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Project E –
Dabbling with The Learning Place

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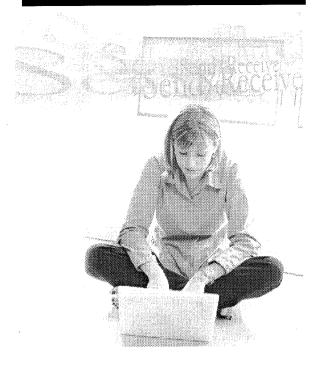*University of Southern Queensland*

One of the Toowoomba Technology Mathematics and Science Centre of Excellence (TTMSCE) roles is to promote online learning. After mentoring several teachers through the writing online courses program, we managed to persuade 3 of them and 3 other local teachers to participate in a collaborative online project, which we called "Project E". This pilot project investigated local teacher and student support for, and skill in, using online learning with an authentic task within the general classroom environment. Project E aimed to provide learnings for both students and teachers in a mix of face-to-face, electronic discussion, web based activities and off computer activities.

The online project involved 24 year 4/5 students across 6 primary schools exploring and applying scientific processes to local vegetation while simultaneously developing online collaboration, communication and presentation skills. Teachers who were interested in the project were asked to select 2 to 4 independent workers to become part of the project. These students were often required to work autonomously on activities separate from the main class without teacher direction. The classroom teacher supported these students (often in spirit rather than body), along with 3 mentor teachers and a variety of community experts who were accessed both in person and online.

Initially students and teachers met face-to-face to discuss the project and their involvement, negotiate the task, develop collegial support and develop or top-up IT skills, particularly in the area of PowerPoint, use of the blackboard environment, use of discussion lists and chatting online.

Students worked online to investigate native trees and their importance to our community. They studied the use of trees by humans and animals, the conditions that effect growth of trees and the characteristics that help to classify the trees. The Blackboard online learning environment was utilised (via The Learning Place) and online chats were regularly held both with mentors and local scientists. Students carried out a range of investigations and shared data through the online discussion board. To further support participants two additional face-to-face

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meetings were held where students participated in experimental activities and spoke with local scientists, and teachers explored how they were managing the project in their classrooms.

The Toowoomba City Council donated trees for the participating students to enable them to conduct experiments regarding what a plant needs to survive and grow. Students were able to use 1 tree as a control and the other tree was placed in a different location, comparisons were made regarding its growth or lack thereof, and students hypothesized as to what elements were essential for effective growth.

The culminating project was to use digital video, digital cameras and MS PowerPoint to organise and present data collected through investigations both at their schools, online and at the Wilsonton Campus. Students created their scripts, filmed their summary reports, and created their PowerPoint at each school. Due to the lack of software in the schools, they then came to Wilsonton Campus which was hosting the QSITE multimedia machine, to edit this raw data using Pinnacle Studio Software and published to HTML using MS Producer. Students and mentors found using the video editing and MS Producer software very user friendly and students were able to create a quality item in a short period.

The mentors created an initial navigation page to enable access to each school's project and the final multimedia e-books were burned to CD-ROM for each student and each school. An official CD-ROM launch took place for students to present their final CD-ROMs. Certificates of participation were presented to the students and teachers from the six primary schools involved in the Online classroom project, along with the mentors and the local scientific experts. The audience at the launch included participating teachers and students, principals, parents, experts, and local government representatives.

Feedback from all groups was very positive and it was seen as a valuable learning experience for all participants. The outcomes of Project E included:

- Students participated in a real-life experience that was embedded within an online learning environment.
- Students and teachers enthusiastically participated in the project & their learning was demonstrated in the production of the CD ROM.
- Improved IT skills for both students and teachers through use of online learning environments, PowerPoint, digital video editing, and MS Producer
- Student and teachers networking across different locations to complete a task
- Promotion of science in education
- Development of links to local scientists and experts

The TTMSCE is planning to run the program for schools in the Toowoomba District in Term four 2003, further information can be accessed from them. Phone: 0407 172 260, email: bditt1@eq.edu.au, http://wilscampshs.eq.edu.au/TMSCE/.