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WIDE WORLD EXPERIENCES
IN THE REAL WORLD

myVIEW



from left to right:
Jill Stonehouse,
Bridget Walters,
Shelly Fournier,
and Betsy Carter

My View: The WIDE World Team Experience

By Betsy Carter, Freetown/Lakeville School District

LAST WINTER, MY DIRECTOR OF INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAMS presented an opportunity for teachers from my school district to take an online math course offered by WIDE World at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. There was a new twist involved in this course offering. You had to sign up to work with a team of teachers from your own school, and speak online in one voice.

Never having taken an online course, this fifty-two-year-old dinosaur was a bit hesitant. Younger teachers at my grade level, who had all recently gotten their Masters' Degrees, some with online courses, convinced me that this was do-able. However, we were all a bit nervous about a Harvard math course. After all, we were second grade teachers from a small community in southeastern Massachusetts. We were about to get ourselves involved with *math people* from around the world! So we took the challenge (the course was paid for by the school district) and that's how Shelly Fournier, Bridget Walters, Jill Stonehouse, and I became *The Freetown Four!*

The course was called *Teaching Math Fundamentals on the Way to Algebraic Thinking in Elementary School*. We had a two week period in which to go online and fill in information about ourselves to share with the other course participants, most of whom were taking the course on their own. There were math teachers from Europe, South America, and Australia registered for this same course, and a number of folks from Cape Cod. It was fun to read about these people and spend a little time "chatting" with them before the course began.

The course was set up in 6 two-week sessions and ran from February through May of 2005. Since Shelly had the most experience with online courses, she offered to be *the voice* for the first session. We all did the readings and the activities that were assigned and sat down to write our group response together, and we were at a loss. We spent an hour and a half and had about seven sentences typed out. We had no collective voice. Yikes, this wasn't working for us! The problem was that no one dared to express their thoughts openly, for fear that we might not all be thinking the same thoughts. We didn't want anyone to feel left out or off-track or

WIDE World
Professional Development
at the Harvard Graduate
School of Education
14 Story Street, 5th Floor
Cambridge, MA 02138
Fax: +1-617-496-5191

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off-base. So, we switched to Plan B. Everyone would go home and attack the responses on their own, then e-mail them to each other, where they could be written and read in privacy. It worked! We all came at the responses from a different angle and everything fell into place. Phew! So Shelly was able to compile the responses and post them in plenty of time — ahead of the deadlines.

We continued on into the second session with Bridget taking on the role of the voice. Reading assignments and responses were handled in Plan B mode, working as individuals to create group thoughts. Finally we had a hands-on assignment to work on with students in our classrooms. That changed our whole dynamic! Once we had firsthand experience with the kids and their responses to math literature and work with T charts, The Freetown Four truly became one voice, empowered by our students and their positive reactions to new methods of instruction, new modes of questioning, and new understandings of math concepts. From that moment on, we had no problem discussing what we were doing and learning.

As the sessions progressed, so did we progress as a team. Jill became the voice in Session 3. It seemed like all we talked about was math. Before school, at lunch, after school: math, math, math. Our students were becoming more confident. We were “algebra-fying” everything we could! We had never had such great 7- and 8-year-old problem solvers before!

Assignments evolved and we were all gaining a better “understanding of understanding”, and “teaching for understanding”, thanks to our able instructor. We were also receiving great feedback and great questions from our study coach and from our classmates. Our thoughts were being validated by others, by real math people. It was a heady feeling that we were able to keep up with this group of people that we had come to admire so much.

Finally, Session 4, it was my turn to be the voice. I had gotten pretty good at responding to my classmates’ postings and I was feeling somewhat confident that I could do this job of responding for all of us. My biggest problem, being the dinosaur, was that I didn’t know how to do even the simplest editing functions, like copying, cutting, and pasting, so that I could post our responses. The team responded to my dilemma and gave me computer literacy study sessions, and I wasn’t even embarrassed! We truly were a team!

I think we were all a little saddened four weeks later when the course came to an end. I think that we thought our conversations would end, but we find that we are more in tune with each other now, stretching our conversations beyond math topics, out across the curriculum. We became very active in the selection process of a new math text for our district, based upon the knowledge we had gained and shared through the WIDE World course.

We just launched the new program in September and the team approach has kept us afloat as we prepare new lessons and materials. It’s an exciting time for us as we start to work with a whole new batch of second graders. What we accomplished with our students last year in five months with WIDE’s help was amazing. We look forward to watching ten months growth with this year’s crop!

As a professional development opportunity, this team approach helped us, not only in improving math instruction, but in proving that team work is a big part of the future for all educators for years to come. I know that we will never go back to “go it alone” education.

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