



2008 AAAS/Subaru Essay Writing Competition for K-12 Educators, Finalist Essay



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Laptops Create Smiles and Inquiry

In our classroom, there are many obstacles, including a lot of students who read below an eighth-grade level. The textbooks we use are designed for students with adequate reading skills, however much of the vocabulary in the textbook includes words which my students may not know. Besides, it is very embarrassing when the student next to you can read faster than you and understand it better.

In order to narrow the gap between the good readers and the poor readers, I decided to introduce technology in the classroom. Our school is lucky enough to have a classroom set of laptops and wireless Internet. So, I decided to blow the dust off of them and put them to use.

We had to start slow. Many of my students do not have computers at home, and most have not been shown how to use a computer and the Internet as a learning tool. First, we started by completing a research project on the Kingdoms Monera, Protista, and Fungi. Half of the project was using resources (books, dictionaries, notebooks, and the Internet) to research the three kingdoms. The other half of the project was learning how to set up a Word

document, including how to set margins, insert page breaks, and adjust the font.

Finally, I felt that I had hit on something that appealed to everyone! My students were interested in what they were doing. They may not have learned a lot about the three kingdoms in this project, but the stage was set. I could see them gaining confidence. Students reading below grade level were able to work at their own pace, and students who were sometimes bored found an outlet and turned in projects beyond the original scope.

Then we moved onto Kingdom Plantae. Students were given the opportunity to learn about photosynthesis and plant reproduction by using their now familiar array of resources. They researched how photosynthesis works, what it does for humans, and how it affects the planet. They found diagrams showing the cross-section of an angiosperm, and studied how flowering plants are pollinated. Again, the atmosphere was relaxed and focused, because everyone was able to work at his/her own pace.

Then we started on Kingdom Animalia. I thought it was time to expand our inter-classroom relationship a little bit. So, we started a group project. Each group was assigned a class of animals to research, and they will teach the rest of the class about those animals. In addition, they will use Word to type up a summary about their project. There is a general feeling of competition in each class about which group will give the best presentation. Some have found videos that will be shown on the projector. Others have found useful lifecycles that show metamorphosis. I look forward to incorporating the teaching aspect of this project,



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to see which students thrive on giving the others information.

Success with the use of the technology in the classroom has been obvious in most of my students. However, it is most obvious in two special education students. The first student, one whose grades were far from As, came to me and told me how much he enjoyed working on the computer. He also said that he was determined to get an A this quarter and to win a school issued medal for good grades and behavior. So far, he is on the right track: he earned a 96% (without extra credit) on our plant test, and according to his other teachers his behavior has improved.

The second student has taken his word processing skills and moved onto other subjects. He was able

to use the desktop computers in class to complete his research paper for Social Studies. He has become so adept at using the Internet and Word that he finished early and offered to help another student type her paper. This student earned a 100% on his Social Studies research paper, and is on his way to becoming Student of the Month.

While I have only been using the laptops in my eighth-grade Life Science classes for a short period of time, I have found students using the skills of inquiry to solve problems. They have risen to the challenge and are improving everyday. Not only are they taking away the science that is required by the curriculum, but we have successfully incorporated technology into their lives and are preparing them for their future.