

Connecting schools and pupils: to what end?

Philosophical issues relating to the use of ICT in school settings

Lawrence Williams

World peace - a ridiculous aim?

First there was Information Technology (IT). Then there was Information and Communications Technology (ICT).

Now there is ICFT. That is, Information, Communications, and Friendship Technology. (Note 1)

My own personal aim in working to develop the creative use of the Internet and its related technologies is amazingly simple : to bring about World Peace. I am, on occasion, accused of being just a trifle ambitious in this respect, but I counter this challenge extremely effectively with a simple riddle:

Question: How do you eat an elephant?

Answer: A little piece at a time.

With apologies to vegetarian readers, of course.

If, eventually, every school across the world learns to use the Internet to link students of all ages, races, cultures and religions, so that they can respect and celebrate the rich diversity of other people's lives, then my belief is that each project, each email message, each image, each music file, each database file, each video-conference, each shared web site, is contributing something, however small and seemingly insignificant in itself, to that larger goal of world peace.

War is caused by greed, by ignorance and by fear. Schools can always do something to address the first one of these problems by educating the emotions of children through spiritual development programmes. But the greatest strength of education lies in its potential to counter ignorance and fear, by teaching children to understand, share, and respect ideas and customs from other cultures. It is here, I believe, that the Internet and the related technologies can be used to do their most significant and powerful work.

Much is made in the media about the negative aspects of the Internet, with the stress on pornography, hate groups and so on, but we must never forget that it is also a powerful tool for bringing people together in very positive ways, for building bridges between societies, and for fostering understanding. In this way, I believe that when our children grow up to be the participants in, and leaders of, our future society, they will not choose to wage war on those people who were once their childhood friends.

We are educated when we have come to care about our own well-being in the extended sense which includes living a morally virtuous life, which itself includes an awareness of the needs of others around the world. Indeed, all of the issues considered in the following three chapters of this book - learning together, taking account of gender differences, the empowerment of students with educational needs - can be underpinned and strengthened by the use of the Internet and the related technologies. These educational issues can most certainly, and most effectively, be resolved by interaction with other students.

An example of this comes from my own early experience of using the old TTNS email, when I had the privilege of working for three years as an advisory English teacher under the Educational Support Grant initiative. My task was to introduce teachers of English to the creative uses of I.T. (as it then was). I was working, as a visitor, on a project in a mixed London school for pupils with special educational needs. The pupils decided, under my guidance, to email a similar school in Tokyo about how Japanese society treated students with physical disabilities. Accordingly, the students became engaged in very meaningful research (through libraries only at this time, of course) to discover as much information as they could about such issues as hours of study at school, facilities provided by the LEA, support services in the community, and employment prospects. This information was then emailed to their partners in Japan, and when the individual replies came in, so that they could make real comparisons, there was enormous excitement, joy, and enthusiasm. They had made contact with pupils experiencing similar physical difficulties on the other side of the world, had shared that experience, had felt that they were recognised as individuals, were accepted, and were understood. They were also able to explore these issues together with their new friends through an exciting new communication medium. My own experience in seeing such joy as the printer rolled out messages with the individual pupils' names, and as they responded so positively to those personal greetings and messages, has stayed with me, indelibly part of my educational experience.

This sense of joyful collaboration has been greatly and continually strengthened by the more recent work with Japan. At the end of each video-conference there is a wonderful sense of having shared in the community spirit of the other country. Emails from Japan speak of the joy and fulfilment of the students as they complete the various projects. They tell of the growing confidence of students who, at first, looked down at notes, but quickly learned to look more directly and confidently at their new friends in the UK. Our own students in the UK speak of the excitement of working with their partners across the world, and of the deeper understanding of a culture so different from our own.

The Kabuki Project work which we have shared is a striking example of this cultural difference, but when explored more deeply, some strange and surprising similarities seemed to emerge. Japanese Kabuki Theatre, for example, began at the same time as Shakespeare was flourishing in England. Both theatres began in the pleasure districts of important cities (in Kyoto and London). Both began with men playing the parts of women. Both used music as important elements in the total theatrical experience, and so on. (See Note 2) In order to share their understanding of Kabuki with us, the Japanese students were inspired to learn in greater detail about their own culture first: to share a knowledge of Shakespeare, our pupils needed the same depth of understanding of their own culture.

