



AURORA HighLIGHTS

Vol. 2, No. 1 September, 2001 a newsletter for members of Aurora

Words from the Director

The Community server software is finished. We still have a couple of walls to paint, but we are moving in! During the last four months, we have created the Community server, consisting of the Curriculum Development Center as well as all of the other features we have been promising. We have received from many a very positive response toward the server's ease-of-use and the many applications for teaching, learning, and administrative tasks. Get ready for a wonderful ride as Aurora expands!



Gary Sacket

Already several Aurora Learning Communities have been established. Among them are the following:

- Northwestern Oklahoma State University has set up a higher education community for conducting distance education courses. Because two public schools are a part of the on-line community, NWOSU pre-service teachers work virtually with K-12 students, mentoring, collaborating in projects, and being mentored to by K-12 teachers.
- The SouthCentral*RTEC, based at the Southwest Education Development Laboratory (SEDL), is establishing a Professional Development Learning Community (PDLC). Its PDLC will support professional developers across five states, including Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Louisiana, and Arkansas. As the PDLC community evolves, it will be possible for any of the PD providers to provide online professional development. The community will also support other initiatives, including Telementoring at the University of Texas and Higher Education resources through the University of North Texas.
- A collaboration of astronomers from universities in Hawaii, Kentucky, Oklahoma and California

are pursuing efforts to establish an Astronomy Learning Community. This community will allow astronomers across the country to conduct seminars, workshops, and courses specific to Astronomy. Sky images will be uploaded into the community for use by researchers, faculty, and students in their online courses, presentations, etc. Efforts are also underway to enhance the Community server so that it will be possible for approved faculty to be able to remotely control telescopes within their own online courses.

- The public schools of Laredo and San Antonio, Texas, and Enid, Oklahoma are just a few of the public schools implementing their own Aurora Learning Communities. These specific sites are developing curriculum or placing their own curriculum products online within the Development Center. They are also setting up online professional development activities, classes, clubs, and even alumni organizations for past graduates to keep in touch with each other and to serve as mentors for K-12 students. The San Antonio Urban Systemic Initiative is evaluating how it can use the SATEC learning community server, which has just gone online.
- The American Indian Research and Development organization, in the context of its Oklahoma Rural Systemic Initiative, is identifying how a Native American Learning Community can be established for 60 tribal communities within Oklahoma's 39 tribal jurisdictions. Officials are very excited about the Aurora Community server, as it would help them maintain dynamic control over their content. The server allows publishing of authentic content on different levels of membership and at different schedules.
- Aurora Central has established a learning community as well. Aurora is developing seminars and workshops on how to set up a learning community and then use its various features for curriculum development, Total Quality Learning, Critical Thinking, and other initiatives.

Changes Come with Project Development

In a country-western song entitled "Time Marches On," singer Tracy Lawrence says about life, "The only thing that remains the same is that everything changes."



Having welcomed the challenge to write the dynamic Aurora web program, Michael and Jeremy Sacket, nephews of the project's director, continually infuse the project with their talent and skill.

This line aptly describes the Aurora Project, which is praised by educators throughout the state. Aurora is known, first of all, because the \$5.45 million five-year federal grant is the first and only Technology Innovation Challenge (TIC) grant awarded in Oklahoma.

Aurora was originally conceived as a way to bring technology to schools, universities, agencies, and communities. Teachers and other content experts would write learning activities and tools to be shared/compared via the Internet with anyone anywhere.

This has happened. Several schools, universities, and agencies formed a partnership, secured computers and

other technology for members, designed the software for doing the project, and then wrote literally hundreds of lessons.

However, the project began to experience massive expansion, as other TIC grants merged their resources with those of the Aurora Project, and as additional schools, universities, agencies, and communities around the country joined the AuroraCommunity. Ultimately, then, massive changes had to be made.

"Approximately 25 servers are going up," Project Director Gary Sacket said, "and they're ready for (the people who get them) to set up their own communities - to decide what they want to put on them. It depends on how they want to manage their own server. Some may include local museums or alumni or whatever they want."

