

Leading Story**PictureTel organises a 16-hour distance-learning event linking schools around the globe with the world's most exciting places**

SLOUGH AND OTHER VENUES. 29 FEBRUARY 2000.

PictureTel organised Global Leap 2000 a day-long distance-learning event which saw schools across five continents link up, via videoconference, with other schools around the globe and visit places like the Great Barrier Reef and Kosovo. The event lasted 16 hours and included a virtual "question time" period of 30 minutes with the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair.

The event linked 50 schools in 14 different countries and 10,000 children took part. A few schools in the UK have videoconferencing equipment and 16 UK schools took part in the event.

The day was split into 18 sessions starting at 06.30 GMT with a visit to the Great Barrier Reef in Australia where 100 children stayed overnight to participate in the event. At this early event children met divers at the Great Barrier Reef.

Later in the day they could meet with mathematicians at Cambridge University, the aeronautical pioneer 'Amy Johnson' at London's Science Museum, animals at Melbourne zoo and wardens at a game park in South Africa.

One aim of the event was to demonstrate the exciting potential of live, interactive 'virtual field trips', for example one where children talk to four experienced astronauts at NASA. One child who spoke to an astronaut was so excited that he could not eat lunch; and he became a hero at the school for having had this live meeting with an astronaut.

Excitement was the general reaction of the children, both during and after the event. They are still excited three weeks after the event, said Dave Hampton who organised the participation by the Princess Diana Children's Hospital in Birmingham.

Adrian Beaumont, a science teacher at the Canterbury High School, arranged for a class of 30 children 12 years-old to participate. "Our children are still excited three weeks after the event. It has had a long lasting effect on the whole class," he told us. The whole experience was highly motivating for the children as they prepared for the Global Leap. All the class were involved in preparations even though only eight went in front of the camera on the day. "Put it this way I am keen to do some more," he said.

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Schools on different continents will continue to video meet with each other

The Global Leap day itself is only the start – there will be a new on-line global directory of other schools and organisations they can collaborate with through videoconference links; there will also be a list of places they can 'visit'.

The web address of the two directories are www.Global-Leap.com, www.EAZileap.com

Question Time for Tony Blair

The most exciting session for many children was "Question Time" with Tony Blair through a video link to a room in 10 Downing Street at 14.15. One child asked why he had agreed to take part. Tony Blair's answer was that he thought the event was very worthwhile.

Earlier he told the deputy head at Arbour Vale School in Slough, Mr Griffith who had a key role in organising the event that "Developing new technology in schools is a vital element in our drive to raise educational standards. I wanted to be part of this video conference to support this school's excellent efforts. I urge other schools to follow our example."

Tony Blair was relaxed and he sat sipping a cup of tea as he listened to the children's questions in the White Room at 10 Downing Street where visiting dignitaries are received. His answers were spontaneous and frank.

Blair was asked "Do you use the Internet?"

Vishai Roda, 15, from Arbour Vale School asked "Do you use the Internet?" Tony Blair replied yes he did ..he had attended a course to help him use the Internet. "My children know more about it than I do; they use it all the time; and I realise how important it is," he added.

A South African boy asked about British help for education in South Africa; and Fiona Kelly, a student at Brinsbury College in Pulborough, West Sussex, (which teaches agriculture, horticulture and veterinary nursing courses) surprised him by asking what were his best memories about learning science.

Tony Blair confessed he had never been very good at science when he was at school but said he was trying to make up for this by encouraging his own children to take an interest in the subject.

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Event participation was the key. There were an estimated 10,000 children watching events in what became the world's largest classroom

Brainchild of Mike Griffith

Global Leap 2000 is the brainchild of teacher Mike Griffith, Deputy Head of Arbour Vale Special School in Slough. He has been building the international network of schools and sites with Maureen James, Education Specialist at PictureTel, the company that provided the technical support and much of the organisation for the event.

Considerable preparatory work was required at each site over the last 12 months. At the James Brindley School in Birmingham, PictureTel dealer Multi-Sense came to help out for two days and brought in extra cameras. Birmingham used them to show the other schools not only their self-made studio & classroom but two hospital wards as well.

Birmingham Children's Hospital School

About 100 children at the school, which provides teaching for children in hospitals across the City at ten sites, took part at three sites - the Children's Hospital, Heartlands hospital and the parkway centre in Lea Bank.

Ms Ann Hill, a teacher at the James Brindley school said "It's been very stimulating and exciting for the children. ...It gives the kids the chance to see what children thousands of miles away are doing and it's real rather than learning about it from a book or in a classroom."

David Hampton, ICT Project manager at the Birmingham Children's Hospital, said "Global leap was something the children will never be able to repeat. They could never do it in their own schools. About 99% of UK schools do not have the technology we have nor do they have the expertise to operate it," David explained.

The views of pupils

Allison Elliman of Arbour Vale School in Slough said "It was really exciting to see Tony Blair. Not many schools get to talk to the Prime Minister."

Another pupil Harpreet Gahley said "My favourite thing is to see all the children from all over the world and find out what they like to do."

Virtual cultural exchanges

Harpreet was referring to the 'Virtual Cultural Exchanges' organised throughout the day-long event when the children shared music, art, poetry, storytelling and language, and discussed some world issues.

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Done Ramushi talking to Kosovo children

UK children talk with children in Kosovo

The video meeting between children in UK schools and the Save the Children Fund workers and children in Kosovo had one surprising and very human result. A Kosovo refugee child who has been in the James Brindley School at Birmingham's Children's Hospital for the last eight months was able to speak her own language to 12 children in Kosovo.

