

By Kathleen Kennedy Manzo

Kristen Riley was having trouble understanding one of the minor characters in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*. With a project due the next day for her English class, which required her to take on the role of Wemmick, she needed some deeper insight into the character. And she needed it fast. So the 10th grade honors student at Ocean City High School in New Jersey did what she normally does when she needs help with an assignment and doesn't have time to consult with teachers or classmates: She logged on to the Internet and

linked to an online tutor.

Within minutes of checking into a chat room devoted to high school English, a teacher pointed her to excerpts in the book that give clues about the essence of the obscure clerk, suggested World Wide Web sites with analyses of the novel, and provided some tips for playing the role. The session helped Ms. Riley earn a top grade on the assignment last fall.

Like Ms. Riley, thousands of other Internet-savvy students are taking advantage of a growing number of online tutoring services and homework-help sites that connect them with encyclopedias and subject-area links, or with teachers, college

students, or software programs to answer specific questions.

But while many of the students—and their parents—seem generally pleased with the services, little is known about their effect on academic performance. And some child-safety advocates worry that such services may be ripe for misuse by adults who prey on minors.

Loyal Audiences

"I use the [online tutors] when I'm having trouble with homework or I need a critique of an essay," said Ms. Riley, who prides herself on the assignment last fall.

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Tutoring Services Pose Potential Risks, Educators Warn

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marily relies on America Online's Ask A Teacher site. "They find out what you need, and then give excellent help."

For Ms. Riley, that means logging on a few times a month for guidance in English, science, and Spanish. Her brother, John, a 6th grader, finds similar help with his social studies and science homework.

The AOL site, which has chat rooms for subjects at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, claims 5,000 young visitors each week.

Newer and lesser-known sites have also found loyal audiences among students adept at using the Web as a resource for completing schoolwork.

"As more and more students have access to the Internet at home and at school... services like this are growing rapidly," said Linda Roberts, the director of the U.S. Department of Education's office of technology.

The keyword "tutoring" brings up dozens of sites on major Web browsers. They range from highly structured services linked to corporate sites to a more home-spun variety run by teachers and students.

The services offer a variety of options, including one-on-one interaction with teachers via computer, referrals for face-to-face

tutoring in regions throughout the country, and links to sites with lessons and resources on thousands of topics.

AOL, which has more than 1,200 volunteer tutors to answer students' queries within a few minutes to a few hours, has been providing the free tutoring service for customers for years. But most tutoring sites are brand-new ventures, or expanded services offered by established education-oriented companies.

GoMath.com, for example, launched its free service last October. Other services, with names like Tutor.com, 1800Tutor.com, and TopTutors.com, have all cropped up within the past year or so. Many of the sites answer students' queries within a day or two.

But with a dizzying array of Internet-based resources providing nearly immediate help in finding needed answers and gathering background information, students spoiled by the speed of cyberspace rarely want to wait that long.

Internet entrepreneurs are taking heed and making plans to enhance and expedite their services.

By spring, GoMath, a service sponsored by Cubic Science, a software company, will expand and begin offering immediate contact with tutors. Tutor.com and 1800Tutor.com Inc., which offer a database of private tutors willing to conduct face-to-

face sessions with students for hourly fees, are also adding online services.

Unlike AOL and GoMath, other companies are betting that customers are willing to pay for tutors, who set rates that range from \$15 to \$200 an hour for students from kindergarten through college for both online and face-to-face meetings.

"After we launched our site, we learned that about half the people wanted a tutor online," said George Cigale, the president of Tutor.com, which is a partner of the Princeton Review, a well-known test-preparation company.

Tutor.com, which until now has been a database of 8,000 tutors almost exclusively advertising face-to-face instruction, launched its fastMatch service last month to link tutors to students online.

"The real push has been to provide a way for someone to easily find a tutor according to their criteria and connect with them immediately," Mr. Cigale said.

Safety Issues

As with any consumer service, and particularly with Internet offerings, the Education Department's Ms. Roberts warns that the user should beware.

"There are important questions to ask of any service," she

said. "The more responsible [tutoring sites] use qualified teachers, they do a lot of training of their tutors, and... they provide support materials."

Experts concerned about children's safety on the Internet also suggest that tutoring services should take steps to screen out potential criminals.

Though there have been no known reports of tutors trying to take advantage of students they meet online, such sites could provide backdoor access to children, said Ruben D. Rodriguez, the director of the exploited-child unit at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. In the past two years, the center's cyber-tip hot line has received more than 14,000 tips of possible cases of child abuse and exploitation that were initiated via the Internet.

"You can be anyone you want on the Internet," Mr. Rodriguez said. "It is an anonymous medium... a perfect environment for pedophiles."

America Online's Ask A Teacher program requires tutors to submit to lengthy academic- and criminal-background checks, and their interaction with and responses to children are overseen by a room monitor. AOL also provides preservice training for tutors and monthly staff meetings to allow volunteers to discuss problems and share ideas.

