

Branscombe School: Our intention in the next weeks is to continue with a science focus on the topic of sound with Years 3, 4, and 5. A distant link with the Science Museum is planned for Year 6.

We would like to see more opportunities where children from both schools can work and learn together and also have the chance to use different methods of communication between sessions. We are considering using sessions to allow one member of staff to teach children from both schools and set challenges that can be reviewed at the next conference.

We are convinced that video conferencing sessions should form a part of normal lessons and not be an additional activity.

We plan to develop more spontaneous interaction between pupils by creating opportunities for pupils from both schools to work together to research a topic, edit their findings and report back to the rest of the group.

Angela Crawford, Branscombe Primary School
Sarah Traynor, Farway Primary School

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Geography and religious education video conferences

Schools Involved:

Sidmouth Community College
Baylis Court School

Background: Sidmouth Community College is an 11-18 comprehensive school in rural East Devon. Baylis Court is an 11-16 comprehensive school in Slough. Initial contact between the staff at the two schools involved a number of different disciplines. At Sidmouth, Roger White, Head of Geography, Celia Fox, Head of Religious Education, and Martin Long, English teacher, held three video conferencing sessions with Kevin Price, Head of Humanities, Cheryl Garlinge, Head of Geography, and Fiona Roberts, religious education teacher, of Baylis Court in Slough. We soon discovered that our two schools contrasted very well. Sidmouth is a mixed, semi-rural school with a predominantly white and middle class intake. Baylis Court School is a girls' school on the edge of London with a very high proportion of Asian, Muslim pupils. During our initial meetings we agreed a number of areas of co-operation. These included looking at local

geography with Year 7 students and then moving on to considerations of use of leisure time. In religious education we felt that the study of festivals would form a very sound basis for co-operation. As well as talking over the video conference link, we also exchanged e-mails and sent a number of maps and photographs to aid understanding of local geography.

Case Study 1: GEOGRAPHY 'SENSE OF PLACE'

Curriculum context: Key Stage 3 geography

Aims: • To give students a better understanding of the two very different environments, stressing basic skills such as interpretation of maps and photographs through the study of the local area • Improve pupils' abilities to describe places and use appropriate geographical terminology.

The Year 7 classes were never taught at the same time, so we agreed to link up during a common half hour at lunch time and to restrict links to small numbers of students. Conference sessions were video recorded as a means of ensuring other members of the class could remain involved.

Preparation

Each Year 7 class was asked to use a number of key words to write a geographical description, using a local post card as the stimulus. Pupils were then asked to choose a picture of a place known to them in the local area, annotate it and write a brief description of the view. These pictures were then sent to Slough, along with Ordnance Survey maps. Baylis Court pupils then studied the maps to identify where the picture had been taken from. It was agreed that during the first video conference, pupils at Sidmouth would talk about their photographs. Students at Slough would then ask questions about the pictures.

To prepare students, we gave them the chance to rehearse what they were going to say before the link went live. This got us over the inevitable 'giggles' that accompany the first time pupils see themselves on the TV screen.

The Video Conferences

The first session lasted 20 minutes. Though both enjoyable and successful in terms of effective communication between the two groups, we noted certain changes to be made for the future. We found if pupils faced each other they were easily distracted and became self-conscious. We now put pupils in a semi-circle facing the camera and TV. We also brief pupils that they should keep as still as possible because movement tended to distort not only the picture but also sound quality. Finally, we ask pupils to talk quite slowly and avoid talking across each other to reduce the difficulty of hearing each other clearly enough.

Session two was arranged a week later. Using the newly-devised guidelines meant we were able to communicate more effectively. Pupils asked each other about their own area and what it was like to live where they did. From this session we identified the need for pupils to think about questions in advance. Though we hoped the session would benefit from spontaneity, in fact there was a tendency for questions to dry up.

Session three took place a fortnight later. The purpose of this session was to compare the leisure opportunities and habits of the pupils from both schools. A leisure questionnaire format had been agreed upon by both schools beforehand and given to all the participating pupils to complete. Sidmouth College pupils then presented their findings to the Baylis Court pupils and responded to questions. The return event for Baylis Court pupils to present their findings is awaiting a suitable future date.

Curriculum Outcomes

This type of video link would fit very well with schemes of work that are undertaken by Year 7 geography students in most schools. Focusing on the local environment proved a very good way of stimulating pupils' interest in geography at a time when the discrete subject is often new to them. It also allows for the development of basic skills, using maps and photographs in a context that is very real to students of this age. It was pleasing to see that pupils from both schools had learned a good deal about each other's home area after the two conferences. The pupils' questions showed that initially they had a poor knowledge of the two contrasting areas, which had improved by the end of the conferences. Through the use of video conferencing technology, the curiosity of both sets of pupils had been aroused and productively used to improve their learning.

