Northern Grid / BECTA Video conferencing Project

Background:

Name of school Saltburn Primary School
Location Redcar & Cleveland
Size 440, children 70 staff (Teaching and non-teaching)
Type Primary – Split site KS1 base separated from KS2 base by about 1km)
Other participants None as yet.
Equipment
KS2 Acer standalone PC (Pentium 4) connected to Internet via RM CC3 network but not networked.
KS1 Hoping to have VC working on our network soon.
Context We believe that this is an exciting possibility for children to develop their speaking and listening skills. It enables them to experience and learn from outside sources which would be difficult to access otherwise. We hope that children will be able to speak to and learn from experts, specialists and peers (both nationally and internationally) that we could not normally arrange either for financial or logistical reasons.

We hope that we will be able to identify objectives and learning outcomes from the curriculum that we will be able to meet through VC. For example, we have been studying the Tropical Rainforest in Geography and we are able to speak to people who live in or have visited a Rainforest to bring the topic to life through discussion and imagery.

Technical installation and set up:

Type of equipment used.
Polycom PVX videoconferencing software
Logitech Quick Cam 5000 webcam with built in microphone and powered speakers. We also have an external microphone if we need to improve sound quality some distance from the webcam. We are able to project the image of conference partners onto a screen so that an audience can see the partner(s) clearly.
KS2 Standalone Acer Pentium 4 PC

KS1 Networked CC3 Pentium4 PC – not working correctly but has worked using a laptop.

Layout and location of video conferencing area. We have the PC and webcam set up in the library. Our aim is to set it up in a room where conference participants can view the monitor and the audience can view the conference partners on a screen. We can accommodate a year group seated on the carpet.

Problems encountered and solutions developed with the above:

Physical Our set up is not entirely satisfactory at the moment. The blinds allow too much light into the room and furnishings and bookcases are an obstruction. The walls are adorned with artwork and so projection is possible only above the door at right angles to the PC

Software installation and settings. We encountered set up problems and were reliant on technical support from Northern Grid. As this was new technology we were unable to set it up unaided.

Other issues There were also communication issues between the school, NG and Liberata. We also had problems with firewall settings and it took time to resolve these and organise for the necessary ports to be opened to enable duplex communication with the outside world.

We had a problem with the initial QA test with JVCS but this was resolved when we discovered an E164 was set up incorrectly on our VC machine. At the time of writing this we have not used JVCS to book a conference but plan to use this in the future.

One curious and as yet unresolved fault is that the initial PVX image, which is displayed on start up is inverted (upside down). This doesn't affect the image to our partner.

Video Conferencing Partners:

Who? We are currently working with the partners in the Northern Grid PVX project. We have links to the Iracambi Project in Brazil who are currently in the process of installing VC equipment. We have just made contact with the National History Museum who are also in the process of installing their VC equipment. We would like to make links with other schools both here and abroad (MFL). It would be preferable if the links could be free!

How contacted? We have contacted the National History Museum and other potential partners by e-mail or telephone. Our link to the Iracambi was through David Raymond at Northern Grid. We intend to look for other partners through a variety of ways.

Other communication channels apart from the video conference .We are in contact with Iracambi in Brazil via e-mail. The children are to send letters to each other and we have also made videos to show the Iracambi children our school life in Saltburn. They have sent us a very interesting video of their life in Brazil.

Other schools or other institutions. We have just had an excellent conference with Ken Roberts and David Ackroyd at North Road Primary School in Darlington. Through their outside links they have visited rainforests in Martinique and spoke as experts about their experiences. We have contacted other schools in the project and will be conferencing with them in the next week about Saltburn life and the link to the Victorians. Our classes will act as experts for the children at Oak Tree Primary, Stockton and St. Aidan's Primary Hartlepool.

If not school then what type of institution? We are awaiting a link up with the National History Museum about the rainforests. We are hoping to talk about 'creepy-crawlies' and they have an expert in termites who may be able to talk to us.

What you did:

Curriculum focus. KS2 Year5: The classes studied rainforests as a cross curricular topic for a half term, this became the focus for the VC.

How the activity fits to work pupils are already doing. Amongst other things, the children wrote poems and climate books, made rainsticks and moving toys, studied rainforest artists. They researched aspects of the rainforests and made presentations in ICT using PowerPoint. They also composed music and added this to their presentations.

Actual VC Activity. We contacted Ken Roberts at North Road Primary who with his head teacher David Ackroyd took part in a VC with both Year 5 classes. A list of questions had been sent to our partners and children asked the questions whilst the other watched.

Aims and objectives of the conference(s). To give the children the opportunity to ask questions of experts who had actually been to the rainforests.

What the teacher / other educational colleagues did. It took some time actually setting the conference up by e-mail and telephone call. We had to arrange for the library to be free.

What the pupils did. The children had to choose the questions they were going to ask and who was going to ask them. We also had a post VC discussion.

Evidence of Activity:

Use of the personal portal desktop – myclasses facility:

We haven't used this facility as much as we could. However after further training today (14.6.06) we will now be using this regularly.

Overall conclusions from the project so far:

Positives and negatives. This initiative has the children buzzing. They are all keen to be involved. Teachers can see how VC can enhance the curriculum. Time restraints and organisation of conference subject matter.
What would you do differently if starting the project now? I would want to know more about the technical set up and possibly have tried and tested the system at home beforehand.
Reactions of those involved locally and remotely.

Staff – Extremely pleased with the links and VC made so far, the Deputy Head teacher Ms Walkley saw this as curriculum enrichment, technology at it's cutting edge.

Pupils – Thrilled to be involved in something so exciting.
Parents – Supportive and interested.
Governors – This has all been reported to the governors by the Head Teacher.

Future developments:

Where do you see your VC activity going in the future?
We hope to have both systems working and children conferencing on a regular basis. The first step is to get our other classes involved and allow other staff to gain confidence with the system.
In the future, we aim to incorporate conferencing into our medium term planning across the school with conferences booked well in advance and follow up activities organised.

- Transition conferencing (because of our split site, KS1 children have not previously seen the KS2 building
- MFL
- Interschool project sharing
- Graduate Teacher Involvement
- Topic links
- Conferencing with residential centres
- Talking to experts
- International relations

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