

A QUARTERLY
NEWSLETTER
FROM
CURRICULUM
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Connections

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IN THIS ISSUE

In previous issues this year we have discussed ways of accessing information electronically and of networking to share information.

In this final issue for 1992 we return to these themes with an example of an innovative experiment in CD-ROM networking between a cluster of schools, and the use of electronic bulletin boards to access information in both primary and secondary schools.

Best wishes to you all for a relaxing holiday.

Dianne Lewis

A CD-ROM NETWORK: NRCCLG INFORMATION ACCESS PROGRAM

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The Northern Region Catholic Colleges Library Group is a well established network of schools that has been operating for over 12 years. We now have 27 secondary schools in our group and meet twice or three times a term.

Our meetings provide a venue for the sharing of information, ideas and resources. At least one meeting per term is devoted to audio visual issues. We organise guest speakers, demonstrations and in-service days. For many years we have shared lists of video and periodical holdings.

When funding became available for the co-operative sharing of VCE resources, our group met and considered what resources our VCE students lacked. We identified the need for indexes and abstracts such as those available on Austrom and Austguide.

It was decided at the meeting that we would make this the purpose of our submission and a working party was formed.

The working party established what was possible within the guidelines of the funding. It was decided that the sharing of the CD ROMS would have to be achieved very economically. The idea of networking was out of the question because of the costs involved, but discussions with experts in the field told us that we could achieve a much cheaper but effective system without networking. The publishers of CD ROMS were contacted and it was soon apparent that we would not be able to link all the schools to a single CD ROM centre because of copyright restrictions. It was decided to divide the seventeen participating schools into four cluster groups with four or five schools per cluster. Within each cluster we would have a host school with a CD ROM player and a selection of CD ROMS, and the other schools within the cluster would be able to dial in and access the information on the CD ROMS held by the host school.

The working party drew up specifications for the project, and wrote the submission.

After we were successful in receiving funding, the working party reconvened and called for tenders. Each company was given the opportunity to present their proposal to the working party. From these tenders, Vital Electronic Services was chosen.

Our system is a simple one. Within each cluster we have designated a host school. These schools were selected on the basis of the schools being able to provide a dedicated telephone line and the staff to operate our system. The school houses a 386SX-33Mhz computer workstation with CD ROM player and modem.

All other schools within each cluster have a 386SX-33Mhz computer workstation and a modem.

Each host school has been supplied with indexes Austguide Austrom and Sage on CD ROM.

The "dial-in schools" need to book time in which to access these CD ROMS. The actual method of how this is done has been left to each cluster, but at a mutually agreed time, a dial-in school is able to access whichever CD ROM they have registered at the host school.

With this simple system, it is possible for only one school to access the system at any time - another good reason for keeping the clusters small.

Some modifications were made to our original specifications. These included the choice of communications software and the decision to run our system

with 9600 baud modems for increased speed.

It is only ever intended that at present we use this system for indexes and abstracts. The data is subject to far less corruption than graphics, particularly when feeder schools are in many cases dialing through school switchboards.

The system has been designed to allow for upgrading. It would be networked in the future should funding become available and all schools have access to direct telephone lines. We also intend to explore other information sharing through the system, such as bibliographies of VCE resources, but the practicality of this has yet to be established. The working party has established guidelines for the overall operation of the system, but the day-to-day management has been left to individual clusters to decide.

The system works! We are now happily in the situation where 6,000 VCE students in seventeen of our schools have access to abstracts and indexes for their studies that were previously beyond their reach.

