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Small World Big Picture: History article

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Imagine a student sitting in a quiet classroom, utterly captivated by a guest speaker giving a gut-wrenching narrative of what it's like to climb the tallest mountain in Africa: Mount Kilimanjaro. She explains how the snow-capped summit will likely be gone in a decade, and asks the student to think about what that will mean for the native people that depend on the water trickling down the mountain for their survival.

The catch is the speaker isn't in the classroom.

She's on the mountain.

Such scenarios have already played out in Ontario classrooms.

Advances in technology have allowed Canadian students to peer into other cultures from a distance, to learn about them and from them.

"As technology grows, the world is getting smaller. Tanzania, 10 years ago was so far away," said Tammy Thornton, the manager of Algonquin's innovation and special projects department. Now it's only as far as the closest phone or internet connection.

Small World Big Picture (SWBP), a program run out of Algonquin's innovation and special projects department, has utilized mainstream media, such as television and the internet, to educate Ontario students about the diversity and challenges facing the world.

This approach is called 'reality learning.'

"Students hear real voices, they see real faces," said Jessica Brown, the project co-ordinator for SWBP. "It's a more interactive way of learning."

“It makes education not only interesting, but engaging and enriching,” said Dr. Shaunna Burke, a participant in multiple SWBP initiatives. “It’s one thing to read about something in a textbook, but another thing to actually see it as it’s unfolding. We’re moving on from the traditional chalkboard.”

In 2004, SWBP launched its first expedition with the lofty goal of Mount Everest. It was this trip which introduced the technology-focused model of ‘reality learning.’

Ottawa high school students followed the progress of the expedition online, as renowned Canadian expedition leader Ben Webster led a team of mountaineers, including Burke, up the legendary mountain. Burke got within 450 metres of the summit, but was forced to abandon her ascent after experiencing violent weather in what is known as the ‘death zone.’

The story of that first trip was documented by the Discovery Channel in a six-hour documentary entitled “Everest: Ultimate Survival.”

Local high school teachers and staff from Algonquin’s Online Learning Centre developed a curriculum based on the expedition which featured Blackboard as a learning tool. It was the first time the teachers used Blackboard, which is now a mainstream teaching implement.

The following year Burke and Webster returned to Mount Everest in another SWBP expedition. Students from across Ontario followed the expedition team in real time through uploaded videos, audio files and pictures. A curriculum was developed with these materials, allowing student to study a variety of subjects, including anthropology, religion, art and even business.

During the ascent Webster broke his leg, forcing him to turn back, leaving Burke with a difficult decision: return home or try to scale the mountain alone?

She stayed, determined to complete the journey she began the year before. Ottawa students followed her journey through online updates like this one, written as she neared the summit:

*Currently, she is resting and drinking lots of liquids in order to stay strong. However, the winds at Camp IV have picked up a bit. Therefore, weather is still a major concern.*

In spite of the weather, on May 30, 2005, Dr. Shauna Burke became the second Canadian woman in history to scale Mount Everest.

“They were basically in our backpacks on Everest,” Burke said of the students who followed the expedition’s progress.

A year later SWBP launched Expedition Africa. In an effort to showcase the wonder and beauty of Africa, as well its hardships the team spent five months traveling through nine different countries, beginning in Egypt and ending in South Africa. During the trip the team also climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. Students followed the progress through audio and video blogs, and news stories on CityTV and A-Channel.

Through fundraising events, students from Algonquin’s event management program, acting under the SWBP umbrella, raised funds to build a new school for children in Rongai, Tanzania. The college sent a carpentry professor and student to help in its construction. They left their equipment and materials behind for future use.

Prior to the school being built, the children in Rongai endured a terrible learning environment. Over 100 students were crammed into a single classroom with no water or electricity. Students utilized as much natural light as they could, often studying from sunrise to sunset.

Not all of the SWBP initiatives are daring exploits. In fact, the quiet ones might be having the most impact.

In 2005 SWBP launched two programs focused on sustaining the environment. This time the location was the rainforests of Costa Rica.

The Algonquin College Rain Forest Project saw the college partner with two Ottawa school boards, Elmwood Academy, Rios Tropicales and EARTH University in an effort to educate Ottawa teachers about the biodiversity, sustainable farming methods, and the ecology of Costa Rica.

Algonquin taught these teachers to integrate the learning material they brought from their trip into interactive e-learning lessons for use in their classrooms.

For the past two years the project in Costa Rica has been run under Algonquin's See-Earth program

Joe Banks, program co-ordinator of the journalism program at Algonquin, went to Costa Rica as part of the See-Earth program this past February in a supervisory role.

"It hit me," he said, "how much the rainforest had been stripped." The stripping occurred thirty years ago, and the land is still recovering.

The Sombra Caf  Project launched in 2005. The deforestation of the Costa Rican rainforests has partly been due to destructive farming practices. To encourage sustainable farming, Algonquin entered into a direct-trade agreement with local farmers to buy their shade grown coffee, which is now sold on campus.

From nurturing the rainforests in Costa Rica to enriching the lives of children in Africa, SWBP has made many positive changes in the world, but the full impact of the program may stem from the people whose lives have been touched.

"Hopefully, down the line, they will make small changes in the world," said Burke, before adding with a laugh, "Or big ones."