



SMART's Bridgit software facilitates distance education

By Heather Ellwood

"The world is shrinking every day, so let's prepare our children for it. That's the really cool aspect of distance education – technology like SMART's Bridgit software lets students step outside to see a far bigger world ... and it lets them interact with it," says Sandy Armstrong, an instructional technology coach with Auburn City School District in Auburn, Alabama.

As Armstrong well knows, SMART's Bridgit™ conferencing software, coupled with SMART Board™ interactive whiteboards, can link classrooms across the hall, across the state, on the other side of the country, or indeed, the globe. Such is the case at the Auburn Early Education Center, where Armstrong works with kindergarten teachers as a technology coach.

The center boasts SMART Board interactive whiteboards and Bridgit software in every one of their 26 kindergarten classrooms. Armstrong is a SMART Exemplary Educator and a SMART Certified Master's Trainer. Supported by SMART's technology products, she ensures the five-year-old students in Auburn have the tools necessary to collaborate on a long-distance literacy mentoring project with seniors in Sage Hill School in Newport Coast, California.

"We want our students to be able to make connections to the world outside of Alabama, and using Bridgit for distance education projects gives our children that much more of an advantage," explains Armstrong.

Step one of the literacy mentoring project involves Auburn's kindergarten students writing a story, complete with illustrations, in their journals. Step two sees each child's story scanned and displayed on the interactive whiteboard. In step three, a student goes to the interactive whiteboard and reads the story aloud. As the child reads, he or she follows the text and uses the Highlighter tool to add any commentary necessary to explain the process that went into the writing. Throughout step three, the teacher records the child with the SMART Recorder.

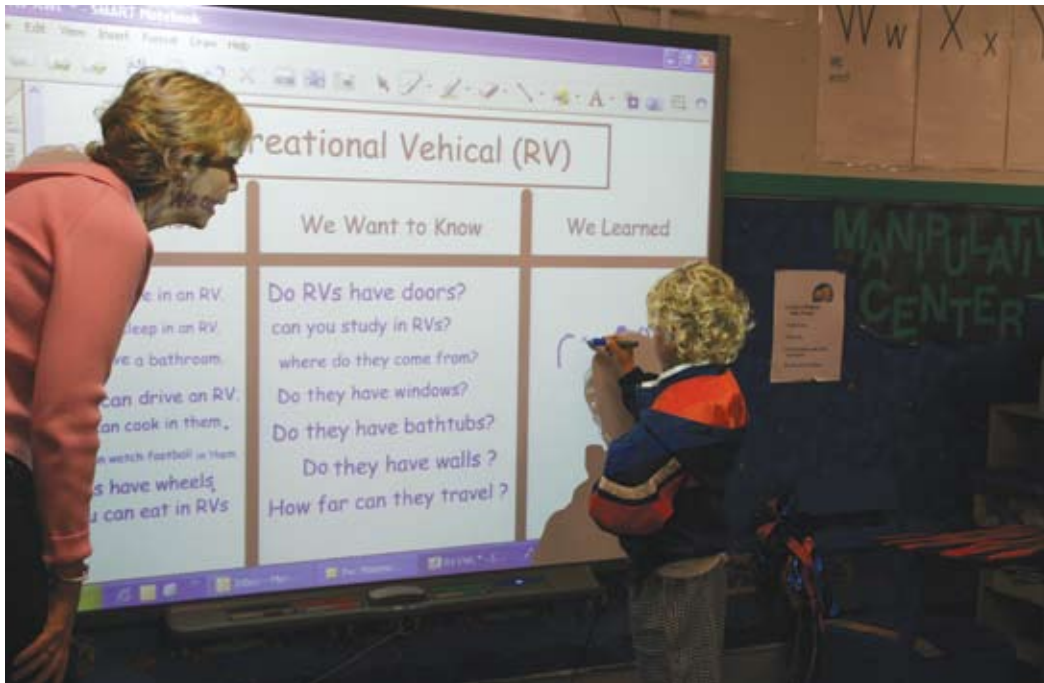
Step four has the Sage Hill seniors watching the recorded clips and, using Bridgit software to connect the two schools, the interchange culminates in a real-time discussion about the story in question. The seniors comment upon the writing, ask probing questions and essentially, encourage the Auburn kindergarten students to become better story tellers and better writers.

