

## The evolution of a unit: from dusty books to paperless projects

by

Mary Alice Anderson, Lead Media Specialist Winona Middle School

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It's 4:30 p.m. on a nice sunny spring day--the Media Center is jammed with motivated 7th graders finishing their multimedia geography projects--a far different situation from kids making Western European "booklets," circa 1985. The famous "booklet" made up of drawings, "facts in brief" and assorted information on countries has evolved into paperless slide show projects or nicely presented collections of information presented with a variety of word processing, graphing and graphic tools.

Shift back to 1985, the year I was hired and asked to introduce technology into a traditional media program. When it was time to start the "booklet", I was eager to change the tradition of boxing up books for the classroom. I spoke with geography teachers about the need to get the kids into the Media Center so we could teach information skills. We still boxed up books, but cut down on the number so that kids would have to come to the Media Center to find information. And--the big push for 1985---we introduced kids and teachers to Print Shop, the tool famous for creating instant success. Suddenly a bit of technology was introduced to the "booklet" in a painless way.

1986 brought a lab and geography databases. 1987 meant an online catalog, and 1988 a CD-ROM encyclopedia. Now there was a recognized need to teach the kids information skills. At the same time we weeded furiously; with fewer books students had to use newer formats. And, we implemented staff development to teach teachers how to use technologies applicable to their projects

Major progress occurred during a staff development day in the early nineties. The day was intended as a time to familiarize teachers with resources in the Media Center and help them work on a curriculum project. A special education teacher with an enthusiastic interest in technology assisted a geography teacher to help him reorganize the "booklet." Using her special education teacher's ability to break projects down into tasks, she helped define specific student tasks, establish task management steps and write step-by-step directions. She offered suggestions for integrating technology into the unit. For example, MacGlobe was introduced as a tool for students to gather information about a Western European country.

Technology options for the booklet now include making a timeline of the country's history and drawing a flag with ClarisWorks. Students display comparative data with ClarisWorks' spreadsheets and graphs. Word processing interpretations accompany timelines and graphs. Students gather information from The Internet as well as books and CD-ROMS such as The World Book Multimedia Encyclopedia on our school's network

Through the years the unit has evolved to include more diverse technology and increased student expectations. To this day the unit is one of the most successful: From a media specialist perspective, the factors that contribute to the unit's success and on task-students are:

- \* clear expectations, directions and deadlines for each specific part of the project
- \* teacher use of task management checklists
- \* using a variety of print and electronic resources that require different levels of expertise
- \* ample time to work in the Media Center. The project is spread out over 7-8 weeks

Students are less overwhelmed because they know they have time to work, reflect and improve as they go along. An overview of this unit as it was in 1995 version is in *Teaching Information Literacy with Electronic Resources: Grades 6-12* published by [Linworth](#) in 1996.

Another major leap forward came with the "no textbooks for each student" decision. Instead, we buy classroom sets of textbooks and teachers are strongly encouraged to do more resource based teaching. For the geography teachers this meant shifting their teaching styles as they learned to use the video disk players, disks and computers we purchased with textbook money. The technology has helped them become more comfortable with all forms of technology and move well beyond the textbook.

The Internet and multimedia presentation tools have brought about the most rapid change in how students access and communicate information. Two teachers have students complete paperless projects using The Internet and ClarisWorks or Hyperstudio.

The "booklet" now fits on a disk in one teacher's classroom. Students gather information from the Internet and present it with a ClarisWorks slide show. These past two springs student teachers have helped design and implement the project. To get the kids off to a solid searching start we updated our Western Europe curriculum web site (<http://wms.luminet.net/curricsites/socstudies.html>) and provided Alta Vista searching help sheets. We provided copies of help sheets for making slide shows and working with graphics.

The steps of the assignment are:

- \* Choose a western European Country to study
- \* Develop a set of three questions related to the country
- \* Describe the plan for data collection and organization. (timelines, outlines, categories)
- \* Get approval from the teacher.
- \* Begin data gathering by focusing on specific topics relating to the question and explain why you chose the topics
- \* Develop a research proposal that is the foundation for the Internet project and get approval.
- \* Gather data and visuals; save them to disk
- \* Present the information in a multimedia slide show.

