

Creating an Online Science Community

Project Title	BirdNet: Creating an Online Science Community for Far North Queensland Students
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Funding Agency	Australian Schools Innovations in Science, Technology and Mathematics (ASISTM – Round 2)
Organisational Base	SiMERR Queensland

Description

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This project aims to develop primary school students' skilled use of information and communication technology to create an activity based website about birds in savannah, wetland and shoreline habitats. The theme of birds – local, native and migratory was used to increase the knowledge of fauna in the local and school environment. Pre-service teachers and environmental education professionals worked with students in small regional schools to enrich their ability to access high quality online information.

An interactive and innovative website <http://www.birdnet.com.au> was designed for primary school children. Each participating school was equipped with a kit containing Slaters Field Guide to Australian Birds, Steve Parish Amazing Birds, binoculars, and an ideas package.

Preservice teachers delivered their class material on natural environments with a focus on birds and their habitat. Students developed a website and were taught to use the web resources in a safe way. Competitions involving identification of birds through the use of Field Guides were placed on the website. Other competitions involving school projects such as building a garden/plot with bird-attracting flora are ongoing. Science, technology and English curriculum outcomes were incorporated in the design of the program.

The following community groups have been honorary consultants: Birds Australia, Birds Queensland, Mareeba Wetlands, Rainforest Habitat and Bird Observers Club of Australia.

Participants

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20 preservice teachers and 600 students and teachers in P-7 in the following small, rural state schools: Miriwinni, Bilbohra, Walkamin, Mt Garnet, Herberton, Irvinebank, Butchers Creek, Lakeland, Port Douglas, Whitfield, Woree, Goondi, and St Rita's Education Queensland initiatives, Daradgee Environmental Centre and Flexible Learning Centre.

Findings

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This project appealed to students' science interests and created an effective online community that has positioned students as knowledgeable users of global information networks. This project enhanced students' ability to navigate a website, take digital photographs, upload their photos and written descriptions, and to use email to submit their work. One area of difficulty was encountered with respect to students' identity and use of the online resources. Issues of student confidentiality is a matter of concern that needs to be addressed in the future.

Outcomes

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A website was produced that is a sustainable, enduring resource that is used by current preservice teachers as this is now imbedded in one of their courses. The interactive website is being upgraded but exists at <http://www.birdnet.com.au>. Findings will be presented at the A2E2 Conference in Darwin and the ASERA Conference in Brisbane this year.

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The project brought professional development into regional classrooms and provided teachers with the encouragement and technical support they need for innovative teaching practices. Computer and web-based literacy and expertise has been directly improved through this project. It has also fostered student and teacher awareness of birdlife in North Queensland communities through excursions to local wetlands and discovery of their impact on the birdlife. Furthermore, development of a garden in the schools with bird attracting plants, research into local needs regarding plants and native birds will assist students and teachers in both knowledge base and appreciation of Australian fauna. Online competitions will ensure that this project will remain an ongoing, enduring project.

The broad impact was reduced as the funds were late in arriving, but the project is sustainable and imbedded in preservice coursework. Key issues that need addressing from this project is the difficulty of teaching preservice teachers about how to add material to the website and privacy issues regarding children's privacy (e.g., email addresses). Student's knowledge of scientific processes has been enhanced (e.g., data collection and dissemination).

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