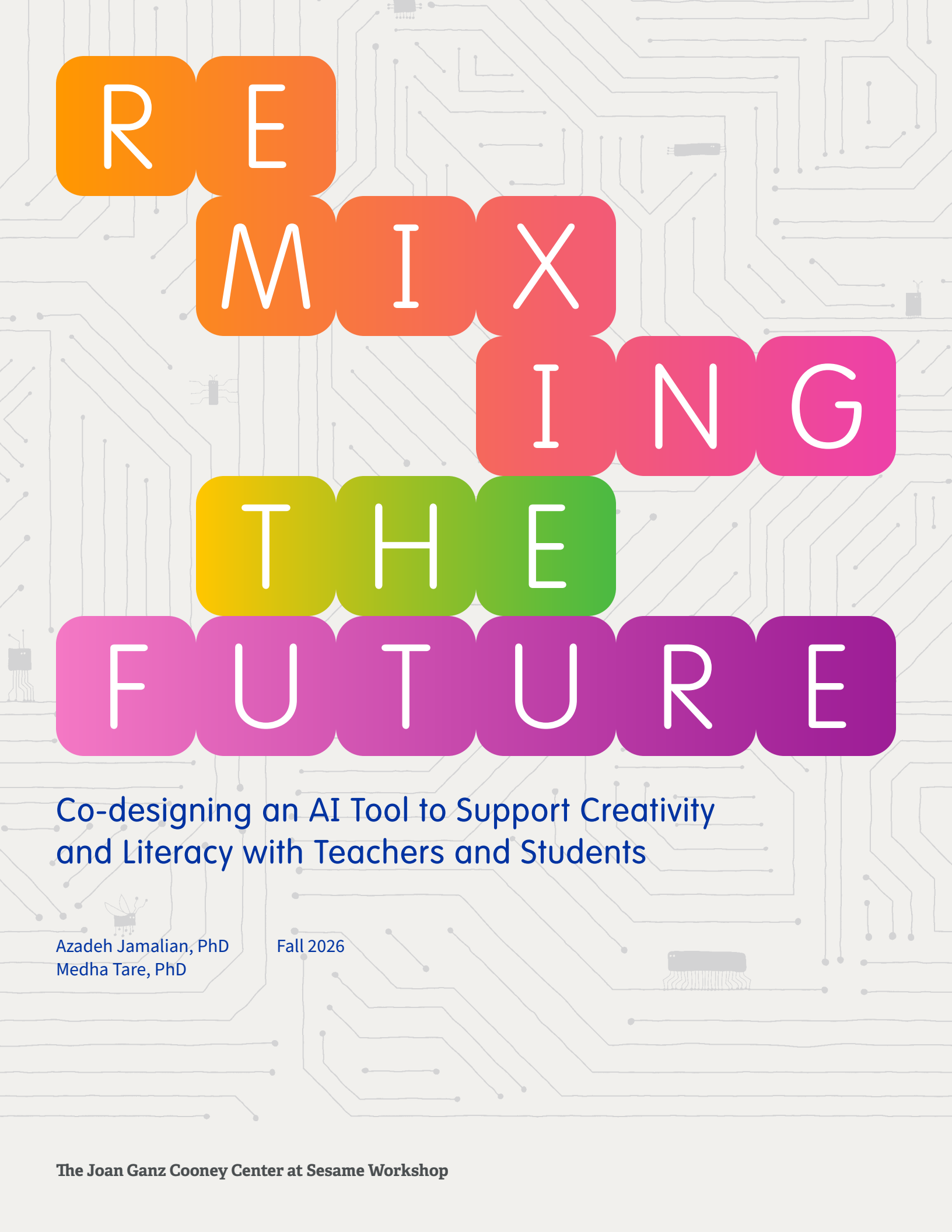




RE MIX ING THE FUTURE

Co-designing an AI Tool to Support Creativity
and Literacy with Teachers and Students



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Fall 2026

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Jamalian, A., & Tare, M. (2026, October). *Remixing the future: Co-designing an AI tool to support creativity and literacy with teachers and students*. Joan Ganz Cooney Center.

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Foreword

As the creation of new AI-powered educational tools moves at lightning speed, there is an imperative to address the inherent tensions that arise to protect student agency, privacy, and learning. The Joan Ganz Cooney Center is proud to share *Remixing the Future: Co-designing an AI Tool to Support Creativity and Literacy with Teachers and Students*, which represents two years of close collaboration with The GIANT Room, not only to support the development of the AI-powered The GIANT Remix app, but also to create a model for co-designing learning technology closely with teachers and students in real classrooms, so that new technologies are created with their human users at the heart.

This work, funded by the Robin Hood Learning + Technology Fund, allowed us to partner with schools in our backyard in New York City. Our close collaboration with a Title I district meant that the development of this new technology took place in classrooms with students who have the greatest needs, including neurodiverse and English language learners. As a result, the product has been designed with a wide range of learner variability in mind. The work directly advances blended literacy approaches: we helped teachers integrate new technology with high-quality, content-rich literacy and science curricula, allowing students to build knowledge, practice skills, and receive targeted support in line with the lessons they were learning.

Critically, this project dives deep on how AI can be used productively in classrooms, in a way that augments children's analog skills such as handwriting and collaborating with each other while building AI literacy and digital skills. As outlined in a [report](#) published by the Brookings Institution (Burns et al., 2026), we must take urgent action to ensure that AI supports teacher and learner agency rather than takes agency away. Brookings recommends co-design, particularly with marginalized communities, as imperative to ensure that AI tools are created to meet educational goals. Through this and other co-design projects in the [Cooney Center Sandbox](#) initiative, we aim to raise the bar in the edtech field and better understand how to address and mitigate risks from emerging technologies.

This report provides a deep-dive case study of the process and findings from the many co-design sessions held in classrooms from 2024-2025 and how the findings impacted The GIANT Remix's product development roadmap. Readers can take away learnings not only from the design insights shared but also from the ways in which districts, teachers, students, and families were engaged throughout the process. We are excited to support the development of The GIANT Remix through this partnership, and in turn support the development of young learners' writing skills, writer identity, and AI literacy.

Medha Tare, PhD
Senior Director of Research
Joan Ganz Cooney Center

Introduction

Teachers have been early and highly active adopters of artificial intelligence (AI) tools. According to a recent [national survey](#) conducted by the Walton Family Foundation and Gallup (Gallup, 2025), three in five teachers already use an AI tool in their classrooms. Yet this rapid adoption raises a critical question: How can we engage teachers and students to become co-designers of the AI tools intended for use in their classrooms?

This question is especially urgent in light of the growing AI [gap](#)—the widening divide between students who have access to high-quality, safe, and empowering AI experiences, and those who do not (Gonzales, 2024). Without intentional interventions, this gap threatens to reinforce existing educational inequities and deepen cycles of poverty. Ensuring that low-income communities can meaningfully shape and benefit from AI, and have access to high-quality AI literacy programs, is not just a matter of innovation; it is a matter of economic and social justice.

