

A Chapter 1 Tele-Reading Encounter

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Telecommunications was introduced into my Chapter 1 classroom within the first month of the Chapter 1 school year. I was not sure of the approach I would take or of the enthusiasm of the students for such a unique and innovative approach to the teaching of reading and writing. As I began I decided that precaution was the best approach and that expectations would be low keyed if not nonexistent. At first the students were mildly curious about this type of communication or message. (We knew that message was its synonym and that tele- meant distance.) The instantaneous answers they would receive were most intriguing, as the students wanted to know just “how fast” their messages would arrive. Throughout the school year the “speed of light” was often demonstrated to anyone who would give their attention to the turning on of the electrical switch and the light which swiftly filled the room.

During this initial period I ventured out into the internet myself looking for possible projects that would fit into my curriculum. In order for this medium to work I knew it needed to be a tool to enable my students to strengthen their reading skills and proficiency. Because everything takes careful planning in an at-risk classroom, tasks take three times longer than anticipated, and time is the most coveted commodity, this new medium needed to prove itself beneficial, before it would become a permanent addition to my methods of instruction.

Traditionally, my students begin their year by writing descriptions of a classmate to introduce and strengthen sentence construction, descriptive, and fact and opinion skills. The KidLink project in which the students described themselves and answered questions about their goals and the world seemed to be the culminating activity that this project always lacked. I joined the KidLink listserv, the students easily wrote and typed their essays, and I posted them to the internet with gleeful expectations. After waiting almost an eternity (one week) the children and I began to pull letters off the net and send out pleas for keypals. We soon found it took numerous pleas and hours of typing (mainly mine) before an answer would come. During one especially cold and snowy blizzard in Cleveland, Ohio, we received a simple computer graphic Christmas card. I quickly answered and pleaded for a reply on behalf of my student, Matt. Matt’s mother had died earlier that year, and he was one child that didn’t need a disappointment. Jerry Martin, the computer lab manager and instructor of an inner city Catholic school, quickly answered, and my students and I

were on our way to a computer motivated education. We e-mailed messages back and forth through the snowstorm, and I asked him what types of projects worked well and which were better avoided. He invited us to join a project in which his school was participating and pointed me toward ART GALUS, who proved to be my ticket to successful telecommunications in education.

What follows is a short sketch of a Chapter 1 Tele-reading Encounter with the Internet. It portrays those things that worked well, those that need improving, and others that are better left untried. I am extremely grateful for all the encouragement and help I received from people I have met on the Internet whose looks I can only imagine and people I met at the University of North Texas who will always remain close friends through the wonders of e-mail.

INITIAL CONTACT

After a thoroughly welcomed Christmas card appeared in my mailbox, I jumped at my first contact hoping he would not be scared away. Jerry Martin was just the twinkling star I needed to give me encouragement and point me in the right direction. When I besieged him with questions he told me of a friend, ART GALUS, who had lots of “energy” and would be more than willing to help. I quickly shot a letter off to ART and he and I engaged in an analogy of zucchini squash. He nurtured me, watered me and added fertilizer as I matured from a seedling to full grown squash and finally became zucchini bread. I promised ART that anytime I wrote his name it would be in capital letters, and so far I have kept that promise.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

I began my journey through the wonders of gopher, a program which allows one to burrow through the myriads of information in the databases on the Internet. I found out what to look for, what to avoid, and a general idea of what is where. I found information on the Chapter 1 program, the new authorization in progress, different teaching methods, lesson plans, and an abundance of student projects.

In November I talked my Chapter 1 director into sending me to the Tel-Ed Conference in Dallas for my professional development during school year 1993-1994. At this conference I heard presenters tell of the many projects they used or represented, met people from many organizations on the Internet, found new friends, and mostly gained confidence that my students and myself could become involved. I tucked various handouts and information away hopefully to be used at a later time.

