

## **Videoconferencing in the Early Years: Try It, You'll Like It**

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Donna Smith teaches First Grade at Fisher-Mitchell School in Bath, Maine USA. She believes that it is important to have a purpose for videoconferencing and she uses it to extend her yearly Travel Buddy project.

Each year her class sends three soft toy animals around the world, with each one going to a school in three different countries over the course of the year. Her class then communicates with the schools via email, online journals, real-time chat and videoconferencing.

### **Her 2002-2003 project is:**

#### **Moose on the Loose**

[www.bathpublicschools.com/fms/Bears/bearindex.htm](http://www.bathpublicschools.com/fms/Bears/bearindex.htm)

Her 2001-2002 project was called **The Three Bears Wide Wonderful World Tour**. Two sections of the project involved students communicating in real time:

1. In 2001 she did a real-time chat with Moorak Primary School in South Australia using ePals. Students chatted about animals and weather in their respective areas.
2. In 2002, she had a videoconference with a school in Peru. The advantage of the video was that students could see the bear they'd sent to Peru, and the Peruvian students could see a souvenir hat that they'd sent to Donna's class.

For both groups of students this made the videoconference a real and moving experience.

The classes used the features on **www.timeanddate.com** for helping with time zone calculations to decide on a time for their sessions. Her students came to school early or back in the evening for a pyjama party. These sessions were informal, with students taking turns asking questions.

Donna sees videoconferencing as an incredible opportunity for teachers although there are technical problems to be resolved, such as the need for good bandwidth and being able to connect around a school firewall.

### **These are her comments and suggestions for teachers starting out:**

I'll admit, my first videoconference two years ago was a bit intimidating initially, but within a few minutes I was enthusiastically hooked on this as a viable and educationally sound means of communication for young students.

Videoconferencing with 6 to 9 year olds is not as scary or complicated as it sounds. With an external microphone and speakers, rather than a headset, all the class may easily speak and hear. Aiming the webcam at the area directly in front of the computer keeps the students facing the other class while they are talking to them and watching them. If the camera is located a metre or so behind the computer, the students aren't able to get their faces up too close. Being young, they need to be reminded that our class isn't the only one seeing that silly face! Keeping the local picture a thumbnail size also discourages focusing on our own images!

Avoiding student wait time is important, so equipment should be tested to make sure it is working before the students arrive. An initial conference between the teachers helps assure that there will be no glitches in the system.

Conference with a purpose. Through prior email contacts, school webpage visits and study of maps our class becomes familiar with the class they are going to see. A prearranged topic or a brainstormed list of questions to ask keeps students focused and the exchange active. Student work or items to show the other class also prompt good conversation and add interest.

By simply picking up the webcam and SLOWLY scanning the room, students can see how our classrooms are the same and different. How exciting it is to be able to see each other's classrooms!

The process is connected, integrated and totally motivating. The impact is immeasurable and far-reaching.

### **Would you like to participate?**

#### **Your students can:**

1. **Contribute information for her class website:**  
[www.bathpublicschools.com/fms/Bears/bearindex.htm](http://www.bathpublicschools.com/fms/Bears/bearindex.htm)  
Send information about your area by going to the bottom of the page and having your students respond to any subjects listed there. Donna will publish it on the website.
2. **Join her in a videoconference when her class starts school in September 2002.**

### **Do you have more questions about videoconferencing?**

#### **Contact:**

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