Unifying the school curriculum

The integrated model of learning which we have developed at Holy Cross is based on a philosophical position which regards knowledge as a seamless fabric, a belief written into our Mission Statement. Recently, the National Curriculum has caused our primary schools to shift away from the excellent, integrated approach of the past, and we see it as part of our mission to "hold the torch" of integrated studies until such a time when these schools can develop new ways of coping with the destructive fragmentation thrust upon them, temporarily we believe, by artificial subject specialisms, targets and levels. We have tried to create some solutions to this problem of fragmentation through a number of cross-curricular projects, the Light Project probably being our most successful example.

We start, then, from this belief - that children learn better when links are made between different subjects, and that the computer provides us with an immensely powerful set of tools, (word-processing, spreadsheets, databases, DTP programs, General Midi files, email, the Internet, video-conferencing) which enable us to develop a model of learning which serves this purpose. By focussing on other cultures and traditions, through the study of the Caribbean and Japan, for example, and by bringing into the classroom real and relevant learning materials, sent directly to us by students across the world, there is an immediacy about the work which provides a further spur to success.

The integrated model of learning at Holy Cross - the advantage for teachers

In addition to the advantages that an integrated and international approach brings to the learning process, there is the further advantage that working together with colleagues from other subject disciplines through these cross-curricular projects (The Caribbean Project, The Light Project and the Japan 2000 Project) has brought the teaching staff themselves together in a greater understanding of one another's work. As the Head Teacher, Mrs. Mary Watson puts it, "This integrated method brings all subjects together, all students together and all staff together. Our Panda Report also shows a rapid rise in pupils' achievements from below the National Average to well above it, over a four year period." So successful has this method been that, in spite of the current severe restrictions of the timetable, we are nonetheless finding ways of extending the time slots available for these Projects, as well as adding new, broad topics on Time, World Citizenship, and Media into Years 8 and 9. Some of this work will also, of course, prepare the students for their GCSE studies.

In this development we are now being helped by some of our parents, who are able to bring their own skills, interests and knowledge into the school curriculum. We are therefore creating stronger connections with the local as well as the international communities.

Creativity and commitment - the advantage for the students

We have also found that by making a cross-curricular framework of learning, there has been an enormous release of creative energy in the students themselves. It seems that, given a balanced combination of clear targets coupled with considerable freedom to choose some aspects of their studies, the students are powerfully stimulated to excel; to share their ideas with their friends; to beat their own last level of performance in very positively self-critical ways, and to explore learning and the development of skills for their own sake. It has been very exciting to see the release of this creativity. Recently, for example, I had a group of extremely experienced teachers in my classroom, critically evaluating the work of my students who were working on a new curriculum project. I had to inform my visitors that the three most creative ideas seen during the Year 7 lesson that the girls were working on were not in fact mine, but their own. These were: making a board game for other children, created using a combination of word-processing and graphics programs; writing a visually creative poem using an art package, instead of a word-processor; and the use of a digital camera by a group of pupils to support their interviewing skills. I am, however, proud rather than ashamed to admit this. If, by truly understanding the creative uses of computer programs, my students can create for themselves better and more imaginative tasks through which to develop their English skills, so much the better. They have learned how to be creative.

Another unexpected outcome of this way of working is the amazing confidence and clarity with which the girls are able to explain what they are doing to our many visitors. They develop

enormous pride in their work, and are delighted at opportunities to share their enthusiasm with others. As Christina Preston, Director of Project Miranda at the Institute of Education, London, (formerly an English teacher, and currently an OFSTED ICT Inspector) said after her visit to the school, "The innovative cross-curricular use of ICT is unique in my experience. It seems to develop in the children a real understanding of their work. I have spoken at length to the pupils, who are articulate and self assured in explaining what they have learnt, and the value that their lessons have had for them."

Teacher Training Issues - a model for the future.

What follows here is a model of how the two schools, Holy Cross Convent School, Surrey, UK, and Ikeda Junior High School, Osaka, working with two universities, London University in the UK, and Osaka Kyoiku University in Japan, have explored together some of the issues related to teacher training, through the "Kabuki Project". It seems to all of us who are involved that strong links between the schools and the training institutions are essential if good practice is to be shared and developed. The Project has therefore developed very rapidly on many levels.

Strand 1. Academic links

This has involved the sharing of academic expertise regarding telematics and the new ICT technologies, through "Project Miranda" at the Institute of Education, London University and the "Konet Plan" through the "International Exchange Project" chaired by Hiroyuki Tanaka, at Osaka Kyoiku University, Osaka, Japan. Papers on this Project have been presented under Project Miranda at the Institute of Education, London in the "Media 98" International Conference, and an update was given at the "CAL'99" Conference. Related papers have also been presented at the international "Poskole" Conference in Sedmihorky; in Osaka; at the Marie Curie- Sklodowskiej University; at the University of Wroclaw; and at the "Informatyka w Szkole" Conference in Katowica.

