Cyber Schools & Net Education

This month Sean Clark presents a parent's-eye-view of the role of the Internet in education and suggests that one of the Net's longer term effects could be to vastly change the nature of schooling...

Everybody seems to accept that the Internet has the potential to be a great educational resource, indeed, this view is commonly used as a selling point by computer hardware companies and Internet Service Providers. However, with so much recent press being given to the negative sides of the Net (compounded by a number of Net-related arrests in the UK) you could be fooled into believing that this potential is somehow being lost as the pornographers, organised criminals and even terrorists begin to muscle-in on Cyberspace. As a parent or educator, you might well ask, is the Net really a safe place for my information-hungry and impressionable kids to be? Or, if you are an educator you might say, what if I leave a class of 14 year olds alone with a computer and a modem? Will they inevitably end-up gravitating towards **www.playboy .com**, or is there enough genuinely useful and engaging content out there to keep their interest focused on more positive things?

These are very real concerns, but as somebody who works with the Internet daily (as well as being a parent) I have yet to see any evidence of these so-called problems having a significant basis in fact. While I certainly do acknowledge that there are difficult issues surrounding the use of public-access computer networks in education, I still feel that the bottom-line is that the biggest computer network today – the Internet – is a simply fantastic place for children and young people to explore. And the real advantages of the Net vastly outweigh all of the potential disadvantages quoted above. From a parent's-eye-view I'd argue that, despite what the distracters might say (those people who complain of a low signal-to-noise ratio on the Net), the Net really does give children (and adults too) access to unprecedented amounts of genuinely valuable knowledge and audio-visual material. Kids and the Net definitely do mix...

So, you've guessed that I'm in favour of the Net being used in education. But, I would go even further by suggesting that since it lets children to interact with other youngsters on a national and international level – turning McLuhan's notion of a 'global village' into
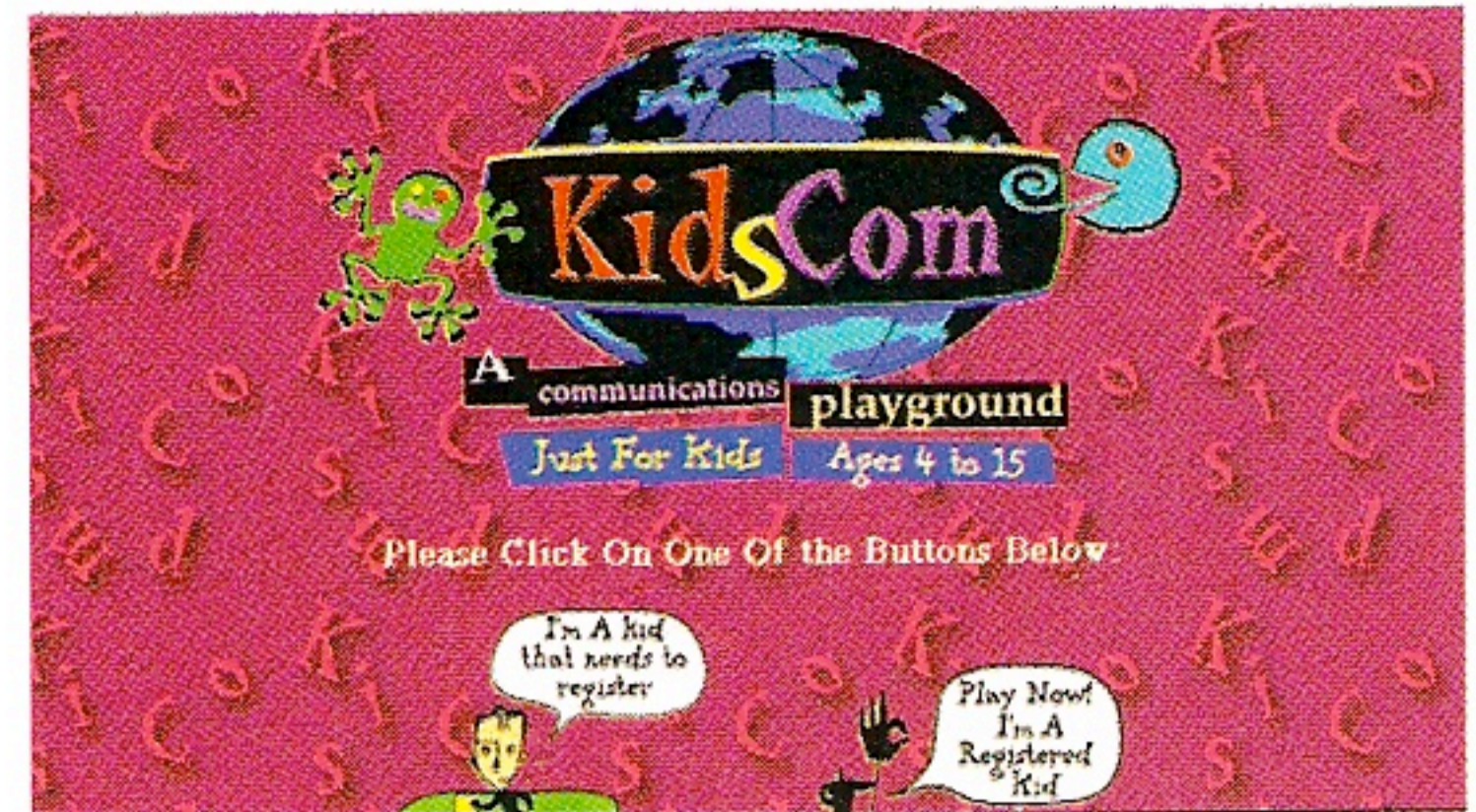
more of a 'global schoolhouse' – the Net will without a doubt have major social as well as educational implications (after all, the understanding of the world that we learn at school tends to be the one that many of us keep throughout the rest of our lives). And this leads me to the main point, the real issues that need to be addressed when discussing the Internet in the context of education are not those of "How do we stop such-and-such?" or "How do we protect the kids from whatever?" but "How do we reinforce the benefits of using online services in education and evolve our education system accordingly?" Basically, the Net's here to stay, so we better make sure that it's utilised to the full by children and educators…

