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 muddle-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 detractors 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...

**Using the Net in Education**

"The Internet is a simply fantastic place for children to explore".

nodak.edu: The Age of Enlightenment in French Painting at http://mistral.culture.fr/lumiere /documents/l'imaginaire/exhibition.html and Live From Antarctica at http://quest.arc.nasa.gov /livefrom/ live from.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 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/kids.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 'K-12' being a popular term used to describe the older-primary-school/younger-secondary-school age range, hence, a site described as 'K-12 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 the story; the Net also supports communication between children and educators. For example, KidsPubs at http://www.en garde.com/kidspub/ 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...

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**CyberKids**

http://www.woodwind.com/mtl ake/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.uct.ac.za: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
could increasingly help to make it to become so.

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 agendas. 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.engarde.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 KidCafe 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/sh ow-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/clas
srooms/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.