

Just a connection Away.....

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Abstract

A partnership between schools nationally and Polycom, Inc. brings a diverse compilation of quality videoconference experiences not only to local students but to students around the world. This paper will share details of ASK programs, literature based authors and expert sessions; Mystery Quest, a middle school world geography project; Read Around the Planet, an international project matching classes for a celebration of reading; and Polycom special events bringing authors, experts, and international collaborations to the classroom.

Just a connection Away.....

Many students in the United States are under-performing in science, social studies, and language arts. With United States jobs migrating overseas, students need to be competitive, creative, global learners. In addition, National Educational Technology Standards require students to communicate with audiences beyond their classroom. These facts present a compelling picture of the need for videoconference services and programming nationally.

Prior distance learning experience proved the importance of partnerships to be crucial in becoming successful using technology. Polycom will assist their customers in finding partners from around the world to collaborate on requested project topics. This paper will share some of the many ways in which educators can find collaborative partners; posting requested subject matter on listserv's, database's, blogs and other resources available to educators from around the world.

The four types of programs included in this article (Special Events, ASK Programs, MysteryQuest and Read Around the Planet) allow students to connect anywhere in the world which would not have been possible without partners working together for a common goal. The partnership between Polycom and U.S. schools enables students to access rich educational resources outside the traditional classroom setting. By using this technology educators can broaden the scope of the learning experience while building new relationships within communities, across the state and around the world. This paper will share some of the benefits educators and student gain by establishing partnerships using this technology.

Imagine your students interviewing authors, experts in the field, sharing cultures with other countries and reading with other students around the world. Interactive videoconferencing provides students, teachers and presenters a way to connect great distances to interact to places and people beyond the walls of the classroom.

ASK Program

ASK stands for Author, Specialist, Knowledge, a literature based program that ends with a videoconference interview with a specialist or author. The program was designed by Dr. Kettel; University of Michigan-Dearborn. The ASK program has become a successful model with educators and has become very popular nationally. This program incorporates several instructional strategies used in the "traditional" classroom today. In the ASK program students are required to read a book, and encouraged to reach beyond their normal reading comprehension to relate what they read from the novel with their own life experiences through creative writing.

In special "ASK Deluxe" programs, an interactive student publishing component is included. Each interactive school submits three writing assignments to their partner school using a web publishing site. Classes are partnered together to provide feedback to each other and write comments on what they appreciated about the other students' story. This process encourages and motivates the students to improve the quality of their writing. Each day student's are required to read, write in their journals and develop interview questions that will be edited by their peers and teachers.

Students are thoroughly prepared and excited about the videoconference interview. Usually three to four classes connect via video and ask questions in a round robin fashion until the hour is completed. A debriefing session is recommended after the interview to find out what students learned and what they thought of the author. One student commented,

I really enjoyed distance learning. I thought it gave me a better prospective of the book. The book had so many lessons and different situations that taught the ways of life.

One of our Special Events, students interviewed blind author Jim Stovall, an inspirational and motivational speaker. In preparation for this videoconference, students read the book *The Ultimate Gift* and followed the ASK Deluxe format described above. Here are some of the questions the students asked:

- *If you had one day to see, what would you like to see?*
- *Did you ever think you'd be in this position 20 years ago and how has it changed you?*
- *If you could give an ultimate gift to someone following the same 12 month process, who would you give it to?*
- *Did any of the experiences in the book happen to you?*

Jim Stovall's story was incredibly inspiring for students. He encouraged students to take the talents they have & bless the world with them. Stovall told them about deciding not to give up and live in a single little room but how he decided to get out and meet people. He urged, "Use your resources to do good things for others. Good and bad days are defined by our reaction to them, not by circumstances."

This Special Event was planned for Black History Month, students read the book *Gifted Hands* by Dr. Ben Carson, a renowned neurosurgeon, and prepared questions based on their reading and scientific study. Six classes were interactive and many others participated via view only and streaming video.

Here is a sampling of some of the questions students asked Dr. Carson:

- How does your work as a professor at Johns Hopkins University affect your family life?
- Throughout your career you've received many awards. Which one are you most proud of and why?
- What was going through your mind when you ran out of blood when separating the Binder twins?
- What do you see as the next scientific breakthrough for neurology?
- Who helped you meet your goals in your life?

Dr. Carson shared scientific information on brain surgeries and diagnoses, his family and work life, his work on the President's Council for Bioethics, and how he made

decisions along the way in his career and early life. In his closing comments, Dr. Carson encouraged students to listen and learn for the purpose of making a difference in the lives of other people around them. He reminded them to Think Big!

