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COMPUTERS AND ABORIGINAL LITERACY

*K. Darvall

INTRODUCTION

Kids love computers. Computers are not seen as work but rather, games.

I believe this to be true for most children. The exception would be the young computer buffs who become hooked on computer technology, and even for these computer buffs, it is probably still a game.

Computer technology has become a fact of everyday life. We're all affected by computer technology. With this in mind, I believe it is essential that all children become familiar with computers, with regular 'hands on' experience. With the right selection of software, schools can incorporate computer-assisted learning across the curriculum. The experiences children have now with computers can lead to a variety of job opportunities in future years.

OUTLINE OF THE APPROACH TAKEN AT WEILMORINGLE

The course of literacy at Weilmoringle took a major change this year. These changes were:

1. A thematic approach taken in language arts to incorporate spelling and writing.
2. The commencement of the Wytaliba Aboriginal Studies Project (funded under a Multicultural Grant) with its objectives of :
 - . children developing a knowledge and understanding of their Aboriginal culture and heritage;
 - . the development of resource materials that were relevant to the children/community and their learning;
 - . recording valuable aspects of local cultural importance for use within the school/community.

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As another aim was to bring the local community 'into the school' by bridging the gap between home and the "white fellas" school, the direct involvement of the Aboriginal community was essential to the success of this project.

3. The development of Weilmoringle Readers - published stories that children had produced during thematic work or as part of the Wytaliba Aboriginal Studies Project.

4. The development of Wytaliba Word Lists, which listed local dialect words that were still being used within the community. Once the lists had been established, children were encouraged to use their own vocabulary in written and spoken forms within the school.

COMPUTERS

In 1985, I was not satisfied with the Primary spelling program. We were using Quota and it was failing. Children had no desire to increase personal quotas. Weekly lists were irrelevant and weekly testing results made you wonder whether any time was being spent on spelling. Out of a class of 24 children, two would consistently make no errors. For the remainder, it would be a good result if children could make less than 75% errors.

The course of action taken was:

1. Purchase of the CARE spelling program.
2. Scrapping Quota and developing a weekly thematic unit which incorporated spelling, process writing, as well as language arts, social studies, etc.
3. Purchase of Lego learning materials (Wall Lego) with children putting up their spelling lists each week on the wall boards.

The CARE spelling program caters for our four spelling levels. Each week, forty words lists are changed on the program (which takes 7 minutes). Each day, every child will use this spelling program to check and spell their individual lists for the current week.

In 1985, the school was fortunate to receive an Apple 2E computer, disc drive and printer, courtesy of CAP. Eventually, the school received copies of Bank Street Writer and Magic Slate, two word processing programs and Print Shop, a program that designs

letterheads, signs, cards, etc. These programs were generally used by teachers to print children's stories. These stories soon developed into booklets. The fascinating part was that children who had difficulty with their Endeavour Reading Books were able to read and were enjoying these booklets, even though the language used was at a higher level than that used in their Endeavour Readers.

In 1986, we have been developing Weilmoringle Readers, where booklets covering a topic are published using the word processor. A copy of these booklets is sent home to each family. In addition, each child receives a copy at school, with extra copies being placed in the library and class reading areas. These are popular readers.

ABORIGINAL LITERACY

Any literacy program must involve parents. Any literacy program must also cater for the parents' development in literacy, and not just the child's literacy development.

By sending home copies of the Weilmoringle Readers, parents are able to -

- witness some of the work the children are producing at school;
- feel pleased that their children are learning to read and write;
- feel proud that what is being read and/or written is meaningful, and they are very interested in the readers because it is local and they can understand what is going on (e.g., the early years at Denewan; going emu egg collecting; going porcupine hunting). The children have got to want to read. These readers have now got children (and parents) wanting to read. For some, it is providing enjoyment in reading for the first time.

Our thematic approach this year has brought some exciting results, especially in spelling. During this term almost every child has not been making any errors in spelling, and only the odd error in dictation. During one week, with the class theme on Pirates, every child in Primary correctly spelt their weekly list and not a single error was made in dictation. I have never seen this before in any classroom situation that I have been associated with. This success in spelling has got parents involved and interested in weekly results and the spelling development of their children.

The Wytaliba Aboriginal Studies Project this year has incorporated three important elements towards a successful literacy program.