Sacket's job, and that of web masters/software developers Michael and Jeremy Sacket, has been to design a structured program that can be used in any method that the community desires.

"The system is flexible," Gary Sacket said. "We had to build into it the ability for anyone to do the same thing in a variety of ways. Each server for each community may use any or all of multiple seamlessly integrated features."

Jeremy noted, however, that there are some things that just cannot be done.

"Performance outweighs the functionality of the task," he said. "We've tried to take everyone's ideas and

merge them into one thing, using the same interface, but it's kind of difficult."

It has been a challenge to set up web pages so that people can enter schedules of classes, sections, courses, assignments, and other such things. However, say the designers, that is nothing compared to writing the HTML language (using the HTML tags) that allows the assignments and courses to be duplicated, omitted, made active, made public, etc.

"The system is flexible. We had to build into it the ability for anyone to do the same thing in a variety of ways."

The possibilities seem endless. "Anything you can dream up can be attached," said Gary. "You can incorporate the content into a form, even a folder, and make it public. Then anyone can use it. (Also) you can give an assignment inside a course or teach in a more social way - through a message board."

Since Aurora started out primarily as a development center for creation of lesson plans by teachers, the addition of all the new features has resulted in the changes mentioned previously. Throughout the summer, teachers attended workshops around the country to learn how to implement the new servers. Aurora facilitators and teachers are ready for the changes.

"The web site is going to look different," Michael said, "and hopefully it will be easier to use. It may not be easier at first because teachers will be used to the old system, but after they use it, it will be easier."

Strike up the band...**for Hugo Schools' Aileen Parnell**

"Becky and Thomas walk to school. It's a small town and people know each other. They have teachers who care about them and their success in school, and who wonder how to expand their opportunities for learning... (The town) has lots of resources and opportunities that textbook-based schooling often overlooks, and we are proposing a project that will use them in a technology-supported package to help Becky and Thomas achieve more, academically and in life."

This is part of the first paragraph of the introduction to the original Aurora Project

Cast in different roles in the Hugo, Oklahoma, Public Schools, Parnell started out, at age 14, as a secretary for the high school principal, working summers and after school. Her work with the schools has continued steadily, to the present school year, when she serves as the technology director and Aurora facilitator.

In between, she has substituted as a teacher for civics, history, and English; taught kindergarten for 18 years; produced a school newspaper; and worked in public relations for the school system.

"This formed the backbone for the current network serving all school sites and classrooms," Parnell said. "My goal was to connect all school sites with Internet in five years. We did it in two."

Now 95 percent of Hugo's classrooms are wired for the Internet and four distance learning set-ups are in place.

At a technology conference in 1997, Parnell picked up a paper that displayed a diagram of a project proposal involving multi-school and public agencies. Curious, Parnell telephoned the proposal's contact person, Gary Sacket. Because of its rural setting and cultural diversity, the Hugo Schools proved to be a perfect "fit" as one of the primary school partners in the project called Aurora.

"At first the principals were not sure why they should have Internet. Now they cannot get enough."

"I've done a little bit of everything," Parnell said, in describing her role as Hugo's facilitator for Aurora. "I picked people for the project who are not afraid to get involved - very dedicated, very bright, creative people." She also works locally at getting more funds to pay for technology training for teachers, and helps teachers by reading their activities and tools in order to offer suggestions for change, if necessary.

She admits her job has not been easy. "I had to go buy (technological) things that I didn't even know what they were, but it's been interesting. A building - a nursing home - was given to the school, and we tore out walls and renovated so we could use the building for technology."

Continuing, she recalled that early on, she had received a small \$2,000 grant for Internet establishment in each school library.

"At first the principals were not sure why they should have Internet. They said, 'Why do we need an Internet connection in the library? Who will use the Internet? What does the Internet have to do with schools and learning?' Now they cannot get enough."



A self-proclaimed one-man band, Aileen Parnell readily admits that her job as technology director has not been easy and that she has had much help. But she has persevered and enjoyed working with the Hugo schools since age fourteen.

grant proposal.

