A touch of humour! Captivating students through the GiggleIT Project

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Abstract

Come and learn about GiggleIT! See how we have successfully implemented the GiggleIT Project, an initiative of IASL, with Year 5 and 6 students as part of our library program at William Clarke College in Australia. Involvement in this new, exciting, online project based on humour has given the students a reason to read, research, discover, discuss, write, reflect, communicate with others and publish their work. The successful collaboration between Teacher Librarians and teachers through this project has provided a platform from which to promote the library across the school community and beyond. Working closely with class teachers provides opportunities to assess, evaluate and modify the program as necessary. The extensive use of technology and the strong international focus is appealing to all students. They can't wait to get to library lessons!

Introduction

The GiggleIT Project has been initiated, facilitated and managed by the Teacher Librarian at William Clarke College over the past two years. Year 5 and 6 students participate in GiggleIT as part of their library program and class teachers work collaboratively with the Teacher Librarian. Timetabled lessons are held once a fortnight. "The GiggleIt Project is a global collaborative publishing project hosted by the International Association of School Librarianship (IASL), working in partnership with the International Children's Digital Library (ICDL). The GiggleIT Project is free and published under a creative commons license. There is a website for the student participants with a section for teachers, plus a complete teaching program and 45+ resources." (IASL, 2011) The GiggleIT Project is specifically designed for students aged 10 to 14 years.

Why GiggleIT?

In 2009 I attended the IASL Conference in Abano Terme, Italy and became aware of the GiggleIT Project. At the time we were looking for a new direction for Year 5 and 6 students in our library program. I was seeking a program that would provide a new challenge for our students, capture their interest in the library, incorporate Web 2.0 technologies, give them a sense of independence and reward them for their achievements. The program needed to satisfy the students' needs and be suitable for a range of abilities. Our budget was limited so it had to be affordable. Being a new member of staff I was keen to collaborate with the teachers, to plan, program, teach and develop something new and exciting with them. My desire was to capture the imagination of the students and empower their capacity to read, write and think effectively in the digital world. Ultimately I wanted to invite, engage and facilitate conversations for learning in our physical and virtual library space and lift the library profile in the school. I was looking for a fresh new idea that really worked!

The GiggleIT Project was a new, international project designed by Teacher Librarians specifically for this age group. Its aim is to improve English literacy skills and engage children in reading and writing with a purpose. The international focus encourages the students to learn about and take pride in their cultural heritage giving them a feeling of self-worth. The use of ICT is encouraged to enhance the global exchange of information and ideas between children. The project is based on humour, a subject not often dealt with in the mainstream curriculum. Each year students can enter their work in competitions. Selected entries are chosen to be included in an eBook called the DigiDoc. The flexibility within the GiggleIt Program means it can be easily adapted to meet teachers' needs and the way they operate in their school. I wanted to think outside the box and this was providing me with the opportunity to do just that. There was a lot at stake. Things could go wrong - what if it failed? I agreed with Buffy Hamilton that "we are the ones who are going to shape the

future of our libraries. Without any risk we cannot create new opportunities for learning."(2011) I gathered all my enthusiasm, decided to be brave, take the punt and run with it!

Getting Involved

1. Planning and preparation

I firmly believe that "the strength and relevance of our library programs lies in the community building we do with our patrons" (Hamilton, 2011). "There are few things more important to a TL's professional well-being and effectiveness than commanding respect and maintaining strong professional relationships" (Hartzell, 2011). With a clear vision in mind and the GiggleIT Program in my hand I presented the idea to major stakeholders in the school – members of the School Executive, Curriculum Heads, Stage Heads and our Headmaster. I was delighted with their enthusiastic response. From the outset I realised the importance of maintaining good, regular communication with them through emails, informal reports, conversations and decided to gather important information along the way. Pictures are worth a thousand words! I led professional development sessions with the teachers involved and encouraged their input in the planning and development of the project. I gathered all the resources necessary to get us started and registered our classes online.

2. Getting Started

By presenting the GiggleIT Project in Moodle I could more effectively scaffold the learning of my students. Moodle provides a means of breaking the project into manageable chunks, tailoring it to the needs of individual students and classes and making the project more flexible. Classes take different directions, some need additional support whilst others are more creative. Moodle allowed me to effectively meet the learning needs of each class.