KidsCom, an excellent Web site which has a strict no grown-ups policy.

Using the Net in Education

Anyway, having talked so far in generalities, what are the day-to-day benefits of using computer networks in education – be it in the classroom or at home? What can you use to improve your child's education? Well firstly, of course, there is the access to information networks such as the Internet offers. As mentioned above, amongst the more esoteric sites on the Internet, there are some excellent resources of the kind that might be unavailable in many school or home-educator's libraries. For example, Volcano World at **http://volcano.und.nodak.edu/**, The Age of Enlightenment in French Painting at **http://mistral.culture.fr/lumiere/documents/files/imaginary_exhibition.html** and Live From Antarctica at **http://quest.arc.nasa.gov/livefrom/livefrom.html** all offer material that can be used to supplement paper-based teaching materials, or even replace them in some cases. And this is just a tiny fraction of what is available. If you search through the popular online catalogues such as Yahoo at **http://www.yahoo.com/** and my favourite, Lycos, at

"THE INTERNET IS A SIMPLY FANTASTIC PLACE FOR CHILDREN TO EXPLORE"

http://www.lycos.com/ you will find many more such resources. Also, there are an increasing number of listings sites that deal solely with education and children-related links, such as the amazing Uncle Bob's page at **http://miso.wwa.com/~boba/kidsi.html** and the Ultimate Children's Internet Sites at **http://www.vividus.com/ucis.html**. Both of which are packed with useful pointers to educational resources (it's worth bearing in mind that when you're searching for educational material much of it will be US-based and therefore categorised using the 'K' scale, with 'K12' being a popular term used to describe the older-primary-school/younger-secondary-school age range, hence, a site described as 'K12 Resources' may not be as dull as it sounds, but in fact could contain exactly the sort of information that you are after!).

But access to information is only half of the story, the Net also supports communication between children and educators. For example, KidsPub at **http://www.en-garde.com/kidpub/** and the Global Show-n-tell at **http://www.manymedia.com/show-n-tell/** allow children to publish their stories and pictures so that other children can enjoy them. What's more some sites (such as KidsCom **http://www.kidscom.com/**) have been designed specifically to support discussion between kids and have a 'no grown-ups allowed' policy! These places

CyberKids

http://www.woodwind.com/mtlake/CyberKids/CyberKids.html

CyberKids is an online magazine for youngsters that features stories, articles, artwork and puzzles. It is well

put together with bold graphics, and this US site also contains an excellent Interactive section where children can post messages. This facility is well used by children of all ages looking for pen-pals (keyboard-pals) around the world. There is also information on the company who run the site and their schools related products.

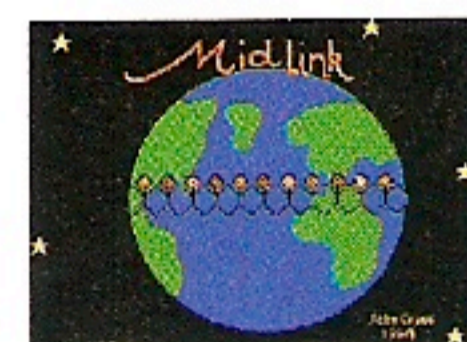## KidsWeb

http://www.npac.syr.edu/textbook/kidsweb/

This is a great educational site for everyone, not just children. It's basically just pages of links to various educational resources from around the world. Almost everything seems to be covered from astronomy to the weather, using various

methods such as drama, literature and music etc. Reference materials are included (dictionaries etc.) as are links to other educational sites on the World Wide Web.