Who is it that knows enough about small, rural towns like that of Becky and Thomas that he/she could help in writing a proposal that ultimately resulted in a \$5.45 million award, the first and only Technology Innovation Challenge Grant for Oklahoma?

Aileen Parnell, a woman who, in her words, is a "one man band."

Because she was no longer in the classroom in the 1990s, Parnell was able to seek grant monies for implementing technology into the schools. In 1994 the Hugo schools, together with the library, hospital, a community action agency, and the Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension Agency, received a federal grant of \$100,000 to create a telecommunications network. Additionally, the schools were awarded \$80,000 by the state department of education.

Scoping It Out at Nicoma Park School

Have you ever been snorkling? If not, Mary Snyder, second grade teacher at Nicoma Park Elementary School in Oklahoma City, has just the thing for you. A pond scope. And she can teach you how to make it for practically nothing. What's more, if you happen to be in the Eastern part of Oklahoma City, you might go by Nicoma Park to see the pond that Snyder helped build.

Lucky for the school's students and teachers, Snyder secured an educational grant three years ago to build a beautiful pond in a dry, hot, barren area directly behind the school.

Snyder explained that Colleen Pachal, the school's media center aide/secretary, had a pond in her yard, so her help throughout the project was invaluable.

"The grant was only for \$500, so we had to have help," Snyder said. "Everything was donated - the rock, the cement, almost everything. The community was great. Parents came in and helped. The railroad donated railroad ties for terracing. The lumberyard donated wood. Nurseries gave us flowers."

Inspired by the beauty of the plants, Snyder wrote an Aurora lesson entitled "Plenty of Pond Plants," which introduces students to hyacinths, lilies, and irises. Moreover, the pond itself is an inspiration to students and teachers.



Fun, educational, beautiful, soothing, unique, and peaceful are just a few of the adjectives people use to describe the pond, which Mary Snyder (above with Kendall and Gina) helped build. Funds from a grant won by Snyder started the project.



Gina and Kendall, two students in Mary Snyder's class last year at Nicoma Park Elementary School in Oklahoma City, made pond scopes, which they happily tried out at the pond, built by volunteers.

"The kids are in awe of it," Snyder said. "It's nothing to have thirty kids standing here watching."

Because the pond is three feet deep, a fence surrounds the area, but teachers often take their classes to the pond to sit and read or to study nature, particularly as the seasons change.

Hiding the pump and filter system are large cut-off posts, standing in nautical fashion, with ropes attached. Nearby several species of trees and flowers grace the area, lovingly landscaped by different individuals and groups. In the water are the water plants, but frogs, turtles, fish, and other water creatures also inhabit the pond (which brings us back to the pond scope).

Determined that the kids should get a better look below the water, Snyder developed an Aurora tool entitled "Making a Pond Scope." The instructions explain how to tape together, lengthwise, several frozen juice cans with their ends cut out. Then, with plastic wrap taped across the scope's bottom, students are able to use the scope for viewing fish in the pond.

It's fun for everyone. No, the students are not snorkling, but they are doing the next best thing. According to Principal Barbara Taylor, the pond is an asset to the school. "It's something unique, and a good place to learn," she said.

Marla Reames : Cheerleader for the Aurora Team

“If you need a school to get involved, you need a cheerleader.” These are the words of Fairview’s Aurora cheerleader, Marla Reames.

As a high school library/media specialist, Reames was in a perfect position last year (when field testing of Aurora activities began) to guide both teachers and students through some of the intricacies of the Aurora curriculum. She had the time and she had the “know how.”

“I had seen the benefits of Aurora, and I didn’t want to lose them,” she said, explaining that she had been an English teacher and knew first hand how hectic life can be in the classroom. She knew how overwhelmed teachers can become by the everyday demands of their jobs, even without extra things to do.

