Global Classroom Projects Brings Together Children Who Are Worlds Apart

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Spartanburg, S.C. -

Curry Sherard, a fourth grade student at Spartanburg Day School, is hard at work creating a digital story of her life that she will share with other elementary school students in her hometown, on the other side of the country, and in the faraway world of South Africa. Digital storytelling is a method to combine traditional storytelling with electronic media.

“Global Classrooms was really fun,” said Sherard. “It required a lot of work even after school but it was worth it because it was cool working with Photo Story, importing pictures and recording. When we go to Blackboard, we talk to the kids in South Africa as much as possible. We learned a lot about South Africa like their artwork and how they use a lot of earth tones. We also learned how to do a lot of new things on the computer.”

Sherard is part of a Global Classroom project that connects local schools (Spartanburg Day School, Cleveland Elementary School, and Carver Junior High School) with schools in South Africa (Lynnwood Ridge Primary School and the Pretoria High School for Girls) and Rancho Santa Fe, California (Rancho Santa Fe Elementary School). There are two groups currently under the Global Classroom Projects – one for grades four through six and one for grades seven through nine. And, starting in the next few weeks, schools in Baltimore and Nairobi, Kenya will be added to the projects.

“We were really honored and happy to be included in this project,” said Pat Osborne, a fourth grade teacher at Spartanburg Day School. “The students have been totally engaged in everything they have done. The technology is amazing and teachers have learned from it as much as the students.”

For now Sherard and her classmates are creating an autobiographical poem that will tell others who they are and where they come from. The students are also taking digital photos that will be included in the project. To complete their “digital story,” the students will record their poems in their own voices and also add music. These multimedia stories are short, personal (and sometimes funny!), and told from the heart. Once their digital stories have been completed, they will be shared via Blackboard, a Web-based educational sharing tool, with all participating students in this global project.

“This is an amazing project from both the local and global perspective,” said Tasha A. Thomas, composition instructor and director of the Spartanburg Writing Project. “Just in Spartanburg alone, we are seeing that the students come from vastly different worlds. Learning about other students their same age is going to be so eye-opening for these children.”

Thomas shares that while students from Cleveland Elementary School are writing about life in Victoria Garden, the students from Spartanburg Day School are writing about trips to Lake Summit and Clemson football games. She said that many students from Carver Junior High School have relocated to the Spartanburg area and share their experiences about life in other places such as New York City and Washington, D.C.
“Being a part of Global Classrooms is really fun and I enjoy participating in it,” said Phila Siampone, a student at Carver Junior High. “I enjoy posting on Blackboard and I learned how to do new things on the computer. Ms. Bradshaw and Ms. Thomas are so much fun and we are learning a lot!”

“Global Classrooms have opened our eyes to the world and is a great way to educate our students,” said Vanessa Anderson, sixth grade teacher at Cleveland Elementary. “This is a new and exciting way for students to get educated on global issues while still upholding South Carolina standards.”

Liezell Bradshaw, technology specialist for global classrooms at USC Upstate, is excited that students will talk live to each other and share more about themselves during two separate three-way video conferences.

“As they compose their stories, the student are exploring and understanding more clearly their individual lives, personalities and cultural backgrounds through writing and multimedia publication,” said Bradshaw. “Once they begin sharing their stories on Blackboard, they will learn more about other students’ individual lives, cultures, and personalities. Working with the teachers and students is amazing, and they are so creative! Even teachers learn more about their own students’ personal lives.”

These personal stories include a mixture of details such as physical descriptions, food preferences, family life, hometowns, and cultural references. The finalized story will be two to three minutes in length.

“The goal is to make sure the student’s voice and personality comes through in the writing, while still connecting with the audience and giving a clear “snapshot” of the student’s life,” said Bradshaw. “I truly believe that it is very important for students not only to learn about his/her own “world”, but also to get to know the “world” of students in other cultures, so they will be more aware of the differences that make each person unique.”

The experience has had such a positive impact on the students and teachers at Spartanburg Day School. Osborne said, “The students’ poetry pieces were outstanding and truly heartfelt. I can honestly say that we will be sorry for this experience to end. It has been a pleasure.”

A second Global Classroom Project is also underway that focuses on the elections in the United States and South Africa. Students from Spartanburg High School and the Pretoria High School for Girls in South Africa have been blogging and discussing the presidential elections taking place in both countries. Today they held a 70-minute live interactive video conference where students discussed the upcoming elections in substantial detail.

“The video conferences are always very informative,” said Catherine Dodds, a 12th grade student at Spartan High. “The Pretoria Girls High students are always very well-informed and they are always ready to defend their points. I really enjoy getting to debate and converse about politics and more with them because they really know their stuff!”

A third Global Classroom project that focuses on science is also underway. Participating schools include the Scholars Academy at USC Upstate (ninth and tenth grade students who are enrolled in college classes) and 11th grade students from the Pretoria High School for Girls. The students will be working in global teams on projects related to global warming.

“These students will introduce themselves by sharing memoirs and pictures, followed by reading recent nonfiction literature on the topic of global warming,” said Melissa DeLoach, director of the Scholars Academy at USC Upstate. “Then global teams will be created and they will dialogue online in a discussion forum to determine a specific issue of this topic they would like to research. Teams may choose topics relating to ecology, biology, chemistry, physics, or any environmental or humanitarian aspect of global warming.”

Each global team will write a digital and documented narrative together based on this research and dialogue. Finally, the students will create a visual presentation using Photo Story or PowerPoint to encapsulate their work. They will post their narratives and presentations online for all global teams to review. The project will conclude in January with a live video conference between the two student groups. All global teams will discuss their findings and answer questions posed by the audience. For the Scholars Academy students, this global project will correlate with the science
fiction unit entitled “Science, the Environment, and the Future” as part of the English III Honors curriculum.

“I am very happy that all of the Global Classroom projects are doing extremely well,” said Dr. York Bradshaw, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at USC Upstate. “Through the use of sophisticated multimedia technology, students from around the country and world are meeting each other and learning more about each other. If we are going to live in a better world, we need for future generations to know each other better and to become good at working through problems at the local, national, and international levels.”

The Global Classroom projects were started by a Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to USC Upstate. More recently, thanks to the strong support of State Representative Harold Mitchell of Spartanburg, the State of South Carolina has provided additional funding through a competitive grant that supports USC Upstate’s Healthy Living Initiative.

“The Global Classroom is the classroom of the future,” said Peggy Karpick, head of the Lower School at Spartanburg Day School. “This is just the beginning of a new and exciting classroom experience for us that is going to evolve over time. Our goal is to build strong relationships with students from other cultures, understand different perspectives, and to actually share curriculum and explore new horizons together.”

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