

STORIES FOR ADVOCACY

Students Share Insights Using the Web

As told by Kyle Peck, Penn State University to Suzie Boss

In 1997, Penn State University helped to launch a technology-rich charter school in the mountains of central Pennsylvania. This was a small suburban school, with 75 students in grades 5-7. Each student received an Internet-ready computer to use at home. At school, there were enough computers so that every two students would have one to share.

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A remarkable teacher named Mark Toci wanted students to use this new technology for an authentic learning activity. He found what he was looking for in a project sponsored by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The project challenged students to develop Web sites about the state's tourism and recreational attractions. Mark had students work in groups of four. They were to identify a focus for their work, develop a proposal, get it approved, then proceed with Web site development.

Although all students had a successful learning experience, one group stood out. This team decided to focus on the caves of central Pennsylvania. They conducted Internet research about natural history to understand how the caves had formed. To keep themselves organized, they used spreadsheets and word processing to track schedules and budgets. When they wanted to conduct their own field research, they organized all the logistics—including transportation, chaperones, and permissions—for a trip to several caves in the region. During the field trip, they used digital cameras to document what they were seeing.

As the project unfolded, students spent hours engaged in higher-order thinking to analyze and synthesize information. They made illustrated maps and wrote informative text. They used the tools of technology to help them research, document, and share their information. Their final Web site included several linked pages, including a home page and related pages about each cave they researched. They were rightly proud of their online product, and included their names and an email address.

Shortly after their Web site went live, the students started receiving email inquiries. Interested readers asked questions about the caves that they hoped the students could answer. One such email began, "Dear Dr. Lehman." The 11-year-old author was flattered to learn that a reader had mistaken him for someone with a PhD, because of the quality of his work. The student realized, at that moment, that he was capable of important things, and did not need to wait for adulthood to be taken seriously.

Through their new access to technology, their deep engagement, and their application of higher-order thinking, these students experienced the kind of learning that is best described as "hard fun."

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