Throughout 2024-2025, The GIANT Room, in partnership with the Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop and funded by the Robin Hood Learning + Technology Fund, has collaborated closely with teachers and students from a low-income New York City public school district to co-design a set of AI tools and agents tailored to their needs, and pilot measures to assess students' learning. The result is [The GIANT Remix](#), an AI-powered platform that integrates self-expression, curriculum-aligned writing tasks, safe AI tools, and personalized publishing to strengthen students' writing skills, build AI literacy for responsible use, and foster their creative agency. By engaging communities in the design process, this work aims to narrow the AI gap and contribute to long-term strategies for reducing poverty through equitable access to emerging technologies.

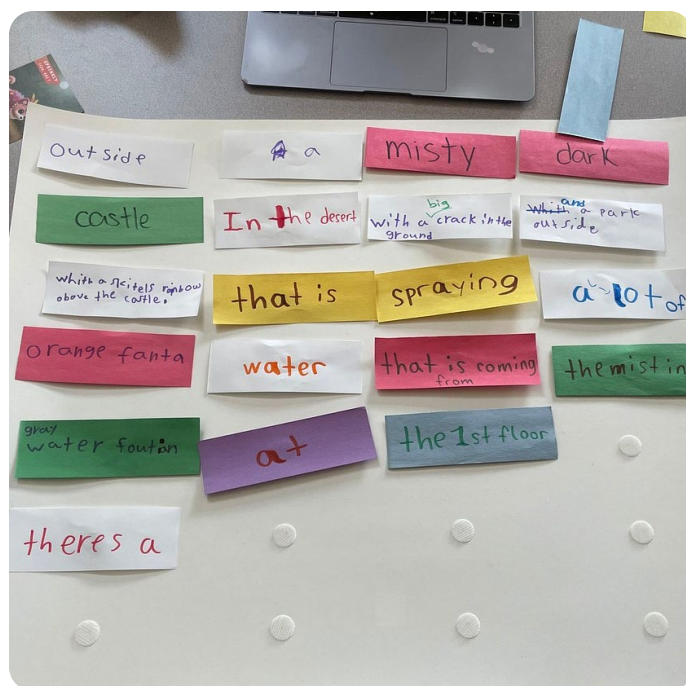
This report outlines our participatory co-design methodology, highlights key design findings from the program that shaped new features in The GIANT Remix app, and shares details about pilot measures used to learn more about the program's impact on participating students.

CASE STUDY

Co-designing The GIANT Remix

Over the course of three semesters (Fall 2024, Spring 2025, and Fall 2025), we co-designed The GIANT Remix app and accompanying classroom resources with four second- and two third-grade classrooms in two Title I schools in a NYC school district. Participating third-grade classrooms (total of 32 students) were part of the New York City Department of Education Nest program—an inclusive model where students with autism learn in integrated co-teaching classes with typically developing peers; and the second-grade classrooms (total of 88 students) were part of the English Language Learner (ELL) program with the majority of students speaking Spanish as their first language. The co-design program was implemented in partnership with each school's head of STEM/Science teachers as well as classroom teachers (total of 10 teachers). Sessions for some of the classrooms were implemented during the students' science block in their STEM room (different from their regular classroom), and for others were implemented during their literacy block in the main classroom with classroom teachers present. We held five to seven co-design sessions in each classroom each semester. In addition to the in-classroom program, we held a total of eight planning and co-design sessions with teachers only, online via Zoom.

The co-design practice for each semester started with planning sessions with teachers to actively design a creative writing and publication program for students while leveraging AI tools and aligning with science and literacy core curriculum. Teachers set the program goals and decided which unit of study they would like to integrate the program with. As the program progressed, teachers participated in co-design sessions and vetted AI agents to be included in The GIANT Remix app that would help generate creative writing assignments to help students reflect on their lessons, apply what they've learned, and develop their own characters, settings, and other elements for their science writing.



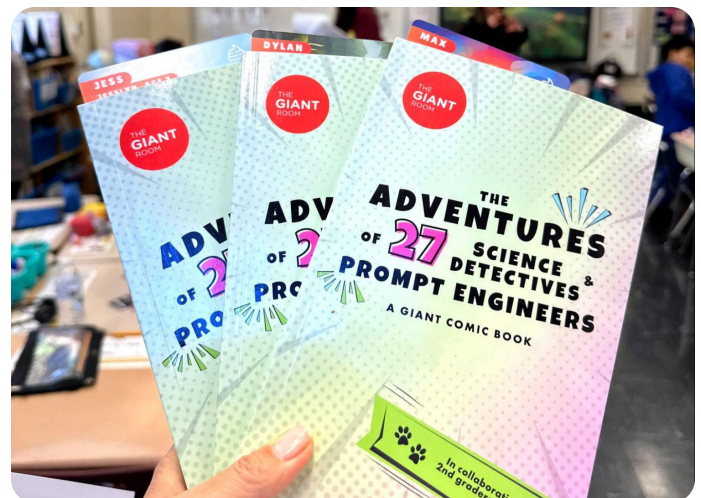


The co-design work with students in the classroom involved iterative, rapid prototyping during sessions, with additional design work by The GIANT Room designers between sessions. The process included classroom implementation and feedback from students and teachers, rapid analysis and reflection on student engagement and design artifacts, and ongoing refinement and development of AI tools and agents. All student interactions with the AI tools took place with trained GIANT educators and teachers in the loop.

In between semesters, design learnings and product recommendations were integrated as part of the development cycle of the app, prioritizing features with the highest impact on student learning and engagement, while new design goals and questions were set to be investigated in the next semester. The findings below represent learnings from across these many co-design sessions and classrooms. These data included conversations with teachers and students, students' artifacts and writing samples, and classroom observations.

The outcome is a creative design, writing, and publication app, The GIANT Remix, that blends hands-on creativity and writing with digital AI-powered design and scaffolding tools, making it possible for students to publish and print their own learning artifacts such as trading cards and books, which they can use to read and play with their classmates in school and with their family at home.

When working on a Remix, students start by receiving a GIANT Mission designed by their teachers and aligned with their unit of study. Examples of GIANT Missions include [Design a Habitat Engineer](#) (while reflecting on the relationship between plants and animals in a forest habitat), [Dream of a Hybrid Animal Family](#) (while reflecting on family genes, inherited, and acquired traits), or [Design a Unique Material](#) for a potion (while reflecting on material properties and cause and effect of materials in a solution). Students receive a printed Mission Sheet as well as pencils and markers to respond to The GIANT mission by sketching, describing their vision, and responding to a set of questions. Photos of the completed Mission Sheets are then uploaded into the GIANT Remix app, where AI tools remix each submission into avatars and create two-way feedback loops so students can give and receive critiques on their designs and writings, make revisions, and make their ideas ready for publication. Over multiple weeks, Missions expand into individual or collaborative writing that reinforces classroom learning standards (See Appendix A for an example).