1. In small groups, children have been listening to parents about various cultural aspects of their heritage. (*Use of oral language, involvement of parents.*)
2. The children have been using these experiences to produce their stories into Weilmoringle Readers. (*Reading and writing are relevant and meaningful and there is an interested audience.*)
3. The development of the Wytaliba Word Lists has led to the use of local words in the classroom both in written and oral forms. (*Respect the importance of their own language.*)

The Wytaliba Project has also incorporated the use of video. The first local production (Porcupine Hunting) also shows that it is an ideal resource for stimulus in the literacy program.

RESULTS

Since 1985, the school has consciously changed from the "white fella's" school to "our school". The Wytaliba Aboriginal Studies Project has positively developed the self-esteem of individuals within the school/community which has given everyone the confidence to try and achieve.

The literacy aspects of the project have stimulated the children to success. Computers have been an important part of their success as a means of publishing stories, as well as a means of learning their weekly lists in an exciting way. During the term, in spelling children on an average have improved 6 months (Schonell Spelling Age Test). In reading, the average improvement was 2 months in accuracy and 5 months in comprehension (Neale Reading Analysis). The result in spelling is the first time in 18 months that the class has shown any improvement. The reading result is approximately the same as previously. The big difference in reading has been the attitude. Children now want to get a book out to read. They are enjoying reading.

CONCLUSION

Computers and computer-assisted learning brings a different approach to learning. Children enjoy computers and their results. It is not seen as school work, so they are easily motivated and interested. Consequently more benefit is derived from such computer-assisted programs in the areas of spelling, reading and writing, than a lot of activities that occur everyday in classrooms. Computers should also be seen as excellent for self-esteem, as well as providing an instant result in activities. The friendly computer can sometimes be a better teacher than the teacher who chastises the child for making the slightest of errors. The friendly teacher can provide a lot more support to the Aboriginal children than the unfriendly teacher.

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SHARE YOUR SUCCESSES

The Aboriginal Child at School is designed principally to be a national forum whereby teachers of Aboriginal children may exchange insights about their students' learning, and teaching strategies they have developed that have proved successful.

Readers of the Journal find the practical teaching ideas developed by teachers in the field to cater for the specific characteristics of their students, school and community, particularly valuable.

The Aboriginal Child at School is able to accept articles and ideas in almost any form - handwritten text, tape recordings, notes, as well as typewritten material can be transcribed and prepared for publication.

Please share your ideas and successes.

"PITTUMA"

ABORIGINAL ARTS

CRAFT

AND RESOURCE CENTRE

P O Box E6, Emerton, N.S.W. 2770

Phone (02) 628 1118

We are writing to introduce our new Aboriginal Arts, Craft and Resource Centre called *Pittuma*, which means "In Search Of".

We are located in Emerton at 42 Copeland Road, which is in the Mt Druitt area.

OUR AIMS ARE:

- . To educate young Aborigines about their culture and heritage and to give them pride in their ancestry.
- . To educate the whole community on the true history and to create a better awareness.
- . For the Aboriginal and general community to have access to Aboriginal arts and crafts and culture.
- . Make it easy for the community to obtain knowledge.
- . To collate and gather all materials necessary to provide the community with knowledge of culture and heritage.
- . For teachers and students to have access to information and resources to be able to partake in in-depth studies.

- . To have a variety of ways and resources from which to learn.
- . To provide a bulletin board to have all information about Aboriginal organisations, meetings, and what they're about, etc.
- . To conduct a variety of workshop events involving teaching and participation in Aboriginal art forms: bringing together speakers, storytellers, dancers, theatre groups, artists, craft people and music from within and without the Western Region of New South Wales.

We would like all organisations to take full advantage of our facilities by keeping us up-to-date on any meetings, functions and sporting events that may be taking place both in the Sydney and country areas. We will have a bulletin board situated in the Centre for the whole community to be kept up-to-date on Aboriginal affairs.

Any information or pamphlets that pertain to the Aboriginal community would be greatly appreciated. If you have any information could you please forward it to our Centre, or feel free to phone and speak to either one of us. Our office is open from 9.00 till 3.00, Monday to Wednesday.

Lyne Murray

Denise Mundine

Liaison Officers