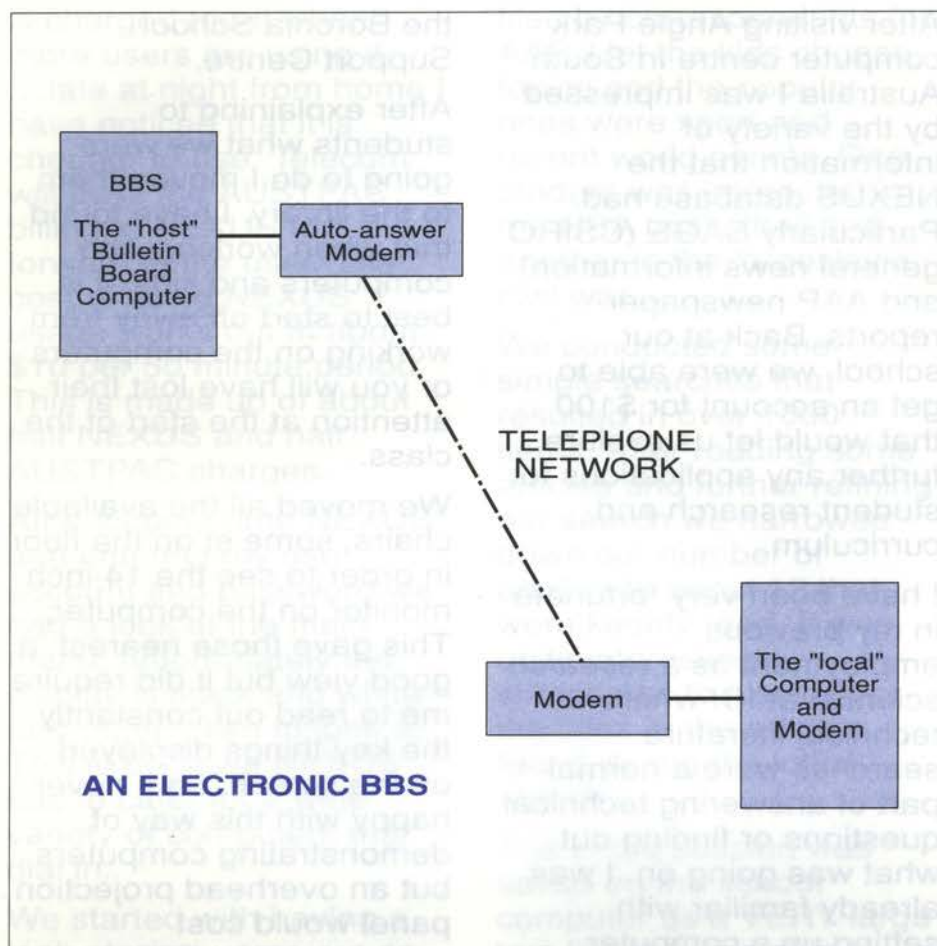
Mary Connellan

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What is an Electronic Bulletin Board?



A bulletin board system (BBS) is a computer network that allows users to communicate with each other electronically, and share data.

The linking of computers can be achieved by many means. These include dedicated cables, satellite links, telephone lines and other forms of electronic communications. Typically BBSs utilise phone lines to transfer data.

BBSs consist of a central computer which acts as a message store. This computer is permanently connected to a phone line by modem.

Individuals using a computer and modem, can link into this service to leave a message. The central computer is controlled by special software that allows it to store messages, as well as send messages to callers. Over a period of time this service evolves into an electronic bulletin board.

How do Bulletin Boards transfer messages?

In order for your computer to be able to "call" the central computer, communications

software must be installed. Communications software controls the operation of your modem and the transfer of the information between computers. Public Domain (free) communications software is available as well as commercial programs.

Communications with your neighbour or the rest of the world.

There are a variety of BBSs currently operating in Australia. Some of the educational ones include CITY LIMITS, COMET, EDMAC and TEMPEST. All of these BBSs are free to registered users, Provided that your computer has suitable communications software, for the cost of a telephone call, you can link into any of these.

The terrific part is that messages can be left on the bulletin board for individuals or for all callers to read. A bulletin board is a great way to ask others for advice, hear about interesting activities, or simply chat.

In order to cater for different interests, BBSs are divided into various chat areas, or "echoes". This means that teachers can chat with other teachers, and students with other students. In addition to communication within a local area, some BBSs provide international chat areas which

can be accessed for the cost of a local telephone call.

Bulletin Boards and file exchange

Aside from leaving short messages, callers can send larger files to the central computer. These might include shareware software, educational material, or other interesting documents. The central computer is able to store files, which other callers can download to their own computers.

Bulletin Boards and Database

Educational BBSs such as NEXUS and KEYLINK (see Connections 2 1992) also provide access to educational programmes such as WRITERS ON LINE or FROGWATCH and to databases such as SAGE and AAP.

Katrina Kolt

(Katrina is employed as a teacher-librarian with special responsibility for Jewish Studies, in the secondary library of Mount Scopus College. She is currently undertaking the Master of Business Information Technology at RMIT).

USING A REMOTE DATABASE IN THE CLASSROOM

After visiting Angle Park computer centre in South Australia I was impressed by the variety of information that the NEXUS database had. Particularly SAGE (CSIRO general news information) and AAP newspaper reports. Back at our school, we were able to get an account for \$100 that would let us explore further any applications for student research and curriculum.

I have been very fortunate in my previous employment as a research scientist at ICI where technical literature searches were a normal part of answering technical questions or finding out what was going on. I was already familiar with setting up a computer, modem and searching an online database.

My first exercise was to use NEXUS as an example of a large online database with my year 10 Information Technology students.

