

Young Changemakers Case Series¹

A Literate Generation: Turning Passion into Change²

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Commented by
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Whether I was rummaging through the New York Public Library's endless rows of books or tending to the library in the corner of my room as a child, growing up with constant exposure to literature instilled in me a deep-rooted love of books. As I started high school, I developed an internal appreciation for those who kept libraries and museums running. To me, they were the undisputable backbones of learning. Yet, as I watched anti-literacy trends unfold in the media, teachers sharing blogs about how their high schoolers lacked essential reading skills, and the silencing of staple works of literature, made me realize the latter. Later, viewing a local school's plan to transform its library into a technology center made me wonder what precedent this would

¹ The Young Changemaker Case Series in *PM World Journal* provides a platform for young project leaders to share not only what they accomplished, but also how they planned, adapted, collaborated, reflected, and grew throughout their projects. Each case elevates the voices of young changemakers by capturing their perspectives on the questions they explored, the decisions they made, the challenges they encountered, and the leaders they became. To foster intergenerational learning, every case is accompanied by a Professional Perspective contributed by a project management professional, educator, or recent graduate, followed by a question from the series editor that invites readers of all ages to continue the exploration. This series is created, organized and coordinated by Ms. Evelyn R. Chao; read her [introductory article](#). To participate, young changemakers, [submit your case here](#); professionals, [sign up to be a commentator here](#).

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set for its underclassmen. The decision made me question what draws the line between progression and destruction.

My fondness for literature ignited my idea for a project. In this guide to planning and executing your project, I will guide you through the steps and specifics of how I initiated my project through research, gap identification, project outlining goals, and expert consultation, and further on how it led me to build a volunteer base, launch an initial platform, and expand through fundraising and outreach.

Research

To begin my project, which was merely an idea of the impact that I wanted to see within the spheres of child literacy and youth writing, I started researching how widespread this issue was within and beyond my community. The research phase is crucial to any project, as it helps you identify problems in your environment and how your project can serve a specific group or individual. The *New York Times* and the Associated Press gave me insights into the increase in technology use in schools, followed by a national decline in standardized test scores and budget cuts to public libraries. During my clinical research internship at ThinkNeuro—a nonprofit combating disparities in access to opioid-abuse treatment—I researched neurodiverse individuals' cognitive perception of literature, and my findings revealed inequities in media-literacy access. Illiteracy continues to permeate the minds of our next generation of thinkers. Being literate breaks economic and social constraints and lifts one higher, offering limitless opportunities in the workplace and media. Many of the current effects of the literacy crisis directly impact low-income communities and schools with inadequate resources/ funding. In a recent NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) report, fewer than half of fourth graders scored at a consistent literacy level, with this shortfall disproportionately affecting diverse student groups. Only 17% of Black students, 21% of Latino students, 11% of students with disabilities, and 10% of multilingual learners can read proficiently by fourth grade.

Gap Identification and Goals

Through this in-depth research, I pinpointed gaps in my environment that my project aimed to address. I began by outlining a plan that combined literacy advocacy with tangible support for local schools, particularly those with limited resources. My goal became to build children's confidence in their ability to analyze the world through writing and to help them understand that

literacy is not confined to textbooks but serves as a gateway to advocacy, creativity, and self-determination.

Connection Initiation

Before launching any project, building connections with others, especially professionals and other similar organizations, is essential. These relationships provide valuable insights and access to networks and resources that can shape your understanding and approach in planning the launch of your project. Being mentored by a specific person in your project's field of study can lead to a multitude of opportunities and help ensure the validity/effectiveness of your project, which not many other individuals can offer. After reading an article about a literacy app being implemented in children's hospitals, I interviewed Elizabeth Adams, founder of Ello (a literacy-skill-building app), about her experiences with EdTech. Our conversation—ranging from the future of literacy to the cognitive functions that form a literate mind—provided insights that I applied to my organization, MedYouthUnited, and my school. Her expertise in clinical psychology and her understanding of how children engage with literature gave me a heightened cognitive, socioeconomic, and technological foundation for my project. She also offered crucial advice to focus on fourth- and eighth-grade students, as these years are critical for literacy development. Her emphasis on technology as a tool to combat illiteracy inspired the virtual start of my project via social media posts and digital blog posts.

Build a Volunteer Base

As previously mentioned, it is also extremely helpful to connect with other organizations to gain insights and advice on issues they may have encountered when starting similar projects. These conversations often reveal insights not found in articles and offer real-world lessons that help you avoid missteps and refine your approach. Connecting with other youth-led programs, whether on social media or in your community, can open many doors of opportunity and expansion.

Launching a Platform

After all the research, planning, and connecting, I realized what I really wanted was to create a free platform where students could post articles and express themselves through writing. That idea quickly became my main focus. Even before officially launching anything, I started mapping out milestones — small steps where I'd introduce new features or goals over time. I knew things like donations or fundraising wouldn't mean much unless I had a solid group of volunteers and

contributors to support the work. So, I focused first on building a community, finding people who cared about literacy and student voice as much as I did. Step by step, the project started to take shape with purpose and intention behind every part. For this reason, I decided to start my organization online, and once I reached a milestone of 40 writers and 1,000 Instagram followers, I planned to begin donating writing kits to local elementary schools.