Insights

INSIGHT 1

Empower Teachers to Lead

Make it possible for teachers to set learning goals aligned with their curriculum

AI should be designed as a tool that supports teachers in advancing learning in the classroom. Through our co-design sessions and focus groups with teachers, we learned that simply listing potential “learning outcomes” or “goals” for a product is not sufficient. Teachers want AI tools that help them plan programs, lessons, and lesson extensions directly aligned with the curriculum they are teaching and grounded in the specific learning goals they have for their students.

Together with teachers, we co-designed an AI agent for The GIANT Remix app that begins by asking educators about their learning goals, the key vocabulary their students need to learn, the standards they are working toward, and their own metrics for success. Teachers also wanted the option to share documents related to their lessons, such as teaching standards, slides, lesson plans, unit overviews, and vocabulary lists, so the AI could interpret and elaborate on this information without requiring them to manually re-enter it.

For example, one third-grade teacher planned a science writing program to integrate with her Amplify science unit focused on *Inheritance and Traits*. She chose fictional narrative writing as the genre for her students' writing assignment, because she knew it would motivate her students most. What did success look like for her? It meant that all students could correctly define key science vocabulary, such as *inherited trait*, *acquired trait*, *offspring*, and *genes*, and use these terms accurately in their writing. Using information provided by the teacher, an AI agent in The GIANT Remix app created a writing program in which students filled out a Mission Sheet with the creative mission to design an imaginary animal family by drawing and writing about unique family features and highlighting the offspring's inherited and acquired traits. The program then tasked students to write a fictional narrative about their Animal Family on vacation and challenged them to include as many science keywords in their writing as they can.



In a second-grade class, teachers designed a science writing program integrated into their Amplify science unit focused on the relationship between plants and animals, with learning goals connected to both their Amplify unit and their HMH Language Arts curriculum. Using information provided by the teacher, an AI agent in The GIANT Remix app created a program in which students were tasked with writing an informational text about a “habitat engineer” they designed, using key science vocabulary such as *habitat*, *system*, *leaves*, *seeds*, and *roots*.

These examples highlight the importance of designing AI tools that are highly flexible and empower teachers to create learning experiences that truly meet the needs of their students.

INSIGHT 2

Strengthen Core Curricular Learning and AI Literacy Using Affordances of AI

Incorporate AI literacy modules to existing units of study

Led by teachers, AI mini-lessons should be embedded within existing units of study so students can explore, practice, and reflect on subject matter while also learning about AI, its limitations, and how to use it responsibly throughout their learning journey. We designed these mini-lessons to be tightly integrated into the main academic lessons: bite-sized, direct, repetitive, written in kid-friendly language, and supported by examples that are relatable, engaging, and memorable.

For example, in an *Inheritance and Traits* Remix lesson aligned to Amplify Science, students used AI to generate avatar images for trading cards featuring an imaginary animal family of their choice. Students wrote about the inherited and acquired traits of the offspring,

their genes, and their “special powers,” all aligned with the key vocabulary identified by their teachers. They sketched their animal families and provided detailed descriptions to ensure the generated avatars reflected their intended designs.

In another class, as part of a *Plants and Animals Relationship* Remix lesson aligned to Amplify Science, students created their own “Habitat Engineers,” describing the role their organisms played within a habitat and how their creations supported the broader system of plants and animals in the environment.

The image displays three example AI mini-lesson slides from The GIANT app. Each slide features a blue header bar and a red circular logo with the word "GIANT" in the bottom right corner.

- Slide 1:** Features a red warning triangle icon with a white exclamation mark. The text reads: "WARNING When working with AI tools, we need to be VERY CAREFUL!".
- Slide 2:** Features a red warning triangle icon with a white exclamation mark. The text reads: "It's TRUE, AI makes mistakes!".
- Slide 3:** Features a photograph of a lion holding a green apple. The text reads: "Spot AI's Mistake" and "Raise your hand and share your feedback!".

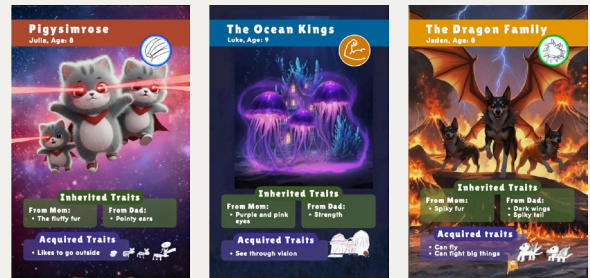
Example of AI mini-lesson slides

In both cases, in every class session in which students used an AI tool, whether to create an avatar, provide feedback to improve their avatar's design, or receive feedback on their writing, students were given a mini-lesson on AI that highlighted how it works, its limitations, and developmentally appropriate tips for responsible use. For example, before students interacted with any AI tools, we included a direct and explicit lesson on AI's limitations: namely, that AI can make mistakes. This lesson began with a memorable example: an AI-generated image of a lion holding an apple with a human-like hand, and students were invited to identify and discuss the errors. Throughout the program, we introduced additional limitations of AI, such as the fact that AI's ideas are not always perfect and that students have the ability to give feedback to adjust or improve AI outputs.

Impacts on AI literacy: Students who participated in the pilot program significantly improved their AI literacy compared to those who did not. On their exit tickets, we included questions that assessed students' (1) awareness of using AI tools in their creative work, (2) understanding of how AI works, and (3) understanding of how to use AI image-generation tools. (See Appendix B for the entry and exit ticket measures we developed.) Students in the program were more successful in defining what AI stands for, explaining what prompting means, recognizing that AI can make mistakes, and engineering prompts to alter outcomes. They also produced more elaborate prompts using more descriptive language, suggesting not only greater AI literacy but also growth in their writing skills.

One of our participating teachers commented on this aspect of the program:

"The best part of the program for me was being able to learn how to integrate AI in other subjects. Also be able to explain to students the benefits of using it."



Connect core learning goals with students' interests to enhance engagement and creative agency

A key affordance of AI tools for classroom instruction is the potential to personalize learning in ways that enhance student engagement and learning outcomes. In our pilot program, we asked how we might design AI features that elevate students' ideas and creativity, putting their voices and interests at the center, while avoiding superficial "interest alignment" based on adult assumptions. Through our collaboration with teachers and students, we learned that *teacher-led, student-forward* design is the most effective approach for interest-based learning: teachers define the learning goals and key vocabulary, while students bring the lessons to life through their own creativity, choices, and reflections on core content.

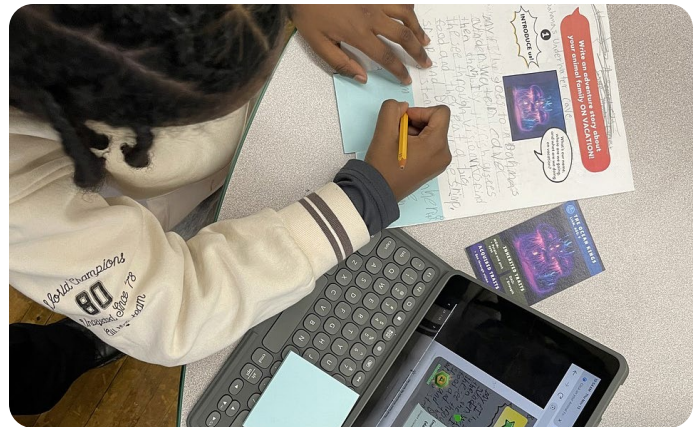
In our pilot program with third graders, each student designed a unique imaginary animal family based on their personal interests. One student created a cat family with genes that gave them laser eyes, soft, fluffy fur, and pointy ears. Another student created an octopus family in which the offspring inherited purple and pink eyes from mom, and strength from dad, with the acquired trait of see-through vision. A third student designed a dragon-wolf family in which the offspring inherit spiky fur from mom and dark wings from dad, and gain the ability to fly and fight big things!