Here are some of the comments from teachers and students who participated in this event:

- *It was an awesome experience. And now I know that you don't have to be "top" of the social part of school, but academically!*
- *I was very inspired. I now know that I can do anything I put my mind to. I'm going to start reading more!*
- *I really enjoyed the interview with Dr. Carson. He was really down to earth with a lot of helpful advice.*
- *The videoconference with Dr. Carson was an incredible experience - to be able to listen to a man who's gone through so much, and done so much for others, was inspiring!*

ASK programs impact students whether they talk to an author or specialist. Students are motivated to read and write by the culminating videoconference activity.

MysteryQuest: A Reason to Research

Another event impacting students' learning is MysteryQuest: World Geography. This project is designed for middle school students studying world geography. Through video conference technology students are able to meet other students while learning about cities and countries in the world. Prior to the video conference each classroom creates a presentation with clues about their **ONE mystery country and city**. The other classrooms, using maps, the Internet, textbooks, and other resources, try to discover the **mystery location** presented by each participating classrooms. This project is coordinated annually by the Berrien County ISD. Similar projects have been developed by other organizations, such as the Wisconsin History Mystery, coordinated by Kenosha Unified School District in Wisconsin.

After signing up for the project, teachers and students chose the country to present and began to research. Each classroom prepared a 5-7 minute presentation. The presentation must include certain required clues. Creativity and extra information were allowed in preparing the presentation. Teachers found that the research required matched their curriculum. One teacher said, "The required clues and questions were right in line with the objectives and fit into our curriculum well."

Students used research skills in various ways throughout this project. As one participating teacher said, "This was a good way for students to use their research skills. It was also a good cooperative learning project." As students prepared their presentation, they had to choose which clues and information to share in their presentation, which defined their research task. They determined which information sources would be appropriate. Most schools used both print and technology resources for preparing the presentations, and for researching the other presentations during the connection.

After researching and collecting information, students prepared their presentation. Many classrooms assigned the sections of required clues among small groups in the class. Presentations were shared in a variety of ways: with note cards, via PowerPoint, with slides on the document camera, with iMovie or videotaped presentation, or in skit format. Students then practiced their presentation skills: speaking loudly and clearly so the microphones would pick up their voices, and speaking slowly and clearly enough so that the other participating classrooms could record the clues.

In preparation for the event, teachers divided their students into five teams. Each team was responsible for discovering one mystery location presented by the other classrooms. The students had 35-40 minutes after the completion of all presentations to match the classrooms with their corresponding mystery locations, using books, atlases, globes, the Internet, etc. A note-taking form was provided to the teachers to copy for the students to use during the presentations. Some schools arranged for the use of a few computers in their distance learning room, or the use of a computer lab down the hall. Teachers and students found that having multiple sources of information was helpful to the research process during the event, especially if there were technical difficulties.

The following agenda is used for each 2.5 hour videoconference:

- *Introductions and instructions. Each team introduced themselves and shared information about their location and an interesting fact or two about their school.*
- *Then each classroom shared their 5-7 minute presentation. If there was time, we checked with each site to make sure they heard all the clues clearly. During this time, students at each site carefully took notes on the presentations, writing down the clues to use later in their research.*
- *After all presentations were completed, students began The Quest. This portion was about 35-40 minutes depending on the number of participating classrooms. A countdown was posted on the screen. "My kids loved the idea they were competing against the clock ticking away on the screen. The pressure was fun for them," shared a teacher from Chesaning, Michigan.*
- *Next, each school had an opportunity to ask one "yes or no" question of each group. The questions were used to clarify clues or check for correct answers. Students asked questions such as: Does your city start with an A? Is the name of your city also the name of a dog? Is _____ the northern most point of your country?*
- *After hearing the answers to their questions, classrooms had 10 minutes to re-evaluate their answers.*
- *Then each classroom shared their guesses.*
- *Finally the correct mystery locations were revealed and students celebrated their success.*

In the evaluation of the project, we received many positive comments such as the sampling below.

- *I would absolutely recommend this project. It was great and the students really enjoyed it.*

- *Everything was very clearly laid out. I felt comfortable prepping my students. It was nice to be able to email if there were any questions.*
- *I think this was the best “field trip” this district has taken. Lots of participation, fun format, not just staring at the screen.*
- *Projects such as this one, with students interacting across the state in such a meaningful, high tech manner, could possibly make me delay my retirement five years.*

It was clear to everyone involved that this unique project simultaneously addressed many essential academic and social skills. Students focused on social studies curriculum, learning about geography, the economics of the countries, and used their inquiry skills. In addition, during the project, students used language arts skills such as reading, writing, note taking, listening, and speaking. They used technology skills in their research before and during the connection, and in using the videoconference system to talk to other students around the country. Finally, students used teamwork skills in preparing their presentation and researching the countries and clues shared by the other classrooms.

