

Program linking schools via Internet earns national award

BY CAROLINE GRECH
Staff Writer

Making a classroom without borders and bringing the nation's resources directly to students earned recognition and honour for two York Region educators.

Along with six other Canadian educators, Janet Murphy and Steve Smallwood received a national technology innovation award from the Learning Partnership, a non-profit organization devoted to strengthening public education.

Ms Murphy, manager of innovative learning solutions with the York Region District School Board, and Mr. Smallwood, a science teacher at

Newmarket's Dr. J M Denison Secondary School, helped develop an Internet program linking universities, colleges, high schools and elementary schools across the country to enrich learning.

"We initiated the program to use broadband to connect teachers, faculty and students," Ms Murphy said.

Using multiple projected video screens, one screen can show the teacher's lesson, while another can be used to connect with other classrooms and experts thousands of kilometres away.

The program has meant classes can take virtual field trips or have

experts beamed into their classrooms to talk about a study topic.

An Alberta class went on a virtual field trip to the Ontario Science Centre through the program.

"It's not just for the wow-factor. Students see the relevance of what they're learning," Ms Murphy said, explaining when they created the program in 2002, they wanted to demonstrate the value of broadband for teaching and learning.

The program has injected new life into classes such as English by bringing authors to the students.

At Sir William Mulock Secondary School in Newmarket, a book study unit for Grade 12 English included

Canadian author David Bouchard in class via video to answer students' questions about the novel.

A Supreme Court judge in Ottawa attended a mock trial at York University, where high school students took the roles of defence, Crown and jury with the help of the program.

Unlike other technological advances that sometimes replace people, the idea behind the program is to add to what the teacher can already do in a classroom setting.

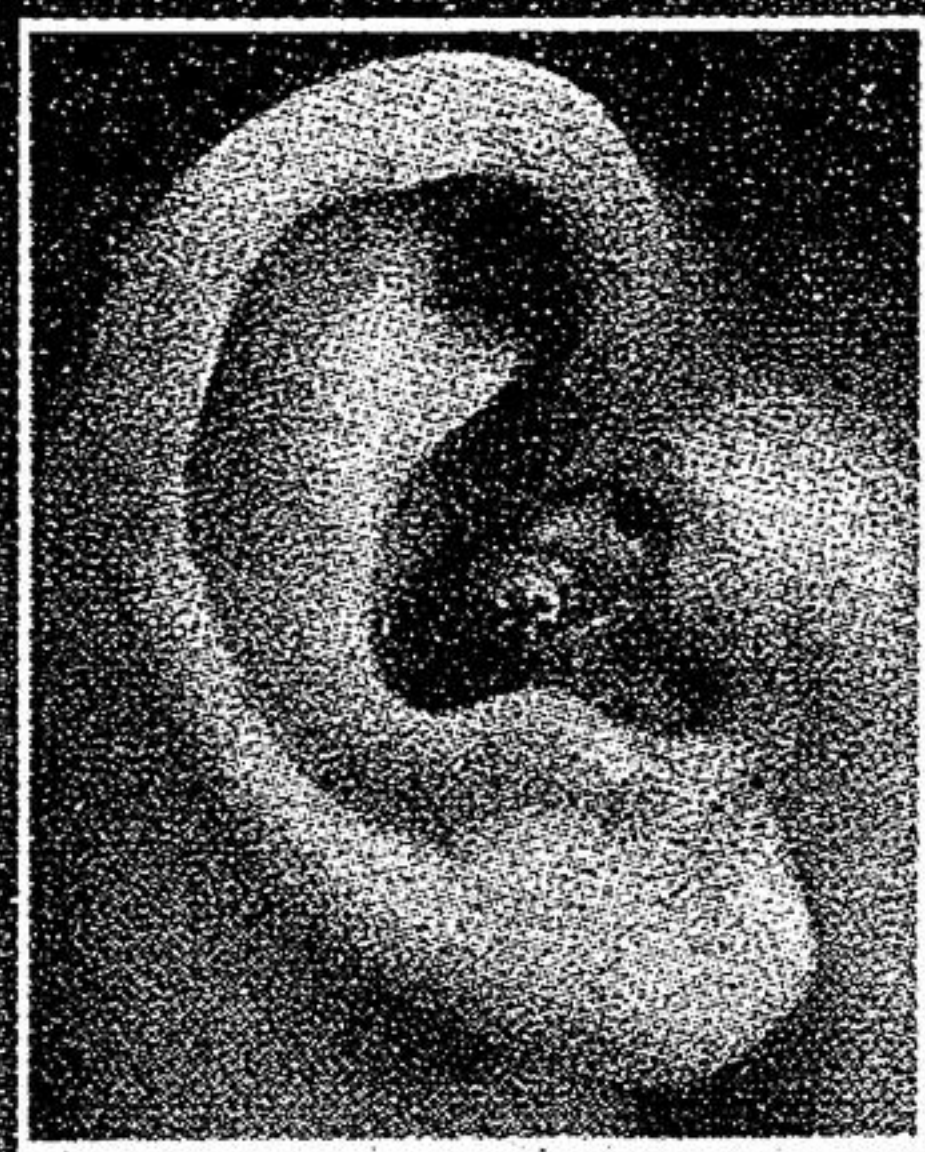
Encouraging children to be interactive in lessons, another popular feature of the system is to have a video screen showing a run-

ning chat room or blog where students using laptops can post thoughts on the lesson without interrupting the teacher.

Features such as the blog keep students accustomed to cell phones, text messaging and MSN messenger from being bored in a traditional classroom setting.

From its inception, Ms Murphy knew the project would be a success.

"We're really excited about the award. It shows what we can do when we share resources," she explained, adding educators are always seeking ways to make education more engaging for students.



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