

Colonial Williamsburg Electronic Field Trips

Nadine M. Roush

“There are so many fabulous, faraway places to see...”

THE LYRICS TO THIS SONG, from the original movie musical *Dr. Dolittle*, capture the feelings of many upper elementary students when they think about the world. Their awareness of place is beginning to expand beyond comfortable and familiar settings. They are beginning to understand that the world is a vast, mysterious, and wonderful place. Students at this age are also developing in their sense of time as well as place, and they are immensely curious about “traveling in time” to “the old days.”

Teachers have always dreamed of taking their students to visit faraway places, or to travel with them to bygone days. Now, through the power of technology, students can experience “virtually” other times and places through “distance learning”. The Internet, satellite communications, television, and telephones can provide access to some exceptional learning experiences for upper grade elementary students.

Among those I have used, the Colonial Williamsburg electronic field trips are among the best distance learning products available to social studies teachers.

In the Field, Virtually

It would be great to hop on a bus with 60 students (two classes) and drive from Lafayette, Indiana, to Williamsburg, Virginia, stay several nights in a hotel, and spend the days touring the “living museum” of Colonial Williamsburg. However, unless our school district receives a sudden tsunami of funding, such an event would remain only a teacher’s dream—if not for the Internet. The Colonial Williamsburg website (www.history.org) is an interesting one to visit. Many brief documents, photographs, lesson ideas, and a few short



Courtesy Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

videos can be viewed there. This article is a review of Colonial Williamsburg’s electronic field trips (www.history.org/History/teaching/effm). Schools can purchase a subscription for a single field trip for \$100, or they can subscribe to the entire season (7 field trips) for \$500. The full resources of the product for each trip are then available to any computer in that school with the needed software (such as QuickTime or Windows Media Player) and Internet access.

A Colonial Williamsburg electronic field trip has several parts. The core experience is participation in a live, interactive television broadcast. Students view historically accurate reenactments of vignettes from the past, interspersed with question-and-answer sessions, during which they may phone in their questions. Historians or re-enactors (who are, if not professional historians, well versed in the historical foundations of their characters) answer some of these questions on the air during the broadcast. Most of the students’ questions are answered off the air. The staff at Colonial Williamsburg provides a bank of about 30 historians to answer students’ questions during and

immediately following the broadcast. In addition to the broadcast, participating classrooms are provided with lessons and materials to prepare the students for the “field trip.” Students also have access to a website where they can participate in activities to prepare for the field trip. The website remains active for the entire school year, so students can follow up on the experience at school or at home. A teacher will need to invest an hour or two in preparing for an electronic field trip by reading the background information and adapting the lesson plans for her own class. Although the amount of time a teacher should plan to allocate for preparatory lessons varies with the topic of the field trips, typically three or four 45-minute class periods should suffice. Because the actual “field trip” (i.e., the live, interactive broadcast) takes place on Thursdays, I usually plan the preparatory lessons for the Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday class periods preceding the broadcast.

Capturing the Audience

The value of participation in events such as the CW electronic field trips is evident

Additional Online Resources for Teachers

There are some excellent websites available for teachers to use in developing meaningful, inquiry-based instruction that utilizes the resources of the Internet. The following are some sites which my students and I have found useful and interesting. Any of these sites will help you and your students practice learning from an Internet source.

www.history.org

This is the home page for Colonial Williamsburg. In addition to providing extensive information about their electronic field trip program, this resource puts students and teachers in touch with the many other resources CW has to offer. Before embarking on an electronic field trip, a visit to this site is advisable. Teachers can find background information that will help make an electronic field trip more meaningful for students as well as the technical tips that will make such a learning adventure more successful. The site provides a look at daily life in a southern colonial city during the 1770s.

jefferson.village.virginia.edu/vch/jamestown

I like to have my students visit this site to take a virtual tour of the early settlement at Jamestown in conjunction with a visit to Colonial Williamsburg. The virtual tour on this website, sponsored by the University of Virginia, provides a look into life in the first permanent English settlement in North America during its earliest years. Again, primary source documents are available to enrich instruction and broaden students' understandings of the challenges and issues of the time. By visiting both sites and learning about life in the two settlements during different time periods, students have the opportunity to analyze the changes that occurred in the Virginia colony during the colonial period.

www.plimoth.org

The home page for Plimoth Plantation offers, among other resources, a virtual tour of the restored Plimoth Plantation, including photographs of costumed interpreters engaged in the daily activities of the people who lived at Plimoth in the early to mid 1600s. The site also provides access to primary source documents from the founding of the settlement at Plimoth. This is a rich resource for teachers, and useful for student investigation as well. This site provides students with a nice glimpse into life during the earliest period of English settlement in North America. When students visit this along with the Jamestown site, they have a great opportunity to compare and contrast the development of settlements in the New England and southern colonies. This site also provides a look into the relationship between English settlers in New England and Native American inhabitants of the region. This site is also linked to a separate site dealing exclusively with the first Thanksgiving at Plimoth Plantation. (The nonprofit Plimoth Plantation adopted an old spelling to distinguish it from the neighboring, modern municipality of Plymouth, Massachusetts).