A joint paper will be published at the end of the Project by Lawrence Williams and Prof. Tanaka, examining the impact and the educational implications of this work, based on the experiences of the teachers, students and the learning institutions involved in both countries.

Strand 2. Teacher Training links between the Institute of Education, London, and Osaka Kyoiku University, Japan.

This involves the sharing of classroom teaching practice and curriculum development, through lectures, talks and workshops given both by Lawrence Williams in London and by the Holy Cross team while visiting Japan. This was strengthened at the "CAL'99" Conference, when two teachers from Ikeda JHS, Ryuzo Tanaka-san, Head of Music and Yoshinobu Yamamoto-san, Head of English, gave a shared presentation about the link with Holy Cross. Introduced by Prof. Hiro Tanaka, this delightful presentation explored some of the benefits to the students of working with partners from another culture.

Strand 3. Teacher Education in the two sister schools, Holy Cross New Malden and Ikeda Junior High School, Osaka, Japan.

This entails the exchange of practical teaching ideas through the Project, especially regarding music, art, dance, drama, the nature of Kabuki Theatre, and curriculum management issues. Teachers in the two sister schools are constantly working together to devise new programmes of

work for their students. Indeed, we were delighted to learn that, as a result of the success of the “Kabuki Project”, Ikeda JHS was accepted by the Japanese Ministry of Education as a National Pilot School for introducing Drama lessons into the curriculum in Japan, for the very first time.

Following a trial period, it is likely that drama will now become a part of everyday lessons throughout Japan. We are all very proud of this.

In a second school link, with Hikari JHS, Miss Misa Manabe, a Japanese Shodo Master, very kindly sent Holy Cross several sets of Shodo equipment (special brushes and inks for writing Japanese symbols). These were for use at our 5th Conference when she taught Japanese calligraphy techniques to the Year 9 students of Holy Cross, live from Japan, over the ISDN 2 video-conferencing link. This idea was later featured by the BBC’s “Blue Peter” team in a Japan Special edition of the programme.

Strand 4. Pupil to pupil exchanges through video-conferencing

Siobhan Clerkin (aged 14, Holy Cross) and Go Fujita (the “Kabuki Gift” play student from Ikeda JHS) were the initial chairpersons of the pupil to pupil links of the Project. Together, they explored the use of the new technologies, and helped with the planning and development of many aspects of the Project. Drama, Dance, Music, Science and Textiles work form the current material for the conference discussions, and email is used for day-to-day communication.

Strand 5. Linked Web Sites

Through the Konet server (Osaka) and the MirandaNet server, UK, ideas from the Kabuki Project, are available to teachers and pupils in both countries.

This, then, has been the development so far of the many levels of communication between the two countries, although the creative use of video-conferencing has always been at the heart of the collaboration. In order to build on this work still further, we have recently completed a further series of video-conferences, which are now being explored by research students in Osaka University, to see in what ways the collaboration and the new technologies are changing social values in the two countries.

Conclusion

I therefore have no reservations whatever about working in this way with computers. It is only our imagination as teachers which limits what is possible. If challenging ideas can be shared across the world through the many new educational partnerships which are springing up, such as TeacherNet, MirandaNet, I*EARN, ENIS, and the Konet Plan, (See Note 3 for web addresses) then the future for education is very exciting indeed. Teachers now have the tools they need to help them create a better future for their students. World peace is no longer a ridiculous aim, but one which is clearly attainable through the creative use of Information, Communications and Friendship Technology.

Note 1

I am grateful to my good friend Hiro Tanaka, of Osaka Kyoiku University, for inventing this new descriptive title, which he used during our joint presentation at the “CAL ‘99” Conference at the Institute of Education, London University

Note 2

For further details about the Kabuki Theatre and its development, see “The Kabuki Story” by Michael Spencer at

<http://www.lightbrigade.demon.co.uk/Breakdown/story.htm>

Note 3

TeacherNet <http://www.teachernetuk.org.uk>

MirandaNet <http://www.mirandanet.com>

I*EARN <http://www.iearn.org/>

Konet Plan <http://www.wnn.or.jp/wnn-s/english/english.html>