

***TELECOMMU-
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AND
INTERNET***

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Our Global Neighborhood - Telecommunications in the Classroom

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The red convertible eased slowly into the parking lot of the high school. The top was down to accommodate two huge pieces of foam board wedged in the back seat, which were bending gently and forming a shape like a wide, flat parenthesis. United States and World maps were curled inside a cardboard tube in the front seat. A can of spray adhesive and red tipped map pins completed the purchase. What was this computer teacher doing trying to teach geography to her students?

When I began reading electronic mail from discussion groups, I noticed that many people appended their messages with a signature, citing their location and often their job title. To give students who had completed computer labs something interesting to do, I designed an activity to mark maps indicating the locations of electronic messages. I wanted to help combat a national ignorance of geography by having students become aware of their neighborhood and the world. Originally, my goal was to find mail from each of the 50 United States and each of the provinces of Canada in an effort to informally focus on the layout of our continent.

After reading several hundred return addresses, certain computer nodes became familiar. Other computer names seemed interesting, from "Venus," "Zodiac", "Zeus", and "Poseidon" to "Snoopy", "Sleepy", "Sunrise," "Suntan", "Sunshine", and a corporate "Pinstripe". One of my favorites was an acronym from a company name, "Tots", managed by a man who signed himself "Harried: with preschoolers."

If messages omitted a geographic origin, I began to inquire where the writer lived. I was amazed how readily people responded. For example, Aas, Norway was formed from two universities. Auburn, Alabama, becomes the second largest city in the state during an Auburn football game. One professor included the longitude and latitude coordinates for his college as well as interstate directions and closest cities. He wanted to be certain we found his hometown!

I soon discovered we needed additional resources to find college and university locations across the world. My students quickly learned how to navigate the telecommunications pathways because they wanted to read new electronic mail whenever time permitted. The technical details of telecommunications became transparent to the task at hand.

Sometimes it took dexterity to find a city or town on an Atlas map and mark the corresponding location on a wall map. The United States and World maps are much smaller in scale and often locating a place required finding nearby cities or even countries. Shifting from a larger scale to a smaller scale often took some creative estimating.

Students in computer classes rarely have the opportunity to share their experiences. "Map marking" has personalized my classes, moving computers from an abstract realm to an accessory for learning about people everywhere. One student recognized a small town near his brother's college city because his family drove through that crossroads. Another student came to class depressed about his college entrance test scores. My map project proved an antidote to his troubles. For several days his knowledge of southeastern United States geography captivated his teenage classmates. Having something worthwhile to contribute, his sense of self worth was reinforced.

Two maps mounted on foam board are dotted with hundreds of red pins. Here I sit with a new box of map pins and lists of cities, colleges or universities that might not be marked. One list reads:

Ardmore, OK Greenville, SC University of Bielefield, Germany Drew University Kauttua, Finland Bonita, CA

There are over 50 locations which students need to find. I wanted to help combat a national ignorance of geography but I found students who can readily master the intricacies of telecommunication idiosyncrasies, students who want to share knowledge of their travels, and a world of people willing to take a few moments to let a class in Virginia know something about their locations and vocations.