MidLink Magazine

http://longwood.cs.ucf.edu:80/~MidLink/

This is an online magazine put together by

kids in the 10–15 age range. The project is free for any school to join and submissions can come via the Internet or post. Amongst other things, the information contained within the Web site includes a wide selection of children's essays about a variety of topics. The research for many of the essays was done using multimedia encyclopaedias, electronic atlases, the Internet, and the WWW.

The International Kids Space

http://www.interport.net/~sachi/

This is a beautifully designed Web site which contains artwork submitted by various children from around the world, some wonderful kids stories (each month they request stories based on a set of small pictures they publish

on the Web site), pen-pal boxes full of children who want to talk to other children and a bulletin board. Basically, it has everything that is needed to get children interacting with each other using the Internet.

are great fun to visit – even as an adult – and they really give you a sense of what will be possible when the Internet is a common feature of every classroom. In fact, they also make you realise how far we in the UK are behind the US in terms of Internet provision for schools – with almost every such site being based in the US and most contributions coming from American youngsters.

The Next Step

If you look through the sites mentioned above and the others reviewed in this article you get a very clear picture of a medium that is very well suited to education. It also becomes clear that the very nature of education could be changed by the Net. Firstly, it offers significant benefits to home educators who can use both the information and communication sides of the Internet to help solve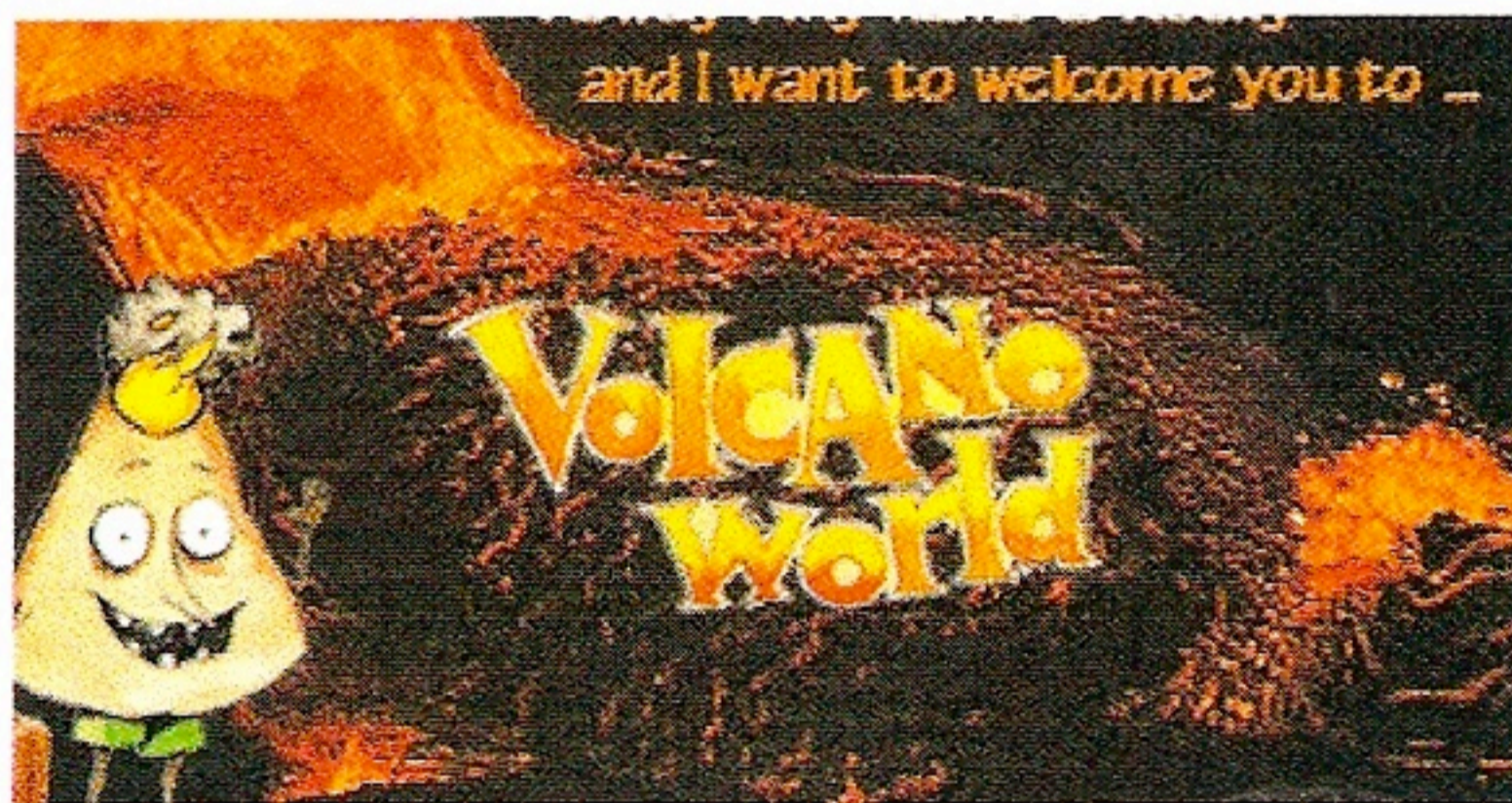 the two main problems with this approach to schooling – the expense of building up a home library and participation in group-based projects. So, while home education may not yet be an option considered by most people, the Net may increasingly help it to become so.