3. Implementation

A positive learning environment is provided where students are encouraged to take risks and try new things. This allows them to build on the skills they already have in a safe and supportive environment. There is a high level of student involvement and participation in active learning making library lessons exciting. The wide range of learning activities provided are appropriate for all abilities and students enjoy the opportunity to work individually, in pairs, in small groups and as a whole class.

The students wrote about their place in the world, their country, state, town, school and class. The use of Google Maps helped them put this in a global perspective. They had fun designing their own Gigglecritters. Their pictures were scanned and put online. We researched humour in our own culture and what made us laugh. The students created their own Aussie jokes. They wrote Acrostic poems and Haiku about Australia, all the time researching, discussing and reflecting on what was important and special about our nation. They looked at humour in their own families, interviewing family members, recording what they discovered and creating a family eBook. Each lesson we looked at the GiggleIT website together and saw our work online. Their excitement in seeing this first hand spurred them on even more and motivated them to continue to share, think, write and read. I learnt to use Audacity, recorded their work and uploaded this to Moodle. They loved reading their stories, jokes and poems and listening to each other. We were learning together. We entered all the competitions together in our classes and sent our entries in. They hoped that they would win! They sent emails, stories and poems to Email Gigglecritter inviting him to come and visit Australia and spend the weekend or holidays with them. An excellent way to encourage persuasive writing! We borrowed digital cameras and in small groups went out and took photos around the College. We sent them in and they too went up online. We wrote culturalised stories and concrete poetry about our country. We looked at what other schools from around the world were doing, read their work online and spent time learning about their countries.

4. Learning along the way

Using Moodle to present my lessons, upload student work, link to online tools and resources has allowed students to work at their own pace, from home and school, individually, at lunchtime in small groups, in library lessons or in class, and include them in this worldwide project continually. They now use audio, video, images and animation to enhance their learning and presentation. The Internet provides the opportunity for students to follow the program and see their work published online, learn about other countries and communicate with students from around the world. Students become aware of copyright and the need for safe use of the Internet. Digital libraries have also been explored and are popular with the students.

I am now focusing on the attitude I want the children to embrace rather than the tools themselves. The tools will come and go and change over time. The most important thing is for the students to have the right mindset and attitude toward their learning. Asking questions is a lifelong skill. I want them to be free to experiment, try out new ideas, be open to different ways of performing tasks and encourage them to understand there are many possibilities open to them. I see my role as a changing one – one of providing access to resources and tools, providing encouragement, support and initiative.

5. Reflection

There is opportunity for students and staff to give valued feedback throughout. Working closely with class teachers provides opportunity to assess, evaluate and modify the program as necessary.
At the conclusion of the year all involved were asked to comment orally and in writing.

In order to review the process and the project as a whole students needed to reflect in writing. "Reflective writing facilitates sorting out knowledge, ideas, feelings and understanding". (O'Connell & Groom, 2010 p. 20) To assist them in doing this I asked them to email me the following reflective writing:
- the activities they enjoyed most in the GiggleIT Project and why they enjoyed them, and
- their overall impression of the GiggleIT Project.

With the aid of Moodle we reflected together on all the learning activities we had completed throughout the project. This gave the students valuable thinking time necessary for personal reflection before completing their writing and sending their emails. I asked for complete honesty reminding them that I valued their evaluation and their feedback would improve GiggleIT in the future.

The majority of students were very positive in their responses. Only one negative response was received. The students loved using the technology and enjoyed using the International Children's Digital Library. The highlight for them was seeing their work published online. They enjoyed the fresh, new approach to learning that GiggleIT provided. Many commented on the creative aspects of the project and how they enjoyed participating in the competitions. They all looked forward to coming to library lessons.

Teachers too, were asked to comment on the following aspects of the project:
- collaboration between teachers and Teacher Librarian,
- use of technology in teaching and learning,
- the content of the project,
- the international focus, and
- their observations of student interest.

All teachers responded positively. They noted the high level of engagement by students in the project and their enthusiasm for library lessons. There was a noticeable increase in library use by these students at lunchtimes. The teachers felt the international focus pushed the students to look beyond Australia and their own experiences. They were positive about the wide variety of activities and the opportunity for all students to use the technology and succeed. The teachers were very keen to continue collaborating with the Teacher Librarian. They were very pleased with the success of their students and the publicity that followed.