Students had full creative agency within clear boundaries and requirements set by teachers to keep the focus on the science content. In every case, students incorporated key science concepts, such as inherited and acquired traits, genes, and environmental influences into their designs. This blend of structured learning goals with student-driven creative choices allowed students to deeply engage with the material while making the lessons personally meaningful.

Impact on student engagement: In an interview series conducted by Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) researchers evaluating our program, participating teachers reported increased student engagement during the co-design year, particularly in conversations, writing, and literacy skill development.

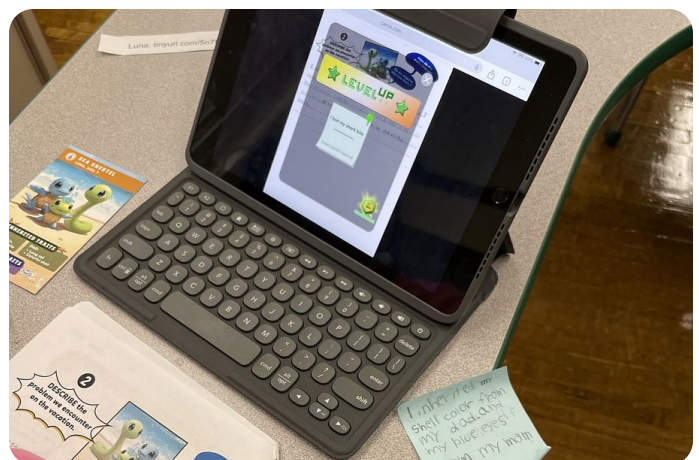
“I was pleasantly surprised to see how The GIANT Remix motivated our students to write, actively engage in science learning, voice their opinion, and collaborate with their peers on their publications. As a teacher, I know the importance of having students practice writing not only in ELA classrooms but in all other subject areas, and The GIANT Remix helped me just to do that for all my students, including English language learners and students with special learning needs.”

Student engagement was also evident in students’ active participation in the writing process: as observed by GIANT researchers in the classroom, all students were keen to participate in the writing activities, consistently asked for more time to work on their writing, actively sought support to improve their work, and used every opportunity they had to share their work with classmates and exchange ideas.



Leverage AI to provide scaffolded and personalized support

If teachers had unlimited time to support every student during writing assignments (the core focus of The GIANT Remix app) what would that support look like? And if students could access as much help as they wanted, what types of support would they request, and at what moments? The reality of classrooms in New York City (and in many districts across the country) is that teachers work with highly diverse learners: students who speak multiple languages and have varying levels of English proficiency, students with a wide range of literacy skills—from those still mastering letter-sound connections to those writing independently—and neurodiverse students with diverse learning needs. When designed thoughtfully and with these realities in mind, AI tools can help teachers provide the kind of responsive, personalized learning experiences they wish they had infinite time to deliver.



As we worked with students, we learned that they value ownership of their writing and take pride in producing work that reflects their effort. They want tools that *support them in doing the work*, not tools that *do the work* for them. Guided by this insight, we co-designed AI features that offer just-in-time, developmentally appropriate scaffolds:

- + **Word banks** tailored to each student's zone of proximal development
- + **Spelling support** that helps students independently write and correct errors
- + **On-demand definitions** of key vocabulary students are expected to use
- + **Context-aware writing prompts**, such as fill-in-the-blank suggestions embedded directly within their own writing
- + **Personalized feedback** aligned with teacher-defined benchmarks

Through these features, AI helped us deliver feedback that was both individualized and actionable. For example, the tool highlighted places where students could incorporate specific science vocabulary and content to meet grade-level science metrics. For more advanced writers—students who had already included all required key terms—the app identified areas where they could deepen their explanation of science concepts or elaborate with more precision. The feedback celebrated students' progress while clearly pointing to opportunities for growth.

The teachers' thoughts on the feedback included:

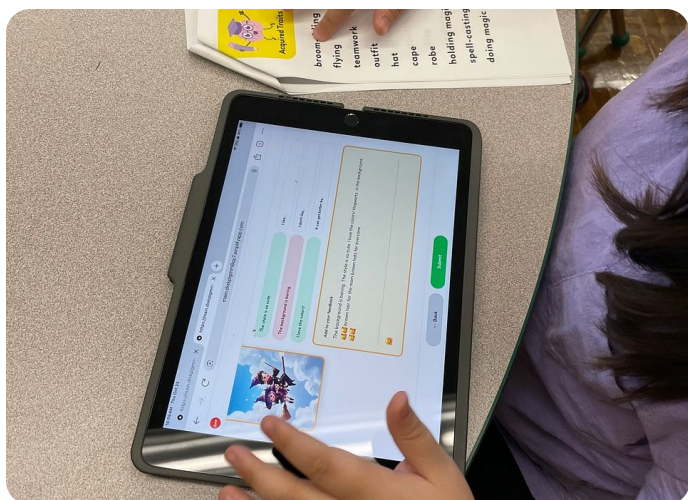
"This was the most fantastic part. We were so amazed by it. The students received clear, specific guidance that helped them understand what they needed to add to their paragraphs. AI also offered student-friendly language and sentence frames that they were able to use. The visuals used for this section were also kid friendly and engaging."

"Leveraging AI to provide personalized feedback is an amazing feature. Students should be provided with personalized feedback, but oftentimes it takes too much time from educators to do it often or in depth."

"The GIANT Room program provides an engaging way for students to use and apply science vocabulary. Our students were able to say, hear, and use science words while creating their avatars. Our students were able to practice their science vocabulary through peer conversations, using visuals and then add it to their writing."

"At such a critical time in science education, the more opportunities students get to use the science vocabulary, the more likely it will remain with them. This is extremely important with the state tests in 5th and 8th grade science."

"The best part [of the program] was seeing the progression of writing of my students. Some students went from writing a few words to sentences."



Allow for translanguaging

As highlighted in [Digital Promise's framework](#) for *Powerful Learning with Emerging Technologies*, a learner-centered approach must allow for translanguaging in order to promote accessibility and remove barriers to learning (Mills et al., 2025). Translanguaging is a pedagogical approach that invites students to use their full communicative repertoires as resources for learning. This includes expressing themselves through multiple modes such as spoken and written language, multiple languages (e.g., English and Spanish), gestures, drawings, and other forms of representation. AI tools have the potential to support rich translanguaging practices by accepting multiple forms of input and generating outputs in varied modalities.