> "THE NET ALSO SUPPORTS COMMUNICATION BETWEEN CHILDREN AND EDUCATORS"

Secondly, in the context of 'traditional' schools, the Internet opens the door to more international collaboration in education, with international class projects becoming almost as easy to run as inter-school projects.

To me this second area is particularly exciting. In a World where 'internationalism' is becoming evermore important it gives us the means to give children a truly international education. While Net-travel can never be a substitute for real travel and exchange visits it can allow our children to form pen-pal (keyboard-pal) relationships with other children from around the world and exchange messages with overseas children and teachers on a daily basis. As a parent I revel in the thought of young Nathan or Anthony coming home from school in a few years time and telling me that "this morning we had a talk about history via the Net from Mr X in the States, then we did a project with class 3b in France and in the afternoon…" Wouldn't that be a great basis for education?

Of course, there is a big assumption here. That is that our schools and home educators will have the resources to participate in the Net revolution. While they are not as expensive as some teaching materials, computers, modems and Net-connections require funding and teachers and educators need training in how to use them. Where will this money come from, especially in a climate where many more basic resources cannot be provided? The answer to this I believe must be from a partnership between UK industry and central government. There firstly needs to be a widespread acknowledgement of the importance of networks in schooling and then funding schemes need to be put in place. Such schemes have been discussed by political parties (e.g. the BT project announced at last year's Labour conference) but it's up to us – parents, teachers and educators – to ensure that this thinking remains on their political agenda. Only then will the potential of the Internet in education be fully realised.

Children can now have fun and education on the Net.

KidPub

http://www.en-garde.com/kidpub/

KidPub is a fairly simple, but effective system that allows kids to publish their stories on the Internet. Submissions are entered into the form and then automatically added to the listing. There is also a collaborative section where you can contribute to a story by writing the next paragraph in 'The Adventures of Gary and Liz…'

KidLink

http://www.kidlink.org/

This Web site, run by the KidLink society, aims to get as many children in the age group 10–15 as possible in a global dialogue. It contains a number of sections including a KidCafé discussion system and KidProj a resource centre for people wanting to run themed projects with children. The organisers claim that since the start of the project over 37,000 kids from 71 countries on all continents have been involved in their activities.

Global Show and Tell

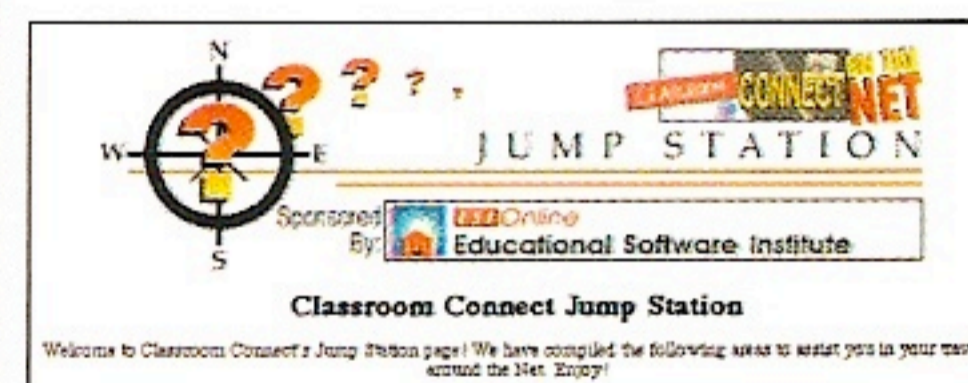http://www.manymedia.com/show-n-tell/

This is a site for kids to show off their prized possessions and artworks to other kids. The material contained includes scans of pictures, stories, links to home pages and the occasional sound sample. The links to children's home pages are particularly fun.

Classroom Connect

http://www.wentworth.com/classroom/edulinks.htm

A Web site with an excellent collection of links to children's educational sites from around

the Internet. It includes a list of educational newsgroups and a page of 'Webs little ones will love'. It also has a great deal of information on 'K12' schools around the World that may well be of interest to those teachers who wish to become involved in international education projects.