CROSS BORDERS CLUSTER
Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia

Online Environments Creating Sustainable Schools through Values Education

Cluster coordinator: Mark Sparvell, Victor Harbour Primary School

Participating schools:
- Victor Harbour Primary School, South Australia
- Mataranka Primary School, Northern Territory
- Birdwood High School, South Australia
- Chrysalis Montessori School, Western Australia
- Spearwood Primary School, Western Australia

UAN critical friend: Emeritus Professor Robert Crotty, University of South Australia, South Australia

Key messages
1. Information and communication technologies can deliver successful values education approaches across distance and cultures to bring new and different understandings and perspectives to students and teachers in a variety of rural, remote and metropolitan settings.
2. A values education process that explores values propositions as a starting point for learning is a useful scaffold for developing a discourse and vocabulary to support student cognitive development. When students can clearly see a purpose for learning that connects to what they believe and understand to be important in their lives, more sustained and meaningful learning takes place.
3. Relating to a values education community of practice and having easy access to values education research findings and current theoretical developments is vital in fostering consistent, strong and supportive values education leadership.
4. Professional learning in the values education area, as well as imparting new teaching and learning strategies to teachers, can lead to the reassessment of ethical, professional and interpersonal behaviours on the part of teachers.
The Cross Borders project, **Online Environments Creating Sustainable Schools through Values Education**, embedded values in an environmental curriculum that had sustainability at its core. This was based on the premise that values cannot be taught in themselves, but rather are learnt within carefully constructed contexts that are designed to allow students to interact with those values.

Each of the participant schools in this cluster designed micro-projects within the area of environmental education. All projects were linked by the key proposition: how can we pursue an explicit values education agenda with an environmental education for sustainability perspective?

This cluster was unique in that it was represented by schools from three states and territories across Australia: South Australia, Northern Territory and Western Australia. The characteristics of the participating schools are their remoteness, the diversity of their student cohorts and the cross-jurisdiction make-up of the schools.

A common theme drawing these schools together was the UNESCO sustainability framework as a curriculum organiser. The cluster used the Centra distance communication system which offered a range of real-time video technologies to bring students together for values discussions in an online classroom.

Centra is a real-time, web-based learning software incorporating tools for lesson delivery, professional development and meetings. It features voice-over-IP capabilities, a shared workspace environment and an intuitive user interface permitting live conversations as well as text chats. It is freely available to all South Australian teachers through the Department of Education and Children’s Services. The services provided by the department include building teacher capacities in e-learning technologies and professional support materials.

Virtual classrooms afford geographically isolated schools the opportunity to share teacher expertise, bridge isolation and bring intercultural perspectives to remote sites. The Cross Borders cluster coordinator conducted professional development for teachers on how to use the technology. Teachers then brought together student online communities from participating cluster schools in virtual classrooms to work with values-rich dilemmas.

For example, students were brought together to discuss the issue of fairness. Using diverse teaching strategies, classrooms firstly conducted lessons with their classes about fairness in a range of contexts. Using Centra, classes from the cluster schools were connected to one another. The moderator, in this case the cluster coordinator, then guided students through a discussion about the concept of fairness and how it is demonstrated in their daily lives and in the rules of the school and broader community. The moderator then challenged students with a dilemma which progressed their understanding of fairness to a new level by having them think more deeply about the concept. Rather than there being the usual class group, students were exposed to a bigger discussion involving a greater range of perspectives. This discussion then formed the basis of ongoing teaching and learning in individual classrooms.

The power of this online environment for the conduct of values education approaches was apparent to the cluster UAN adviser:

> Despite the initial difficulties the Cross Borders cluster has achieved some outstanding results. These outcomes and reflection on the factors that formed the cluster have delivered remarkable information. The cluster has something to say to schools in remote areas. It has something to say to schools that use or would like to use innovative online technology in order to broaden student horizons. For schools where there is an emphasis on the environment and ecology, the cluster shows that this curriculum area can be greatly enhanced by using this curriculum as a mediator for teaching values.

As well as schools coming together for cluster projects using Centra, individual schools also conducted environmental projects to suit their local contexts. For example, Birdwood High School, South Australia, explored economic and environmental sustainability. Its Youth Environment Council connected the values in the National Framework to the UNESCO sustainability framework.

Victor Harbor Primary School in South Australia, on the other hand, focused on its local marine environment. Chrysalis Montessori School, Western Australia, combined Montessori philosophy and practice with modern pedagogy.
The Montessori curriculum explicitly espouses environmental awareness and promotes responsibility for global ecological imbalance.

As echoed in the Pullenvale cluster, learning about the natural environment should take place in the natural environment. Students’ appreciation of learning about the environment is heightened when they are exposed to values propositions that provide a moral compass for students to refer to when adopting values-centred environmental dispositions.

It is also evident that students in this cluster formed a growing self-knowledge of their world locally and globally.