Cross-country projects like this are becoming more prevalent in our schools, as are more traditional distance education courses, which might see a smaller rural school with no senior math teacher linked to a larger urban one. A survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in 2003 analyzed technology-based distance education in U.S. public elementary and secondary school districts. It found that 72 percent of districts with students currently enrolled in distance education courses had plans to expand those offerings in the future.



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A collaborative journey

Auburn's Armstrong is not surprised by this statistic, and she is not alone in her cheerleading of distance education. As the NCES research states, more and more schools are opting to bring the outside world into the classroom, and easy-to-use technology has given them the wherewithal to make the necessary connections to do just that. Making such connections, Armstrong maintains, bridges the gap between the haves and the have-nots in a cost-effective way. And this type of collaboration doesn't have to encompass long distances. Armstrong and her peers have found that by designing cooperative activities to use with the SMART Board interactive whiteboard and linking one classroom to another with Bridgit software, they can facilitate students from different kindergarten classes working together.

"We find we can pool resources by using Bridgit and our interactive whiteboards because what one class may not have in the way of resources, another class may. One of our goals is also to encourage peer tutoring and peer interaction. By having all of our kindergarten teachers and classes working together, we're maximizing the effectiveness of each class and using our resources together in an easy-to-manage way," explains Armstrong.

This kind of collaborative and cooperative learning, many educators insist is a major benefit of distance education. When groups of learners, from across the hallway or across the country, engage in a common task, interact with one another and seek solutions, the results have more meaning for the participants. Armstrong believes that's because the students are so actively engaged in the content and connected to a common goal.

As more and more employers demand that new employees enter the workplace with team-building and team-playing skills, this type of connecting and collaborating is learning with a purpose. This is what Armstrong is hoping her students get from the "home town project" she is working on, which will connect Auburn kindergarten students with a class from Winnipeg in Manitoba, Canada.

"Our plan is to link up our children and let them work together to compare and contrast how daily life is different and how it's the same in Auburn, Alabama, and Winnipeg, Manitoba," Armstrong says. She adds, "I find when we use Bridgit to establish links with other communities, our learning is authentic. Researchers know that children and adults learn for authentic purposes. If there's a real reason to learn something, children will remember it."

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Keeping a connection

Connecting to a school via Web conferencing software has become something of a savior for some children. It allows students to fulfill requirements that they might miss out on due to geographic or physical challenges.

Such is the case for two students in the Auburn community. Both have cancer, and when they are not convalescing in their homes, they are receiving treatment in a hospital nearly three hours away. In order to give them the opportunity to stay connected with their school and their respective classes, Armstrong installed Bridgit software onto their home computers.

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Having access to the school community provides a semblance of stability and reassurance for both the parents and children. Armstrong has found that the parents often need a connection to the school as much as the children. She explains, "The kids know that something's going on, but they don't get the weight of it all, but for the parents it's very comforting to know that their child is linked to their school."

The destination is learning

Distance education is a process that takes knowledge or information or expertise or experience, breaks it down into bits and bytes and then, through the power of technology, beams it to students wherever it is needed. It delivers shared lessons and resources to a school full of kindergarten students. It lets a five-year-old child in Alabama read her journal entry to a soon-to-graduate senior English student in California. It connects a sick child from a hospital bed to a homeroom and allows him to take part in a class discussion on cloud formations.

This type of education pools resources in an easier and more cost-effective way. It allows any school district the ability to accommodate special circumstances, and facilitates collaborative and cooperative learning. Lastly, distance education creates interactive and authentic learning opportunities for all students, no matter where they live.

Says Armstrong, "Technology like SMART's makes it possible for all children to receive the education they deserve. There are educational gaps around the country and the world, and technology like this gives teachers the tools they need to close them."