Slide show grading criteria include the presence of title, map, flag, research questions and answers, and bibliography. Students are also graded on their work ethic.

Students evaluated the project and their work. Overall, they loved it! One said "I had fun and enjoyed the project I thought the Internet assignments was really cool." Another commented " I really liked getting all kinds of information; I learned a lot about my country."

One student said he didn't like finding "information in books; that's why I liked going on the net. It's a lot easier to find information on the net than in books [or CD-Roms]." Most of the work was completed in a mac lab and several students wished they had more class time in the Media Center and its lab because "the computers are faster and there are also books as well as the Internet."

Student comments also showed perceptions about their own abilities. One noted "I liked . . . doing something I'm good at, and being on the Internet." Many regretted not making backup disks, writing down their sources or taking advantage of the extended Media Center hours. They also realized they were learning from their mistakes and think this is a good way to learn. As for improvement, they would like more developmental instruction, especially in working with different graphic formats and "a numerous page packets with answers to help kids out." Negative comments pertained to the need to "fight for a computer" in the Media Center after school and slow LC III's in the other Lab. (Our media center has 40 Macintosh LC580's and a variety of Power Mac models)

Dedicated career teachers provide these forward thinking learning opportunities for over 350 7th grade students each year ; each makes this happen in his own unique way. Greg, the teacher who first made changes in the booklet still travels with his box of colored pencils, pens, rulers, atlases and almanacs. Technology is integrated slowly, but carefully and soundly.

He's been the last to utilize the Internet or multimedia presentations but appears ready to move forward now that the other two teachers are seeing success.

Bob is a former football coach and physical education teacher who jumped in the process a few years after the other two teachers had begun using technology. When he made the curriculum switch he often joked about how he was the kind of guy who would be slow to learn and often requested my help; with his open mind and positive attitude he has learned quickly and adapted superbly to teaching something quite different than what he taught for over twenty years. He takes almost every appropriate staff development class and is always ready for new ideas. He epitomizes "you can teach an old dog new tricks" concept.

Harold is a well-traveled person who brings academic and technological skills to the classroom. He carefully researches web sites and provides students with wonderful lists for Internet searching. He also develops handouts to help the students use technology. This past year his student completed five projects involving technology. He described the slide show projects as "where students really get into their project, being creative and imaginative as they put they work together." "Some who don't show much interest in other types of assignments will work intently on the computer. Some who might have learning problems but a knack for the computer get a good dose of self-esteem by helping other students figure out a problem. . . and it gives the student a chance to teach the teacher." Last spring we both observed how well behaved the students were as they worked in the Media Center on the projects. We agree they would not have been so involved and on-task on a nice spring day a few years ago. Some students do projects on more than one country. With the second one he is "looking for more self-direction, creativeness and imagination," and says "I'm seeing it!"

Harold's approach will move us forward into the next step. For example, we recently discussed the need to move the students beyond finding facts and pictures on the Internet. The result was an assignment based on "thinking questions" related to Hong Kong. For example, instead of gathering facts and pictures of flags students researched

- \* How has Hong Kong changed during the time it has been under British control?
- \* What might the future hold for Hong Kong?" We noticed students who were on-task and involved the students were in their work--the thinking was "something new" for them and they appeared quite intent on finding the possible answers.

The finished project is a word processed document. Students are required to turn in all phases of the project including printed out notes which include sources, handwritten notes, and draft..

Our ongoing staff development opportunities have helped these teachers acquire the skills to implement these projects. They are in the group of teachers who always attend classes and keep moving forward to the next level. The classes they have attended include a multitude of ClarisWorks classes, Hyperstudio, Advanced Netscape, Copy, Cut, Paste, Multimedia, and Troubleshooting.

Change is often hard to see when we are part of making it happen, but curriculum delivery, information access, and information presentations are radically different from 1985. Since the unit's evolution began student motivation is definitely improved; teachers appear enthused and rejuvenated. What was once revolutionary is now ordinary and expected. Students ask if they are going to the computer lab and if they aren't " why not?" The environment in the Media Center has changed to a popular place for active, constructivist learning. Our labs are booked solid, usually weeks in advance. As Harold noted, "technology is an interesting tool both for teaching and for learning. It dresses up teacher instruction and is a hands-on vehicle for students to do their work."