After one school year, my folders on TENET are full of information. I am continually sorting through, sending a quantity on, and answering requests for information. I know where to find information on the Internet

and where the information is periodically updated. I have found out that joining listservs or reading them in usenets are important to connect with people with similar interests and to find out the latest news on and about this new “information highway” that is constantly in the media. AskEric and other e-mail services furnish information on almost any request and provide suggestions for other sources of help. No question is ever too burdensome or ludicrous and someone is always ready to assist.

Mentors are everywhere on the Internet, but each person needs the mentor that works best with her/him. ART GALUS provided that service for me by e-mailing information, giving advice, answering questions, and expending encouragement when things were not working. During this process of my being nurtured I was not exactly sure how it was working, but in retrospect I know that without Art I would not have seen the progress in myself and my students. Now, I am a mentor for students at the University of Texas at Austin and provide information and help whenever I can in a quiet, undemanding way.

One day, when rummaging through Gopher I signed up for Net-Happenings, a listserv about new happenings on the Internet. I began returning ART’s information with information that I was receiving, and to my delight warm thank you notes were appearing in my e-mail box. I was starting to make a contribution, and I liked the way it felt. Some time later, a message, “what do you think of this?” arrived with the NOVAE logo, and I was officially a member of a newly formed listserv organized to help teachers like myself tread out onto the Internet. As of this week, the Novae-k8 listserv is on the University of Idaho server, provides information, but does not act as a discussion group. We currently have over 1200 participants and have been cited in periodicals including T.I.E., the publication from ISTE.

STUDENT PROJECTS

The Harrison Lane Chapter 1 students began their telecommunication venture with the KidLink Kids-94 project. The fourth, fifth, and sixth grades answered four questions:

1. Who am I?
2. What do I want to be when I grow up?
3. How do I want the world to be a better place when I grow up.
4. What can I do now to make this happen?

Answers to the questions were posted to RESPONSE@vm1.nodak.edu. Through this we made our first contact with St. Francis school and were invited to participate in a Number Munchers project. Since our classes are learning to read we made a counter proposal and began a third grade contest on Word Munchers instead.

Jerry bent over backwards to accommodate us in our “first real project” and allowed us to participate with our own rules. I quickly worked Word Munchers into our curriculum and my methods of teaching decoding, while Jerry, a lab manager working with Apple IIs, plugged his students in as their time would allow. My students were monitored and paced according to difficulty and content. They began far below St. Francis, but quickly surpassed and excelled in all decoding skills. This year, our third grade Chapter 1 students read more fluently and decode large words quicker than any other year.

From the beginning of their telecommunications to the present my students are yearning for keypals. They send out and still are e-mailing pleas for computer friends. The students carefully pick their keypals and may or may not answer unsolicited messages. During the initial stages of keypaling I would send out their letters to several students on the Internet hoping for any answers. My students quickly informed me that they did not send a message to a certain student, since they would never write to anyone “with that name”. I have learned to be extremely careful to respect their choices and allow them to find their own keypals.

Each year, my second graders write letters to Santa Claus, and last year the letters were sent via computer to a class in Texas that helps Santa’s elves. But, they were burdened with over 160 letters, and with apologies, we received wonderful answers to most of our mail, and the editing was left to me. Since Santa’s elves can’t spell as well as Santa that was no problem. The looks on my second and third graders faces, and the thrill they received reading personal comments to their carefully written letters was worth all the minor problems. This year, we e-mailed our letters to a few commercial Santa servers such as elves@North Pole. The personal letters we received from the Texas seventh and eighth graders were far superior to the canned answers we received from the commercial Santas.

After last year’s earthquake in California an opportunity arose to make contact with a classroom nearby to show our concern and ask questions. “How are you?” “I am sorry about the earthquake.” “Are your friends and you all right?” “Is Disneyland all right?” were some of the questions we asked. We learned first hand what it is like to be in a major earthquake.

In March, the fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students participated in “A Day in the Life of ..” by writing down everything they did for one day and sending it out to the other participants. We received replies from Russia, Finland, Ireland, a deaf school in Washington D. C., Hawaii, and many states and provinces. Students writing were as young as third grade and as old as seniors in high school. Initially, I would run off the journals and leave them for the children to read. They could hardly wait to come to

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