During the morning recess I assembled the modem and IBM computer near the library phone line and tested a favourite communications program called TELIX. The modem was "borrowed" from the VASS Deslink system and TELIX was given to us by

the Boronia School Support Centre.

After explaining to students what we were going to do I moved them to the library. I have found that when working with computers and kids, it is best to start off away from working on the computers or you will have lost their attention at the start of the class.

We moved all the available chairs, some st on the floor in order to see the 14 inch monitor on the computer. This gave those nearest a good view but it did require me to read out constantly the key things displayed on the screen. I am never happy with this way of demonstrating computers but an overhead projection panel would cost anywhere from \$600 and require more setting up. An option might be to divide the group into two but this would halve the time available or double the connection cost. I am interested in a network product that displays on all the selected monitors of a network, what is happening on any one terminal, so that teachers and kids can see what is happening on their own monitor.

We dialled NEXUS using AUSTPAC, a cheaper form of STD for computers that

is charged more when more users are using itlate at night from home I have noticed that it is cheaper to use. Telecom will pass the AUSTPAC billing to NEXUS to forward to the user. The cost of using NEXUS usage works out at about \$10 per 50 minute period. This is made up of about half NEXUS and half AUSTPAC charges.

After logging onto NEXUS and entering my user account and password we had a look at the main menu, unfortunately the display is black and white and rather plain to look at. This is because NEXUS has to cater for a wide variety of computers that dial in.

We started with having a look at what users are on line and sent HENRY (a NEXUS employee) a message saying hello. Electronic mail is not one of NEXUS best features. It is expensive to use, only one student can use it at a time and it does not have the international connectivity that we are able to use at our college Mail Point that has run enormously successfully on all the computers at our college network.

By choosing menu options we were able to read the reports that have been

filed by correspondents for AAP. I let the kids choose topics and the popular ones were sport and recent world events. One student was interested in the NBA basketball and another in the Yugoslavia civil war.

We conducted some simple searches that resulted in over 1000 items. After reading some articles and further refining our search we narrowed down our number of articles to about 12 that were keenly read. It was quite interesting sometimes to just look at the titles of the articles found during the initial search.

The entire session was saved on the school computer as a VERY large text file so I was able to review or progress for next time. This is a very useful feature of TELIX. I even printed out parts of the log that were requested by students.

I had managed to keep the kids attention up for over 40 minutes having a look about the system. I probably should have printed out earlier a list of the databases that are available for searching and I probably should have prepared some simple searches in advance for them to try out, but it was

an interesting learning exercise.

With another group of year 12 chemistry students I was unable to use the library so I had to crowd 13 larger students into the small area of my staff room! We were interested in conducting search of SAGE for items relating to their chemistry research topics.

Using a simple proforma, I had previously asked the students to define their questions and write down the key words. I helped them to build this up into a search by using () and the words AND, NOT and OR. this is well explained in the NEXUS manual. I had explained to them that they needed to be prepared to narrow down their search if they had too many articles selected by the system. A good rule was for them to aim for less than 30 articles.

A key step is refining your search by examining the initial search for miss hits or irrelevant articles and examining ways of rejecting them from your search. This is best learnt from experience or watching somebody else conduct a search.

I have noticed that students need a lot of guidance in conducting their first search but were

USING BULLETIN BOARDS IN A PRIMARY SCHOOL

The idea of a 'Global Village' in an informational sense is with us. Our world is changing at a rapid pace. Educators of even young children have not just the opportunity but an obligation to take part in this world-wide development.

At Yarra Valley Anglican School, we have been involved, in varying degrees, with the new technologies over several years. Here is a brief outline of Junior School's response to the developing world of electronic communication.

COMET

Yarra Valley Anglican School runs its own bulletin board (COMET). This is a public board and membership is available through application to the SysOp Mark Dodds. [You can phone Mark on (03) 876 1366 -Ed.]

COMET allows for low cost, efficient computer communication in Australia and through related systems, virtually the rest of the world. The tone of COMET is very much educational.

Junior School children have, using this system, set up communication swaps with French students in France and Canada. This was established as part of the French lessons in Junior School. Our students would mail off in English and receive their mail in French with each group doing their own translation. The different

school year times between Europe, Canada and Australia were a bit of a problem as were computer breakdowns, but we had some success.

Some readers will be aware that Y.V.A.S. has hearing impaired students attending regular classes. Extremely worthwhile E-Mail (electronic mail) has been set up between our hearing impaired students and students in similar schools in America. It was very exciting to see the flow of ideas and comment between the pupils.

On the same system during the Gulf War, electronic mail was uploaded by students living in Israel detailing their experiences at that time. This electronic mail made its way via FidoNet to COMET and was used by students at Yarra Valley. As you can imagine, reading, discussing and answering this E-Mail generated enormous interest.