The GIANT Remix embraces this approach by allowing young learners to express their ideas using pencil-and-paper drawings, written descriptions, symbols, physical prototypes, spoken language, and multiple languages. A set of AI agents then analyzes these multimodal inputs and synthesizes them into a cohesive prompt used to generate visual avatars of students' creations. These avatars appear on trading cards, alongside written notes that highlight the key details provided by students.

For example, one bilingual student designed an imaginary animal with pointy ears and star-shaped earrings, naming it “Zoro,” meaning “fox” in Spanish. To express her idea, she sketched her animal on a GIANT Mission Sheet, used written language to describe its distinctive features, and built a small model using arts-and-crafts materials. Using AI agents capable of interpreting ideas across modalities, The GIANT Remix generated a trading card featuring her creature, represented both visually and in text. Although she never explicitly wrote the word “fox,” the app accurately captured her intent by translating “Zoro” from Spanish to English and incorporating that meaning into the prompt used to generate her avatar.

Impact on accessibility: In an interview conducted by CPRE researchers, one teacher with a diverse group of student learners explained how the visual nature of the intervention was particularly beneficial:

“...the students...with the disabilities, language learners, being able to provide them with more visuals...I felt like even our students that are low, they were able to come up with different ideas. They were able to draw and explain and then show their thinking.”

Another teacher, working with a large population of English as a New Language students, remarked that the program made content more accessible by allowing students to work in Spanish with support from both the AI tools and GIANT Room facilitators:

“[The GIANT Remix Program] was another way of helping bridge that [language] gap, because if they had to, they could speak in Spanish, and AI would still [work].... So to me, I think it just gave an opportunity for my kids to really have a good time and really produce a product that they could be so proud of.”

3 Tell us what physical traits your animal has. Fur? Gills? Large claws?

It has black and brown fur and a clip with a star on it.

4 Give your animal some special powers! Flying? Telepathy?

Telekinesis (A potion spilled on her)

5 Where does your animal live? Where is its habitat or home?

In a modern mansion

Creative Scientist:
Lisa

How old are you?
7 years old

AI Prompt created based on student's entry on the mission sheet: A black and brown fox with fur, pointy furry ears and wearing star earrings and a hair clip with a star on it. 3D illustration, kawaii style. Nature background.

INSIGHT 3

Enable AI-powered Hands-on Learning

Leveraging emerging technologies such as AI does not mean reducing or replacing time spent on hands-on writing, reading, play, and learning. Young children who practice handwriting show improved [letter recognition and early reading skills](#) (Ose Askvik et al., 2020), [improved spelling and phonics](#) (Ray et al., 2022), [higher-level writing abilities](#) (Hirschler Lichtsteiner et al., 2018), and [deeper memory encoding](#) (Mangen et al., 2015). In fact, as we co-designed AI features for creative writing with teachers and students, they expressed a strong preference for hands-on work over purely digital experiences. Both teachers and students favored hands-on writing with paper and pencil instead of going fully digital, playing with physical printed trading cards as opposed to digital versions, and reading physical books instead of e-books.

“When students are able to touch, draw, and explore, they become engaged and invested in their learning.”

“Hands-on learning gets students excited to learn and keeps them engaged.”

In response, we invested significant time in designing seamless hybrid learning experiences that combined hands-on activities with AI-powered digital tools. This approach allowed students to engage deeply in creative and learning processes in tactile, authentic ways while still leveraging AI's affordances to support, enrich, and extend their work.

1. GIANT Mission Sheets: Students start their creative and writing process by drawing, writing, or designing on a GIANT Mission Sheet—a low-tech, accessible entry point designed so every child, in any language, can participate. Pictures of their hand-made, hand-written, or hand-drawn designs are then analyzed by a suite of AI tools to transform them into avatars. Students then have the opportunity to review avatars and provide feedback using scaffolded guidance (digitally on the app, and available for print through “word-banks”) to support their critical thinking skills.

2. GIANT Published Books: Students receive a printed book featuring their writings. They get to celebrate their writing achievements by signing their and their classmates' copies of the book, reading, and sharing with friends and family. Digital e-books are also provided online for families to access.

Impact in classroom: Students enjoyed practicing writing by hand while receiving personalized and scaffolded writing assignments and feedback through the app. In our pilot work in classrooms, teachers shared that the most challenging part of writing for students is to get started—with the GIANT approach, every single student jumpstarted designing their avatar on their mission sheets (accessible entry point), all students started writing on their personalized writing missions without any hesitations (featuring their original avatar), and all students made a significant number of revisions and edits to their writings.

For example, check out [How the Animals Got Their Cool Traits... On Vacation!](#) written by third graders, and [Super Habitat Engineers to the Rescue!](#) written by second graders. These books highlight students' original handwritten manuscripts while showcasing AI-generated avatars and feedback students received throughout their writing journey.

INSIGHT 4

Foster Student Collaboration Through Small-Group Work and Opportunities to Share

As AI tools become more prevalent in day-to-day life, concerns are growing that they may reduce, or even replace human connection. Examples include children and adults forming relationships with AI bots, teachers relying too heavily on AI-generated feedback and becoming less connected to their students' work, or students turning to AI tools for answers rather than seeking support from the adults in their lives. These concerns are especially critical when designing AI tools for children. For this reason, it is essential that AI designers prioritize human connection over AI glorification. AI should be built to strengthen relationships between teachers and students, support meaningful interactions, and enhance—not diminish—the human elements of learning, creativity, and care.

Throughout our co-design sessions in classrooms, we paid deliberate attention to identifying and enhancing opportunities for human connection, finding ways to ensure that AI features supported, rather than replaced, meaningful interactions between students and their peers and teachers. Below we describe the design decisions we made, and the features we co-designed with students and teachers:

- + **The language we use matters:** In all of our communications about AI (on student-facing slides and The GIANT Remix app), we were extremely careful to always refer to AI as “it” and avoid using “she/he.” In addition, we always represented AI using a computer chip and avoided giving it a persona resembling a human.
- + **Group publication:** Another important design decision was to have all students in a class work on a group publication (a book featuring chapters written by small groups or individual students, and more). This allowed students to collaborate together on a classroom project, enhancing community building and students' sense of belonging. Teachers were also invited to contribute to the book by designing their own avatars and writing their own manuscripts alongside their students. This allowed teachers to use and experience the AI tools personally and to collaborate with their students on a publication.
- + **Provide opportunities for peer celebration and play:** Children are experts in finding joy and spotting opportunities to play. As we spent time with them in the classroom, we learned from and with them how to design for joyful and playful learning. These playful features included: publication parties in which students and teachers add autographs to each other's books, personalized mini-games in the app featuring classroom avatars, tabletop card game ideas to play with their final published cards, read-aloud slides for the class to engage in reading and sharing their stories, and more.

Impact on students' collaboration: In a feedback survey, all teachers *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that The GIANT Remix provided meaningful opportunities for students to collaborate in small groups and encouraged them to respect and appreciate their peers' differences. Throughout our classroom sessions, we also observed strong collaboration and genuine connections between students and teachers, as well as among students themselves. Learners were consistently eager to share their work, draw inspiration from one another, play together, and celebrate the joy of learning and creativity as a community.

