

Teaching Your Students

Building connections—through online learning and a rigorous curriculum—is a must for today's students

Victor Rivero



Last fall, seven high school seniors from Minnesota traveled with more than 200 business, government, academic, and civic leaders on a mission to China. It was one of the largest state delegations ever from the U.S., and the participants shared their impressions online with those back home.

While there, the students discovered their preconceptions were vastly different than the realities, as they observed firsthand the schools, economics, culture, agriculture, science and technology, environment, and government.

“You can buy television show and movie DVDs for a buck,” says Nick Buettner, who over the past decade has produced and directed more than a dozen distance learning expeditions on five continents. “At first, the students were like, ‘So what? It’s cheap.’”

With an inquiry-based approach, Buettner pushed them to examine what that might mean for U.S. business interests and profitability. Students also saw a new car—a Ford that had been torn apart, rebuilt, relabeled, and resold. Again, “no big deal”

until, with more questions, students became increasingly introspective about broad-scale economic consequences. At an mp3 player factory, they observed assembly line workers putting in 15-hour days—with quotas for repetitive, single-piece soldering—working for less than living wages.

But students also observed an open-heart surgery performed with surprisingly advanced technology, and they visited schools where specialization before graduating from high school was the norm.

Buettner, who helped the students post their impressions to a special website (www.minnesota-china.com), says the participants walked away with some 21st century skills—and some challenges. “They need to be able to communicate, to innovate while being flexible to change, and to have a perspective and understanding of cultures,” he says.

Goodwill trade missions aside, many in the United States see the challenges presented by an increasingly global economy as an opportunity Americans need to seize before it’s too late. Fortunately, our students don’t need to travel to China to learn these skills—yet.

“Countries from Great Britain to India to China are developing a new education strategy centered on and powered by online learning,” says Susan Patrick, former director of the Office of Educational Technology at the U.S. Department of Education. “The ability to deliver the best instruction digital-

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ly and the best curriculum digitally can turn any resource-poor learning environment into a classroom of the future.”

STAYING CONNECTED

In April 2006, Michigan became the first state to pass a law requiring every student take an online course as a graduation requirement. “Why?” asks Patrick, now CEO and president of the North American Council for Online Learning. “Because they realize the old industrial economy is fading, and to compete in a global economy, students must become lifelong learners and un-



derstand how to learn in online environments.”

More than 40 percent of high schools in the U.S. don’t offer a college preparatory curriculum today, leaving Patrick to wonder how we will prepare these students in an economy where 80 percent of the jobs require at least two years of college. “Online learning can help schools offer the rigorous curriculum that all students need to graduate and be successful in the global economy. The Internet is not going away,” she says.

The global economy needs creators of ideas and information, not just consumers, Patrick says. Students and adults must solve real-world problems through excellent written communication skills and the ability to create and process ideas through visual data, charts, images, graphs, and sound and video.

“The 21st century demands new skills in evaluating information for validity and reli-

ability while being creative thinkers,” Patrick says. “The global economy needs today’s students to be self-directed, responsible, and able to organize information into valuable concepts that are relevant. We must ask ourselves: Are we deliberate in measuring these skills in our schools? Let’s face the music and begin to implement strategies that work so our kids can succeed in a global economy.”

MOVING FORWARD

In June, West Virginia and North Carolina entered into an initiative with the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, according to Steve Paine, West Virginia’s superintendent of schools. “We’ve really made a commitment to reforming all of our educational practices,” he says.

As West Virginia schools in recent months have busied themselves bringing up the performance levels of all students, Paine admits that his state has neglected to set expectations high enough “if we expect them to be fiercely globally competitive.

“I don’t think that attaining mastery of a standardized test is enough of an expectation for our students to be globally competitive,” Paine says. “As we have incorporated more rigor into our curriculum, our content standards, and our objectives, as we have incorporated information technology and thinking and problem-solving skills within our curriculum—we also have a corresponding technology plan that has a pretty hefty price tag.”

That plan calls for technology tools to be used in every classroom by teachers and by students, showing a commitment to preparing students through the use of technology tools to learn the kind of 21st century skills that they need as prerequisites for success, he says.

Partnerships are key to the technology plan. Paine says he’s talked “very extensively” with numerous partners, including the West Virginia School Boards Association. He compares what’s happening in other nations to what is happening in his state’s schools.

“Very quickly, you see that we are not producing the number of science and mathematics majors in higher education [that we should],” he says. “Our experts in the business sector at the National Business Roundtable have called for tripling the number of engineers by the year 2015. We’re certainly not going to get there if we don’t change the way that we do business within our public schools.”

A RESOURCE-RICH ENVIRONMENT

The reason we have a global economy is because of the connected, collaborative environment that technology networks allow, Patrick says. “The technology is the delivery system of the global economy—and of 21st century learning environments.” However, she says, the U.S. will fall further behind unless we can bring online learning into every classroom and make online options a real choice for all students.

On a recent trip to Mexico, Patrick observed school officials there preparing a fully digital curriculum. “To them, it isn’t a technology initiative. It’s building a resource-rich environment into schools that are starved for resources,” she says. “The global economy is powered through knowledge workers with ubiquitous access to powerful laptops and other technology. We must prepare teachers and students to work, live, and learn using 21st century tools and digital resources.”

Paine agrees. If we fail to make the necessary changes, he worries that America will not maintain its competitive edge in 15 to 20 years. “Even though this [technology] is expensive, the cost of not making these changes in our system today—the price tag on that is probably heftier,” he says.

“If we really want to build the right future for our children, we think that the ingredients are a rigorous curriculum with high-quality instruction seasoned with technology tools with the proper assessment strategies—and that equals 21st century learners.” ■

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