

Cultural Understanding

Case Study: iEARN - Connecting Cultures: Understanding our connected past, to build on a united future

Partner: International Education and Resource Network, Trinidad and Tobago (iEARNTnT)

Location: Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago

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Introduction

Started in 1988, iEARN (International Education and Resource Network) is the world's largest non-profit global network that enables teachers and young people to use the internet and other new technologies to collaborate on projects that both enhance learning and make a difference in the world.

Since 1988, iEARN has pioneered online school linkages to enable students to engage in meaningful educational projects with peers in their countries and around the world. Many countries from the international community, the academic world, civil society, women, men and students have since come together to promote a 'culture of peace while exchanging indigenous knowledge'.

iEARN runs projects as structured interaction among students with specific discussion topics, activities and a final product that shares the learning and helps build a better world.

Activity

The '*Connecting Cultures: Understanding our connected past, to build on a united future*' project is one of many iEARN has organised. For this project, students are asked to research the history of people who migrated to their country, the legacy they left and the impact on their economy, population and society today. The students then share with each other, online, information about traditions, personalities, family life, heroes, nations, communities, islands, cities, and about their way of dress, religion, foods, customs, language spoken, trade, games and so on, as well as the links today with the countries the immigrants came from. Learning about the contribution of immigrants is meant to enhance efforts to connect cultures and respect differences.

The project touched on many curriculum areas, covering social studies, science, language arts, history, fine arts, cultural arts, culinary arts and geography. Some of the research projects and classroom activities included:

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- genealogy research;
- creation of an autobiography;
- geography research;
- storytelling/drama/drawings/essays/music;
- foods;
- tracing the origin of children's games;
- cultural activities/sports; and
- clothes that represent the different cultures and regions.

Finally, the project languages were English, Dutch, French, German and Spanish.

Many links were formed as participants showed a greater appreciation for history through their research. Their cultural understanding was enhanced as they learned, for example, about: 'Colours of our Culture from Romania and Russia'; different special days and festivals in India, Suriname, Senegal, the US, England, Pakistan and Canada; and '*What is Freedom? What does it mean?*' They also learned about death and mourning, weddings, and summer, Easter and Christmas vacation observations in different countries; how to prepare the American Grits; Latin American dishes; and rituals from more than 250 schools.

As the students who took part from Trinidad and Tobago carried out their research, they made important connections and observations between countries. They learned about the Spaniards, who first came to Trinidad, the music of the Parang, and at Christmas-time the traditions still left alive today. Then came the French, who built communities like Lopinot, Paramin and also introduced traditional dance and cuisine which have since not changed.

With slavery came the Africans: they influenced the rhythm of Trinidadian calypso; carnival; and tam boo bamboo, the forerunner of the famous steel band.

From India, 157 years ago, came the indentured labourers. Hindu Temples, and the food, feature in many prominent places in the country. And not forgetting the Syrian/Lebanese and the customs and culture they brought, all those who came and are still here are part of this 'global village' that is Trinidad and Tobago.

Impact

Reports from local history teachers revealed that students, after participating in the project, became more interested and involved in the subject area. Students accumulated a greater understanding of history, cultures, geography and the world, as it relates to them, and learned to respect all nations for what they have done for peace. Also, the last national examination results showed more students had passed the history course than previously.

The project also helped enhance the appreciation of culture and traditions in the promotion of a 'culture of peace', while helping students from different parts of the world understand their common bond and linkages.

Lessons

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In summary, the project objective was met by the following:

- By discovering personal connections to other parts of the world, students are able to gain a sense of their global citizenship and enhance and develop their sense of self-esteem.
- Arts and culture play a major role in building communities. This project was meant to promote peace and cultural understanding while building personal global connections that promote appreciation of cultural difference.