“We are delighted to have worked with the GIANT Room. The GIANT Room encourages collaboration, problem-solving, and communication. Students were motivated to work, ask questions, and explain their thinking to peers. This program helped our students to develop confidence and take ownership of their own learning. The GIANT Room made learning joyful and memorable to the students and their families. The most memorable part was the publishing party where students proudly shared their writing with their loved ones.”

INSIGHT 5

Leverage AI to Improve Students’ Critical Thinking, Writer Identity, and School-Home Connection

Critical thinking through guided practice

As AI tools become increasingly integrated into all aspects of daily life, from teaching and learning to entertainment, social media, and even toys, it is essential to support young people in developing strong critical thinking skills. These skills include the ability to question content, evaluate AI outputs, and provide constructive feedback. In our pilot work, we observed that although most students initially struggled to give constructive critiques, they learned to do so through guided practice and intentional scaffolding.

Together with teachers and students, we co-designed features for The GIANT Remix app that support the development of critical thinking and students’ ability to critique AI-generated outputs:

- + **Providing choices and supporting student autonomy.** Students were given multiple options representing different interpretations and artistic styles derived from their original ideas. A human reviewed variations before presenting them to students to ensure any inappropriate images were removed; then we intentionally allowed non-harmful AI mistakes to remain to show students. This reinforced the message that AI makes errors and celebrated students’ critical attention as they identified these inaccuracies.
- + **Requiring students to provide feedback as part of the process.** Teachers modeled how to give constructive critiques by offering sentence starters and example language. These sentence starters were later embedded directly into The GIANT Remix app as scaffolds to support students’ written feedback.
- + **Offering “word banks” to reduce language barriers.** Many students initially lacked the vocabulary needed to articulate critiques and often relied on gestures or adult support. To address this, we co-designed personalized, context-specific word banks that offered language students could use when writing feedback. This allowed students to communicate their ideas and opinions more independently and precisely.

“This helps them solve problems more, because it doesn't give you...a straight, true-false answer. It kind of makes you think a little bit more when the response comes up, because you don't just copy what AI says. You need to read it over. So, for me, it actually gives kids more computational thinking skills. Because they're not just trusting what AI said, and they're reading over and saying, is that really what I was trying to say? Or do I need to add a little more, or do I need to change something? So I actually think it does make them think more.”

Writer identity through publication and engagement with published artifacts

“Writer identity” is how students perceive themselves as writers: whether they see themselves as someone who can write, has a voice, and belongs in the community of authors. This construct includes students’ beliefs and attitudes about writing and develops through social experiences with teachers, peers, texts, and feedback over time. Student writer identity matters because [it drives motivation and persistence](#): students who believe “I am a writer” are more likely to invest effort, revise, and keep going through challenges, while students who internalize “I’m not a good writer” often withdraw and avoid writing, creating a self-reinforcing cycle that limits growth (Johnson, 2024; Graham, 2018; Ivanič, 1998; Skar et al., 2023; Li et al., 2024).

The GIANT Remix was co-designed with improving student writer identity as a primary goal, particularly for English learners and neurodivergent students, by embedding proven, identity-supporting writing practices into a scalable, AI-powered workflow. The design starts from a simple principle: students develop stronger identities when they experience writing as meaningful, improvable, and socially valued, and when they are treated as real authors, not just “students completing an assignment.” Together with students and teachers, we co-designed a set of features to directly address this principle:

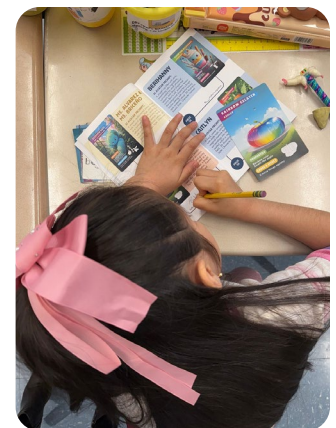
- + Celebrate imagination while making opportunities for growth visible.** We learned to provide AI feedback that protects students’ voice while supporting students to improve their writing. A core The GIANT Remix feature is AI-assisted writing feedback that spotlights students’ “big wins” (strong ideas, vivid details, effective phrasing) alongside specific, manageable next steps. This aligns with identity-centered feedback guidance: students can “feel” whether adults view them as capable writers, and feedback that recognizes strengths while naming growth areas supports a positive writing identity. By leveraging AI affordances, The GIANT Remix makes this approach scalable, ensuring every student receives timely, individualized responses more consistently than a teacher can typically provide across a full class, every day. This is [especially important](#) for students who have disproportionately received writing feedback primarily as correction or deficit-framing (McKinley & Rose, 2026), which can quickly [erode confidence](#) and willingness to take risks (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).
- + Create purpose and an engaged audience through AI-powered publications that validate writer identity.** Writer identity strengthens when [students write for authentic audiences](#) and create real products that invite sharing, discussion, and pride (Ferlazzo, 2019; Boscolo & Hidi, 2006; Graham, 2018; Myhill et al., 2023). The GIANT Remix uses a suite of AI tools to transform student ideas and drafts into *published artifacts*,



such as trading cards and books, designed to be read aloud, shared with families, and played with in classrooms. This “publication loop” is not a decorative add-on; it positions students publicly as authors with something worth reading. By making it easier and faster to turn student writing into polished, shareable formats, AI helps schools offer authentic audience experiences more frequently and to more students.

+ **Treat students as real writers through the full writing cycle (planning → drafting → revising → editing → publishing).** The GIANT Remix deliberately structures the complete writing cycle, reinforcing that writing improves through process and effort—key to identity and motivation. For English language learners, this aligns with evidence-based approaches that emphasize scaffolded writing instruction, joint construction, supported independent writing, and feedback opportunities that build language proficiency over time (Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest, 2025). Finally, The GIANT Remix culminates in celebration opportunities such as publication parties and peer-added autographs, so students in our program repeatedly experienced the social message at the heart of writer identity: you belong here, your ideas matter, and you can grow as a writer.

Impact: In feedback surveys, we asked students to rate their published books and trading cards, indicate whether they felt proud of their work, and share whether they would like to continue using AI to publish more books. Not only did students rate their books and trading cards very highly, but they also reported feeling proud of their work and wanting the opportunity to continue publishing more avatars, cards, and books.



In a post-program survey, one participating teacher said the best part of the program for her was its effect on students' writer identities:

"[The best part of the program for me was] to watch the students use their imagination to create a fabulous book. Here they can feel proud to show their work to others. They are able to say 'I am an author.'"

School-home connection

Many parents are concerned about the use of AI, yet see opportunities to leverage it to support their children's learning, both in the classroom and in everyday life (Common Sense Media, 2026). In response, a key part of our process was keeping parents informed about how AI was being used in the classroom and creating meaningful opportunities for them to join the conversation. We also asked: How might we leverage AI affordances to strengthen school-home connections that further support students' learning, creative agency, and writer identity?