Expansion

Finally, with all my planning, I was truly able to fulfill my project. I went into the creation of my organization with confidence based on my previous holistic preparation. Fueled by my desire to challenge this stigma and my inherent love of literature, I founded my organization, MedYouthUnited (MYU), in March of 2023 to spread a love of writing and reading among my generation. I strive to promote literacy to our volunteers, writers, and blog readers. Overseeing 40 writers and 3 teams, I strive to make literacy more relatable to young people. To reach my projected first milestone, I gained a following by collaborating with established youth organizations, distributing flyers to elementary schools and youth programs, and promoting MedYouthUnited across all social media platforms. Embedded in MYU's fun Instagram posts, youth-written STEM articles, and writing sessions is a mission to make literacy more accessible.

When taking on a task, it is crucial to break it down into as many sub-projects as possible. This ensures that if one aspect fails, other parts of your project will still work. To keep our writers engaged, I held monthly meetings to discuss their articles and college-essay sessions to enhance their writing. Beyond our essay-editing and writing workshops, building connections with students from over thirteen countries gave me hope for preserving traditional literacy skills.

Once I reached my first milestone in social media, I channeled my efforts towards New York and initiated a 'Literacy Revolution'. To raise funds, I asked my volunteers to share a GoFundMe link with their communities and applied for local grants and community service scholarships to buy the kits.

Challenges

To gain school support, I cold-emailed numerous literacy programs and schools to see if they would be interested in having me host a Kit Table at a reading event or open house. This approach led to some setbacks, pushing back many events I hoped to plan, since much of my outreach relied on word of mouth. I encountered many unanswered emails and calls, which pushed me to put more effort into strengthening and establishing my platform.

MedYouthUnited's writing kits are tailored to inspire a love of creative writing in a personal, unique way. Guided by advice from the students I have met through MYU, I continue to reach and support students across New York. Each kit includes a Writing 101 pamphlet, a notebook, pens, pencils, stickers, and toys, helping set the foundation for a more literate and hopeful generation. So far, we have donated over 500 kits to four institutions, with plans to donate more than 1,000 additional kits in the following months.

Through research, collaboration, and careful planning, I transformed a simple idea into MedYouthUnited, a thriving platform that empowers young voices and promotes literacy in tangible ways. By building a community of passionate volunteers, connecting with experts, and thoughtfully expanding the project, I have made a real impact on others, including donating hundreds of writing kits and inspiring youth across New York. Lasting change begins with deepening understanding of the problem, fostering connections, and taking deliberate, purposeful steps toward a shared vision of literacy as a gateway to self-expression.

Professional Perspective

By Sean Chao, PMP

Grace's case of founding MedYouthUnited is a strong example of project leadership in action. She followed a disciplined path that many experienced project professionals would recognize: researching the problem, identifying gaps, consulting stakeholders, defining milestones, building a team, launching a minimum viable platform, measuring progress, and adapting after setbacks.

Grace's project grew out of her observation of a local library's transformation. Through further research, she developed that curiosity into a project vision. By connecting literacy data, local resource constraints, and the experiences of underserved students, she established a clear problem statement and a meaningful purpose: to make literacy a tool for advocacy, creativity, and self-determination.

Grace also demonstrated thoughtful stakeholder engagement. Interviews with an EdTech founder, collaboration with youth organizations, outreach to schools, and conversations with student writers informed both strategy and delivery. The decision to begin digitally before expanding to physical writing-kit donations was especially practical: it allowed her to establish a volunteer base and test engagement before increasing costs and operational complexity. When school outreach produced unanswered emails and delayed events, she did not abandon the mission; she adjusted by strengthening the platform and community first. That is adaptive leadership and risk response in practice.

For project professionals, this story is a reminder that meaningful projects begin with listening closely to a real need. Young leaders can bring urgency, creativity, and mission-driven persistence, while experienced practitioners can offer structure, governance, and sustainable scaling. Conversations between both groups can help turn community concerns into lasting results.

One Question to Keep Exploring

Imagine you are an experienced project professional mentoring young changemakers who want to grow a successful pilot into a sustainable initiative. What advice would you give them to help preserve the creativity, shared ownership, and close community relationships that made the pilot effective as it expands?

About the Author



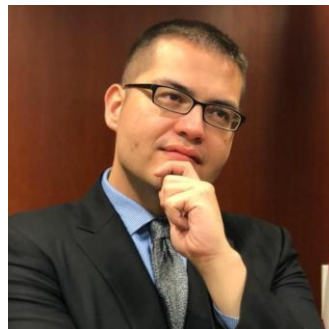
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Grace Andino is from Uniondale, NY. She currently attends Yale University (class of 2029) and fosters literacy among youth through her organization, MedYouthUnited.

About the Commentator



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Sean Chao is a serial entrepreneur, accomplished Program Manager, technology leader, and Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Army Reserve where he serves as a Commander of European Command Joint Analysis Center. Sean holds two decades of experience across defense, national security, and the private sector, across extremely disparate environments. He leads and advises multiple companies and ventures focused on delivering practical capabilities to government and commercial customers. Across his roles, Sean combines operational military experience with program-office fluency, business leadership, and a strong network of technical and mission partners. He has led the design, implementation, capture, and deployment of tailored solutions across the Department of Defense, the intelligence community, and other complex business environments. His work centers on building the partnerships and execution paths that move important technologies from concept and prototype into fielded, sustainable capability.