INTRODUCTION

Talk about life taking a right angled turn. A year ago a colleague gave me a simple sheet of paper and changed my life and the classroom happenings in my school. No it wasn’t my transfer papers. It was an electronic mail message from a teacher in New York. I read the email message and had a grin from ear to ear. I read it aloud to the teachers at the staff room table and they too took on that beaming smile and the discussion turned immediately to the contents of the message. It was one of those simple yet brilliant teaching ideas that would capture the hearts and minds of the children. The sort of idea that let children have great fun and learn a lot at the same time.

Jude Curtin of Noxon Road Elementary School wrote,

My class is studying world wide communities this year. Since we can’t travel to all the communities we will be studying, we would like to send in our place Travel Buddies. Our Travel Buddies are stuffed animals from home which we will be sending on journeys.

GETTING CONNECTED

I was hooked. Where had this message come from? What was the Internet? How did I get connected? How much would it cost? Who could I con to pay for it so I could explore? My mind was spinning. I started nagging everyone I knew who was connected to find a way to get online. Finally Michelle Williams at the Queensland University of Technology took pity on me and put me out of my misery. She gave me access through a trial she was running that used the Internet for the professional development of teachers. I was connected!

Not surprisingly I developed a passion for life in cyberspace that spread to other teachers at school. I lasted three days in my professional development before I couldn’t stand keeping it to myself any longer. I had to get the children connected too. Where to start? I read a message on Kidsphere, a discussion list for teachers throughout the world, asking for someone to share their favourite books with a year two class in Miami, Florida. As a teacher librarian in a primary school, I could get away with trying this. So we started our first project using electronic mail to discuss the stories read by a couple of year two classes located half a world apart. The project had a quality we weren’t quite prepared for. The children responded dramatically to this real audience for their writing. A new excitement and urgency permeated the lessons.

KOALA CHRIS

We noticed that the Miami children hadn’t read any Australian books, so we offered to send them some in the company of our own travel buddy, Koala Chris. He packed his passport, books, souvenirs and gifts and set off via snail mail to the US. What was to follow was a delightful exchange of writing about a special toy with a life of his own. Children sent their mothers to school with their homework when they were sick because the children in Miami were counting on them for their letters. There was quality to the efforts of the children that wasn’t there before.

When it was time for Koala Chris to come home, he had found a cobber, a baseball loving bear named Marlin Max, to bring home for an Aussie adventure. Chris’ photo album was a wonderful stimulus for the children as was his diary and collection of merit certificates from his time in Miami at the Centre for Modern Languages, a special school for talented children. His passport had even been stamped by immigration. The two mates went home with each child in the class. Their camera recorded the farm visits, flights in ultralight aircraft, the Ekka, picnics, shopping trips, new friends and playmates. Their diaries recorded the wonderful experiences they shared with the families and friends of the children.

Thanks to a trial by Open Learning Development Services (OLDS) within the Department of Education, we were given a second and more powerful access account to the Internet and we were able to try more exciting things with the children. With the help of Phil Buchanan from OLDS, we experimented with an Internet Relay Chat (IRC) which allowed the children to type on the computer here and send it immediately to the waiting children in Miami. They then typed their responses. The children were all so excited to ‘talk’ to each other. We learnt how to
send graphics with our mail so we could share the pictures the children were taking. There was a very special bond between these two groups of children - so far apart and yet sharing many wonderful learning experiences. The language learning was overshadowed by a special relationship that had been precipitated by a cute koala puppet and a cuddly baseball mascot.

Throughout this time, our local city council had been bringing the dream of some forward thinking visionaries to life. They were building a library without walls to service the community in Ipswich and surrounds. The Global Information Centre, an impressive multi-story building to house the library and the hub for Global Info Links (GIL), was taking shape in the city's heart. GIL was to be an Internet host and a provider of various electronic services to the community. We offered to be the tangible demonstration site for what GIL would offer to the educational community and a bond was forged between the GIL team and Bundamba.

WHERE WE WENT

We tried all sorts of things with the World Wide Web, email and every other Internet service we could find a use for in an attempt to test the waters for those schools who would soon be joining us through GIL. We combined a comet's collision with Jupiter, pictures from the Hubble Space Telescope downloaded from the net, a father's passion for astronomy and his marvellous telescope with the year six science curriculum and had our own encounter between cyberspace and outer space. It changed a normally remote and intangible topic and gave the children the power to be involved in the real event. Our children were thrilled when they had the photos of the collisions before the newspapers.

We tried to share the glimpses of the potential of the net that we were getting through our first attempts at exploration and involvement by conducting information afternoons and demonstrations. We sowed some seeds and with the fertile ground provided by GIL and the enthusiasm of the teachers in the area, December 8, 1994 saw the virtual community of GIL launched.

AN OPEN DOOR

From these humble beginnings a year ago we have slowly trained more teachers and children. We have found many new opportunities to pursue and made some great friends both near and far. We have seen the boundaries of the classroom blur and distances diminish. We have seen a community of teachers develop within our local area who share ideas and support one another although they have never met in person. We have seen the vision of a virtual place where the Australian educational community can interact. We have made friends and worked as teaching partners with people half a world away. A door to our classrooms has opened that I hope never closes again because it not only let our ideas out, it lets in other new and exciting ideas and friends from all over the world.

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grow as those with investment in them determine choices, justified often by a fear that otherwise there might be a dropping of standards. The voices of the past are beginning to find new forms of expression, carrying with them new forms of establishing control which exploit the electronic media's potential for empowerment (and associated disenfranchisement).

MESSINESS AND MULTIMEDIA

I believe we should be prepared to face the problem of messiness, and be accepting of 'doing the best we can' as teachers. We will need to abandon our passion for confirmation from our students and help them seek their satisfaction from our teaching practices.

I am working on the idea that if we think of sense-making as inclusive (in the ways suggested above), of working with our students on their sensitivities, using all our senses, we will start to find we have far more opportunities as teachers to help our students learn.

I am working in a multimedia environment more comfortably for being able to think like this. Being alert to the possibility that students might be reading in ways I have not yet articulated, and reading things which I have not by design locked into some step-by-step program of activity, makes it easier to find the opportunity to act as a teacher in the moment of teaching, to participate with the student in the learning process.

CONCLUSION

I can only offer my reader a collection of ideas and questions, unsure about what fits where but conscious of a new richness of inquiry. Opening up to the possibility that it is not just more catholic acceptance of others' way of teaching and learning that is at issue, but the chance to rethink my own, has made it possible for me to find a lot more in what I am doing. I hope my reader can enjoy the same sense of renewed challenge.

Endnotes

1. Fagan was a consultant on the Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia CD Project.
2. In the discussion that follows, the mouse is used generically to include trackballs and sensitive pads.

References