osv.org

Old Sturbridge Village is another living history museum that shows a slice of life from the colonial period, although it looks at a later period in history (late 1700s - early 1800s). Again, a virtual tour of the village is available, along with activities for students and lesson plans which a teacher can adapt for use in elementary, middle school, or high school classrooms.

earlyamerica.com

This site is titled "Archiving Early America," and is a rich resource for primary source documents on a wide variety of topics. Appropriate material can be found here for use with students at almost all grade levels, on themes including community life, family structures, manners, health and medicine, agriculture, commerce, politics, and numerous other topics.

www.si.edu/history_and_culture

The Smithsonian Institute is another wonderful source for primary source documents. This site will allow teachers and students access to the remarkable collection of documents, art, and artifacts from America's past, which is housed in the Smithsonian's vast collection. While I have found this most useful as a source for obtaining the documents and artifacts I want to use in enriching my units of instruction, there is also a nice "scavenger hunt" type of activity which my students have enjoyed visiting to learn about the scope of the Smithsonian's collection.

in students' enthusiasm. They are truly engaged in asking questions and digging more deeply into concepts. Multiple paths to learning are accessed as the students watch (and sometimes participate in) simulations; play learning games (and sometimes create their own games); take notes; read; and write creatively. Several areas of the social studies (especially history, economics, and geography) are addressed during such learning experiences. Language, the arts, science, and even mathematics were also part of the material in the field trips that we have taken. Electronic field trips can provide wonderful opportunities for teachers to integrate standards and curricula from many content areas.

Equipment Requirements

As with any successful field trip or lesson, the key to success is teacher preparation. With an electronic field trip, the teacher should first make sure that the technology is in place so that the trip can be fully utilized. The three major technical concerns can be organized under the categories of hardware, software, and communication links. When you visit the Electronic Field Trip page on the CW website, the "Tips for Teachers" section contains specific information about these requirements.

HARDWARE: The essential pieces of equipment needed for participation in an electronic field trip are a television set (with a satellite link or the ability to access a station with a satellite link), a telephone, and a computer. My students and I have participated in several electronic field trips, and have found the experience worthwhile using just the basic equipment. Students can use the computer on my desk to respond to the online poll. It would even be feasible, with the assistance of your building's media specialist, to send students singly or in small groups to the library to access the website if the library is the only site in your building that has Internet access. It's certainly nice to have a computer lab where all students can access the website simultaneously, but it isn't essential to benefit from this experience.

SOFTWARE: Your computer will need to have Internet access to utilize the website resources. To see brief movies on

the Internet, your computer will need QuickTime or Windows Media Player, depending upon the computer set-up in your building. Information about these software requirements, and how to download them at no charge, is available when you visit the “Tips for Teachers” on the Electronic Field Trip home page.

COMMUNICATION LINKS: The teacher must become familiar with some of the technical aspects of distance learning. Most schools now have an Internet service, but does your school have a television satellite connection (which is needed for participating in the live broadcast)? If not, can someone in your school or district hook one up for you? You may have to make these arrangements with your local cable provider or a local public television station. Be sure to check on the availability of these services before subscribing to any electronic field trip programs.

Fun Fundraiser

Once the appropriate Internet access is secured, you will need to consider ways to fund such learning experiences. The first year my students and I participated in an electronic field trip, our school district paid the \$100. However, as with many school districts today, ours does not have the funds to provide this resource every year. Because I am convinced of the value of such learning experiences, I sought other avenues for funding. One year I was able to secure a grant through a local Public Schools Foundation to fund our participation. Recently, my students and I held a fundraiser to obtain the funds. We sold lollipops to other students throughout the school. We were able to raise \$250, which is half the cost of a year-long subscription to all seven electronic field trips. The parent association at our school agreed to match the funds we raised. Through the exercise of a little creativity, you might be able to find funding for this type of project.

Teacher Preparation

With each electronic field trip, it is important for the teacher to become thoroughly familiar with the content being covered. Very often, the sponsoring organization will provide background material to

participating educators. This material can often be accessed online, and may also be available by subscription in hard copies. Read the background material carefully. It may be adequate for your needs, or you may find that you need to do additional reading to familiarize yourself with the topic at hand.

Next, you should analyze the supporting lesson plans. Which activities are appropriate for your class? Will you need to adapt them for your particular group of students? I rarely use every activity provided in the support materials, and I often adapt the materials that I do choose to use.

The teacher’s guides provided with Colonial Williamsburg field trips include historical background, lesson plans, and copies of primary documents. My students and I have participated in 10 electronic field trips over the past 4 years, and I have found the teacher guides for each trip to be very adequate. I nearly always use most of the activities with my students, with some adaptations.

Internet Activities

Part of the advance preparation for an electronic field trip includes previewing the website. I think it is advisable to work through the activities myself before taking my students into the computer lab. This way I know what pitfalls we might encounter before I’m faced with thirty hands waving at me from behind computer screens!