She identified a friend who was on camera in Kosovo. The lift this gave to the pupil, Done Ramushi, who is suffering from trauma, was quite extraordinary. The link with Kosovo was only one of many cultural exchanges during the day. But it was surely the most moving and significant.

Educational events for Bath school

Students at the independent Royal High School in Bath took it in turns to participate in the day-long event. Different groups from the senior school attended the visits that were useful to their studies and had the chance to ask questions and meet other students.

Bath's A-Level Physics students watched the tour of the NASA Headquarters in Florida and had the opportunity to ask the astronauts about their first hand experiences of zero gravity and other problems in outer space.

The Bath School's IT Manager, Christopher, O'Mahony, probably spoke for all the schools taking part when he said: "It went really well. It was a very ambitious project and it was exciting for the students to see so many people and places without leaving their classroom."

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Leading Story**Global Leap made it clear to teachers and students alike that videoconferencing is a huge resource that education has not considered**

PictureTel's Enterprise Services Division provided technical support for the event, including the multipoint bridge that connected hundreds of schools to the videoconference throughout the day. The event was sent as streaming video over the Internet allowing thousands more children to participate. Enron Broadband Services provided much of the infrastructure to support Global Leap; in many locations, Enron's Intelligent Network (EIN) and ISP partners were able to deliver the video of the event at a much higher quality than on a typical Internet connection.

**Slough school's "Global Leap 2000" Logo**

The children at Arbour Vale School designed a logo for Global Leap and had tee shirts made that included it. They wore these at a morning session and persuaded children they spoke to in Australia that they should buy a batch of them.

Kids take easily to videoconferencing

David Hampton told us the kids take the technology in their stride; the staff find it harder than the children. The children have no nerves, they take to it easily, they want to have a go at something that is new. Even when meeting children who they have not seen before, they are not flustered, introduce themselves and get chatting away easily and immediately.

VC seen as an important new tool for education

Adrian Beaumont summed up the feeling of all the teachers we spoke to when he said "What the project Global Leap has made clear to us the teachers as well as the students is that videoconferencing and distance learning is a huge resource that education has not considered just as it had not considered computers 20 years ago. We really have got to set out what we can do with this tool for education."

"Videoconferencing can improve ways of teaching and ways of learning," he added. "It is a completely new way of learning for a child. They are used to sitting in a room and being told something by an adult or reading something in a book."

"When they start working with a group of people who are in different countries at one and the same time, this is a whole new way of discovering and working. It is a step further than using a computer in learning. We are clearly at the beginning here of something with a tremendous potential."

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Linking up with other schools

David Hampton, Director of ICT at Birmingham Children's Hospital wants to find a children's hospital in the USA so that they can "twin" with them. "Our children will be able to send e mails down the line as well as watch and talk to their American friends," he said. "This would bring them in touch with children from a different culture. It would be fantastic, something the kids would really enjoy."

Paul Woodman at West Sussex College of Agriculture said his more adult students liked the contact with other colleges and schools and have decided they want to build their own directory of all the schools that took part.

Adrian Beaumont at Canterbury said they want to link with students and teachers in a school in the USA to explore cultural differences.

The way forward

The success of Global Leap 2000 should now be harnessed to enable schools and colleges to participate in regular videoconferencing activities. In addition to the directory of schools who want to connect to each other, a series of educational events are planned in a variety of curriculum areas.

The events will be described on a new web site EAZileap.com. The web site will be a forum for training and curriculum ideas. It will offer a variety of videoconference packages and may be able to offer quarterly global conferences open to 20 sites.

All of this should persuade the head teacher that a half-hour video meeting with an event on another continent is as valuable as, say, four new junior school textbooks. But it will not change the inadequate funding of British schools. Only Tony Blair can do that. That is what the kids deserve. ■

Leading Story**Schedule of sessions for "Global Leap 2000", the PictureTel day-long interactive distance learning event for children on 29 February 2000**

Time	Lead Location	What's happening	Theme
06:30	Great Barrier Reef, Australia	Explore, with a diver as guide.	Ecology
07:30	Melbourne Zoo	A glimpse behind the scenes at the zoo.	Animal conservation
08:00	Bishop Stortford School, UK	Four stories told in different ways to reflect different cultures.	Storytelling
09:00	Belfast Institute, UK	Students take kids behind the news.	World issues
10:00	Science Museum, London	'Amy Johnson' describes her historic London to Darwin flight.	Technology
12:00	Global schools	Art and music are often the basis for cultural identity – why?	Culture
12:30	Cambridge University	Making sense of chaos.	Mathematics
13:00	NASA/Aquatic Research Institute, Indiana, USA	Taking part when astronauts experience weightlessness or zero gravity	Science Experiment
14:00	Game Reserve, South Africa	An exciting expedition into a working game reserve.	Geography
14.30	UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair	Answers childrens questions	Question Time
15:00	Science Museum, London/ Schepens Eye Research Technology Institute's Starr Centre, USA	A look at medical techniques, past, present and future.	
16:00	Global schools	Share the talents of musicians from around the globe.	Music
17:00	NASA, USA	A chance to talk with real astronauts.	Science
18:00	SA Game Reserve, S. Africa	Another exciting visit.	Geography
19:00	Young people that the charity Save the Children works with in Kosovo	Join children around the world to share experiences of very different childhood backgrounds	World issues
20:00	Global schools	A taste of different languages.	Languages
20:30	UK schools	A leading figure in our world today answers children's questions.	Question Time
21:00	Ocean Institute, California,	Experts talk about what it's like to live in extreme conditions.	'Living on the edge'
22:00	Great Barrier Reef/NASA	What's in the future for our planet?	Environment
22.45	Schools on five continents	Children from five continents meet.	Grand Finale