

GERMANY

Regional development in the classroom — Yes, it is possible!

Combining two projects with the use of new know-how and new technology enhances regional awareness, develops new teaching skills, and engages the youth of the region and beyond

by Andreas Kurz, new media advisor

Introduction:

The project 'Data pool Auerbergland'

Time and again the local action group Auerbergland thought about how it could involve young people in its region's development. At the same time the LAG's task group 'New media' decided to update the obsolete municipal data on the World Wide Web by introducing new ways of using the Internet for regional needs.

'We started from a situation where citizens and 11 local authorities expressed their strong interest to create a virtual network for a joint citizens' information system', explains Stefan Boos, spokesperson of the task group 'New media' of the LAG Auerbergland. No sooner said than done! In 2003, a system was established within the framework of the project, allowing local authorities, all the interested local actors, and specific working groups, to store the contents of their activities centrally on a joint server and to place it on various websites (www.auerbergland.de). At the same time, new media advisor, Andreas Kurz, developed in collaboration with teachers Sabine Saalwirth and Franz Mödl a didactical concept for using new media at elementary and secondary schools in the region. Thus 'Data pool Auerbergland' was also able to support the creation of 'School Net Auerbergland' (www.schulnetz-auerbergland.de).

The long way towards a joint network

Four years ago nobody would have imagined such a development. At this time only a few village schools had the necessary technical equipment to give pupils computer access. Donations of second-hand hardware meant that all schools could be equipped, and afterwards the necessary pedagogical tools on how to use new media had to be developed. In 2003, a pilot project began to virtually connect 11 elementary and secondary schools and one special needs school. Already during this testing phase it became clear that the introduction of new media in the classroom not only opened ways to new didactical approaches, but also encouraged pupils to get more deeply involved with their own region.

Pupils become information multipliers

As the project continues, 20 teachers together with 18 classes from 11 schools are using the school network during lessons, as well as for networking between the schools. This has led to the creation of 11 school websites, a central



School children learn about some of the project's more technical aspects

website and a joint mail server. Fifty per cent of the support for this project comes from Leader+, with the remainder being financed by the local authorities as part of their responsibility to cover the schools' material expenses. The funds are used to support training activities, project management, and the purchase of specific technical equipment, such as digital cameras, network cards and scanners.

Apart from the introduction of new media, the aim is to integrate, into school lessons, the concept of regional identity and awareness of the region's strengths and weaknesses. As pupils take their knowledge as well as their questions home to their families they become perfect information multipliers! Thus they indirectly facilitate the discussion about regional issues and the process of regional cohesion. Integrating work with a computer and the Internet into school lessons represents a new didactical approach. In addition lessons can become more attractive, since the new teaching platform enables teaching staff to exchange modules they have developed for their lessons, present new suggestions to their colleagues, and participate in the implementation of joint themes and projects. The improved collaboration of teachers and pupils coming from different villages and different types of schools

within the geographical area of the LAG Auerbergland is a desirable side-effect.

A welcome concept

Pupils are enthusiastic about the chance to use computers during lessons, since it has added an interesting aspect to daily school life. New teaching concepts support them in developing initiatives independently, and to improve their ability to express themselves and their media competence. Local authorities have realised that the activity is beneficial for the region and they therefore strongly support the school network. Motivating the teaching staff nevertheless proves more difficult. Not all the teaching staff in the school network take part, since the use of new media has not been made an obligatory part of the annual curriculum. The fact that teachers are free to decide whether to participate in the project requires significant efforts by project management to motivate them in becoming involved. The elementary school of Burggen was the first one to develop an internal curriculum for 'New media' (www.grundschuleburggen.de).



'Samson' inspires the children's imagination

Sustainable results for all parties involved

The direct benefit derived from the school network to teaching staff and their lessons represents a critical measure for success: the numerous tools offered had to be designed in a way to allow their introduction into lessons without much effort. Field knowledge was

the sole key factor for success, with pedagogical experts putting forward proposals which could be used by their colleagues. The fact that children find working with a computer exciting also helps to generate enthusiasm. Finally, 'School network Auerbergland' has helped to improve the quality of the schools' technical equipment.

Providing a link between education and the ongoing process of regional development has so far shown a lot of promise for the schools involved. New didactical methods have given pupils the chance to get acquainted with new media, and have thus contributed to raising the level of qualification within the region. Therefore, the project 'School network Auerbergland' is sustainable.

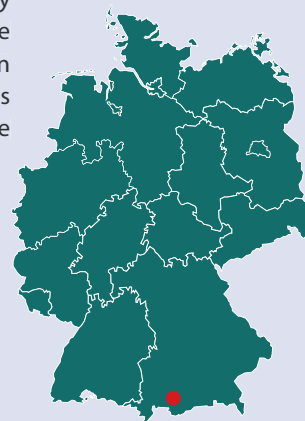
The 'test' has turned into an export success story

School network Auerbergland's success has led to the development of a transnational cooperation project with the Regio-Plus-Group, 'Personality Werdenberg', from Switzerland. The school network Werdenberg is currently organised on the same technical basis as the one from Auerbergland and both school networks are to be linked (www.schulnetz-werdenberg.ch). A virtual presentation of both regions to get to know each other will be followed by a real exchange, where pupils will meet each other as part of a mutual exchange programme. Thus, step by step, more and more organisations will be actively working with chil-

dren and young people in both regions, and they will also be included in the project.

The school network in practical terms

The school network offers children various levels of participation. One example is the 'virtual knowledge-rallye Auerbergland', where participating schools developed questions about the region's history and answered each other. As a result, children better understand their region and the use of the Internet. 'Samson, the Aurochs' is a stuffed toy animal who is travelling for a year through the Auerbergland, and who serves as a project focus for the children, who can document his experience with pictures and texts on the Internet. The project 'children news' has also encouraged pupils to write texts for publication on the website. Another project 'Story writing within a virtual group' supports capacity development in written expression and also helps to motivate pupils to write. During lessons new chapters of an ongoing story are developed and read out to others. The possible story lines are discussed before the final sequel is written together by the whole class as the next chapter of the story.



Regional development in the classroom

Member State: Germany

Region, district: Bayern

Name of the LAG: LAG Auerbergland

Population: EUR 19 500

Surface area: 25 000 km²

Project total cost: EUR 17 000

EU: EUR 8 500

Other public funds: EUR 8 500

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Photographs provided by the German national network unit