

Riverside students explore hometown history

If you're going to tell the story of your own community, west suburban Riverside is a good place to be. The first planned community in the U.S.—designed by Frederick Law Olmsed in the 1860s—the town is rich with historical architecture and local landmarks.

So fourth-grade students at St. Mary's School in Riverside used a digital storytelling approach for "Riverside—Then & Now," a cross-curricular project that encompassed social studies, English, technology and even fine art.

Under the guidance of teachers Tricia Spohnholtz and Antoinette Struck and technology coordinator Donna Veverka, students first spent time researching the town's history, and then set off on a walking field trip through Riverside.

Parent volunteers took students through town with stops at local landmarks such as the town's distinctive 1871 water tower, the library, and historical homes. At a number of locations, community experts met with the students to provide background and additional information; students could also walk through some of the homes included on the tour and talk to the homeowners. While on the tour, students also shot photos using digital cameras, and the teachers shot video using digital camcorders.

The students then worked together to develop a PowerPoint presentation, developing a storyboard, writing a script and assembling photos they'd shot, as well as materials such as maps and old photos they'd found through research. The presentation included an iMovie segment that the students created by editing footage of the walking tour and adding music. The final presentation was shown not only in class, but also to school parents at a "State of the School" assembly at the end of the year.

The project was successful on a number of levels, says Veverka. Students had a chance to learn more about their own environment through resources they discovered outside the classroom. It also gave them a solid introduction to technological tools such as digital photos, video, and PowerPoint.

But Veverka says they were most excited about the digital storytelling approach. "It adds another voice to the written word," she says, "and really engaged the students and gave a lot of them opportunities they might not otherwise have had."

Students adopt a pet project

If you have an elementary-school-aged child in your life, it's likely you've had some contact with a Webkinz. The little plush pets are purchased bearing assigned codes, which then permit their owners to log into the Webkinz Web site, register and "adopt" the pet. The pets also give their owners access to Webkinz World, where kids can care for their pets, play games, and earn "KinzCash," (which helps in the care and feeding of the critters).

Faye Lack, a fourth-grade teacher at Southwest School on Evergreen Park District 124, decided she'd take advantage of the toys' popularity by incorporating the site into her class technology "centers." The class adopted a Webkinz bulldog—which is also the school's mascot—and use of the site is part of an incentive system in the classroom. Once on the site, Lack says, kids have improved their math skills and polished their tech basics. An added bonus: Lack says the kids get a lesson in responsibility, since the online pets have to be fed and cared for on a regular basis.

Offline, the stuffed bulldog also helps students with their journaling abilities as well; the toy takes turns accompanying students home on weekends, and when they return on Monday, students turn in written accounts of the pet's adventures at home.