However, Reames wanted the teachers in Fairview - at the very heart of the Aurora Project -

to be more than just *familiar* with Aurora. Like other primary partner schools, Fairview had several teachers who had worked since the project’s inception at creating activities and tools for Aurora’s curriculum. Yet, those lessons now needed to be field tested and the results shared, so that one day they could be compared with results from other schools using the same lessons.

Thus, the cheerleading began.

“I thought, ‘Okay, I love sharing. I can do this. I can teach the lessons I have written.’ So that’s what I did,” she said.

Beginning with computer classes, Reames helped students videotape the Student Council Easter egg hunt and gave assistance to seniors who created slide shows for their parents. She then taught some classes with students writing poetry and typing their cinquain, diamond, and haiku poems into the data forms for the Aurora lessons.

“Here we had things that kids wrote and put on the web,” she said excitedly. “It’s all right there! You don’t have to be so computer literate to do this. We put much

of it on-line so that all the teachers have to do is print them out.”

She also did a lesson on career choices, using Bridges.com, “a wonderful site,” she noted. “Seniors did a lesson on thank you notes, as a review, because of graduation gifts, and eighth graders wrote thank you notes, too.

They drew a number and got a gift. Then they wrote their thank

you notes satirically, using all parts of a letter.”

For Reames, the negative side of being a cheerleader for Aurora was glitches in the system, since everything is being created dynamically, constantly changing.

“I’d just say, ‘Okay let’s drop back and punt,’ and I wouldn’t get frustrated with it,” she said, “because technology is the learning curve, and it’s steep. But it’s not so steep if you have someone to help you. When the teachers looked at the old lessons and the new ones, side-by-side, they were so happy to do these lessons, to see the wonderful side of Aurora.”



Using the Aurora lesson “Y2K and Beyond Job Market -- Are You Ready?” is Sara Wiens, a 2000-2001 senior at Fairview High School. Teacher Marla Reames helps her find additional information about careers.

Students Like Diversity of Aurora's Curriculum

Alternative school teacher Mark Van Meter's students in Fairview, Oklahoma, truly receive an alternative education. In fact, "diverse" more accurately describes their learning experience with Van Meter.

After completing their regular assigned classroom modules, the students get to do lessons from Aurora's varied curriculum.

"It's a break from their normal routine," Van Meter explained, "and the kids really like it. We do as many lessons as we can."

Last year's students helped select the activities they would do, sometimes simply by their unusual titles - "You've Come a Long Way", "Hey, Mom, Can We Drive to Paris?" and "Where Does All My Money Go?"

What Van Meter likes most is the way the kids respond, once they access the Aurora activity and begin working.

"When we did the lesson 'You've come a Long Way,' we had a speaker come and talk about the changes in the (Fairview) schools since 1894, when the school was established," he said. Then the students used the Internet to do research, which each lesson encourages and often requires, by having links to sites where more information can be found.

"Before we started the lesson on a trip to Paris, I had them make guesses to estimate the total mileage, the airfare, meals, and lodging," he explained, "and then we got on the website and looked it all up. They were amazed when they found how far off they were - how many miles it actually was - and how much the total cost would be."

Continuing the money theme, Van Meter said he chose one activity just

for its practicality. "The one entitled 'How Do I Get a Tax Refund?' is one that will help them later on," he said. "I have some seniors, and this is really good for them."

The students also did some...well, not soul searching, but definitely some deep thinking when they had to decide what two things they would be willing to give up to save money in the lesson "Where Does All My Money Go?"

