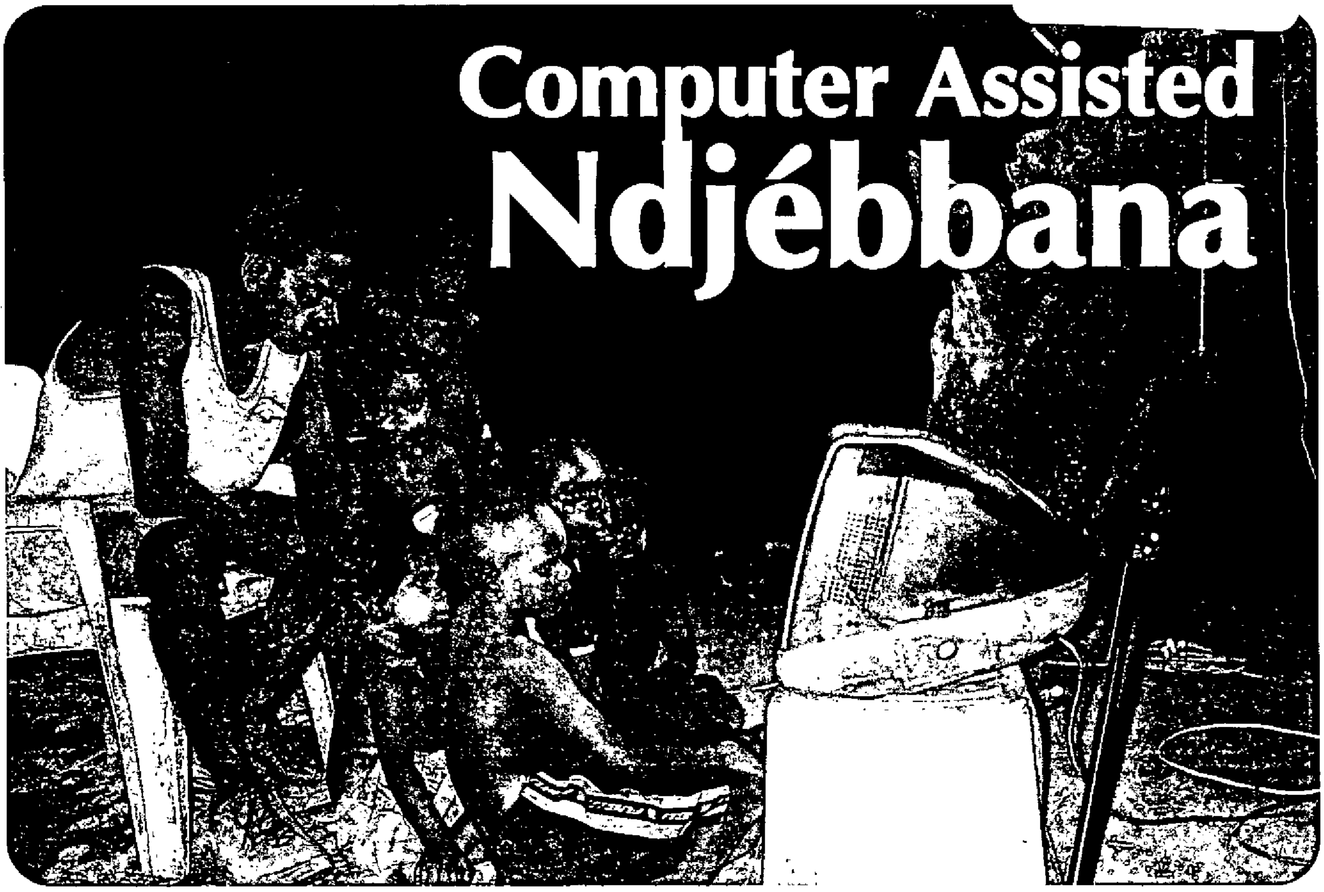
Computer Assisted Ndjébbana



Many urban teachers use talking books as a matter of course. In a remote community which simply didn't have any, Glenn Auld solved the problem with sophisticated technology and a sense of purpose

Computer Assisted Ndjébbana focuses on the use of the computer to assist in the teaching and learning of Ndjébbana. The 150 Kunibídji, who all live in Maningrida, are the only speakers of Ndjébbana, which is their first language. Due to the unique historical and social context of Maningrida, most Kunibídji children learn to speak English as their third or fourth language when they come to school.

When the Kunibídji children first arrive at school, they learn to read and write in their first language as part of the Ndjébbana Bilingual Program. The students are gradually exposed to more English at school as they get older.