For example, in the case of Colonial Williamsburg electronic field trips, one of the on-line activities in which students have the opportunity to participate is an on-line poll. There are usually two or three questions for the students to think about; they can then cast their votes electronically. I try to have my students visit the site and cast their votes before the broadcast, so they will know their results are part of those being reported during the program. Students can cast their votes during the broadcast, but I find that this can distract them from the information I want them to glean from the broadcast.

Many other types of activities are available for students when they visit the supporting website. For example, most of the activities provided in the teachers’ guide

Children’s Activities

This is an example of free material at the Colonial Williamsburg Website, www.history.org/Almanack/places/geddy/geddychi.cfm

At the James Geddy House in Colonial Williamsburg, youth interpreters frequently re-create different aspects of the life of colonial children, including education, music, dance, play, and daily chores. They bring the 18th century to life by dressing in period clothing and demonstrating typical activities of children of that period.

Education was widely accessible to those who could afford it, so youth interpreters frequently depict educational activities such as practicing letters on slate boards, reading 18th-century children’s books and assembling educational puzzles.

Sewing was an important part of a young lady’s education, so girls sit by the window working on a sampler, mending clothing, or perhaps making doll clothes.

There also was plenty of leisure time for children in an upper-middling home like the Geddys’. Since toys and games were readily available in Virginia stores, young interpreters also play board games, puzzles, and cards. Outside they engage visitors in activities such as rolling hoops, walking on stilts, or a game of ninepins.

Many of our games today have changed very little over the centuries, and these activities give visitors a sense of how old some of today’s pastimes are.

for each electronic field trip are also available on-line for the students. Students can access excellent and relevant primary-source documents from Colonial Williamsburg’s extensive collection when they visit the website, and meaningful graphic organizers are provided to help the students in their analyses of these documents.

Often a game or simulation is available as part of an electronic field trip. These games and simulations encourage students to apply their learning, and frequently integrate map skills, economic concepts, and more primary source documents in a very engaging activity. Occasionally video clips that are related to the electronic field trip are available for students to view as well.

Because the websites for Colonial Williamsburg electronic field trips (and for the others cited below) are kept active for the whole school year, students can revisit various aspects of a unit of study

throughout the year. Students can review materials, and their understanding can increase as they repeat related activities.

The Big Day

On the day of an electronic field trip, check, double check, and triple check with any technical support staff to be certain they have the needed satellite coordinates and so forth. If a technical support phone number is available, be sure they have this on hand. In some schools, the best computer technician may be a student! Nevertheless, I would advise having at least one adult helper during the live broadcast. I recruit a parent volunteer or a local university student who might volunteer for service learning credits. Even if you have a telephone in your classroom, it is not a good idea to use it for phoning in students' questions during the live broadcast. If you do use a phone in the same room as the television, audio feedback may make it difficult for your students and the docents on the other end of the line to hear one another. Use an adult volunteer to oversee the phone call, which can happen from a phone in

the hallway or a phone in any other room. This leaves you free to supervise the student viewers, adding your personal comments to the experience and overseeing the students' creation of other questions.

Some of the richest learning sessions have been the follow-up "debriefing" that I conduct after each electronic field trip. I encourage students who phoned in questions to share with their classmates the questions they asked and the answers they received. Thus, the students become the teachers...and upper elementary students really enjoy being cast in the role of expert! When their classmates ask them questions to follow up on these short presentations, learning is extended to yet another level, and the research continues. Some powerful writing assignments have occurred as a result of these electronic field trips. Depending upon the topic of the trip, my students write letters, persuasive essays, editorials, journal entries, poetry, skits, articles, or stories.

Alternative Plans at the Ready

While I have found electronic field trips to be extremely beneficial learning exper-

iences for my students, they have not always run smoothly. Quite the contrary! Experience has taught me that—as with most things that happen in an elementary classroom—I must be prepared for something to go wrong. Sometimes the problems involve the technology. On one occasion the computer lab at my school was "closed for repairs" for the week prior to the electronic field trip, so I had to rework my lessons into a format that did not require the students to access the website. Another time, the weather in our area was so severe that the technicians in the radio-television department were not able to make the satellite connections. We located another school that had participated in this trip and obtained a videotape from them. We couldn't participate in "real time", but at least we got to see it!

My most memorable electronic field trip adventure involved a broadcast about the Lewis and Clark Corps of Discovery's Expedition. Due to technical difficulties on our end, we were receiving video but no audio. Thankfully, I had done my homework, and I knew enough about the topic that I was able to use the visual cues on the screen to provide a reasonable, albeit spontaneous, narration of my own. My students were still able to phone in their questions, and it was a positive morning for them (although a nerve-wracking one for their teacher!).

Distance learning through electronic field trips can widen your students' horizons in many ways. The power of modern technology can put them in touch with the past, and can help them travel to places they will not otherwise be able to visit. It expands their world and their minds. My students and I have found them to be enriching learning activities. They always look forward with great anticipation to the answer to the question, "Where are we going this week?" 🌐

Notes

1. For examples of the Internet-based activities available to teachers and students through the electronic field trips at Colonial Williamsburg, see www.history.org/trips

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DAILY SOCIAL STUDIES

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Where the President lives	<input type="checkbox"/>	A	B	C	
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