

Bridges to Understanding **2007-08 Teacher Collaboration Project** **by Jennifer Geist**

Bridges to Understanding engages students worldwide in direct, interactive learning and storytelling to build cross cultural understanding. We use digital photography and multimedia software to help students create digital stories to express their learning and to share with their international peers. Creating youth media has been done in many different educational settings, but is difficult to integrate with standard curriculum and implement in the classroom. For teachers who are new to digital storytelling to incorporate its' many aspects (photography, multi-media technology, narration, story development, sound recording and teamwork) into an already full curriculum often requires skill development and classroom support. To implement a collaborative project with an international partner, also requires special attention and facilitation. The demands of teaching today are considerable, and teaching for the future in our rapidly changing world can be overwhelming without a framework, colleagues and resources. **Bridges** has set out to give the kind of support that teachers need in order to accomplish their goals for using digital technology to teach, learn and share across cultures.

When all of the skills, and support mechanisms for using digital storytelling as a tool for international teaching and learning come together and work, the rewards are extraordinary. Students gain myriad abilities in cross-cultural communication, self expression and critical thinking from distinct perspectives. They learn to work together, to see the viewpoints of others as not only valuable, but an essential resource in problem solving. The power of media to change the world becomes a first hand experience as creators are transformed by the process itself.

Bridges is learning from each of the 28 teachers around the world exactly what we can assume will work for everyone, and what is subject to the vast differences in teacher styles, cultures and available resources. In addition, **Bridges** is poised to narrow the gaps that exist by fostering understanding, providing on-site support and tangible resources so that teachers can carry out the projects that they hope for. In this effort, **Bridges** becomes the clearing house for ideas and best practices, as well as the cultural and linguistic translators for the information.

The teacher development model that **Bridges to Understanding** is employing this school year is based on the idea that teachers really know best what works in their own classrooms, and that some percentage of that knowledge can be generalized to all classrooms. The fifteen Puget Sound region teachers who are working with us this year are teaching us and each other how to adapt digital storytelling to the classroom setting, including using the process as a content reflection tool. In turn, **Bridges** provides in-class coaching, photography lessons and technology support. We facilitate the exchange of stories and ideas between local classrooms and classrooms in our seven sites around the world (Tibetan Children's Village, Peru, Guatemala, South Africa, Israel, Canada and the West Bank). By June 2008, we will have a variety of completed projects and the collective wisdom of these teachers to disseminate to even more teachers. Our common theme is Climate Change. If, by the end of this project, all of our 500 students around the world understand that this is a problem that we all share, and that it will be through cooperation and understanding that we resolve it, we will consider this project a success. And further, if our 28 teachers can teach and learn to use digital storytelling to an educational advantage while building empathy and compassion among students worldwide, we will know that we have found our path.



Our cohort of teachers gathered at Jennifer's house for our quarterly teacher dinner meeting on December 6, 2007.