Development of Computer Assisted Ndjébbana

I arrived to teach a Kunibídji class around the same time that multimedia computers were being introduced to the school. The students obviously enjoyed using them. Whether the interactivity of the computer appealed to the visual and spatial skills of the children, or the computer was an escape from my high levels of English (O'Donoghue 1992), I could see the potential for the use of a computer loaded with Ndjébbana.

However the computer was only loaded with English software. I began to wonder what message this was sending to the students and how hard it would be to put Ndjébbana on the computer. It was not a simple matter of ringing up the local ABC shop and buying a Ndjébbana interactive CD. They don't exist.

So with lots to help from the Kunibídji community and the teachers at the school, I made one. I had to learn the scripting behind two multimedia programs to make a simple Ndjébbana Talking Book that highlighted the text as it was read. When digital cameras came, they integrated well with the new Ndjébbana talking books.

The creation of the Ndjébbana talking books involved making a storyboard and getting pictures with the digital camera. The texts were jointly negotiated back at school and once they were checked the Ndjébbana talking books was made.

The computer was taken around the community in the afternoon session of school where different Kunibídji were recorded reading or repeating the texts. Although the first Ndjébbana talking books had simple phonic activities, through a set of counters we could tell they were not used much.

One of the problems about including the phonic activities was that it took a long time to produce each talking book. The children were soon bored with the small number of Ndjébbana talking books. More were made with an aim to include as many Kunibídji as possible in their production. New Ndjébbana talking books were made as the students acted out pictures in old Ndjébbana texts. The photos that were taken of the students were used in the new Ndjébbana talking books. Some older books were recoloured and used as well.

The digital Ndjébbana talking books complemented the printed books used in the classroom, giving the children a choice of media. However the distribution of the finished product was only available at school. While the 'roadville' children of Maningrida were going to bed after using the Internet at home, the Kunibídji children did not have access to bedtime stories on a digital medium in their own language. The use of new technologies in an informal context had the potential to improve their command of print literacy.

After trialling a touch screen in the preschool, some more were purchased through an Aboriginal Benefits Trust grant. One of these is in the picture above. Using the touch screens, the children could turn the pages of the book by touching the screen. While the parents were close by, the children had access on demand to any of the 96 talking books. Some videoing around the computer suggested discourse in Ndjébbana included simple reading, critical commentaries and even some questions about sultanas (centre left of photo).

Reflections

By now a lot of you are probably thinking, What does this have to do with my teaching situation? Well, there are some generalisations that are useful. First we can create new literacy spaces using technology. By moving the computer from the classroom to the Kunibídji community, it was transformed from an on-line connected workstation in a classroom to an off-line multimedia Ndjébbana resource located in an informal context. The computers capabilities were matched to the language learning needs of the students (Wyatt 1988). The touch screen without a keyboard or mouse was the best solution to promote access of the talking books in an informal context.

A second generalisation is the approach to technology. While we are familiar with critical approaches to literacy, the basis of the transformation rests with a critical approach to technology. As teachers, we need to manipulate technology to suit the students, 'rather than be led purely by the capabilities of the latest technical innovation' (Levy 1997, p. xi). There is a potential for large amounts of totally inappropriate spending where this critical approach is not taken, particularly in a bilingual context.

The Internet was not a good solution for the Kunibídji's first language needs, as they all live in Maningrida. The Internet would also exclude the informal location of the computer around the Kunibídji houses. While most Kunibídji houses have power, only a handful have phones.

The development of Ndjébbana Talking Books on touch screens is an example of deconstructing the computer for the possibilities. Just as we transform and select texts to match our students needs we should also transform and select technologies. I am not suggesting we all need to know how to program a computer or pull it apart. However we need to send clear messages to the students that we are not dominated by technology and we are prepared to 'tinker' with technology. As there is a reciprocal relationship between technology and literacy, a critical approach to literacy will be jeopardised by a functional approach to technology.

The third generalisation worth discussing is the multimodality of new digital technologies. As we are now able to scaffold print with a variety of media channels, we can include people who are struggling with print literacy. One example is the recordings on the Ndjébbana talking book by older Kunibídji who can not read. They repeated the words as a Kunibídji younger literacy worker read them. The old people's speech is now highlighted as it is read in some Ndjébbana talking books, teaching the younger students how to read. Digital technologies combined with innovative practice can include people who have been systemically excluded from the literacy production process.

