

UWO students facilitate online learning environments

by Allison Reineck - Wednesday, February 09, 2011

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/9044/uwo-students-facilitate-online-learning-environments/>

Cairo, Egypt—known as one of the oldest cities in the world and currently a place of protest—is home to alumnus Kim Nerenhausen and his fifth grade class, who are being mentored over the Internet by University of Wisconsin Oshkosh students.

Advancing science fairs through online mentor programs

In October 2010, leaders of the Near East South Asia Council of Overseas Schools Virtual Science Fair (NVSF), including UW Oshkosh Assistant Professor Eric Brunsell, came together for training and to discuss mentoring programs for fifth grade students participating in virtual science fairs throughout the Middle East.

Since NVSF added a fifth grade component to strengthen the mentoring aspect of the program, Brunsell thought it looked like a perfect fit for students in his elementary education science methods course.

“The project provides multiple opportunities to advance scholarly research into the use of communication technology to facilitate global collaboration projects between pre-college and college students,” Brunsell explained. “The experience will also benefit students as they learn how to facilitate learning in online environments, deepen their understanding of other cultures and cross-culture partnerships, and gain authentic experience in helping children develop specific science research skills.”

Not only did leaders in higher education attend the training in Cairo, but elementary and middle school teachers travelled from other countries, ranging from Kathmandu, Nepal to Tunis, Tunisia.

“The purpose of meeting in Cairo was to focus on identifying ways to help mentors better advise the children participating in the science fair,” Brunsell said. “In particular, I focused on a process that connects UWO students and high school students from participating schools as mentors for more than 150 fifth grade teams.”

According to Brunsell, the elementary and middle schools participating in the science fairs are private schools offering an “American style” of education.

“These schools are a true mixing pot of cultures and nationalities,” Brunsell said. “The term ‘minority’ is absent from their vocabulary, and many of the teachers are from the United States and Canada but have been teaching abroad for years.”

Connecting with fifth grade students in Cairo

Students currently enrolled in Brunsell’s course during the spring 2011 semester get the opportunity to mentor and interact online with Nerenhausen’s fifth grade class at the Cairo American College (CAC)

and other fifth grade classes in the Middle East. Both UW Oshkosh and CAC students get to use an online platform called Moodle, which is very similar to D2L, during the mentoring process.

“The UWO students interact via the Web in a mostly asynchronous manner throughout the spring semester, using Moodle at least twice per week,” Brunsell said. “When we can get schedules to match, we will also encourage connections between UWO students and fifth grade teams via Skype.”

Fifth grade teams are to begin their projects by identifying and creating a science investigation. Then at the end of the project, the fifth graders will showcase the projects in a community science fair at their school as well as have their projects judged online.

“The top schools from these community science fairs create a poster describing their project, similar to a poster that a scientist might present at a conference,” Brunsell said. “Then the posters and other explanatory materials are posted online for virtual judging.”

Working around current events

Due to recent protests in Egypt, Brunsell said much of the communication between him, Nerenhausen and CAC is “fragmented,” and the school in which he stood in four months ago was closed for the week of Jan. 31 with some of the students’ families and teachers evacuating.

“Teams from CAC have begun their projects but obviously have had a lot of disruptions,” Brunsell said. “Our students at UWO will be able to support CAC in a few ways, such as providing advice on parts of projects they have completed and pulling together resources from the Web to create activities students can work on while they are not at school.”

Through support from students at UW Oshkosh, children in Nerenhausen’s class that have left Cairo can easily continue their work through Moodle while they are not at school.

“This will give the children the opportunity to keep up with some of their schooling, and as communication avenues are restored, we will look for additional ways to support the teachers and students at CAC,” Brunsell said.

For more information about Near East South Asia Council of Overseas Schools Virtual Science Fair, visit <http://www.nesacenter.org>.