Chapter XIV
Virtual Field Trips:
Advantages and Disadvantages for Educators and Recommendations for Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a brief history of videoconferencing when used as virtual field trips in educational settings, and to discuss some of the various aspects in which they can be implemented. In addition, this chapter focuses on the unique benefits to students and teachers as noted in the literature that videoconferencing field trips can bring to the learning community, and some of the challenges that many educators, eager to use this technology, have experienced. Speculation as to what the future will hold for virtual field trips and where the technology will possibly take us is also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the history of virtual field trips and a discussion about their recent increase in use in America's classrooms. In addition, this chapter clarifies some of the many operational definitions and terms that currently exist in the literature regarding videoconferencing field trips, to document ways in which educators have integrated this technology into their classrooms to provide richer learning experiences for their students.

Despite the large volume of literature depicting positive experiences in using virtual field trips, there are certainly challenges and disadvantages to their use. One noted disadvantage is the wide

range of definitions and descriptions used by proponents. Although this range of definitions is certainly helpful in bringing multiple perspectives to the arena, Clark, Hosticka, Schriver, and Bedell (2002) and others report that such a wide array might actually be confusing for educators who are new to the concept. In fact, Clark et al. believe that the enormous amount of varying descriptions and definitions may actually have adverse effects and, in turn, discourage, rather than encourage, educators from implementing aspects of a virtual field trip into their classrooms. Professional development groups and those that provide such enrichment opportunities to teachers interested in implementing VFT should be aware of these benefits and challenges and address them during training.

Another aspect that appears to be consistent in the literature on virtual field trips is the lack of sufficient evaluation and empirical research to support their use. It appears that the majority of literature is comprised primarily of testimonials and first-hand accounts of teacher/developer perspectives rather than empirical research. In fact, rigorous evaluation methodologies and research studies appear to be limited, particularly those empirical studies that are cause-effect in nature. In addition to overviewing aspects of research on virtual field trips and their impact on students' achievement per se, this chapter will discuss the challenges often faced by educators in their delivery of virtual field trips and the utilization of information gained from these field trips. Additionally, we will proffer recommendations that address these issues for the novice, as well as the expert field trip "traveler."

BACKGROUND

The traditional school field trip as described above, but within much shorter distances and with far greater limitations, has, without a doubt, been the main staple of enrichment for K-12 education. Long before there were thoughts of technology integration, the traditional field trip to a museum, local farm, or factory was one method in which educators could provide their students with an alternative forum for learning. A review of literature on the traditional school field trip reveals that while much of the scientific documentation supporting its use has focused on student recall and memory of events, there has been little evidence to support this recall in terms of classroom curriculum and overall learning (Hudson & Fivush, 1991).

In the 21st century, the traditional school field trip has changed. No more do teachers have to spend their days organizing chaperones, loading students onto crowded buses, taking periodic head counts, and monitoring the bus ride home, all for the purpose of visiting a local museum or historical battle site a few miles from school. Virtual fields trips (VFTs) are providing "virtually" thousands of educators and their students the opportunity to visit many exciting attractions without ever leaving their seats (Ashton, 2002; Hayne, 2002; Roush, 2004; Sullivan & Smith, 2001). This technology integration has allowed many educators in America's schools to exceed time and physical distance (Klemm & Tuthill, 2003) during a morning field trip to the Great Wall of China, the Grand Canyon, and the Statue of Liberty, and be back in time for lunch.

Born out of early videoconferencing, virtual field trips have increased dramatically in the last decade in both their development by providers (e.g., museums) and the frequency of their use by consumers (e.g., school classrooms) (Klemm & Tuthill, 2003). Although many still hold the notion of a typical VFT as being a visit to the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York City or the Smithsonian in Washington D.C., the fact is that, in their rise to popularity, VFTs have taken on many new forms. In reality, educators are engaging in many different types of field trips: visiting the desk of a best-selling children's author for an in-depth discussion of a book that the class is currently reading or visiting the inside