

CULTURAL EXCHANGE @ HIGH SPEED

By Lucinda M. O'Neill

Cable in the Classroom's Project Cam allows educators to connect their students with peers around the world.



On an April afternoon, high-school students from Cataño, Puerto Rico, and eighth-graders from Bangor, Maine, met for the first time—in cyberspace. Using a simple webcam, Cable in the Classroom's Project Cam interface, and high-speed Internet connections provided by Adelphia, the students gave lively presentations about their respective cultures, then chatted live for almost an hour. "We talked freely to students on the other side of the screen about the intense and unique features that shape our culture," says Cataño student Francis Merced. "Through the webcam, we shared folklore—music, dance, food, among other things, and talked about our day-to-day living."

Puerto Rico's Secretary of Education Cesar Rey and First Lady Sila Marie Gonzáles Calderon joined students in Cataño's Francisco Oller High School library, while representatives of Maine's Senator Snowe and Congressman Michaud were on hand in the Bangor auditorium of James F. Doughty Middle School. "The interaction among the kids was magnificent," recalls Gail Kelly, state director for Senator Snowe. "They were so enthusiastic and so surprised to be able to see in real-time what was happening in another country."

The Cataño students reminded the Maine students that they, too, have cars and microwaves. Both groups of students eat at McDonald's and listen to the same kind of music. Apart from the climate differences, they also live in similar surroundings—oceanside communities where fishing is a main activity. "They learned something really important—there's not that huge a difference between them," says Eva Vasquez Ortiz, public-affairs manager at Adelphia and the

coordinator of the Cataño project.

Teachers, administrators, and officials agree that a webcam exchange can be a powerful way to enhance students' appreciation for another culture. Here are some tips to maximize the learning.

Make it a face-to-face experience.

"You can talk to a person through an electronic method—messaging or e-mail—but you cannot see the expression or the nonverbal communication of the other person," says Vasquez Ortiz. Being able to see the other students' facial expressions, their body language, how they're dressed, and their physical surroundings really enhances communication, she says.

Building on the success of the Cataño-Bangor exchange, Maranacook Community School in Readfield, Maine, has signed on with Adelphia to enhance an existing foreign-exchange program with webcam exchanges. This fall, students in Carol Ladd's advanced-placement German classes will host students from Bremen, Germany, as part of the German-American Partnership Program (GAPP) the school has participated in for the past 10 years. Ladd plans webcam chats before the actual visit and sees them as an opportunity to "keep us in contact and create anticipation for whatever the travel event is going to be." Adds Rich Abramson, superintendent of the Readfield school district, "It just seems to open up some wonderful opportunities when you're in the moment, rather than through e-mails or letters or phone calls."

Turn the language barrier into a positive.

To understand another country's culture, it helps to speak the language. The teachers involved in

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the Bangor-Cataño exchange agreed to level the playing field. The Francisco Oller students, who speak English as their second language, but have had few opportunities to use it in real-life situations, would speak only English during the live webcam chat. The Bangor students—first-year Spanish students—would speak only Spanish. The Cataño students roared with laughter during a conversation about cafeteria food when one Bangor student said she ate vaca (cow) instead of carne (beef). Hilda Ortiz, who teaches English at Francisco Oller, used the language problems that surfaced during the webcam chat to teach her students a follow-up lesson on idioms.

All of the teachers involved expressed an interest in expanding the webcam program. Francisco Oller librarian Wilma Delgado would love to see weekly webcam exchanges with students in the U.S. to help the Oller students learn English faster and become more confident in speaking it. Abramson already envisions incorporating webcam exchanges into the district's French and

looking for something the students can get interested in," says Delgado, who saw the webcam project as an opportunity to stimulate her students' achievement. Before the project, many Francisco Oller students had never used the Internet, let alone experienced a high-speed connection and used a webcam. Delgado says her students were fascinated by the idea that they could talk in real-time with students in a different country via computer. One student, Vasquez recalls, likened the experience to being in the futuristic world of *The Jetsons*.

Make preparation a part of the learning.

"Having less than seven months of exposure to the Spanish language meant that the students would have to put in numerous hours of preparation," notes Robert MacDonald, principal of the James F. Doughty School. "They also had to learn about the customs and culture of Puerto

Rico. "They decided that to show how to dance the salsa was really important," says Vasquez, "because it's part of their life and what defines them as Puerto Ricans." ❧

Related Resources

Cable in the Classroom: Project Cam

www.ciconline.org/ProjectCam

Current and existing projects, tips for a successful webcam experience, details on the features available, and more.

TIPS FOR TECHNOLOGY-ENHANCED CULTURAL EXCHANGES

INVEST IN THE HARDWARE. "We used the same equipment the Cable in the Classroom web site suggested," says Vasquez, including a webcam and tripod, external microphone, projector, and large screen. A large screen is essential so that big audiences can see what is on the computer screen. "It creates more impact," she says.

CONSIDER TIME DIFFERENCES. The school you want to connect with may be many time zones away. For the German exchange, says Ladd, "it's not going to work for everybody, and it's not going to be totally convenient to do it whenever we have class time. It's going to involve out-of-class time as well."

COME UP WITH A REALISTIC TIMELINE FOR IMPLEMENTATION. Leave time for trial and error when getting the technology up and running for the first time. "No matter how long you think the project's going to take," Abramson says, "it's going to take longer."

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Spanish classes as well. "We have a foreign-language department that's very interested in seeing three languages in grades K-12, and kids being able to sample all three."

Capitalize on students' technology interests and learning styles.

Playing on students' strong preference for visual learning, the Francisco Oller teachers already use Cable in the Classroom programming, such as The History Channel and the Discovery Channel, to supplement lessons on science, civil rights, historic figures, and other topics. "We're always

Rico in order to generate questions for the session that followed the presentations."

At Francisco Oller, the teachers asked the students what they wanted to talk about. Sports, the students fired back. Baseball players and entertainers from Puerto Rico. "Others wanted to speak about our history to let other people know our country," recalls Delgado. The students were so enthusiastic about the process that they persuaded the teachers to let them film an introductory video about their school and community to send to the Bangor students before the webcam event. Using the webcam on a tripod, they filmed several students performing the salsa, the plena, and the bomba—typical dances in Puerto