The Importance of Crafting Culturally Relevant Content

By Karen Ellis copyright 2000
http://www.edu-cyberpg.com/AboutUs/bio.html

When Philadelphia resident Karen Ellis recalls the memorable teachers in her life, she likes to talk about how they gave her the "building blocks of how the world works." These teachers "gave me the skills to negotiate for the rest of my life."

One teacher, who had fought with the French Resistance, taught a 10-year-old girl about the Nazi persecution of Jews in World War II Europe. Another teacher taught a 17-year-old young woman in a "media literacy" class how to evaluate critically all the news media and government reports about the Vietnam War.

Ellis, 48, remembers well these lessons and other lessons from the 1950s and 60s: "Being a part of a culture that saw integration happen -- and the danger, pain, and humiliation of segregation -- left a powerful collective memory of what intolerance feels like."

Ellis has been working for the past few years to use all of these lessons to help educators, parents and students to make use of online resources -- to help give today's students building blocks of how the world works.

Her efforts, so far, have led to the creation of Diversity University Collaboratory, an electronic mailing list that appeals to a broad range of interests and encourages innovation and interaction across many disciplines; and to an Internet portal, the Educational CyberPlayGround, http://www.cyberpg.com, that not only is interdisciplinary and collaborative but also is trying to cut across social and cultural barriers and to encourage broad use of Internet resources.

Educators, parents and librarians, for example, will find the online curriculum resources for Black History Month and for other minorities on the Educational CyberPlayGround a safe place for children to be online, Ellis said.
"We know that the Internet sometimes can be overwhelming, and we want to help those with limited Web experience, particularly those involved with education, to master Web tools and skills. The focus is on integrating what has become a fragmented community of educators and regular folks."

Ellis directs this focus as coordinator of both the Diversity University Collaboratory and the Cul De Sac mailing list for online curriculum and she is the organizer, coordinator, director and guiding spirit of the Educational CyberPlayGround.

Ellis said the Educational CyberPlayGround is trying not only to provide learning resources for different cultural and ethnic groups but also for those with different approaches to learning. The portal provides K-12 interdisciplinary, collaborative, thematic modules that use multiple-intelligence approaches for schools, home schooled and learning centers.

"We are sensitive to different learning styles -- not just logical learners but visual and intuitive ones as well. This will let students use the pathways that work best for them."

Ellis, whose background includes a bachelor's degree in elementary education, a certificate in the Orff Schulwerk approach to music education and experience as a teacher and music therapist, has throughout her career attempted to integrate her interests.

Her three years as a teacher in St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, for example, resulted in her book, "Domino," collection of 60 authentic Caribbean play songs that included maps, proverbs, history and cultural information. An accompanying cassette features children performing the play songs and is the only live-sound field recording from that area of the world in the Folklore Archive in the Library of Congress.

The Midwest Book Review in 1990 noted that "Domino" is "a unique opportunity to absorb the culture and sounds of an area which has received relatively little attention," providing a political and cultural review of the Virgin Islands.

Her work in St. Croix also resulted in the development of an extremely successful thematic reading curriculum that makes use of children's indigenous songs and games to help them learn Standard English and that dramatically raised their reading scores, Ellis said.

Literacy [http://www.cyberpg.com/literacy/] Ellis is bringing this same integrative approach to the Educational CyberPlayGround.
Available on the portal are a Web tutorial for "newbies," guidance of "Ring Leaders," experts in their fields, to provide assistance to new and experienced Web users; research, editing and Web-site development services; an educational vendor directory to aid users in locating goods and the online curriculum resources in the

**Cul De Sac area [http://www.cyberpg.com/culdesac/Home_culdesac.html](http://www.cyberpg.com/culdesac/Home_culdesac.html).**

Ellis said the varied "Black History Month All Year Long" online curriculum includes materials about the Underground Railroad, Martin Luther King Jr., slavery, pioneers, original Anansi folk tales in e-book form, Amistad and African-American contributions to science, literature, music, art and film.

