San Francisco Chronicle DH:2000D/68Et

Students Give Teaching Assist

Computer-savvy kids help enliven class presentations

By Elizabeth Bell
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Like many teachers, Cynthia Bowden is technologically challenged. She has taken workshops on using computers in the classroom, but when she ventures into techieland, she often gets stuck.

Now the Dublin middle-school English and history teacher has two seventh-grade students trained to help her do the job.

Bowden recently collaborated with Varun Yadav, 11, and Anthony Ziebarth, 13, to find a more interesting way to teach information from a chapter of their history textbook. The result: a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation for their peers comparing medieval European knights to Japanese samurai.

The semester-old "Generation www.Y" program at Wells Middle School in Dublin is churning out young missionaries of technology who get an impish glimmer in their eye when they speak of teaching the teachers.

It is part of a program begun by a school district in Olympia, Wash., almost four years ago that pairs technologically savvy students with teachers to help weave technology into the mainstream curriculum.

"Generation Why," as it is more commonly called, now has about 350 "franchises" throughout the United States – including the Dublin school and Los Altos High School in the Bay Area.

The program is still run by the Olympia schools. It is not for profit, but schools pay $200 per semester to become a franchise, which does not include the cost of course workbooks.

"Generation Why" includes a curriculum to teach middle- and high school students computer skills ranging from researching on the Internet to building Web pages. But beyond teaching technology skills, the program requires students to collaborate with teachers to use the technology in a classroom lesson or project.

"Kids usually know more about computers than adults do, so let's use the kids to help us," said Sandy Hare, Dublin Unified School District's director of education services.

Other Bay Area schools are also increasingly relying on students' computer expertise. At Vintage High School in Napa, network administrator Katy McVicar has trained a posse of 20 students to help teachers navigate computer glitches throughout the school day.

"This is a real-life job," said McVicar. "We're managing a real network here." McVicar said she would like to use the Generation Why model of pairing students with teachers for longer-term projects.

Integrating technology into the curriculum is often the biggest challenge in schools, said David Greene, a senior associate of the Bay Area Research Group in Palo Alto, which has researched technology use in schools.

Even teachers who know the basics of the Internet or a particular software struggle to find meaningful uses for the technology to deepen and broaden their lessons, he said.

"What's distinctive about it (Generation Why) is the teachers are bringing the curriculum side to the kids and the kids are bringing the technology side to the teacher," said Greene.

But although he gives the program credit for innovation, he wonders whether the partnership works.

"You have to know the technology to think about how to use it in the classroom," said Greene. "It's hard for me to imagine what a kid is going to teach that is going to help teachers figure it out."

This year, Wells Middle School offered the semester course to students before school, although the school board may make it part of the standard curriculum next year, said instructor Jim Gahl. Students received no course credit and no letter grade, but the school had more students interested in the class than it could serve. The sixth- to eighth-graders were selected by lottery and faithfully showed up daily at 7:15 a.m.

Students paired with teachers who assigned them a curriculum topic into which they wanted to inject some technical pizzazz. The students learned the technical skills and worked on their projects before school, meeting periodically with their partner teachers.

One seventh-grade girl was building a Web page with links to information on Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. A sixth-grade boy was putting together a computer slide show on famous artists.

While some students had never surfed the Internet, Shyam Dwaraknath, 11, already knew how to build a Web page and was well into learning his second computer language when he signed up for the class.

"I'm doing a Web page on political and inspirational world leaders like Einstein, Gandhi and Herbert Hoover," he said.

Teacher Don Miller began the course this year at Los Altos High in Los Altos. Because his is a yearlong course with older students, he goes further than Generation Why's curriculum, teaching students about computer networking and creating graphics and animation.

While some of his students paired up with teachers, helping build Web pages for various school departments, others are branching out into the community.

Renee Deboise, 16, helped a senior citizen set up her computer at home. Yang Zhang, 16, was helping create a careers Web site for teenagers that will link to the local Chamber of Commerce Web page.

Students are learning technology skills and collaborating with teachers on the curricular content of their projects, but they are having a harder time drawing teachers over to the techie side.

Bowden is counting on help from the students who helped with the history presentation this year to put together her own PowerPoint presentation on the scientific revolution.

She sees using new technology as a way to meet students on their own turf instead of relying solely on the traditional classroom lecture.

"They're living in a visual, spatial world, and technology is something they relate to, and it catches their attention," said Bowden.

For more information on the Generation www Y program, visit Genwhy.wednet.edu.