

The Global Classroom

There is a small group of islands in Europe, called the Shetland Islands, located off the north coast of Scotland. The Shetland Islands form the division between the Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea. The Shetlands were once occupied one thousand years ago by the Vikings who landed here whilst on their epic journeys across the Atlantic Ocean from Norway to North America.

There are more than 100 islands that form the Shetlands but only 18 are occupied. It would be fair to say that the Islands are very isolated and that life in this remote part of the world can be lonely and difficult. The temperature throughout the year is cool and in the winter months there is less than 8 hours of daylight. Only 22,000 people live in the Shetlands giving the islands a density of 15 persons per square kilometer; a figure somewhat different to here in the Mid-Levels. There are thirty four schools in the Shetlands, the largest being Anderson High School in the main town of Lerwick with an enrolment of 800 students.

On the surface there would seem to be little in common between Anderson High School and St. Paul's College. However, there is one fascinating comparison between our schools; we both operate a Global Classroom Programme. In the mid-1990s, enormous deposits of oil were discovered in the seas off the Shetland Islands. The discovery brought an influx of workers to the Islands and Anderson High School suddenly needed to enrol the children of oil workers who came from countries around the world. After thousands of years of isolation, the Shetlands Islands now had an international population.

The Principal, teachers and students at Anderson High School sat down to think of ways that they could use this new rich resource; not the oil in the ocean but the culture and experiences of its new overseas students. The idea that the school came up with was the Global Classroom, that is, to take their classroom beyond the Shetland Islands by using Information Technology. Their first task was to establish ties with other schools overseas and here they turned to their new students. Within a short time, they were corresponding with schools in Sweden, Germany, The Czech Republic, South Africa and Japan. The six schools, one from each of the six countries, decided to form a Global Classroom Partnership with the aim of giving students and teachers the opportunity to research issues that the group identified as being really significant. Each year, the schools decide on a theme, for example, the environment, global warming, human relations, tradition and technology. The students and teachers at each of the six schools will then research the theme and report their findings to the other schools.

In the early days, the schools shared their information by email. As students and teachers came to know each other through their email messages, the decision was taken to use webcams and video-conferencing. The result is that the schools now regularly conduct live webcam links of lessons and activities. Furthermore, it was not long before the students and teachers decided to hold a Conference, the first held being in Japan. Today, students and teachers from the six schools take part in short-term exchanges.

This Global Classroom Partnership grew from a simple idea but the result has been dramatic for the students and teachers at the six schools. For the children at Anderson High School, the Shetland Islands are no longer quite as remote and isolated.

In four weeks time, Mr. Ngan and I will travel to Shanghai to mark the first link for St. Paul's College with a school on the mainland. Mr. Ngan, the Head of the Chinese History Department, identified the High School Affiliated to Shanghai Jiao Tong University as a suitable twin-school for SPC and over the past six months we have been building a relationship with the school. Jiao Tong University is widely regarded as one of China's leading universities and a high percentage of students from the Affiliated High School are admitted to the University. This relationship will provide many opportunities for students and teachers at both schools to participate in a range of activities, the first of which will be a Cultural Exchange Tour to Shanghai for five days during the Easter holiday period. It is hoped that in the future our students and teachers will have an opportunity to share ideas, information and experiences.

The intention is for the Twin-School Programme to extend to other leading schools in Asia and around the world. The next ties will most likely be with schools in Beijing, Canada and the United Kingdom, although we are also looking at the USA, Japan and Singapore. This programme is very much in line with our vision of the 'Global Classroom' where we aim to open up the world to SPC through a variety of international experiences and opportunities. Maybe the time will arrive soon when, like the students at Anderson High School in the Shetlands, you will be able to study and learn directly with students in other parts of the world.

The Global Classroom for 2007 offers an exciting selection of tours that should cater for the interests of a broader range of students than might have been the case in the past. The Community Awareness Project in Cebu, in the Philippines, is the first time that you will be able to participate in an overseas community-based activity. This is a 'hands-on' tour that should open the eyes of our boys to life in another country. Another new Global Classroom initiative this year is the Science Study tour to Cambridge where the participants will live and study in a College of this famous university town. This year, there are two Language Enhancement Courses, one in Beijing and one in London. These intensive language courses will improve your learning of Putonghua and English respectively. This year also sees the 21st World Scout Jamboree in the United Kingdom and it is fitting that our own 10th Hong Kong will be participating. The Treble Choir will also be taking part in a major festival in Europe while members of the Swimming Team will be off to Japan and the Basketball Team to Singapore.

These tours provide outstanding opportunities and I would encourage all of you to try and participate in at least one tour during your time at St. Paul's College. Like the students and teachers at Anderson High School in the Shetland Islands, we have a great deal to learn from students and teachers around the world.

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