affecting Eduardo and Maria’s grandmother and other neighbors. The town plans to cancel its big parade that the children have been planning to participate in for weeks. Armed by scientific specialists, they gather evidence and explore evolutionary biology and disease transmission in order to identify the mysterious illness.

Interactive Elements

Interactivities embedded in the narrative engage readers in solving evidence and finding patterns that may help solve the mystery.

Design-Based Research

During the development of the comic book and educator guide, designers, educators, and researchers worked together to ensure the resources were useful for educators, while still engaging students from backgrounds and interests in science.

Infographic explaining the transmission of avian influenza in the context of West Nile virus.

Engaging Youth in Practicing Scientific Inquiry

A compelling narrative based on a local urban neighborhood and relatable characters takes the reader on a journey collecting evidence, testing hypotheses, and working with scientific experts. The young characters are at the center of the scientific process, while experts serve as resources for knowledge and methods. Conclusions in the comic are supported by interactions such as real scientific evidence and infographics that illustrate the mechanisms of zoonotic diseases and their dispersal. Readers come along for the journey to identify the mysterious sickness, making discoveries at the same time as the comic’s protagonists.

Embodying Scientific Approaches

The three main characters in the narrative embody different approaches to scientific inquiry. Maria represents the documentation and collection of evidence, Eduardo embodies the generation of hypotheses (sometimes involving aliens), and Rani is a true science nerd with an intense interest in analyzing evidence using a variety of technologies and techniques.

Teacher Advisory Board

Six local middle school educators served on the Transmissions Teacher Design Team. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the project, we recruited educators who taught a variety of subjects including science, health, and English Language Arts. To represent diverse student populations, including English Language Learners and students with special needs. From March to June 2021, the advisory board met monthly for several hours and participated in several asynchronous assignments between meeting dates. The advisory board provided valuable feedback on the comprehensibility and usability of the Transmissions story, graphics, and structured interactions, and also provided input on the design of supplemental resources to ensure that these materials can be successfully extended and made accessible to students in the classroom.

Educational Workshops

In February 2018, NYSCI educators ran a three-day camp for 20 students in grades 6 through 8 to pilot test the supplemental educational materials. In particular, the goals of the camp were to test how the educational materials surfaced and built upon student ideas about evidence and the nature of science, as well as how the materials supported learners in systematically problem-solving.

Student work where the students explaining their ideas about what items they see in the soil and on the nutrients.

Supplemental Resource Guide

The comic book is accompanied by a supplemental resource guide for implementation and support in informal settings.

Character Cards highlight the interests, traits, and special talents of the three main characters.