The Spinoffs

1. Integration of technology

Students are actively using technology as they participate in the GiggleIT Project. I am conscious that incorporating new technologies into teaching and learning opens up many new opportunities and experiences. It not only inspires me and challenges me in the presentation of my lessons on a daily basis, but also in my professional practice as a whole. In order for it to be a success I find it necessary to constantly reflect, assess, evaluate and be willing to adapt and change. The challenge for me as a Teacher Librarian is to weave Web 2.0 effectively into learning experiences, to harness new media and adapt it to suit our learning needs. It is essential we select and use some tools well rather than try to embrace a multitude in a shallow way. Further opportunities to include new technologies are always on the horizon.

Throughout the program the students are encouraged to carefully consider the environment and think 'green'. This means paper usage is kept to a minimum with all work computer based and published online.

2. *Developing pride in cultural heritage*

Throughout the GiggleIT Project the students have developed a feeling of self-worth and pride in their cultural heritage. They have had to stop and think what makes their place in the world unique. The program uses humour as a base and students are encouraged to read a genre not widely explored in their mainstream subjects. This gives them permission to read all those jokes, poems and funny stories and they love it! Through GiggleIT they are connecting with the rest of the world.

3. *Promoting the library across the school community and beyond.*

I am conscious this is a shared success story. This is not just my story. This is our story.

- The students…. they continually inspire me by their enthusiasm and willingness to learn.
- The College…. my colleagues, the Executive, the Headmaster, the College Council and the parents.
- IASL GiggleIT Team…. they who have made it all possible! This project has been created by Teacher Librarians for use by Teacher Librarians and teachers in their schools. It is free to use and all resources and support material is provided.
- ICDL…. The International Children's Digital Library. GiggleIT is a partner with ICDL which hosts digital versions of beautiful children's books in many languages.

How could I use this 'best practice' success story to change perception of school libraries? What could I, Kerry Pope, do to spread the message that the school library is integral to teaching and learning. The success of the GiggleIT Project at William Clarke College and the positive collaboration with teachers during the process has provided me with a platform from which to promote the library across the school community and in the local, state, national and international arena. I needed to plan, be prepared, be confident, be brave and sing from the rooftops!

I accepted our prize for winning the GiggleIT Photoshoot competition, a handmade Gigglecritter called Mr Giggle, on behalf of the College at the IASL Conference in Brisbane last year. With the teachers help we held a special assembly at the College where we presented the students with awards and certificates celebrating their involvement and success. I emailed all staff, informing them about GiggleIT and what wonderful things had been happening in the library, put up displays in the library and on noticeboards around the school, showcased our success on the College website and wrote articles for the School Bulletin and Magazine. Presentations were given to the College Council, the local TL network and at a State Library Association Day. I enlisted the help of our College Publicity Officer and we contacted the media. The local press interviewed and photographed the students. I prepared a press release and our message went out far and wide! This message not only highlighted our success in the GiggleIT Project but the important role of school libraries and the impact they could have on teaching and learning.

Conclusion

Our students absolutely love being involved in the GiggleIT Project and we have all been learning as we go. We have had so much fun. Involvement in GiggleIT has given the students a reason to read, research, discover, discuss, write, communicate with others and publish their work. They continually inspire me by what they produce, how they naturally mentor each other, their enthusiasm for learning, their willingness to

grasp new technologies and their love of learning. They constantly stretch me professionally to present my lessons in new, dynamic, meaningful and innovative ways, to stretch my knowledge and understanding of what is possible. "By inviting and engaging conversations for learning the library becomes more than just a physical space in the school……It becomes an experience that will stay in our students for a lifetime." (Hamilton, B. 2011) Our students have developed skills as we have progressed, have been so excited seeing their work online and have become enthusiastic library users. The extensive use of technology and the strong international focus is appealing to all students. They can't wait to get to library lessons!

Key Learning areas:

- The GiggleIT Project has provided an opportunity to successfully work collaboratively with teachers and integrate Web 2.0 technology into teaching and learning
- Being involved in an international project has given the students a feeling of self-worth and pride in their cultural heritage
- The success of the GiggleIT Project has provided a platform from which to promote the library across the school community and beyond

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Biographical Note

Kerry Pope has taught for over 30 years in Public, Christian and Independent Schools as a Teacher and later as a Teacher Librarian in country and city areas within Australia. This has included experience in Primary (K-6) and Whole School (K-12) situations. Currently she is a Teacher Librarian K-8 at William Clarke College in Sydney. In 2007 she gained Accreditation at Classroom/Professional Excellence level in NSW. She is energised by exciting, new learning opportunities and is keen to take every occasion to raise the profile of her library and its important role in the school.