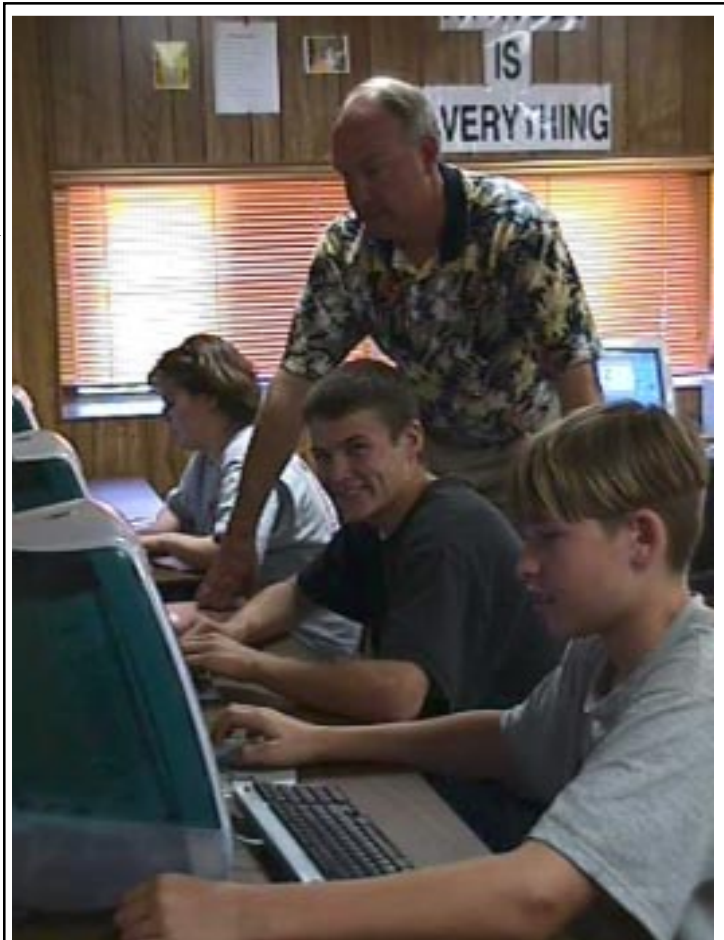
"Many were surprised at how much they were spending on things that aren't really important," Van Meter said.

Students left the school twice in order to further their educational experience - once to conduct a survey ("How Many Students Drive to School?") and once to deliver a hand-made replica of a coin.

"One of Fairview's most well known residents is Waymon Carnelson," Van Meter said. "He's a big part of history - a man in his 80s. We designed a community

coin and put a picture of his home on it. We put things from the community on the coin - wheat and cattle, and an oil derrick on one side. We put it all on posterboard and took it to him."

Through these and several more Aurora lessons, Van Meter's students learned about their school, community, the world at large, and money. Later, when all the data forms are entered and other communities far from Oklahoma enter their data into the forms for each lesson, Van Meter's 2000-2001 students will be able to look at the results. What they will find is that students/towns everywhere are alike in many ways, yet each one is *different*, uniquely individual. The data forms will reveal the differences.



During the spring semester, Kendra Ratzlaff, Alan Branson, and Bruce Hendricks demonstrated their expertise (and enjoyment) of technology, while working on an Aurora activity, guided by teacher Mark Van Meter.



Some Sightings Around Aroua

Many changes occurred with Aurora during this past school year, the fourth of the five-year project, as web masters labored to make the system, with its eclectic curriculum, user friendly for the masses. During several professional development workshops, teachers brainstormed, developed, and tested various features of the system. Dr. Brian Campbell (above), science professor at Southwestern Oklahoma State University, worked during one conference with teachers Donna Richey, Anadarko, and Kathy Rader, Clinton. Project Director Gary Sackett (above, right) guided a group of teachers from Hugo in April. In July Beverly Straub and LaVida Martens (at right) learned some of the new website's features, which they will share with fellow Jenks personnel this year. Meanwhile, Clinton teachers Vicky Stangl and Marie Pool (bottom right, at an earlier conference) will network this year with other Clinton Aurora members (in front, below) Karen Chapman, Patti Lindsey, and Beth Richert. Behind Chapman is Kelli Mills, from Pryor, who also attended an August workshop in Weatherford.



Aurora Calendar

Sept. 25 - Board/Peer Facilitator Meeting
 Sept. 27-28 - Encyclomedia, Myriad,
 Oklahoma City
 Oct. 16 - Board/PF Meeting
 Nov. 27 - Board/PF Meeting

Meetings are at Bishop McGuinness High School
 in Oklahoma City, unless otherwise listed.

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Aurora's curriculum is on the Web.
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