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No permission slip needed

'Virtual field trips' let students visit places otherwise far out of reach



Photo by James Gibbard for USA TODAY

Long-distance learning: Riley Easton, 9, holds up a cotton boll during a "virtual field trip" on cotton cultivation at his school in Howe, Okla.

By Ken Fuson
USA TODAY

This school year, Hannah Landeros, 17, a junior at Howe (Okla.) High School, has visited with Pearl Harbor survivors at the USS Arizona Memorial, surveyed Hurricane Katrina damage in New Orleans and compared notes about college placement tests with students in Canada.

She did all this without leaving her school.

"Virtual field trips" are proving increasingly popular in the nation's schools. The same videoconferencing technology that allows business executives to see and communicate with one another half a world away can take students like Hannah any place a camera can go.

"It's just wonderful," says Carol Ann

Ford, coordinator of the gifted and talented program in Howe, population 700. "Your imagination is the only thing that limits what you're interested in doing in the classroom."

Students still pile into school buses to take field trips to their state capitols or nearby historic sites. But they're also "going" to the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, the National Baseball Hall of

Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, N.Y., and the National World War II Museum in New Orleans.

In another example, teachers in White Plains, N.Y., have organized collaborative virtual field trips with schools in other countries.

"Because we're taking them everywhere, (students) are becoming little global citizens," says Jody Kennedy, a teacher in White Plains. "They're becoming leaders. These are all happy surprises we've never expected."

The technology is spreading

The technology for virtual field trips has existed for decades, says Jan Zanetis, market development manager for education at Norway-based TANDBERG, a company that designs and sells videoconferencing equipment to schools and colleges.

A report by Wainhouse Research, prepared last year for TANDBERG, said about one in four schools in the USA have videoconferencing equipment, reaching an estimated 23,000 classrooms. California, Texas, New York, Oklahoma and Ohio have the greatest number of video-enabled classrooms, the report said.

In November, Hannah and several of her Oklahoma classmates visited with Pearl Harbor survivors.

"We were able to ask them questions," she says. "Just to be able to see their faces and their expressions and how they felt — it was amazing. You could really tell where their heart was."

Next stop: Hannah's teacher hopes to take high school students to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland. Without leaving home, that is.

All of this in a rural Oklahoma school district with a total of 471 students (including transfers from other districts).

"It really is the opportunity to bring the world to our students, because our students can't go to the world," says Lance Ford, Howe's technology coordinator.



Photo by James Gibbard for USA TODAY

Live on television: Oklahoma-based students Destiny Coffey, 9, left, and Karleigh Jones, 10, watch high school students from Stamford, Texas, teach a course about cotton cultivation.

It's not just the teachers who have noticed.

Kenneth Hoffman, education director at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans, says the museum wants to do more virtual field trips as part of its mission to educate students nationwide.

"Obviously, a school in Oklahoma will never be able to get on a bus and drive to New Orleans."

The way teaching should be'

While companies like TANDBERG supply the videoconferencing equipment, the not-for-profit Center for Interactive Learning and Collaboration in Indianapolis sets up the field trips.

"Interest has exploded," says Ruth Blankenbaker, the center's executive director. One sign: Two years ago, schools could choose among 120 virtual field trips. Today, the number is 850, "and the number is changing monthly."

Destinations include zoos, museums, libraries and theaters. Blankenbaker says providers — who generally charge less than \$200 to conduct a field trip — find this an effective way to expand their educational reach as well as earn a few extra dollars in tight budget times.

Some schools are not only going on virtual field trips, but they also are conducting them. High School students in Stamford, Texas, have produced a course on cotton growing for other students, handling everything from operating the cameras to giving the presentation.

"We learn a lot doing it, and we hope to teach the kids a lot," says Thelia Lisle, Stamford's technology teacher.

The videoconferencing equipment can cost schools \$1,000 to \$10,000, but federal grants often are available to defray the costs, teachers say.

Kennedy, the White Plains teacher, has been one of the more ambitious users of virtual field trips. She's working on a project to collaborate with 25 schools in 14 countries to take virtual trips and classes together.

"It is the way that I believe teaching should be," she says.

Last year, her students went on a field trip to the Great Barrier Reef in Australia with a class located in Mexico. Some of the Mexican students were learning English; some of the White Plains students were learning Spanish.

And they all watched as a diver in Australia talked — underwater — about sharks.

"It's just an incredibly exciting time right now," Kennedy says.

Ken Fuson reports daily for *The Des Moines Register*.