Verification of teaching qualifications and references are common for other sites as well, but few screen tutors for any potential red flags in their dealings with children.

Some services are working to lessen the risk of linking children with potential predators by providing the tutors with the services of investigative agencies to verify their clean records—if they so choose to undergo the background checks at their own expense.

Most sites, however, do not re-

quire a search of tutors' criminal histories, leaving it up to students and their parents to ask such questions.

"Many parents have requested background checks, and we tell our tutors that if they have had a background check, they are more likely to get clients," Mr. Cigale said.

Cyber-Classroom

The new medium has other trouble spots to work out as well. A review of homework and tutoring sites by *The New York Times* last month found many of them to be impressive, but said some were difficult to navigate, had lengthy response times, or were disappointing in content. The reviewer, Alice Keim, also found "that it is easy to get almost too much help—good news for the student who needs a quick fix and potentially bad news for parents and teachers."

Ms. Keim said that online tutors may not be able to separate those students truly in need from those who are simply looking for an easy way out of homework. Besides, she wrote, students cannot be certain that the information and advice they receive is correct, although some site sponsors have gone to great lengths to ensure accuracy.

Evidence on whether tutoring online makes an academic difference for students remains largely anecdotal. The relatively new phenomenon has yet to undergo the scrutiny of independent research.

Some studies on the effect of face-to-face tutoring, while somewhat dated, suggest a number of key factors in the most effective programs, including appropriate and ongoing training of instructors, consistent and regular interaction between tutors and students, and a connection with classroom teachers. But those findings may not translate well into tutoring's

Cyber-Tutors

Here are several of the tutoring services available through the Internet:

America Online: Homework rooms for various grade levels and subjects are staffed with online tutors most weeknights and during some weekend hours. Students can link to the chat rooms by using the keywords "homework" or "Ask A Teacher." The service is free for AOL customers.

Algebra Online: Free online tutoring and information service in algebra. www.algebra-online.com.

Go Math Online Tutoring: Free online help in mathematics for K-12 students. www.gomath.com.

Tutor.com: Provides a database of tutors offering online and face-to-face services in academic and nonacademic subjects. Tutors set own hourly rates, which can range from \$15 to \$200. www.tutor.com.

1800Tutors.com: Provides a database of tutors available for face-to-face tutoring. Expects to launch database of online tutors later this year. Tutors set own hourly rates, which can range from \$15 to \$200. www.1800tutor.com.

TopTutors.com: Connects students with tutors in various subjects both online and by Internet-linked phone. Headsets and software provided. Costs \$39 per one-hour session, with most students needing five to nine sessions. www.toptutors.com.

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growing cyberworld.

Online tutors, for example, generally don't know the identities or academic backgrounds of the students they are counseling. Often they will work with them only once or twice, or sporadically on different topics or projects. Thus, it may be hard to develop the kind of personal relationship that is commonly seen as a big advantage of more traditional tutoring.

But students who have grown up with online technology are often comfortable communicating by keyboard. And promoters of the sites point to their popularity as proof that they are beneficial.

Mary Frances Riley, Kristen Riley's mother and a kindergarten teacher at Ocean City Primary School, agrees. The chat rooms, she argues, are similar to classrooms, despite the lack of furniture and the physical distance separating participants.

The elder Ms. Riley was a tutor in the Ask A Teacher elementary reading room for the past two years. During that stint, she vol-

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unteered four hours or more a week during the evening hours, when the chat room is usually "full" of curious and confused students seeking help.

Ms. Riley said it was easy to get to know students who repeatedly sought assistance; she became adept at recognizing the phrasing and frequency of their questions, or their focus on a particular topic.

Teachers trained to spot troublemakers in the classroom can easily do so online as well, she said.

The occasional class clown will ask for a date, type zzzz's on screen to indicate boredom, or submit a facetious question such as "Where do babies come from?" Unlike in a regular classroom, though, the teacher can end the session and ban the errant typist permanently, Ms. Riley said.

Overall, she said, the help room is a lively, friendly place full of students eager to learn and teachers eager to help.

"It's like I'm an invisible teacher, and the rewards are similar to what I get from teaching," Ms. Riley said of her volunteer experience. "When you are working with a child who doesn't understand something, and then you see the light bulb go off... it makes you very happy for that child."

New Company Hopes To Score Big With Online Advanced Placement Courses

By Andrew Trotter

Eric Delaney knew his first online course—an Advanced Placement U.S. government offering he took last fall—would be a new kind of experience for him.

But the senior, a top student at Marceline (Mo.) High School, didn't expect it would be so tough, and he was taken aback by the score on his first essay: 38 out of 50.

"That doesn't happen real often," Mr. Delaney, 18, recently said of the low mark, which put his perfect 4.0 grade point average at risk.

