This project represents to Australia’s education community a valuable model for breaking down the barriers between states and territories. While education departments support the project in principle, its collaborative dynamic has a grassroots base — individuals responsible for local projects decided to cooperate. The catalyst which made the ideal become reality, was the combined financial support of Telecom and the Queensland Department of Education, who co-fund the position of national coordinator. State and Federal organisations could well take note of this project which demonstrates collaboration without loss of autonomy and coordination without an expensive bureaucracy.

TELECOMPUTING ACTIVITIES FOR SCHOOLS

Background

In February 1991 schools across Australia received a copy of the ‘Australian Educational Telecommunications Calendar 1991’. This calendar of telecomputing activities evolved from the need perceived by a group of educators to coordinate their energies to offer projects on a national level. This group defined telecomputing as ‘the use of computers and modems so that people can communicate by sending messages to electronic mailboxes of Bulletin Boards attached to an electronic mail system’.

Previously individual teachers, consultants and state coordinators had been promoting curriculum based tele-computing projects in schools. This cooperative effort aims to give all students the opportunity to participate in National events regardless of the computer or communications systems in use at their school.

Aims

The aim of the calendar of events is to increase student and teacher participation in educationally sound, electronic communications activities throughout Australia. A range of educational objectives are met during the process where students communicate with each other, where they can access information services, where they can communicate with experts, writers and the community, and where students can cooperatively research, write and work together to improve the environment or share cultural experiences and understandings.

WHAT’S HAPPENED SO FAR IN 1991?

CHARACTERS ONLINE

This event allows students or classes to write to characters from children’s books. The character then replies to the students’ questions. Each term during 1991 there will be two characters online. The project organiser is Dr Anne Russell, Queensland University of Technology.

In February and March, the characters Ben, Pete’s little brother from Pamela Allen’s I Wish I had a Pirate Suit and Penny Pollard from books by Robin Klein were online. Approximately 20 schools from Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria were involved. Most schools sent letters on several occasions and many included letters from a number of students. Three students from the Charters Towers School of Distance Education were also involved in the activity. These students live on properties in Northern Queensland and receive their education via radio, conventional and electronic mail.

The characters provide motivation particularly for students who find writing difficult as the following comments from Ron Nooteboom (Head Teacher, Poolajilo Primary School, Victoria) indicate.

‘At Poolajilo I have a few children who find motivation a problem when it comes to writing. They eagerly read about Penny in Robin Klein’s books in search of interesting questions that they wished to ask. The motivation was that Penny herself would reply and the benefits from this experience are now evident in their work.’
NEWSDAY

Children contribute articles for newspaper publication to a national board. Then on a set day, a simulation of a real newspaper production occurs. Students select stories and produce newspapers which are distributed to the participating schools. Members of a class become reporters, editors, layout artists, illustrators and printers for the day. Newsday can involve students in a number of cross curricula activities.

Four Newsdays each with a different theme have been planned throughout the year. The first Newsday for the year happened on 7 March using the theme ‘World Peace, Issues and Attitudes’. Greg Butler (University of Western Sydney), the project organiser, outlined the theme for the Newsday, guidelines for organisation at the school and interschool level and tips for a successful school Newsday event.

Many of the articles provided by students revealed an insightful understanding of the Gulf War and the impact of the war on individuals, their families and the environment. Schools participated from Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria.

AUSTOUR

What a tour of Australia! Austour provided a new way for teachers and students to travel Australia. Approximately 65 schools across Australia participated in the adventure with the tour organisers Graham McAuslan, Ministry of Education, Victoria and Vicki Lowery, Department of School Education, NSW.

Some schools acted as host schools providing information about their local area using predefined headings. Other schools acted as travelling schools which visited following a set tour itinerary — Victoria, Western Australia, Queensland, Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales and Tasmania during March. When a particular state was visited, the host schools provided information about their local area which had previously been researched and answered questions from the travelling schools.

The tour provided the opportunity for students to be involved in a broad range of activities including research of their local area and the areas visited by the tour; mathematical and mapping activities to select routes and to calculate distances and times of travel; and a range of writing activities including questions to other schools, letters home while on tour, reports on local area and postcards of local area features.

Peter Brodie, a teacher at Elimbah State School, Queensland, participated in the project with his multi-age class of 23 Year five, six and seven students as both a host and travelling school. Peter used the event as a major part of his classroom work for a three week period as the event embraced most subject areas and provided a stimulus to learning.

The following comments made by Peter Brodie about Austour are significant and appropriate to all the events planned under the ‘Australian Educational Telecommunications Calendar 1991’ banner.

‘I believe that schools benefit from participation in a project such as this, not for what they can get out of it, but rather for what they can put into it. It is a valuable opportunity for purposeful communication, for practising and applying the skills we develop in the classroom.’

NASA NEWS

This bulletin board contains the latest information on NASA projects including details of launches, progress reports on space journeys and data on research activities. For example, the bulletin board can be used to follow NASA’s Galileo spacecraft on its journey, through the asteroid belt passing the large asteroid Gaspra on 29 October 1991, to the giant planet Jupiter and its system of moons.

TALKING IN LANGUAGES OTHER THAN ENGLISH

Non-english language classes are being matched with classes in other states and schools to allow students to participate in a variety of writing activities.

SPORTSLINK

The Australian Sports Commission provides continually updated information regarding Aussie Sports.
OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS

The response from teachers indicates that the telecomputing projects are motivating students to read and write. The projects are providing a stimulus and a purpose for research, reading, writing and many other classroom activities. The actual time spent online may be only a small component of the overall involvement of the school in the event.

Comments from teachers include statements such as 'students are motivated to read and write', 'stimulus to learning', 'Austour provided a "reason" to study'. The writing process was one of the main outcomes of the project. The events have provided a real audience for student writing. This requires students to make decisions about their writing. For example, what is the background knowledge of the students to whom they are writing. Does the term 'sucker' mean the same thing to a student living on a pineapple farm in Queensland as it does to a student in Victoria. Many styles of writing can also be explored. These include a newspaper article, a letter home, formulation of meaningful questions, a formal report, and a travel brochure. Other activities students were involved in included: mapping, use of timetables, price comparisons, reading and gathering information, library research, individual and group projects, maths projects, designing itineraries, calculation of travel distances and times, map reading, and comparison of local area features.

Classes presented displays of materials produced during the events for the information of other classes, teachers and parents.

The events have provided for some schools a reason to learn how to use electronic mail. Some schools intend to continue communicating with the schools which they met through their involvement in the project.

EVENTS FOR THE REST OF 1991

The Characters Online and the Newsday activities will be repeated three times each before the end of 1991. Just a couple of the events planned for the rest of 1991 are outlined briefly below.

PRICE WATCH

At three times during the year, students collect prices of a standard basket of items at local stores. These are collated on a national bulletin board and students can look at Australian trends.

WRITERS ONLINE

Students will be able to communicate with an author to answer questions about the author's ideas, plots, characters and writing styles. The first author in May was Jenny Wagner a well known Queensland writer of children's books, and in August, scriptwriters from the television series Home and Away will participate.

VENUS

This event provides the opportunity for students to name Venusian geographical features after famous Australian women. The project aims to produce a proposal for the US Geological Survey team which is currently looking for 1000 new names of famous women for inclusion in their database to be sent to the International Astronomical Union for approval. International convention decrees that all features on Venus are to be named after women.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For general inquiries about the events referenced in this article or further details on other telecomputing events outlined in the 'Australian Educational Telecommunications Calendar 1991' contact:

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