Read Around the Planet

Read Around the Planet is a celebration of the National Education Association (NEA) Read Across America. Classrooms use videoconferencing to connect with other classrooms “around the planet” and read to each other. For 2007, this activity is sponsored by TWICE and Polycom, Inc., in cooperation with NEA. TWICE provides the registration tool, matches classrooms with partners, and provides support documents. Participating classrooms are responsible for their own video connection and developing their own reading activities for the event.

Last March, two classes connected to Read Across America in Spanish. A Spanish Immersion school in Columbus, Ohio connected to a class in Niles, Michigan. The classes shared poetry, short statements, and choral readings together, mostly in Spanish. Then they asked each other questions in English. The Columbus students asked the Michigan school what they hope to do with videoconferencing. One of the students said, “I want to connect to you again, because it’s very fun to talk to you guys.” Then the Michigan students asked if they wanted to do Flat Stanley together and be pen pals. The classes continued the partnership after the videoconference.

Elementary students from Salk Elementary, Michigan, shared the joy of snow with their partner class in Paris, Texas. According to an article Janine received from the Frasier Clinton Township Chronicle, *the Texans opened a package sent from the Michiganders to find snowman cookies, handmade snowflakes, and a collection of paper snowballs, each with a message inside. Amicucci [the teacher] encouraged the kids to throw the [paper] snowballs toward the camera, prompting a virtual snowball fight between both sets of students.*

“We thought we could have the world’s first video snowball fight,” she said, as the room erupted into a flurry of white paper.

.... *“I just thought this was an awesome experience,” said Amicucci. “They were truly ‘Reading Across America.’ Most of them have never been outside of Michigan. This is one of the best things we’ve ever done.”*



Since the TWICE-organized Read Across America celebration started in 2001, Lim has worn a full Cat in the Hat suit for her local RAA videoconference connections. Her philosophy is to give students something fun to see if their connection doesn't work. Sometimes she is the audience for class presentations when the partner school can't connect. In this picture, a colleague gave her whiskers and a cat nose too. Sometimes you have to be creative to really enjoy all the connections!

Connecting International

With the explosion of IP (H.323) based videoconferencing and portable IP videoconference carts, the possibilities for engaging learning experiences are expanding to cover the entire globe! Before the advent of IP-based-videoconferencing, the long distance charges for an ISDN videoconference were prohibitive. In addition, overseas connections were often 128K resulting in poor video and audio quality. However, now with the exponential growth of IP videoconferencing around the world, students can collaborate and converse with peers around the world.

Why might it be advantageous to have students engage in conversation and projects with students in other countries? Students can learn how people live in different areas of the world. Students can learn the value and benefit to be gained from different cultures, points of view, and experiences. Global videoconferencing help students feel connected to the world around them, gaining an understanding of global issues and differing perspectives. Students can learn more than just tolerance of other cultures, but appreciation for the value that other points of view bring to an informed dialogue.

So how does one get started? By participating in global activities and events planned by others; by networking with colleagues using listservs and directories; and by attending conferences to meet and network with colleagues interested in videoconferencing.

Megaconference and Megaconference Jr.

A megaconference is a worldwide conference spanning 12-16 hours with participants from around the world. Megaconference VII occurred December 9, 2006 with over 200 participants around the world. Megaconference started with higher education, but often includes participation from K-12 schools and organizations as well. The second annual Megaconference Jr. occurred May, 2006 and is organized, facilitated and planned by K-12 students from around the world. Both of these events include short 5-20 minute presentations on creative uses of videoconferencing. Both events are an excellent way to meet and network with videoconferencing colleagues around the globe. Megaconference participants learn about multipoint videoconferencing etiquette as well

as best practices of videoconferencing. We highly recommend these events to anyone getting started with videoconferencing.

Conclusion

By using this technology educators can broaden the scope of the learning experience while building new relationships within communities, across the state and around the world. Other partnerships can be built with higher education institutions, community organizations, experts in the field, museums, historical sites, other countries and much more. Students will remember these experiences for the rest of their lives. These programs promote educational equity allowing all learners access to content no matter what kinds of teaching or material resources are available in their communities. Doors can be opened for the student to interact with positive role models throughout the world. Videoconferencing partnerships can enrich a unit of study just as speakers and field trips have in the past.