Through our classroom co-design work, we implemented multiple school-home connection initiatives to: (1) inform parents about the use of AI in the classroom; (2) suggest discussion topics and at-home activities that help families support children's responsible use of AI; and (3) create opportunities for parents to celebrate students' achievements and engage with their children's publications through play and shared reading. For example, we invited parents to classroom publication parties, provided free access to digital publications for all families to view at home, and provided each student with a printed copy of their published book and a trading card to take home.

Impact: We asked parents (N=28) who joined the publication parties to share their feedback and impressions about the program. Almost all parents mentioned that their child has talked to them about the program at home, expressing their excitement about using AI to create avatars, cards, and books based on their imagination.

"He told me about his writing and the process of how they've made the book and sometimes about what they wrote."

"That is fun to use AI and they liked making books using it."

"Excited designing the avatar. Using good adjectives. It's fun writing the words to the story."

"[My daughter] loves the idea. She believes that it will help her with her school work. Also, as a parent I believe that's helpful tools for kids."

"He told me that he was creating his own card, kind of like a Pokémon card."

In addition, across varied levels of prior exposure to AI, parents consistently viewed the program as beneficial, safe, and forward-looking. Most importantly, all survey parents reported that they are proud of their child's published book.

Parents also shared their thoughts and impressions about the program with participating teachers. In an interview with CPRE researchers, one of the participating teachers highlighted how impressed and proud parents were with their children's work:

“The parents came up for the celebration and their parents were like, ‘Oh, my gosh, this was so wonderful. My kids came home and talked about it every single week.’ [Parents said] ‘they love science, but [the program] was just something extra.’”



INSIGHT 6

Keep a Human in the AI Loop to Ensure Safety

It goes without saying that there are serious concerns about using AI tools with children, especially the risk of inappropriate, biased, incorrect, or misleading AI-generated content. While safety guardrails (e.g., filtering, blocked terms, and system constraints) are necessary, they are not sufficient on their own. Child-centered [AI guidance and risk-management frameworks](#) consistently emphasize that systems affecting children should include stronger testing and oversight, including human review at critical moments (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025).

In our co-design work, we made an intentional decision: children should not be the first “safety check” for AI outputs. During classroom pilots, all student interactions with AI were facilitated with trained GIANT educators and teachers in the loop. An important co-design question we asked was: How might we keep a human in the loop while remaining scalable and feasible for classroom use and providing a seamless experience for students?

We designed The GIANT Remix so that human review happens at two high-stakes touchpoints:

1. Human review of AI-generated avatars before students see them

Between classroom sessions, every AI-generated avatar is reviewed and approved by an adult in the backend before being released to students for review and critique. This step screens for unsafe or inappropriate content, as well as harmful or stereotyping representations, without putting the burden on teachers to manually monitor every output.

2. Human review of AI-generated writing feedback before students receive it

Every AI-generated feedback comment on student writing is also reviewed by a human before it is shared with students. This is essential because writing feedback can easily become misleading (e.g., misreading a student's intent), overly authoritative, developmentally inappropriate in tone, or misaligned with the teacher's learning goals.

Impact on student safety and engagement: By placing human review at these two touchpoints, we found that student engagement increased from session to session: students looked forward to seeing their approved avatar drafts and receiving feedback on their writing. Participating teachers also reported high confidence in GIANT Remix's safety for classroom use, because they knew students were not encountering unreviewed AI outputs.

"It was amazing, even from the children who aren't normally writers, but because of the AI being able to help them they were just so incredibly excited to [write] and they didn't want to stop writing at the end of a [class] period. They wanted to keep going. It really, really excited the kids, because then they would go into the app...they could see their work on there, and they could correct things right on the app."

Conclusion

Co-design is an ongoing, iterative process that moves through multiple cycles across the design and development timeline. Designers should engage intended users early—even before a working prototype exists, as we did in Fall 2024. Rapid design and early prototyping with users ensures that their ideas shape the product before major design decisions are finalized and significant development resources are committed. As a result, the product is more impactful in the classroom: it addresses the needs of real students and teachers and is carefully designed to support successful implementation.

Between co-design sprints, it's important to identify high-impact, co-designed features and create a product roadmap that aligns expected impact with the resources required to implement each feature. During these in-between periods, developers from The GIANT Room rapidly built digital prototypes of selected features, which were then tested and refined in the next classroom-based co-design sprint in Spring 2025. After another round of development over the summer, we returned to schools in Fall 2025 for an additional co-design sprint.

The result is the first version of The GIANT Remix app, ready for implementation in schools and libraries worldwide, while continuing to evolve through ongoing development and improvement. This work would not have been possible without the support of the Robin Hood Learning + Technology Fund's commitment to supporting innovation that supports real student needs in real classrooms throughout New York City and beyond.

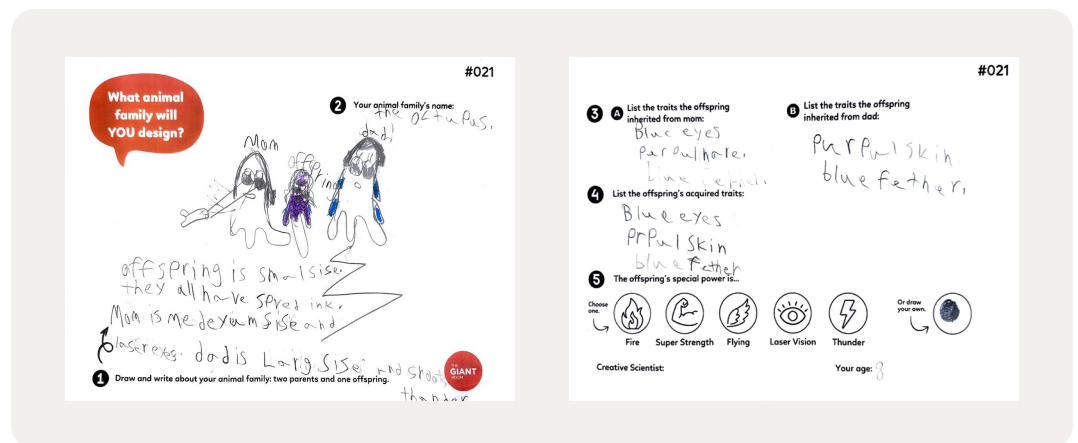
Appendix A: Example Remix Publication Process

Below is an example of a mission sheet co-designed with a third-grade teacher as part of their Inheritance and Traits Amplify science unit, a sample student submission, avatar generated, feedback provided by the student, resulting published card, personalized writing prompt, and book chapter spread published, to illustrate the full design and writing cycle:

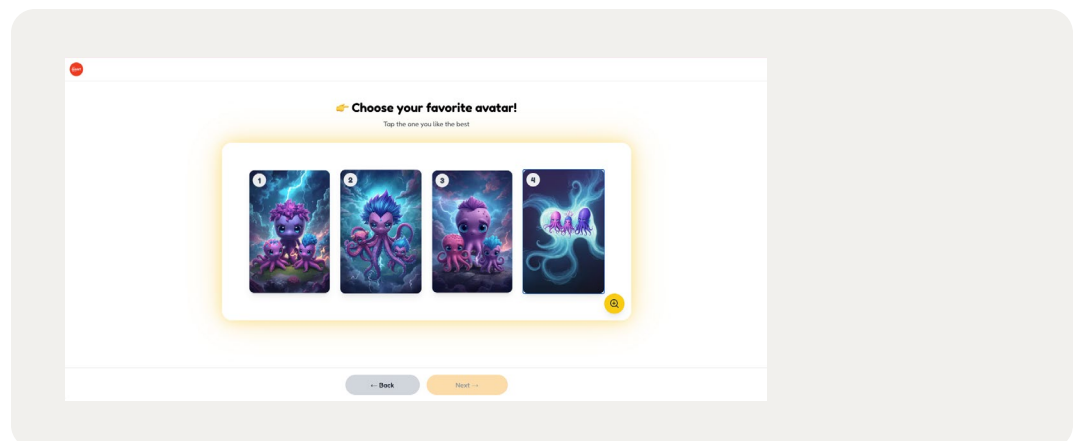
Mission Sheet with the Creative Mission: What animal family will YOU design?



Example of a student's submission:



Avatars generated with The GIANT Remix app using information from the submitted mission sheet:



Student's choice and feedback given on the app:

Give Feedback

What do you like? 🍌 What don't you like? ❌ And how can it get better? 🗣️

Feedback ideas

The style is so cute. I like...

The background is boring. I don't like...

I love the colors! It can get better by...

Add to your feedback

The style is so cute. The style is so cute. The background is boring. The style is so cute. The background is boring. The background is boring. I love the colors! I like... the. Animals It can get better by... adding a cute whale 🐳 and the mom dad should have hair. I really love how they and the baby is just

Back Submit

Student's published trading card, used as a writing tool to respond to the writing mission:

The Ocean Kings
Luke, Age: 9

Inherited Traits

From Mom:

- Purple and pink eyes

From Dad:

- Strength

Acquired Traits

- See through vision

SHAHID #021

Write an adventure story about your animal family ON VACATION!

1

INTRODUCE us!

What's our name, where are we going, and what are we doing on vacation?

Use words like inheritance, traits, genes, offspring, inherited traits, and acquired traits.

GIANT

www.thegiantroom.com

Student's published writing

YUMMIEST VACATION TREATS AWARD
For delicious details about milkshakes, chocolate, and waffles in Bora Bora.

CHAPTER 14: THE OCTOPUS
By Sean, Age 8

I am the offspring of Ivonix and Max. My octopus family went to Bora Bora. Dad's trait is inherited. Then we got a strawberry milkshake with chocolate syrup and waffles with Dubai chocolate. I got a chocolate milkshake. Mom got the strawberry milkshake with mango. Dad got a mango milkshake with whipping cream. Mom's inheritance is laser eyes. I inherited tentacles from both my mom and my dad.

The first day was a big problem! The hotel key fell into the pool. Then the owner came and dived in the pool and got the key. Everybody had a big, big party and danced together. The owner had a wedding party for his daughter, Meshell. They dance and dance until it is time to go home but the owner can't go.

Be careful to not drop the hotel key in the pool.

Appendix B: Entry and Exit AI Literacy Measures Used in the Program

The following questions were piloted and refined over the course of the program with second and third grade students who had limited exposure to AI to assess their (1) awareness of using AI tools in their creative work, (2) understanding of how AI works, and (3) understanding of how to use AI image-generation tools.

1. What does “AI” stand for in the context of technology and computer science?

- a) Alien Invasion
- b) Analog Interpretation
- c) Artificial Intelligence
- d) Apple Instruction
- e) I don’t know

2. Does AI make mistakes?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) I don’t know

3. What does “AI Prompting” mean?

- a) Writing descriptions for AI to create images
- b) Fixing the AI machine so it can do its job
- c) Building smart homes for AI
- d) Teaching AI to color inside the lines
- e) I don’t know

4. Is it possible to give feedback to AI?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) I don’t know

5. Write a prompt describing your next avatar:
An animal, real or imaginary.

6. Give feedback on the image:

Bobby prompted AI to generate an image of “A black happy cat with blue and orange stripes in a magical garden full of flowers” and the AI generated this image



7. Which description prompted AI to generate this avatar?

- a) A yellow ghost with blue sunglasses and a pink background
- b) A blue ghost with red sunglasses and an orange background
- c) A yellow ghost with red sunglasses and a pink background
- d) A yellow ghost with red sunglasses and a green background



8. Spot the AI's mistake! Bobby prompted the AI to generate an image of "A boy having a picnic in the park alone," and the AI generated this image. What's the mistake? Circle it!



9. Sally prompted the AI to generate an image of "A scary spider monkey hanging from a tree," and the AI generated this image. What's the mistake? Circle it!



10. Sam prompted the AI to generate an image of "Kids playing with a dog in a park," and AI generated this image:



But Sam wanted the image to show kids playing with the dog in a playground. How would you engineer Sam's prompt to help AI generate an image closer to what Sam wants?

- a) "Kids playing with a dog in a PLAYGROUND"
- b) "Kids playing with a CAT in a park"
- c) "BOYS AND GIRLS playing with a dog in a park"
- d) "Kids FEEDING a dog in a park"

11. If you were to use AI again, how would you use it?

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We appreciate the Robin Hood Learning + Technology Fund for funding this project, with special thanks to Laina Vlasnik Yip, Lianne Remen, and Amber Oliver for their thought partnership throughout.

We also thank the schools we worked with for their partnership in this work. In particular, we are grateful to Ellen Darensbourg for her guidance in working with the district and for her invaluable advice and insights throughout the project. We also thank Principal Heather Benson and teachers Bianca Bibiloni, Natalia Alvarez, Elizabeth Briceño, Nicole Scrima, and Jessica Anastasio for their partnership and invaluable insights. Finally, we thank Principal David Berkowitz, science teacher Tracy Ivanic, and all the other dedicated educators who partnered with us on this work, contributing their insight and wisdom.

A GIANT thank you to the GIANT team of educators, designers, and developers who contributed to the program: María Eugenia Segovia for her thoughtful design of classroom resources; Hongjin Du for leading the co-design process; Rebecca Schifilliti for overseeing GIANT Remix product development and student publications; Chris Daly and Eden Goonesekara for leading the technical design and development; and Jessica Mezei, Rama Deshpande, Astha Sethi, Maya Hood-Wilson, Pauli Quezada, Aaron Toplin, Camila Soto, Vanessa Raphael, and George Kiiyukia for their design and teaching support.

Thank you to Joan Ganz Cooney Center team members Michael Preston, Allisyn Levy, Angelica DaSilva, Liza Gak and Catherine Jhee for their support of this project.



The GIANT Room is a creative STEM and co-design organization that partners with museums, libraries, and schools to design programs where young people and families create, imagine, and publish their ideas together.



Joan Ganz Cooney Center

The Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop is an independent research and innovation lab dedicated to advancing learning and well-being in a digital age. Through research, convenings, and practical resources, the Center works to ensure that emerging technologies and media experiences support positive outcomes for children and families.



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