



# REALITY

## Learning Experience

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In September 2006 Ontario students participated in a reality learning experience through the *Small World - Big Picture Project, Expedition Africa*. This opportunity was a collaborative effort among various partners including Algonquin College, Canadian Adventure Productions, Renfrew County Catholic District School Board and Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board.

Through the use of innovative technology, the *Small World - Big Picture* projects are designed to engage Ontario students to more fully understand the challenges, opportunities and realities facing people and communities outside of Canada. The *Expedition Africa* project led by Ben Webster and his team included a journey that descended the eastern coast of Africa with visits to Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, Botswana and South Africa, including Lesotho. A wide range of curriculum topics were addressed with a broad multimedia presence in the countries visited. The expedition was an opportunity to raise the profile of Africa through links between Ontario classrooms and African communities, people and foundations. Learning materials were developed prior to and during the journey. Expedition updates and mini-learning opportunities were delivered via CITY TV in Toronto and the A Channel in Ottawa. An enhanced website created by Algonquin College allowed people around the world to follow the expedition including real-time curriculum support materials involving text, pictures and video, as well as GPS tracking.

The Windsor-Essex CDSB decided that the board's focus to establish a link to the *Expedition Africa* project would encompass culture and the arts. An African drumming project was introduced to several elementary schools, including Notre Dame, St. James, St. Bernard (Amherstburg), Stella Maris and

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Holy Name. Students in Grade 8 participated in the learning experience. The drums traveled from school to school and at every location, the students were very engaged in the project. These students also followed the expedition via the Algonquin website as Ben Webster and his team moved from country to country on the African continent.

At the secondary level, St. Thomas of Villanova Catholic Secondary School's arts division created an evening to celebrate Africa entitled the *Africa in Us*. Students from the visual arts, dance, music, English and drama disciplines collaborated with drumming students from Holy Cross Elementary to present a 45-minute production that was filmed by F. J. Brennan Catholic High School's communication technology students and staff. Through this experience, students developed a better understanding of teamwork, unity and appreciation of one another's gifts and talents. Under the guidance of committed educators, these students learned the art of interpretation and how the arts can be relevant springboards for change. This rewarding experience allowed teachers and students to draw upon issues relevant in our own society and transfer these to issues facing East Africa.

The St. Thomas of Villanova world geography students were given a valuable opportunity to participate in a video conference with students and teachers in Lesotho, South Africa. Prior to the video conference, the students had been diligently following the expedition and studying the food security issues, human migration, species endangerment and geopolitics of the eastern African countries. As these students prepared for the video conference, they created some very challenging questions for the African audience but soon realized that the students there

were more interested in learning about life in a Canadian school: the school day, sports and after school activities. It was quite an educational experience for both the St. Thomas of Villanova students and the Lesotho students.

Another video conference occurred with Lionel Davis, former political prisoner imprisoned with Nelson Mandela, who had visited with the Windsor-Essex CDSB intermediate and secondary students in the spring of 2006.

The culminating activity in the *Expedition Africa* project occurred on May 3 and 4 when the expedition leader, Ben Webster, visited Windsor to speak with many of the students who had participated in the project. Ben was quite impressed with the interest and knowledge of the students as they posed challenging questions as to the hope for the future of Africa.

When the Renfrew County CDSB got involved with the *Expedition Africa* project, the aim was to create lessons that would encourage



## **Egypt • Sudan • Ethiopia • Kenya • Tanzania • Zambia • Botswana • Lesotho**

and empower students to make meaningful connections between what they knew about their own lives in Canada and what they could learn about the lives of people on the Continent of Africa. With this goal in mind, the team created curriculum for grades 9 and 10 locally developed English and Mathematics. They also developed a unit for Grade 11 Open Art in order to provide a hands-on opportunity for students to experience the richness and vibrancy of Tanzanian art. By design, the delivery of this unit at St. Joseph's High School in Renfrew, coincided with the expedition team as they made their way through Tanzania, climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro.



Perhaps the most exciting offshoot of the board's involvement with the project took place in a combined Grade 7/8 classroom at St. Joseph's Elementary School in Calabogie. The students' level of participation in the project was exemplary. They visited the Algonquin College website regularly, checking on the expedition team's progress through live GPS and satellite images. They kept up with the team's on-line journals and felt a part of the journey as it wound its way down the eastern coast of Africa.

The involvement of this class culminated in two live video conferences with the expedition team. The first was informal and took place when board technology personnel were doing a dry run to make sure that the technology was able to support the conferencing. The second conference took place a few days later. Students had prepared questions for the expedition leader, Ben Webster. With African birds, chirping in the background, the connection was made and the questions and answers began. The level of sophistication of the students' questions was impressive. It was clear that they had engaged in the project and followed the expedition as they asked pointed and informed questions about health care, travel, endangered species and education.

This experience provided a window into the world for the participants, illustrating the endless possibilities for students through the creative use of technology.

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