Other casual use is made of COMET by students writing E-Mail to penpals or in a one off contact. The system has a reasonable level of reliability, but is dependent in part upon people at both ends making regular searches for their mail.

KEYLINK

A more reliable, but more expensive E-Mail system used at Yarra Valley is Keylink. This is an electronic messaging system operated by Telecom

Australia. Electronic Mail is sent to one or more specific addresses where it is read and replied to electronically.

Each year, a large number of exciting and educationally sound activities are carried out over KEYLINK. Many of them are child-centred and can be carried out at reasonable cost. The following are a few that junior School students have used.

CHARACTERS ON LINE is a literary based activity where the project operator assumes the role of a book character and invites pupils to read the book and write to that character as though writing to a 'real person'. Some of the more recent books have been "Vithy" by Allan Baille; the character written to was Vithy. Hector from "Lake at The End of The World" was another recent one.

In responding the children are expected to view the character as a real person and attempt to have vicarious experiences with them. Pupils from Year 4 to Year 7 have taken part in such activities.

AUSFUTURE is an activity being carried out at the moment. A famous

Australian is asked to give their view of the present and future prospects for Australia.

Sir Mark Oliphant has written of his views which the pupils have read, discussed and

responded to with their own comments and questions. In due course, Sir Mark Oliphant will reply and his response will form the basis for further group discussion.

TIC TAC TOE was a project I ran on Keylink. This was a maths activity requiring classes to play a large number of Tic Tac Toe games and record wins, losses and draws.

The results were then uploaded and combined with the results from many schools. The total large scale results were then E-Mailed back to participating schools. Comparisons with individual class results were then carried out examining similarities and differences.

Teachers can also use both E-Mail and on-line databases to enhance their own teaching and lesson preparation. There are many on-line facilities aimed at educational use. The cost of these can be high, so the use made should be discretionary. One I have found useful is NEXUS.

NEXUS is owned and operated by the South Australian Education Department. It gives access to E-Mail and a large (and growing) number of databases. The cheapest way for interstate users to contact Nexus is via AUSTPAC. This is Telecom's packet switching system.

I have been a regular user of Nexus' databases in the preparation of my lessons.

AAP90/91/92 are Australian Associated Press newspaper articles for each of these years.

As you can imagine the databases are massive. Each can be searched in a variety of ways and the located articles downloaded. When covering a particular topic in class, I search AAP for relevant material and if appropriate, incorporate it in my lessons.

The Macquarie Dictionary database has also been helpful in my teaching. Why not use one off the shelf I hear you ask? The electronic variety allows for subject searching and compilation of all related words. For example, if a study of spiders was being undertaken it is possible to assemble all the words that relate to spiders contained within the Macquarie Dictionary and then download them. This is a great help with topic word study. Try doing that with a dictionary off the shelf!

This is a brief insight into what is being attempted at our school. The activities are carried out in small groups or by individuals. I firmly believe it is an important area for schools to be involved in and an area of computer use that will continue to grow.

(Allan is Computer co-ordinator of the Junior school at Yarra Valley Anglican School in Ringwood, Victoria, as well as a teacher of grade 6)

[Editor's Note

Details of NEXUS, KEYLINK and other Bulletin Board and on-line services can be found in *Connections* issue no.2 1992.

An Excellent book for further reading is *Bull'n boards: some computer networks* by Juhani E Tuovinen, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, NSW, 1990. 2nd ed.]

Allan Garbutt

continued from page 5

quick to catch on. Students that use school CD-ROMs for their research should already have the sufficient experience in conducting searches.

I decided not to read all the articles and save the results as a log file. Instead I used a HARDCOPY option from NEXUS and sent all the output to a printer for the kids to keep. Forests fell to keep them happy so I will have to think more about how best to manage this in the future.

In all, a worthwhile exercise and I would like to thank Di Lewis for sharing her NEXUS experiences and giving me the opportunity to write this article. (For the technically minded, I am entering it at Syndal Secondary College on a Novell networked IBM AT clone where it will be file attached and transmitted to the Deakin University SECAP system, await Mt Scopus and Di to retrieve — over to you Di).

Glossary of some terms used

NEXUS

on line database found in South Australia

AUSTPAC

Telecom packet switching mail system for computers

TELIX

shareware communications program

SECAP

Deakin University Mail Point Computer

Roland Gesthuizen

(Roland is computer co-ordinator at Syndal Secondary College in Victoria.

**He was recently co-presenter of a paper on the Mailpoint BBS system used at Syndal at the recent ACEC 92 conference.)*