"Teachers should find enough materials to allow them to include 'Black History Month All Year Long' as part of their classes all year," she said. A preview of the curricula is available at: [http://www.edu-cyberpg.com/culdesac/bhm/bhm.html](http://www.edu-cyberpg.com/culdesac/bhm/bhm.html).

The Asian-studies curriculum, intended for middle-school grades, allows students to compare and contrast the American Constitution with others. Students work independently, receive critical thinking opportunities and turn in essays that demonstrate their understanding of the issues.

Under development is the American Virgin Islands Online Curriculum, which Ellis said will provide a "missing part" of U.S. history, particularly in regard to the slave trade. U.S. history and social studies textbooks of past decades have ignored the American Virgin Islands, she said."

Such multicultural, diverse content now is possible with online resources. We produce and publish unique, fresh and accurate interdisciplinary K-12 online curricula for a diverse multicultural population that print publishers have never included in the traditional school textbooks."

Such efforts to increase Internet resources for educators and to provide interactive, interdisciplinary studies have brought the Educational CyberPlayGround attention from national news and trade publications. MacWorld Magazine has chosen the Educational CyberPlayGround one of the 50 best sites for "high-quality education on the Web." The portal also has a permanent link with the Philadelphia Inquirer.

Earthlink.net featured the portal in its bLink Magazine in August 2000. The bLink profile described Ellis as using "her experiences teaching movement, dance, and elementary education to young people in the U.S. Virgin Islands" to create the Educational CyberPlayGround as "a learning site that celebrates diversity in students' background while highlighting the variety in students' preferred approaches to learning." USA Today in January 2000 selected Educational CyberPlayGround as one of its "Best Bets for Educators."
The Educational CyberPlayGround also has been a USA Today "Hot Site," in both its online and print editions; and a "Web Pick" of MSNBC News online, and the New York Times featured the portal in the New York Times on the Web Learning Network. 

The Educational CyberPlayGround provides teachers, parents, librarians, homeschoolers and regular folks to a 'webliography" of links to educational resources," USA Today wrote.

The Times noted that the site provides opportunities for parents, teachers and librarians, even with limited online experience, to learn how to use the World Wide Web to provide more effective teaching. "

The site offers well organized links in the areas of curriculum, arts, the Internet, linguistics, music, teachers, literacy and technology," the Times stated.

The Internet provides several advantages in regard to providing such curricula, Ellis said. The space available on the Web, for example, allows the opportunity to target information to numerous ethnic and cultural groups.

Future plans for the Educational CyberPlayGround include providing increased resources for dialect speakers.

"A dialect is simply a language without an army or a navy," Ellis said. "It's a legitimate language with rules just like every other standard language has." Creole speakers will eventually be able to read the resources of the Educational CyberPlayGround in their own dialect.

Ellis said the Internet also provides the opportunity for frequent updates and rapid, if not immediate, corrections of course materials. "Course materials should be fresh and accurate, and we have zero tolerance for false and misleading information of any kind."

Another advantage, she said, is that students can become active, or perhaps interactive, participants in their own education:

"Online learners have a multisensory experience, when combining audio, video, text and graphics. They can control the information they want and also get it when they want it on a need-to-know basis. It's called just-in-time learning. When motivated -- you can learn anything and that is simply the key to all success.

Ellis said that the current computer environment provides today's students with a different way of interacting with information compared with their parents and grandparents.
"These folks are used to television, movies, radio, newspapers, magazines and books which presents information in what called a 'linear learning style.' They never had control over how they were given the information. The flow of information was predetermined by the providers of the information. Those days are gone."

Ellis said the industrial revolution and the "factory model" of education are over.

"Children learn very differently now; we all do. Technology allows the learner to be interactive and control how they take in the information. Learners can direct the flow, modify speed, complexity and manner of presentation, allowing for collaborative learning -- collaborative teamwork is what is used as the business model today."

"Online curricula gets children prepared for the future and everyone off on the right foot," said Ellis, trying, as her favorite teachers, to provide good building blocks for today's students.