The hybridity and intertextuality of multimodality is worth considering (New London Group 1996) as well. Digital technologies enable us to make a variety of new texts from old and new resources (hybridity) and link the reader of the text to the author or characters in the text (inter-textuality). The creation of contextualised resources using new digital technologies is a powerful tool for teachers of disempowered students.

The final generalisation that was valuable in this project was the separation of the creation and presentation of the literacy resources. The collaboration between indigenous and non-indigenous people during the creation of the Ndjébbana Talking Books was different Ndjébbana discourse that was spoken between young and old Kunibídji interacting around the touch screen. It is useful to plan for different spaces, time, people and media when creating and presenting digital literacy resources. Where we can push for flexible and innovative uses of technology and literacy, the domain of the classroom will change to make it more relevant to the students.

Glenn Auld has taught in Maningrida for the past eight years. He is now feeling the cold in Ballarat completing a PhD in Computer Assisted Ndjébbana. Contact him at wamud@ozemail.com.a

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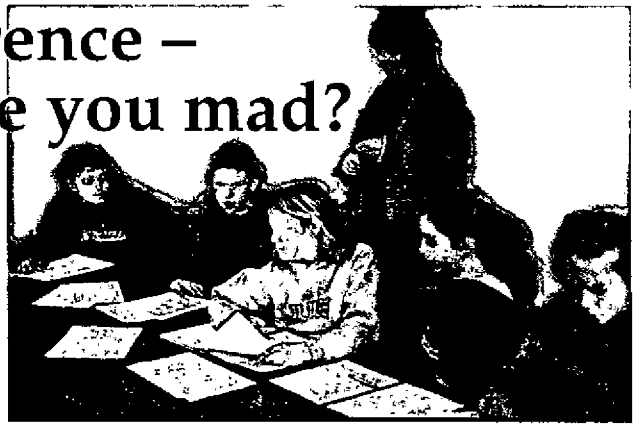
Kids making a difference – are you mad?



Back in October 1999 we published an article by Helen Stearman – *Junior School Councils, More than a Game!* – which looked at some of the ways we can develop literacy through enhancing democratic processes with our students. That article suggested that we needed to give JSCs (or SRCs) roles of real value, not a token place in the curriculum.

Anne Nelson, AP at Spensley St Primary in Clifton Hill, Victoria, has been working with her Junior School Council on this question of values, using the *r.u.MAD?* Program.

r.u.MAD? is described as a values-based toolkit for teachers to involve their students in community projects, with the aim of going beyond charity to contribute to real change.

Full details of the program can be downloaded from www.rumad.org.au. The acronym stands for *Are You Making A Difference?* (in the community!)

Spensley Street's JSC comprises representatives from 15 homegroups, with kids from Grades 2 to 6. They normally meet every fortnight for an hour and a half. Early in the year Anne used *r.u.MAD?*'s Values Workshop to establish the children's shared core values. This took two working sessions, and the class reps then took the stated values back to their homegroups for further discussion. At the next meeting additions or revisions were discussed and a final list drawn up.

Friendship, having fun, generosity and valuing family then became the 'mission statement' underpinning the further work of the JSC. This included organising a MAD Day with videos, sausage sizzle and busking. $800 was raised and put aside by the students to be given away later to causes that met the criteria listed in the values statement.

The literacy involved in this work has been considerable – speaking and listening, obviously, in the clarification of values, plus keeping minutes, writing agendas, reporting back to homegroups, writing reports for the Parent Bulletin, designing and producing posters for MAD Day, negotiating with the local butcher and bakers for very cheap sausages and bread, attending the adult School Council to explain their processes and activities, and budgeting and mathematical book-keeping with the fund raising.

The JSC is now operating as a junior version of a philanthropic foundation, raising money (banked by the Bursar) and granting it later to community groups in accordance with their shared core values. The students also have a decision making role in the redesign of the school grounds and provision of new play equipment.

r.u.MAD? has been used by over 50 Victorian schools in a variety of ways, including JSC work and programs for leadership and resilience. Brunswick South West PS, for example, has written one its Charter Priorities around the concept. Many Secondary Colleges are using it for Middle Years projects that engage kids, involving them in networks and partnerships outside the classroom and get them using their literacy for authentic purposes.

Note: John Davidson, Coordinating Editor of Practically Primary *was seconded from Spensley St PS during 2002 to work as Schools Coordinator with the Education Foundation on the* r.u.MAD? *project. He wrote this after discussion with Anne Nelson, AP at Spensley Street PS. Contact Anne at nelson@unite.com.au*