He recovered by semester's end. But the course, he said, was unlike the usual fare at Marceline High, a 210-student school that offers only one AP course of its own, in calculus. Looking back, he said the online study gave him a taste of the academic demands he expects to face in college.

Mr. Delaney is now taking an AP course in microeconomics online from the same company offering the government course—Apex Learning Inc.

Started in 1998 with a major investment from Paul Allen, a co-founder of Microsoft Corp., Apex has quickly become the most-talked-about player in the expanding niche of online Advanced Placement instruction.

Nationwide, Apex's current four courses—calculus, statistics, government, and microeconomics—are in about 100 schools this year. That number is expected to increase dramatically as the Bellevue, Wash.-based company launches additional courses and begins a broad marketing drive.

Apex recently formed a partnership with Edison Schools Inc., the prominent school management company, and one of its financial backers, which will use Apex's courses and online professional development for Edison's teachers. And it agreed to a marketing deal with Kaplan Educational Centers, a subsidiary of the Washington Post Co., in which the two companies will sell Apex's AP exam-review materials under a joint brand in the consumer market.

An Attractive Niche

Apex's online competitors include several nonprofit, university-based programs; PA Homeschoolers Inc., a family business based in Kittanning, Pa., that offers 12 AP courses for home schoolers; and Class.com, a for-profit venture owned by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Class.com's courses aren't aligned specifically to AP tests, but they are taught at an advanced level.

One reason for the growing interest in online Advanced Placement courses is that many students lack access to such coursework in their schools. Over 40 percent of the nation's high schools offer no AP courses, according to the College Board, the New York City-based nonprofit organization that owns and governs the exams.

Advanced Placement courses, generally recognized as having greater depth than standard high school curricula, are intended to prepare students to take AP exams. Colleges and universities award credit for a high score on the exams.

But many high schools find it difficult or impossible to hire qualified teachers in AP subjects; others say they can't afford to pay for classes that might be attended by only a handful of students.

"We allow schools to incrementally add high-quality classroom experiences, one student at a time," Bryan Barnett, Apex's chief academic officer, said.

The company's courses have been warmly received in its home state of Washington, said Larry E. Norwood, the project coordinator of the state's Internet-based-curriculum grants project.

Mr. Norwood is overseeing the distribution of \$500,000 in state money over two years to support purchases of online AP courses. More than 300 students, at 53 schools statewide are participating this year; about 80 percent of the students are using Apex courses, which costs

the online government course from a teacher in Walla Walla, Wash. The school paid a reduced tuition rate because it agreed to be a pilot-test site.

The online option gives the small, rural school a way to offer advanced courses for some of its best students, said Melody Potter, a guidance counselor who oversees the experiment. "It's hard to be able to justify teaching a section with two kids in it," she said.

School officials got really interested after last May's AP test results came out. All four students in the online government course scored at least a 3 out of 5—high enough to earn college credit, Ms. Potter said. In four years, the school's own AP-level calculus course has yet to produce a single such score.

Marceline's experience was mirrored in other high schools that participated in Apex's small trial. Of the total 40 students who completed the company's courses last year, 37 took AP exams, and 31 earned a 3, 4, or 5.

Jamey T. Fitzpatrick, the vice president for development and educational policy of



Marceline (Mo.) High School offers only one Advanced Placement course, but senior Eric Delaney has been able to take more AP courses using a computer in Melody Potter's office.

\$395 per semester course per student.

"Apex started out with a pretty good price and an excellent product, and they've been able to corner a great share of that market," Mr. Norwood said.

The company's formula starts with providing an experienced AP teacher for each online class. Enrollment is capped at 25 students, who can be located at schools anywhere in the world.

Lessons draw on sophisticated tutoring software, students' research on the Internet, and online discussions, as well as conventional textbooks and other readings. An Apex teacher e-mails students daily assignments and weekly progress reports, which are also sent to the school and the students' parents.

Apex also provides versions of its courses that allow schools to use their own teachers, as well as review packages that prepare students for particular AP exams.

Promising Start

Marceline High's relationship with Apex began last spring, when four seniors took

Michigan Virtual University in Lansing, Mich., believes Apex could play a key role in improving the participation of the state's students in AP tests. Currently, 45 percent of Michigan's high schools don't have access to Advanced Placement curricula.

"That's a significant equity issue in this state," Mr. Fitzpatrick said. "One of the most economical ways to try to increase that number is to create alternate delivery vehicles."

MVU, a state-supported economic-development organization, is now marketing Apex courses to Michigan schools; it collects a fee for every school that signs up.

Online AP courses aren't for everyone, Mr. Barnett said, noting that about 22 percent of the students who start an Apex course do not finish it. But he underscored that the schools themselves must pitch in by tracking their students' progress.

"It's easy [for students] to subordinate an online course" to other classwork, he said, "because their regular teachers see them every day."