Ideas for Potential Development

- Further exchange of e-mails, with digital photographs attached, as a way for pupils to exchange their personal views on their local geography
- The video conference would be a very good way to introduce pupils to a partner in the link school.

Roger White, Sidmouth Community College

Things to think about when setting up a video conferencing project in geography

1. *Exactly what is the geography you want your students AND those they are linking with to learn?*

- What aspects from the programmes of study or syllabus?
- What PRECISE geographical learning objectives do you want them to achieve?
- Is it for a case study - if so what particular aspects of localities are you and the students looking at?
- What are the geographical questions that all involved in the conferencing will be answering?

2. How does video conferencing particularly enhance their learning and understanding of this geography? Could they learn it more effectively through e-mail, for example? Does what you are planning to do need direct face-to-face contact? What are the specific geographical learning outcomes for those who participate in the conference?

3. What advanced classroom preparation will you need to do with students so that they get maximum learning benefit from the video conference?

- Do they need to brainstorm questions to ask other students - in which case what makes GOOD geography based questions?
- Do they need to research and prepare materials for students with whom they are conferencing? Can you take this opportunity to teach important geographical research skills associated with geographical enquiry?
- Do you need to prepare and send any advanced materials to the students at the far-end? There is particular value in sending out base maps, photographs and PowerPoint presentations about a particular theme in advance so that video conferencing time can be spent in actual DEBATE about the topic under review.

4. During the actual conferencing - what specific learning activities will students involved in the conference be doing?

- Will they be listening to other students talking and making notes on particular aspects of geography - if so what recording grids will they be using? Will they concept map what they hear?
- Will they be participating in actual debate about a geographical issue - if so how will it be organised?
- Will they have their own notes?
- Have they had the opportunity to practise a real debate before the conference? There is a wealth of useful material about active speaking, listening, debating and note taking in the Key Stage 3 National Literacy Strategy 'Literacy across the Curriculum' folder.

5. After the conference what follow up activities will you do with students so that it consolidates their geographical understanding?

- What do they do with what they have just learned from other students via conferencing? Do they write it up as case studies, for example? Good use of ICT in a subject involves well-planned follow up activities back in class which use the materials obtained via ICT!

Case Study 2: RELIGIOUS EDUCATION 'FESTIVALS'

Curriculum Context: Key Stage 3 religious education, citizenship

Aims: • To increase pupils' awareness of Islam and the Muslim way of life forms an important part of the Year 8 course at Sidmouth. The link with Slough was of great value because there are few opportunities for Sidmouth students to talk to pupils from other cultures and religions.

Preparation

Groups of Year 8 students took part in this link up, which was based on a series of questions generated in whole-class discussions before the link up. Pupils had discussed the Muslim faith and the aspects of it which believers consider to be important. They compared these beliefs with their own faith community. They rehearsed their questions before the link up to increase their confidence in front of the camera. Celia Fox (Sidmouth) and Fiona Roberts (Slough) exchanged e-mails before the conference and the Sidmouth students' questions were sent before the link up.

The Video Conferences

Session one contained some engaging answers from the Slough pupils to a range of perceptive questions asked by their peers in Sidmouth. At this stage, Sidmouth pupils had had more experience of using the video conferencing equipment and were subsequently less self-conscious than the Slough pupils, many of whom were experiencing a video conference for the first time.

Session two was a chance for the Slough pupils to ask their peers in Sidmouth some questions. As the session was in the middle of December, questions from Slough tended to focus on how we celebrated Christmas. The Slough pupils were all Muslims and were obviously very curious about what Sidmouth pupils did during Christmas. They also made some very good parallels with what happened during their own festivals, and the exchange of gifts seemed to be a common thread that interested students at both schools. The session also reinforced the benefit of pupils being familiar with video conferencing technology. This time round, the groups were far more comfortable with each other and there was generally a much higher level of engagement on both sides.

Curriculum Outcomes

Such cross-cultural links have considerable benefit for schools like Sidmouth that tend to be mono-cultural, having very few contacts with other faiths. Through the improved knowledge these sessions provided, gained in a convivial, informal atmosphere and based on pupil-to-pupil talk, Sidmouth pupils understood that differences are not strange or threatening but enriching to a culture. One Sidmouth pupil stated that she did not think she was very religious and when asked by a girl at Slough which religion she thought she liked, she stated that she might like to be a Muslim. Such exchanges, at a time when pupils are starting to think about moral issues and belief systems, can only be for the good in our increasingly secular society. There would also appear to be strong links to citizenship criteria.

Celia Fox, Sidmouth Community College