Exploring Virtual Fieldtrips: Using Technology to Promote Learning

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The integration of technology into our classrooms has become an essential part of life for students and educators in the 21st Century. While the purpose of education is to promote learning; it has also never been more resourceful, ingenious, creative, and just more amusing for the learners with the use of the latest educational teaching tools and technology such as, the internet. Today’s graduating senior class of 2008 is one of the first groups through this educational system to harvest the full benefit of integrated technology in our classrooms. The new kindergarten class of the 2008-2009 school year will soon be learning even more with this integration. As technology advances, there is a guarantee for many new developments when they are ready for graduation in the future.

According to NETS (National Educational Technology Standards), to be successful in today’s information-rich society, students must be able to use technology effectively. Technology enables the students to become (ISTE: International Society for Technology in Education, 2004):

- Capable information technology users
- Information seekers, analyzers, and evaluators
- Problem solvers and decision makers
- Creative and effective users of productivity tools
- Communicators, collaborators, publishers and producers
- Informed, responsible, and contributing citizens
These qualities mentioned (ISTE, 2004), make for a well rounded and educated adult that have entirely taken advantage of the new 21st Century purpose of education: Using Technology to Promote Learning. By means of this new technology, many classrooms are taking advantage of the internet. The internet alone has made a huge impact on how our students are learning in today’s classroom; and its uses are not limited to educational software, games and music downloads. One of the best uses for the internet in any classroom is exploring and searching for information. This is accomplished through joining Virtual Field Trips, also known as VFTs.

Virtual Field Trips are an entertaining, educational, practical and cost effective alternative to the curriculum extension of the traditional class “field trip” teachers have been planning for decades. The planning for these regular field trips is a challenge to any “apprentice” or “veteran” teacher and the cost for schools and students can become a burden on many school districts and families. Time and budget constraints, increased safety procedures including liability, increased classroom assessment requirements, environmental constraints, restricted access to instructive and accessible field sites and increasing class size (Rooney, 2002 and Laurie Beth Cantwell, 2004) are forcing instructors to find alternative means to provide students with a realistic field experience without leaving the classroom (Smith, 1996, Curry and Burton, 2002). For schools throughout the world, real field trips are often physically or financially out of reach. A “field trip” it often a dream, not a reality for students to be able to take advantage of these extensions in the curriculum used to promote learning. Although some Virtual Field Trips charge for participation, many great ones are available to any student, class, school or district free of charge. There are many web sites and programs available
through web searches that will allow students to take advantage of the VFT’s use of digital media through the utilization of video, sound and photographs. Teachers can also produce their own class Virtual Field Trip for other schools to visit and learn about what happens in their rooms and students’ day-to-day activities.

One of the many advantages of the VFT is the opportunity to share ideas with the field trip organizers, museum coordinators, scientists, doctors, lawyers, actors and other field trip online hosts. This interaction between student and host allow for greater learning and experience that may not be possible otherwise. Many trips allow for follow-up activities for classes including: emails, journal entries, updates of photographs and revisiting the site for a new venture. A good resource for new virtual field trip classroom exploration is available at the site www.jasonproject.org.

The Jason Project has been around for over 15 years and has allowed many students throughout the world the opportunity to experience and explore exciting locations such as: satellites in space, the Apollo, NASA and polar regions to name a few. I am convinced that students in the original planned class “field trip” were never allowed to experience the thrill of flying into the eye of a hurricane! With the Jason Project’s virtual field trip, many students have seen and heard what it would be like to experience this- not through reality- but virtuality! In addition to this website, there are many other links to trips to cultural museums, zoos, aquariums and even theme parks in Orlando.

Many long time educational sites are now including lesson plans and lesson idea exchanges for teachers to share experiences and thoughts on their classroom trips. The
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well known site for teachers, Kathy Shrocks’ Guide for Educators©, (2008), includes many valuable virtual field trip searches and databases. A fantastic example of a “follow-up” activity for VFTs can also be found at this very popular website. Kathy Shrock has been a pioneer in the “teaching with technology” industry for over a decade. I found it a great resource for all educators and suggest them to check out a link to her web address for further activities: http://school.discovery.com/schrockguide/evaltour.html. These type of activities are considered engaging to students while allowing for the teacher to follow through with up-to-date technological lessons that are becoming a classroom expectation in most state curriculum guides and standards.

Although technology has emerged into a useful resource for both student and educator, many still find it as something a bit intimidating and overwhelming. There are still several who argue about its uses in today’s classroom. Many skeptic teachers still dispute the value of the virtual field trip. In a recent article, Laurie Beth Cantwell (2004) states that little in depth research has been completed to quantitatively validate the learning value of virtual trips. Preliminary, predominantly anecdotal, research suggests that students are extremely positive about the potential of virtual field trips to provide valuable learning experiences but are also insistent that virtual field trips should not replace traditional field trips (Spicer and Stratford, 2001). With all the state requirements met and the many benefits offered utilizing the virtual field trip; any positive student experience in the classroom is worth the effort for educators to at least attempt a VFT once. If they are not convinced, they can always go back to setting updates, writing/sending permission slips, ordering buses, getting office required paperwork in and packing school lunches. Everyone involved will enjoy a day away from school.
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References


