

December 2002 *Interconnect* article

## **So many choices! Classes try out digital resources**

What kinds of resources will digital instructional television (ITV) one day bring into the classroom? Eighth-grade teachers Jane Behrens, Loreen Schultz, and Willie Kolb from Cherokee Middle School in Madison could give you an idea.

### **Content**

This fall, the three teachers have been participating in a Digital Classroom Project being carried out by the Wisconsin Educational Communications Board (ECB) in cooperation with the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). To expand their curriculum on western expansion in the U.S., the project gave the Cherokee teachers and their students searchable access to a media library that included 15+ hours of digital video from two PBS series—*Lewis and Clark: The Journey of the Corps of Discovery* and *The West*—and two ECB series—*Investigating Wisconsin History* and *Tracks: Impressions of America*.

The media library also featured more than 1,000 Web pages and other resources. All this digital content could be accessed in three ways. Teachers and students could tap into the media library using

- video on CD-ROM,
- streaming video over the Internet, or
- video that the ECB digitally datacast to the school's computer network using the WHA-DT broadcast signal. (*ECB staff installed a server provided by PBS and then wired the three teachers' classrooms and the school's computer lab could receive the digital datacasts.*)

### **Curriculum**

During their initial project training in early fall, Behrens, Schultz, and Kolb began to see the possibilities for integrating the digital content into classes on U.S. westward expansion. As they explored the media library, the teachers discovered primary sources and stories about historical figures that their students would be able to look at. Doing searches, they found, would enable their eighth graders to explore historical events from a variety of perspectives.

They thought of other ways to use digital content as well. For example, cross-curricular efforts might include scientific study—using video clips and journal entries—of the plants and animals found by the Lewis and Clark expedition. Students also might use digital content in slide show presentations or create Web pages illustrated with short video clips.

Once the teachers were trained and had thought about curricular applications, it was time to introduce the digital resources to students in the classroom. As teachers and students used the media library to explore U.S. westward expansion, both ECB staff and an independent evaluator from the Center for Children & Technology in New York were on the scene to watch. They also interviewed the children and adults involved.

The evaluators were trying to learn what having access to these resources enabled teachers and students to do that wasn't previously possible. They wanted to know how easy it is to use each of the three digital delivery methods. Another evaluation goal was to get ideas about how new digital media formats may shape the curriculum of the future and what factors should be considered by anyone creating ITV resources for the digital age.

With the complexity and newness of the project, technical problems also were expected and did arise. PBS, ECB, Cherokee, and Madison school district staff were there to find solutions and make needed technical refinements. Future articles in *Interconnect* will report both evaluators' findings and what the project revealed about the technology tools that work best in various teaching and learning situations.

### **Future**

For the Cherokee Middle School teachers, one project outcome was gaining insights into the types of learning digital resources could make possible in the near future. Behrens foresaw possible changes in the way students are taught history. "It could become less chronological and linear. It would have much more depth," she said.

Both Behrens and Kolb noted that the wealth of available content would challenge teachers to select and focus on resources that support their most primary curricular objectives. Schultz added that teachers would have to compare the range of possible projects with what they want students to get from their explorations, and then choose projects carefully. "I wish I had a year to look into it further," Kolb added.

The ECB is one of seven public television broadcasters participating in the Digital Classroom Project, made possible by PBS and funding from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations. See the September 2002 issue of *Interconnect* for an overview of the project.