Level 3 English - Using Email to Bring the World to Your Classroom

PEEL in Practice: 1300 ideas for quality teaching
Sandra Mariniello, Upper Ferntree Gully Primary School

During a unit of work on the topic of Australian Geography with a Year 3 class, the children and I decided to embark on a Digital Tour of Australia.

To begin, we wrote an email message as a class, explaining our unit of study and all about our surrounding area. We included information about our school, about us as a class and about our Digital Tour. We then asked for the person receiving the email to reply and tell us one or two interesting facts about the place where they lived. The children took turns to copy and paste our letter into an email message and to use the Internet to find the address of someone they thought would be interesting to hear from. Then we waited!!

On a large map of Australia, we marked the path of our intended tour and attempted to get a reply from each place marked before moving onto the next. As the replies came in, we added them to the map and each child also kept his or her own record of progress and of any replies to his or her emails.

This was just a fantastic experience for all concerned. We were amazed at the people who took the time to reply. For example, the Captain of the Perth Yacht Club, the Chief Executive Officer of a large mining company in Western Australia and policemen at a station in Tasmania were just a few who replied. The children learnt a wealth of fascinating information, receiving "local" interesting facts, not just the ones that come in books. We also received images and photographs that people took the time to send us from remote places we would otherwise have never hear of. We were able to ask questions of a group of Aboriginal children living in an outback community. It was a permit-only place, yet we had the opportunity to ask questions and find out about their daily life - the students were writing to a real audience for a real purpose. We wrote to children in a 16-student school in the Daintree Rainforest and to a man living on a minute island off the coast of Queensland. We became part of an Australia-wide network that helped us learn. WOW!!

We replied to each letter, generally just a thank-you, but on a number of occasions groups of children began corresponding on a regular basis. At last count, one pair of girls were still writing to someone they met via the School of the Air, way out deep in the Northern Territory.

Conducting the activity in this way brought far away places into my classroom. Children were able to ask questions of people otherwise inaccessible. The use of the technology was central to the learning. We couldn't have done this activity in any other way. Reading a book is superficial, not REAL and you can't write back and ask the author for clarification. Writing letters is just too slow.

The excitement of checking the email each morning and after every break had to be seen to be believed, and, oh yeah, I'm sure our Geography skills improved as well!

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